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**RUTH: A SPIRITUAL ROLE MODEL FOR THE
RELIGIOUS WOMEN OF SOUTHWEST CHINA**

A Thesis by

Xiaoqiong Chen

Presented to
The Faculty of the
Jesuit School of Theology
of Santa Clara University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Committee Signatures

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Abstract

RUTH: A SPIRITUAL ROLE MODEL FOR THE RELIGIOUS WOMEN OF SOUTHWEST CHINA

Xiaoqiong Chen

Aware of the need to address the existing challenges of the religious women of southwest China, I find inspiration and guidance in the Book of Ruth. This thesis suggests that the main challenge to women's religious life in southwest China is the lack of foundational religious formation and a vital spirituality of religious life. It argues that the character of Ruth embodies the spiritual principles of solidarity, initiative, and integration, and can therefore provide the religious women of southwest China with a model of holistic spirituality which fosters a formational renewal of spiritual and communal life and confirms religious identity.

Chapter One presents an overview of the history of Chinese religious women, particularly the life and ministry of the religious sisters of southwest China. Chapter Two gives a brief introduction to the Book of Ruth, followed by an exegetical study of four passages through the lens of women's spirituality, conducting a close reading of these passages in relation to the three themes of solidarity, initiative, and integration. Chapter Three serves as a synthesis and conclusion, demonstrating the link between these spiritual features of the Book of Ruth and the needs of the religious sisters of southwest China for a renewal of religious life.

With regard to methodology, the study employs historical analysis to trace the emergence of religious life in China, particularly the life and ministry of the religious women in the southwest region after the end of the Cultural Revolution. My approach to

the Book of Ruth consists of a close reading of the character of Ruth through the lens of women's spirituality, using a formalist literary method that attends to what a character says and does in the text, how the narrator describes the character, and how other characters respond or react to this individual. In addition, it employs a socio-historical analysis of the character's social location in order to understand what it means for Ruth, a Moabite woman, to go to Bethlehem and to struggle for survival in the patriarchal culture of ancient Israel.

The story of Ruth offers to the religious women of southwest China a source of inspiration, one which can be of great help in the process of exploring the charism and spirituality of our religious institutes. Ruth's qualities of solidarity, initiative, and integration, which reflect a biblical spirituality, can provide a spiritual model for the formation of the religious women of southwest China. Such a model could help us to fashion an integrative transformation of religious life, one that binds us together in solidarity and kinship, and renews our passion for the love of God and the service of God's people.

Gina Hens-Piazza, PhD, Director

To
The Catholic Church in China
and
all Chinese religious women who dedicate
their lives to the love of God
and to the mission of the Catholic Church in China

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Introduction

I am a religious sister from southwest China, where Christianity is a minority among the minorities. The religious women in southwest China form a tiny group in the local Catholic Church. All of us belong to the newly established or re-established religious institutes of our respective dioceses. Each community is directly under the authority of the local bishop. Unlike the religious women of the major religious orders in northern China, most of us perform pastoral ministry in local parishes and are directly involved in the lives of the parishioners. Since we are few in number, there is often only one religious sister serving in a local Christian community and living apart from her own religious community.

The religious institutes of southwest China are very small, and both administratively and financially depend on their respective diocese. One of the disadvantages of the diocesan religious community is that there is very limited space for the sisters, both individually and communally, to foster their particular religious identity and spirituality. This creates difficulties for us to live out the communal aspect of religious life. Because we have left our families and joined a religious institute, we need mutual support from one another. However, since we are few in number, the arrangement of sisters working alone in a parish, apart from the community, tends to weaken the communal aspect of religious life, which is essential to us as religious. Because we are few, we need all the more to cling to each other, thus transmitting our kinship with God to the kinship with other members of the community. Aside from the vows of poverty,

chastity, and obedience, the community life is considered the fourth vow for a religious person.

This thesis will read and interpret the biblical text of Ruth through the lens of women's spirituality. I have chosen four passages that manifest the spiritual features of solidarity, initiative, and integration. It is my hope that the spiritual principles revealed in the Book of Ruth may assist my fellow religious sisters in their spiritual development. I therefore propose that Ruth could serve as a role model for the spirituality of our religious life. Specifically, I argue that Ruth's spiritual qualities of solidarity, initiative, and integration could help to unify us as a community, helping to form a new religious identity and to integrate the physical and spiritual dimensions of the sisters' lives towards a holistic transformation.

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) in China, with its destruction of old social and cultural traditions, there has been a gradual liberalization of policies towards religions. The Catholic Church, along with other religious traditions, was permitted to restore public religious practice in the early 1980s.¹ Nevertheless, this required time to recover from the destruction. The Catholic Church in southwest China needed to be reconstructed and renewed. Therefore, the construction of buildings was the Church's primary concern. Consequently, the needs for faith formation and spiritual renewal were almost ignored for the first two decades. The most urgent need was to produce sacramental ministers who could quench the thirst of the faithful for the

¹ Daniel L. Overmyer, "Religion in China Today: Introduction," *the China Quarterly*, no. 174 (June 2003): 308.

sacraments to which they had lacked access for decades. Thus, the formation of the religious women became secondary. Many young girls who desired to enter religious life did not proceed because the local dioceses were ill-equipped to provide adequate formation. As a result of this lack of resources, the remaining sisters from that period did not receive proper religious formation, and thus, some of them can only provide inadequate ministerial services today. This has served to diminish their initial passion for religious life.

In light of the sisters' lack of formation and the consequent religious vocational crisis, I am eager to explore some possible changes and improvements to religious life for my fellow sisters. The Book of Ruth provides a spiritual model of solidarity, one which can inspire us to cling to each other, binding us together as a community in spiritual kinship. Ruth chooses to cling to her mother-in-law rather than returning to her mother's house to seek protection. Her solidarity with Naomi is manifested in her pledge to her mother-in-law that "wherever you go I will go, your people shall be my people and your God my God" (Ruth1:16). Ruth's initiative breaks the boundaries that separate people from one another. Ruth crosses lines that categorize people through dichotomies. She takes the initiative to provide life sustenance to her mother-in-law and, in so doing, reconciles the grief of her widowhood with the gift of life and the redemption of the family line. Her union with Boaz elicits divine intervention, and she conceives and bears a child. This is the fullest articulation of a spirituality of integration between the physical and spiritual realms.

Scope and nature

This study considers the Book of Ruth as a foundation for women's spirituality, proposing a close reading of the text through the lens of Ruth's vow to Naomi. The study presents a brief overview of the history of Catholic women religious orders in China, with particular attention to the life and ministry of contemporary religious women of southwest China. I suggest that this small ancient book provides spiritual insights and a way forward for the religious women of southwest China. Ruth's initial decision to remain in solidarity with an old widowed woman, Naomi, offers religious women a new understanding of the commitment to community life. Ruth's kinship with Naomi, and her initiative in providing life sustenance for them both, as well as her physical and spiritual integration, may offer concrete spiritual principles for the religious women of southwest China, fostering a spirituality rooted in biblical tradition, leading to a formational renewal of spiritual life, and emphasizing unity in community.

Thesis statement

This thesis argues that the character of Ruth embodies the spiritual principles of solidarity, initiative, and integration, and can therefore provide the religious women of southwest China with a model of holistic spirituality which fosters a formational renewal of spiritual and communal life and confirms religious identity.

Methodology

I will employ historical analysis to trace the emergence of religious women in China and in particular the life of religious sisters in the southwest region after the end of the Cultural Revolution. My approach to the Book of Ruth will generally be a close

reading of the character of Ruth through the lens of women's spirituality. I will use a formalist literary method that attends to what a character says and what she does in the text, as well as how the narrator describes the character. Additionally this method takes into account how other characters respond or react to this individual. I will also undertake a socio-historical analysis of the character's social location in order to understand what it means for Ruth, a Moabite woman, to go to Bethlehem and to struggle for survival in the patriarchal culture of ancient Israel.

Significance

This study will benefit the religious women of China more broadly, and especially those in southwest China, whose communities are quite small. The finding of spiritual inspiration from the Book of Ruth communicates to us the spiritual principles of solidarity, initiative, and integration, providing a biblical foundation of spirituality for religious life. This study helps the religious sisters to realize that the bond of kinship with each other in community life is an integral part of religious vocation, unifying us as one in Christ and thus witnessing to the reign of God. Furthermore, each sister could learn from Ruth regarding Ruth's pledge of solidarity, her initiative on behalf of the other, and her integration of the physical and spiritual dimensions, all of which may help to forge a holistic transformation of religious life. It suggests an alternative way for us to understand ourselves as participating in the tradition of biblical women of our past.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One will present an overview of the history of Chinese religious women, particularly the life and ministry of the religious sisters in southwest China. Chapter Two

is divided into two sections. The first gives a brief introduction to the Book of Ruth, which will provide an overview of the story and its geographical, socio-historical setting. What follows is an exegetical study of four passages through the lens of women's spirituality, beginning with a definition of women's spirituality, and followed by a close reading of the passages on the three themes of solidarity, initiative, and integration. Chapter Three will serve as a synthesis and conclusion, demonstrating the link between these spiritual features of the Book of Ruth and the needs of the religious sisters of southwest China for the renewal of spiritual and communal life presented in Chapter One.

CHAPTER ONE

The History of Catholic Religious Women in Southwest China

Introduction

In the history of the Catholic Church, religious life itself is a historical as well as a theological reality.² Church teaching asserts that religious life is a great gift for and fully participates in the life and mission of the Church. Thus, religious life is ecclesial.³ The religious orders have been an internal source of creative revival movements throughout the history of the Roman Catholic Church. Besides participating in the life and mission of the Church, they have helped assure the long-term vitality of Catholicism, as well as stimulating Christian unity.⁴

In the Catholic Church in China, orders of women religious have existed for several centuries.⁵ As early as the 1600s, there were pious Chinese Catholic women who

² Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, “Essential Elements in the Church’s Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate” (SCRIS), Vatican, 31 May, 1983, 4, accessed January 14, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_31051983_m agisterium-on-religious-life_en.html.

³ Pope Paul VI, Vatican II Documents on Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis* (October 28, 1965), *Lumen Gentium*, (November 21, 1964): Ch. V, accessed January 13, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html; http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

⁴ Roger Finke and Patricia Wittberg, “Organizational Revival from Within: Explaining Revivalism and Reform in the Roman Catholic Church,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39, no. 2 (December, 2002):156.

⁵ Beatrice Leung and Patricia Wittberg, “Catholic Religious Orders of Women in China: Adaptation and Power,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, No. 1 (March, 2004): 69.

dedicated their lives to the service of God and the Church through a private vow of chastity. They are the Catholic virgins in the history of the Church in China. The “institute of virgins” is the early form of religious life in the Catholic Church in China. Since then, this group of consecrated virgins has played an essential role in the propagation of Catholicism in China. They have brought a valuable contribution to the apostolate in the local communities.

The emergence of religious women in southwest China can be traced to the 1700s, when the French missionaries introduced the institute of virgins to Sichuan. Those consecrated virgins were actively involved in the external catechetical apostolate and the care of abandoned girls.⁶ It was not until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century that the native women’s religious orders in southwest China were established.⁷ During the 1950s, when the foreign missionaries were expelled from the country, all religious institutions were dissolved. Consequently, the sisters were sent back to their families. The contemporary religious institutes in southwest China were established or re-established in the 1990s, after the re-opening of the Catholic churches in China.

Given that the history of the Catholic Church in China has been accompanied by intermittent persecutions and restrictions, there has always been a shortage of priests. Consecrated women, both of the institute of virgins and of the native religious orders,

⁶ For a detailed discussion of the developments in eighteenth-century Sichuan, see Robert E. Entenmann, “Christian Virgins in Eighteenth-Century Sichuan,” in *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth-Century to the Present*, ed. Daniel H. Bays (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996): 80-193.

⁷ R.G. Tiedemann, ed., “Appendix,” in *Handbook of Christianity in China: Volume Two: 1800 to the Present* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010), 932-37.

have played an important role in the propagation of the Catholic faith in the Church of China. Today, these contemporary religious women in southwest China continue to perform the roles of evangelization, catechesis, and pastoral ministry in their local dioceses, regardless of the very limited training they have received.

Unfortunately, despite the essential values that consecrated women have contributed to the Catholic Church in China, Chinese Christian women are rarely mentioned in any kind of written document.⁸ This poses difficulties in the research of Chinese Catholic women's religious orders. Nevertheless, I will attempt a brief history based on a limited number of scholarly essays and monographs.

I. A Brief Overview of the History of Catholic Women Religious Orders in China

The following presents a brief history of Catholic religious orders of Chinese women in three subsections, arranged chronologically: 1) the history of religious women prior to 1949, 2) after 1949, and 3) after the Cultural Revolution.

i. Women Religious Orders prior to 1949

The earliest form of consecrated women in China was the *beata* system,⁹ of which evidence comes from the seventeenth-century Fujian province, where Chinese Christian laywomen consecrated their lives to the service of God and the Church by a private vow of chastity. They continued to live with their families and instructed the

⁸ Jessie G. Lutz, ed., *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women: Gender, Christianity, and Social Mobility* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2010), 55.

⁹ “*Beata*” means blessed virgin. It refers to women who took vow of chastity as members of the Third order of Dominicans. It was a popular form of spiritual service in late medieval Spain. The Dominican missionaries in the Fujian Province introduced the *beata* system to Chinese women in 1600s.

women and children in the household.¹⁰ In southwestern China, the lifestyle of consecrated virgins was introduced during the early eighteenth century by French missionaries. These virgins were organized to devote themselves to teaching and evangelization.¹¹ The first rules of conduct for virgins were subsequently approved by the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*propaganda Fide*). It was further elaborated by the Sichuan Synod of 1803, and then made applicable to the entire China by decree in 1832. The Rules for virgins remained in force well into the twentieth century.¹² The essential value of these virgins' contribution to the apostolate is evident. They became the true pillars of the faith within the local Christian communities during the difficult years of the sporadic persecutions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹³ Thus the Chinese sisters and consecrated virgins prior to 1949 provided a valuable service and enjoyed a lifestyle and social status that many young Chinese women found attractive. Despite clerical control, they preserved some autonomy and, for more than 200 years, served an innovative role in adapting Catholicism to Chinese culture.¹⁴

¹⁰ Leung and Wittberg, 69.

¹¹ Robert Eric Entenmann, "Christian Virgins in Eighteenth-Century Sichuan," in *Christianity in China*, 184-89.

¹² R. G. Tiedemann, "Controlling the Virgins: Female Propagators of the Faith and the Catholic Hierarchy in China," *Women's History Review* 17, no. 4 (September 2008): 503.

¹³ Lutz, *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women*, 90.

¹⁴ Leung and Wittberg, 70.

ii. Women Religious Orders after 1949

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Communist Party attempted to control and ultimately to eradicate religion. All the religious sisters' convents were closed, and their service institutions and properties were nationalized. Foreign missionaries were expelled.¹⁵ Under the influence of Maoism, to be a religious sister was politically incorrect. Particularly during the time of the Cultural Revolution, the plight of religious sisters in China was terrible. They were ordered back to their original homes and families. Some were sent to prison or labor camps. Due to difficult circumstances or pressures, others married and worked with the skills gained in the convents. Despite the difficulties, however, a large number of these consecrated women were able to remain living out their religious identity in private. Others, who belonged to international religious congregations, went abroad and continued serving as religious in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, as well as in cities around the world, where most overseas Chinese were concentrated. These religious communities were barred from China for nearly three decades and waited for their revival.

iii. The Revitalization of Women Religious Orders after the Cultural Revolution

The death of Mao in 1975 led to the revival of Catholicism and other religions. Deng Xiaoping's policies introduced a greater degree of religious tolerance in China. In the 1980s, several religious communities were re-established in response to the needs of the Church's revival. However, the new government did not allow the religious orders to

¹⁵ Leung and Wittberg, 70.

exercise autonomy, but mandated that they be subjected directly to the bishop's authority. Furthermore, the re-opening of religious communities had to be negotiated between the bishop and the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) officials for the purpose of administration.¹⁶ Therefore, the religious sisters have been put in a passive position since they are legally unable to initiate any new form of service in the local church. Most congregations of women religious have been established by local bishops for the purpose of performing pastoral services according to the bishop's will. Their tasks have been primarily teaching catechism and instructing believers on the proper conduct in liturgical worship, visiting and consoling the sick and elderly, and forming and leading prayer groups in rural areas. Some are also assigned to secretarial functions in local parishes, and others have served as domestic helpers for the bishops and priests.¹⁷

Over three decades after the reform, there has been a substantial increase in the number of religious women in the Catholic Church of China. According to the statistics of the Holy Spirit Study Center, as of 2015, the total number of religious sisters was 4,570 in 124 religious congregations of both official and underground Catholics communities.¹⁸ Most of the sisters are quite young. Despite their increasing numbers, these religious orders have faced various difficulties. Among these difficulties is the lingering government opposition towards religion. Fearing that the theological training might better equip the sisters to proselytize, the government has attempted to prevent the

¹⁶ Leung and Wittberg, 71.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Holy Spirit Center, "Statistics of the Catholic Church in China (2016)", Hong Kong, accessed Jan 13, 2018, http://www.hsstudyc.org.hk/en/china/en_cinfo_china_stat16.html.

sisters from pursuing further education.¹⁹ The culture of consumerism and the materially-oriented society are the sources that have created challenges for the religious living out their vows according to the Evangelical Counsels. Moreover, the reality of the mixed motivations of recruits has reduced the success of the formation in religious life.²⁰

As mentioned above, there were varieties of Chinese religious congregations re-established over three decades after the reform. Beatrice Leung and Patricia Wittberg group these religious orders into three categories. The first consists of those congregations that have developed an independent administrative system, a viable plan of service (medical care, homes for the elderly, pastoral work, and so forth), and a fully developed system of formation programs for sisters in different stages of religious life. The second category is the opposite. These are the diocesan congregations, in which the sisters have not received proper training, and consequently, their religious lifestyles vary from the norms and are somewhat similar to those of the Institute of Virgins. The third category is assigned to the diocesan congregations in major cities. These orders contain a handful of middle-aged and well-educated members who have intimate relationships with the Chinese Communist Party. As a result, even though they occupy positions of leadership in the community, they receive little support from their fellow sisters.²¹

Overall, most of the local religious congregations belonging to the last two categories could not provide sufficient initial formation to their candidates. Furthermore,

¹⁹ Leung and Wittberg, 72.

²⁰ Ibid, 72- 73. For the “mixed intention” of some of the women who join the convent do so primarily for personal development, increased social status, and for higher education.

²¹ Leung and Wittberg, 73.

most of the religious sisters have not had on-going formation and theological training. Nevertheless, most of these sisters perform clerical work in the diocese and serve in various parishes. However, these improperly trained religious sisters have not been able to provide adequate service to the local Christian communities. Gradually, these sisters are losing the passion they had at the beginning. Some of them are reduced to serving as domestic helpers of the bishop and priests.

II. The Life and Ministry of the Contemporary Religious Women in Southwest China

The religious women in southwest China form a tiny group of religious orders in the local Catholic churches. This religious group belongs to the above mentioned second category (the diocesan orders). It consists of 120 professed sisters in 10 local religious institutes, all of which have been re-established one after the other in the 1990s, about one and a half decades after the restoral of the public practice of religions in China. The following segment will trace the emergence of this group of religious women, how they have been formed as religious, and their life and ministry.

i. The Emergence of the Religious Women in Southwest China

Three decades after the religious convents were dissolved in the 1950s, the new government relaxed its control of religion. As the Catholic churches of southwest China continued to open in every major city, many Catholics returned to publically opened churches to participate in worship and prayer activities.²² In this context, there was an

²² Edmond Tang and Jean-Paul Wiest, eds., *The Catholic Church in Modern China: Perspectives* (New York: Maryknoll, 1993), 169.

urgent need for assistance given the lack of clergy in southwest China. This lack was largely a result of the chaotic period of the Cultural Revolution, when religion had been completely banned.

This lack of clergy was somewhat mitigated by the fact that beginning in the 1980s, there were a number of young Catholic girls who were willing to dedicate themselves to the love of God and the service of the Church. Nevertheless, due to the Church's lack of material resources and well-qualified leadership to organize and form the young women, it was not until the 1990s that religious institutes in southwest China gradually began to be re-established. The majority of these young women were from the rural areas. Their average of educational level had not advanced beyond junior middle school. While a few had attended high school or college, some had attended only elementary school. The earliest emergence of a re-established religious institute in southwest China was in February 1990 in Guiyang Diocese, led by sisters who had been well trained prior to the period of the Cultural Revolution. Currently, the order consists of 24 sisters, which is the largest number among the religious communities in southwest China. The rest were re-established within the next ten years. None of them have a complete constitution and rule for religious life, thus unable to develop its own spirituality.²³

ii. The Inadequate Formation of These Religious Women

Given the lack of qualified formation personnel in China, it has proven difficult to provide formational and spiritual training to Chinese sisters.²⁴ The fundamental training

²³ Tang and Wiest, 76.

²⁴ Leung and Wittberg, 75.

of the religious women in the southwest varies. The religious order in Guiyang, led by one of the older sisters, has already developed certain formation programs for the young sisters. In 1993, the bishop of Xichang invited sisters from Guangxi Province, who helped to establish a women's religious institute in the diocese. They also helped to organize postulancy and novitiate formation programs for the training of candidates from all over the southwest region seeking to pursue religious life. The rest, however, lack access to adequate formation since most of the newly-established diocesan religious institutes have not yet developed well-planned formation programs. These young women have not had the opportunity to attend an adequate training to religious life.

In the past, some diocesan leaders attempted to provide better novitiate training for the sisters by sending their new candidates to other dioceses (I was one of those who were sent). However, in the majority of cases, the sisters received inadequate initial formation at the congregations to which they were sent. Moreover, as soon as they completed the novitiate, they returned to their diocese of origin, and currently, have not had the opportunity to receive the rest stages of the religious formation, which is very important to religious life. Furthermore, the sending of recruits to other congregations for training created disunity in the sending congregation as the candidates tended to imbibe the charisms and spiritualities of the congregations to which they were sent, which often caused conflict upon their return. Today, the practice of sending candidates out for instruction has effectively ended, as there are very few new candidates.

There are others, however, who have not had any formal training during their religious life. They have simply lived with the older sisters who had returned after the Cultural Revolution. What they learned from the older sisters was through observation

and imitation, as well as some external instruction on proper conduct. Occasionally, they were directed by older diocesan priests, who played the role of spiritual director for the sisters. Without formal training in the religious life, these Catholic women have nevertheless professed and thus become religious sisters by putting on a religious habit through a public ceremony of profession. They have been recognized as sisters only because of their willingness to serve in the Church and their perseverance. However, their lifestyles are somewhat similar to the institute of virgins in the nineteenth century.

Consequently, despite the religious zeal of these young women who have desired to dedicate their lives to the love of God and the service of the Church, they have not received proper initial formation, nor have they had access to on-going formation and theological training. Therefore, these young women are feeling increasingly lost, and their initial passion is declining. It seems that religious life has lost its meaning for them. As a result, a good number of them have left the religious life.

iii. The Life and Ministry of these Religious Women

Influenced by the mainstream culture of Confucian tradition, the Chinese society is patriarchal by nature. Under the system of male domination, Chinese women in general have been trained to be submissive. This is notably true of the religious women of southwest China, since we are at the bottom of the hierarchal structure of the Catholic Church. Even the existence of women's religious institutes was established according to the will of the local bishop. Like most Chinese women's religious orders, this particular religious group in the southwest depends totally on the local diocesan bishop in terms of administration and finance. These religious orders have been put in a passive position.

They have little autonomy to initiate new forms of service according to communal decisions or the individual charism of the congregation.

Although institutes and training centers offering ongoing formation and theological training for consecrated women have been opened in recent two decades, not all have had the opportunity to avail themselves of this training. Many communities do not see the need to allow their members to pursue further education or to attend refresher courses for the nourishment of their religious life. Rather than being prohibited by the government officials, the sisters have been prevented by the local Church authorities from pursuing their desire for renewal. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that the life and ministry of these religious orders is subject to the diocesan bishop's desire.

The primary ministry for most sisters is engagement in pastoral work. They are assigned to local Christian communities separately, to assist the parish priest in teaching catechism, visiting the sick, and counseling those in need. However, due to their lower educational qualifications and lack of training, some of the sisters are unable to provide effective service to the local communities. Thus, their lack of ministerial adequacy reduces their status in the local Catholic churches despite their hard work and dedication to the ministry. This makes the sisters more vulnerable to discrimination and oppression within the Church's hierarchical system, where they are often relegated to such powerless positions as domestic workers in the church and for the priest.²⁵ Their tasks consist primarily of cleaning, cooking, and taking care of the sacristy.

²⁵ Leung and Wittberg, 74.

Furthermore, there is no place for religious women on the diocesan leadership committees. They do not participate in decision-making and thus have no voice in the local Church. In order to survive under the hierarchical system, they have to obey male authority figures. Some attempt to please the person in power in order to enjoy better conditions in their religious life and ministerial assignment. This has allowed a spirit of competition to arise among the sisters, one which poses a hidden danger to the unity of the community and thus violates the communion of communal life.

Conclusion

Overall, the contemporary women's religious orders in China confront multiple external and internal difficulties. Among the external difficulties are the restrictions of the RAB, and internally, the local Church hierarchy, which seeks to control all aspects of the life and ministry of religious women's institutes. As noted, the interventions of the RAB and the Church hierarchy together contribute to a large extent to the poor quality of the sisters' formational education. The lack of adequate integral training in religious life results in an ineffective witness of gospel values and certain deficiencies in pastoral service to the Christian community.

The institutes of religious women in southwest China have experienced all these difficulties from their inception. Since these religious institutes are exclusively diocesan in nature, not only are they under episcopal control, but they also encounter clerical interference, which makes their lives as religious all the more challenging and disturbing. As a result of these difficulties, the sisters have generally received inadequate training in spirituality and the values of religious life. Consequently, some of them lack of a basic

understanding of their own identity as members of a religious institute, conceiving themselves as part of the structure of the diocese and thus accountable to the bishops and priests rather than to their own religious superiors.²⁶ These religious sisters' confusion with regard to their own religious identity underlies their passive position, which also gives reason for the clerical disrespect towards them.

Consequently, unlike the consecrated virgins prior to 1949, who in a certain sense enjoyed an independent lifestyle and respectable social status, the contemporary religious women of the southwest region depend on the local Church hierarchy and have a lower status in a world characterized by male domination. Nevertheless, despite their limitations and inadequacies, these sisters strive to be faithful to their religious vocation and try their best to contribute their "small coin" to the apostolate in the local Christian community.

As one of this group of religious women from these young and small diocesan religious institutes, I have personally experienced all of the above-mentioned difficulties. There were moments when religious life seemed meaningless to me, because I had a deep sense of inadequacy with regard to my assigned pastoral work. I felt helpless and lost hope for the future, for I did not know much about the value of religious life. Furthermore, I had neither a spiritual director nor a formator and therefore, had no spiritual consolation or support. Consequently, I felt discouraged by my fruitless life style and had a deep desire for professional training and religious studies.

²⁶ Leung and Wittberg, 75.

Fortunately, I have had the privilege to receive a series of on-going formational opportunities and theological studies. Gradually, I have realized the importance of adequate training and a deep spiritual foundation for a person who is called to the religious life. I am aware that most of my fellow religious sisters in southwest China have received a far less adequate initial formation in their religious life. As noted, their appeal for on-going formation has been refused. Because of their lack of professional education, fundamental religious formation, mature spirituality, and sense of community belonging, as well as their confusion about their own religious identity, their initial passion for religious life has declined. Their zeal for the love of God and the service of the Church is cooling. As a result, their religious vocation will likely be exposed to crisis. Facing the current situation of the religious women in southwest China, I am aware that there is a great need for the cultivation of a deep spiritual grounding and confirmation of their religious identity.

Therefore, this study seeks to contribute a biblical spirituality that is grounded in the Book of Ruth, a text which addresses one aspect of these great needs of the religious women in southwest China. I am proposing that the character of Ruth can serve as a spiritual model for these religious sisters and provide a biblical foundation for their spirituality. I suggest that the story of Ruth exemplifies the principles of a spirituality of wholeness characterized by solidarity and initiative, and concretized in human activities that integrate the physical and spiritual realms.

I suggest that since none of these religious orders have yet constructed a complete constitution, the spiritual principles embodied in Ruth's life can help the religious women of southwest China to foster a spirituality and charism that is grounded in biblical

tradition. The spiritual principles provide a model for the formation of these religious women, which can help in building up a loving community and forming a Christ-centered religious identity, despite our limited sources of formation.

Rather than going back to her mother's house for protection after the death of her first husband, Ruth chooses to cling to the old widowed woman Naomi. Her kinship with Naomi provides a spiritual model of solidarity, which can help the religious women of southwest China to develop a spiritual kinship with one another, that they may be united as one in Christ. Ruth's principle of initiative manifests in life-giving actions for herself and Naomi that break the boundaries separating people from each other. Ruth's initiative, however, is not without risks, situating her in uncertainties and estrangements. Ruth's story teaches us that in the building of harmonious community life, we need to risk ourselves and take the initiative in loving and serving others.

The story of Ruth also teaches us to reject a dualistic mentality, one which separates the spiritual and the physical realms. Both Ruth and Naomi are ordinary women in a village, yet in their struggle for survival in a man's world, they have found personal transformation and redemption, and in so doing, have imparted blessings to the whole nation of Israel. The story reflects God's hidden presence in the lives of these women. In a similar way, the religious women of southwest China can learn to see the image of God through their everyday activities, in both the physical and spiritual realms. This practice will help the sisters to foster a holistic spirituality that manifests itself in a life of integration, which implies that a deep spirituality is grounded in every moment of our lives. Ruth invites us to become integral spiritual beings.

CHAPTER TWO

An Exegetical Study of the Book of Ruth through the Lens of Women's Spirituality

Introduction

For centuries, the Book of Ruth has been the subject of many exegetical studies and related background works. It has been reflected upon from multiple perspectives and varied methods. The richness and diversity of scholarship on Ruth has sprung up in abundance in the last five decades.¹ In the course of the history of interpretation of the text, the traditional readings make the human characters into models of piety and altruism. When it comes to the character of God, interpreters assume God's never-failing presence and God's absolute authority over the affairs of this world.²

Nevertheless, a number of contemporary scholars admit the existence of the ambiguities of meaning built into the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of the story. These ambiguities thus become sources of the large interpretive issues of characterization, theology, and purpose. In such instances, various readings become possible. The narrator leaves the task to the reader to formulate his or her own suppositions, and no one knows for sure if they are correct.³ Furthermore, in recent years, feminists interpret the story of

¹ Jeremy Schipper, "Bibliography," in *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 7D (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 55-68; majority of these listed bibliographic sources have been written in the last five decades.

² Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, introduction to *Ruth and Esther*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), xiv.

³ Linafelt, xiv-xvi. For those who see the ambiguities, Mishael Maswari Caspi, *The Book of Ruth: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994); Schipper, *Ruth*.

Ruth as a message about the resourcefulness of women. They assert that Ruth and Naomi prove that women can triumph in a male-dominated society.⁴ They thus claim that if Ruth could succeed in the culture of Israel, she surely provides a role model for what women can do today.⁵

The diversity of scholarship on the Ruth encourages the attempts of this study to adopt an alternative reading of the Book of Ruth, with special attention to the character of Ruth, in order to construct a biblical foundation of spirituality for the religious women of southwest China. In surveying the vast array of literature related to Ruth that has been written over the last fifty years, the themes regarding women's spirituality compel me. Some of these include Ruth's statement of solidarity with Naomi, Ruth's initiative action and her integration of physical and spiritual dimensions, which manifests itself in Ruth's interaction with other characters throughout the story. While there are other themes in the book of Ruth, I consider these three themes essential elements of spirituality for the religious women of southwest China.

This chapter consists of two main sections. The first will be a brief introduction to the book of Ruth as it is necessary to have a picture of the whole story before proceeding to the particular texts that address the above-mentioned themes. The second section will address the three themes of women's spirituality. I have chosen four texts of Ruth related to women's spirituality to illustrate these themes. The section will begin with a brief elaboration of the term "women's spirituality," followed by a close reading of these four

⁴ Caspi, *The Book of Ruth*, xi.

⁵ Alice L. Laffey and Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, introduction to *Ruth*, *Wisdom Commentary 8* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017), xlv.

texts through the lens of women's spirituality. These texts include: Ruth 1: 8-18 for the theme of solidarity; 2:1-17 for the theme of initiative; and 3:6-15, 4:13 for the theme of integration.

I. Introduction to the Book of Ruth

This introductory section provides a general overview of the Book of Ruth. I will first look at the book's content, authorship and date of composition, as well as its placement in the canon. This is followed by an analysis of the geographical setting and socio-historical context of the story.

i. The Content, Authorship, and Date of Composition

The Book of Ruth is a Hebrew historical short story.⁶ It has only four chapters and consists of 85 verses. It tells a story of two ordinary women who live in a small village struggling for survival in a patriarchal environment. These women endure hardship, danger, insecurity, and alienation without a man at their side. Nevertheless, they were able to risk bold decisions and shocking acts to work out their own salvation.⁷

The story traces a journey from Bethlehem to Moab and back again, a journey from famine to fullness, from futility to fertility.⁸ It begins with a famine in Bethlehem of Judah, which forces Elimelech and his entire family to leave Judah and seeking for a

⁶ Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 7 (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 3.

⁷ Phyllis Trible, "A Human Comedy," in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1978), 166.

⁸ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, introduction to *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), xv.

means of survival in Moab. While they are in Moab, Elimelech dies. The two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, marry two Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. When they have lived there about ten years, the two sons of Naomi also die, leaving the three childless women alone. While Orpah returns to her family, Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi, pledging herself with the famous words “Wherever you go, I will go... your people will be my people, and your God my God” (Ch.1:16), and return with her to Judah (Ch. 1). In Bethlehem, Ruth the Moabite takes the initiative to glean the leftover barley in the field, in order to have some food for the two women. She meets a wealthy landowner, relative of her late husband, whose name is Boaz. Impressed by all that Ruth has done for her mother-in-law, Boaz extends privileges and protection to her (Ch. 2). In light of Israelite legal institution, that Boaz, a kinsman of the deceased men, is obliged to redeem his destitute relatives. Thus, Naomi instructs Ruth to approach Boaz at night and alone, and asks for his support, “For you are a redeeming kinsman” (3:9). Although Boaz enthusiastically consents, he points a closer relative and his priority to be responsible (Ch.3). The next day, at the city’s gate, Boaz contacts a public assembly of elders to discuss about the widows’ situation. Finally, Ruth marries to Boaz and gives birth to a son, who becomes the grandfather of David. The story ends with a genealogy, culminating in David’s name (Ch. 4).

As with most biblical narratives, the author of the Book of Ruth neither reveals his or her identity nor the date of its composition. The text provides little information about the historical figure or figures responsible for the Book of Ruth as a written composition. Scholars have attempted to investigate the authorship of Ruth, and a number of theories about the author’s gender, ethnicity, and social status have emerged. To name

some, a Jewish Talmudic tradition attributes Ruth's authorship to the prophet Samuel.⁹ Some modern scholars suggest female authorship, or a male author identified with women's interests;¹⁰ others argue for a royal scribe or one from wisdom circles.¹¹ Still others suggest that it was written by a Northern Israelite,¹² or a Moabite.¹³ Nevertheless, despite their tireless investigations, the identity of Ruth's authorship remains uncertain to us.

The date of the composition of the Book of Ruth has been a subject of continuous debate among scholars, and a wide range of possible dates has been suggested. From the closing genealogy, which ends with David (4:22), the book could not have been written before the time of David, even if Ruth lived in the time of Judges, as said in the beginning of the book (1:1).¹⁴ Examining the Hebrew vocabulary and grammar used in the narrative, critical scholarship argues for a later date, sometime during the postexilic era.¹⁵ Others suggest a transitional period, which spans the late pre-exilic to the early

⁹ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, xvi.

¹⁰ Shlomo Dov Goitein, "Women as Creators of Biblical Genres," *Prooftexts* 8, no. 1 (Jan. 1988): 9-10; see also: Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth*; Robert L. Hubbard, *The book of Ruth*; Adrien J. Bledstein, "Female Companionship," *A Feminist Companion to Ruth 116-33*; Fokkeliën van Dijk-Hemmes, "Ruth: A Product of Women's Culture?" *Feminist Companion*, 134-39; Irmtraud Fischer, "the Book of Ruth: A 'Feminist' Commentary on the Torah?" *Brenner* (1999).

¹¹ Robert Gordis, "Love, Marriage and Business in the Book of Ruth: A Chapter in Hebrew Customary Law," in *A Light unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers*, ed. Howard N. Bream (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), 241-63.

¹² Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*. NAC 6 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 597.

¹³ Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Random, 1996), 342.

¹⁴ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, liii.

¹⁵ Schipper, 20, Schipper lists the references of theories about the book's date of composition.

postexilic era. Therefore, the time of the book's written composition could possibly be either pre-exilic or postexilic.

Besides the linguistic features, what was happening in the world behind the text also needs to be taken into consideration, for this world could possibly generate the purpose of the narrative composition. Those who date the book during the pre-exilic period, posit that it might have been written to function as an apologia for the claims of the Davidic line against its detractors.¹⁶ The depiction of David's ancestors as models of piety and good conduct was a way to defend his right to the throne.¹⁷ On the other hand, those who date the book to a postexilic setting understand the genealogy of David as support for a universality which integrates foreigners into the Jewish community by showing how such inclusion benefited the entire nation.¹⁸ In this view, the Book of Ruth is a deliberate polemic against the exclusionary policies of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jewish representatives of the Persian authorities, who are forcing the dissolution of intermarriages (Ezra 9-10; Neh.13).¹⁹

Arguments on both sides revolve around the language of the text, customs assumed in the story, literary parallels and their provenance, as well as the text's ideological or theological orientation. However, these criteria are subject to assumptions

¹⁶ Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 21.

¹⁷ Eunny P. Lee, "Ruth," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 143.

¹⁸ Eskenazi and Frymer-kensky, xix.

¹⁹ Lee, 143.

and biases, and none of them have achieved a consensus. It is up to the reader to decide which one has the greatest merit.

ii. The Book's Placement in the Canon

Although the canonicity of Ruth has been virtually accepted without question, its position in the canon has varied and has occasioned considerable controversy.²⁰ The contemporary Hebrew Bible places Ruth in the *Kethuvim* (Writings), the third division of the Bible, as part of the Five Scrolls or *Megillot*, which also includes Song of Songs, Ecclesiastics, Lamentations, and Esther. The sequence of these five books in the modern Jewish Bible follows the Jewish liturgical calendar, in which Ruth is read on *Shavuot* or the Feast of Weeks, fifty days after Passover, roughly around the time of the Pentecost celebration in Christian tradition.²¹ In the Leningrad Code, which is the oldest surviving full manuscript of the Hebrew Bible, Ruth follows Proverbs and precedes the Song of Songs. This could imply that Ruth, a woman of strength (3:11), is linked with the woman of strength depicted in Proverbs 31:1, and with the independent young woman in the love story of Song of Songs, who goes after her beloved in the middle of the night (Song 3:1-4; 5: 6-7).²²

In the Christian Bible, which follows the sequence of the Septuagint (Greek) and Vulgate (Latin), Ruth is placed in the collection of the historical books, right after Judges, since according to the opening verse, Ruth is situated at the time of the judges (Ruth 1:1),

²⁰ Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary 9 (Dallas: Word Books, 1996), 5.

²¹ Eskenazi and Frymer-kensky, xx.

²² Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, xlvi.

and is followed by 1 Samuel, which describes the rise of David, who is named at the end of the Book of Ruth (4:17; 22).²³ Thus the Book of Ruth provides a chronological bridge between Judges and 1 Samuel. It serves as a transitional link between the pre-monarchy, an era marked by lawlessness and chaos, and the emergence of the Davidic monarchy. Its great king is a descendent of Ruth the Moabite.²⁴

iii. The Socio-Historical Context of the Story

The author situates the story of Ruth during the time of judges by beginning the book with “in the days the judges ruled” (1:1). The story culminates in the name of David from the genealogy (4:22). The historical period mentioned in this book runs from the period of chaos (Judg.17-21) to the institution of the monarchy (1 Sam.16). Thus, instead of tracing the political situations of the story, I will focus only on the geographical locations, and the ancient legal customs and practices reflected in the story.

Geographical Places

The story takes place in two locations, namely, Bethlehem of Judah, and Moab. Thus, it is necessary to have some information about these places.

Moab

The Kingdom of Moab was a territory east of the Dead Sea, in the southern part of Jordan. This land is comparatively high in elevation, reaching points over 3,000 feet above sea level, and is well watered. Its economy was based on cultivating wheat and

²³ Eskenazi and Frymer-kensky, xxi.

²⁴ Lee, 143.

barley, and raising sheep and goats.²⁵ The origins of the Moabites are said to be descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot, who had an incestuous relationship with his elder daughter (Gen. 19:30-38). Moab is depicted as an enemy of Judah (Judg. 3: 12-30; 10:6) because of the Moabites' inhospitality during the wilderness period when the Israelites were returning from Egypt (Dt. 23: 3-4). Therefore, the Moabites are rejected in the assembly of the Lord in Israel.²⁶ Moab is also condemned in several Israelite prophetic oracles (Isa 15:1-16:14; Jer. 48: 1-47).²⁷ Nevertheless, despite the negative portrayal of Moab, the narrative of 1 Sam 22:3-4 reveals that David sent his parents to the king of Moab to secure their safety during the time he was in crisis. Furthermore, in our story, Moab is the destination of the man Elimelech, who leaves his home country for Moab, in order to find means for survival.

Bethlehem of Judah

Bethlehem of Judah is a town from early in the Israelite period according to the biblical tradition. Bethlehem was claimed to be the political center of Judah prior to Jerusalem's ascendancy.²⁸ In Hebrew, Bethlehem means "house of bread." It is ironic that there is famine in the "house of bread," which forces Elimelech and his entire family to seek refuge in a land that is culturally and politically foreign to them. Bethlehem is a small town of over twenty thousand inhabitants, about three miles southwest of Jerusalem

²⁵ P. Kyle McCarter Jr., "Moab," in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, 3rd Revised and Updated, ed. Mark Allan Powell (HaperOne: Haper Collins Publishers, 2011), 645.

²⁶ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 9-10.

²⁷ Schipper, 38.

²⁸ Campbell, 54.

in the territory of Judah. At an elevation of 2,460 feet above sea level, Bethlehem sits along the north-south ridge road of the central highlands.²⁹ Bethlehem is first mentioned as the burial site for Rachel in the Bible (Gen. 35: 19; 48: 7; 1Sam. 10:2). The city is the family home of David (1 Sam. 16:1; 17: 12) and the place where he is anointed king (1 Sam. 16: 4-13). After the division of the Kingdom into Israel and Judah, Bethlehem became one of the fifteen cities in Benjamin and Judah fortified by Rehoboam (2 Chron. 11:5-12). By the time of Micah in the eighth century BCE, Bethlehem was only a small, insignificant village (Mic. 5:2).³⁰ Christians identify Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus (Matt. 2:1; Lk. 2:4).

Legal Custom and Practice

In the Book of Ruth, ancient legal customs provide a crucial backdrop to the events of the story. Three areas of Israelite legal custom that underlie the Book of Ruth are inheritance, redemption, and the remarriage of a childless widow. The following provides a brief description of these three customs.

Inheritance

Most of the biblical legislation governing inheritance concerns the passing on of land, not personal wealth or other property.³¹ Land is the most essential resource for economic survival of the people in the biblical Israel households, as they are primarily

²⁹ Charles H. Miller, "Bethlehem," Powell, 92.

³⁰ Ibid, 93.

³¹ Barry Lee Eichler, "Inheritance," Powell, 407.

agricultural. Israelite family land was in principle inalienable. It is important for the family to have a male heir to keep the clan and its operation of family property intact. The Book of Numbers 27: 8-11 establishes the guidelines of property transmission. It demonstrates the order of a person's right to inherit the property of a man. The first heir is son. If a man dies without a son, then the right of inheritance goes to the next in succession. The order is arranged in this sequence: sons, daughters, brothers, father's brother (uncle), or the nearest relative in the man's own clan to inherit his property.

In the story of Ruth, the biblical laws do not specifically address situations of widows without living sons. Consequently, Naomi and Ruth's right to the family's land has been subject to debate. However, some biblical narratives mention widows who own land (see 2 Kgs. 8:3.6). In a clay fragment from Judah in the eight-century BCE, a widow's judicial petition concerning land from that has been given to her by her deceased childless husband, which reflects widow's inheritance from deceased husband.³² The extra-biblical resources in the ancient Near East provide evidence, showing the right of widows to the inheritance and control of property in Israel during the late monarchial and Persian periods.³³

Levirate Marriage

The Hebrew root word for levirate marriage is *יבם* (*ybm*), which refers to a special kind of relationship by marriage, in which a brother-in-law marries his sister-in-law, who

³² Ziony Zevit, "Dating Ruth: Legal, Linguistic and Historical Observations," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117, no. 4 (2005): 587.

³³ Ziony Zevit, 589.

is his deceased brother's sonless widow. The origin of the relationship is defined by the directives in Deuteronomy 25: 5-10.³⁴ The institution of levirate marriage is a legal custom in Israel and Judaism which decrees that when a man dies without a son, the brother is obliged to marry the widow, his sister-in-law, and the first-born son of this marriage is accounted the son of the deceased.³⁵ In the ancient Near East, some practices are similar to the levirate marriage in Israel. The parties and purposes involved in such marital arrangements are discussed to varying degrees in the Hittite and Middle Assyrian laws and in one text each from Nuzi and Ugarit.³⁶ Even early biblical stories bear evidence of this practice. One explicit example is the story of Tamar and Judah (Gen.38: 6-11), which states that it is the "duty" of Onan, the brother-in-law of the widow Tamar, to provide offspring for the deceased man, the brother of Onan (38:8). This story implies that the early levirate law was more concerned with the continuation of the family line than with land and possessions as there was no real land to speak of at this point. Later appropriations of the law had a broader focus, which included inheritance, land and offspring, as well as the care of the widowed sister-in-law.

The story of Ruth portrays this later levirate marriage in operation. However, the legal institution involved in the marriage between Boaz and Ruth is not aligned with the law in Deuteronomy, since Boaz is not a brother but a distant relative of Elimelech. Ruth's case suggests that levirate marriage in the Hebrew Bible is not simply concerned

³⁴ Erlangen Kutsch, "יבם," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 5, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 368.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 370.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 372.

with producing a male child or with producing an heir to the dead man's property. It is concerned with the support and protection of the widow, and the perpetuation of family property within the immediate family.³⁷ This legal institution is also considered a matter of redemption, which we shall see in the following.

Redemption

The Hebrew root word of Redemption is לָאָה. The verb means “to restore, to redeem.”³⁸ In the Hebrew Bible, this practice is considered not only a socio-legal dimension, but also a religious one.³⁹ In Leviticus 25:48f., the “redeemer” refers to a man's brother, uncle, cousin, or some other kinsman who is obliged to buy real property that an Israelite is forced to sell (cf. Lev. 25: 25ff; Jer.32:6ff). The reason behind this practice is tribal solidarity, which extends to the possessions of tribal members.⁴⁰ The wife of a deceased relative is also part of the redemption. In the Book of Ruth, it assumes that a kinsman is supposed to “rise up the name of the deceased upon his property,” by means of acquiring the wife of the deceased (4:5, 10), for the siring of children who can inherit the property of the deceased. Although Boaz is one of the relatives and redeemers of Naomi and Ruth (2:20), there is a nearer kinsman-redeemer who has the priority (3:12;

³⁷ Victor P. Hamilton, “Marriage,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 4, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 567.

³⁸ Helmer Ringgren, “לָאָה,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 2, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 351.

³⁹ Jeremiah Unterman, “Redemption,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 650.

⁴⁰ Ringgren, 351-52.

4:4). Only when that redeemer surrenders his rights is Boaz permitted to take both responsibilities (4:9).⁴¹

To summarize, the Book of Ruth is a small book but communicates beautiful and encouraging messages despite the existence of various ambiguities. It is one of the three books in the Hebrew Bible named after women, and is the only book that is named after a foreign woman. The Book of Ruth is “a song of hope, a wonderful love story, a story with a perfect happy ending, a story that captures the reader’s imagination and heart.” Ruth and Naomi represent strong women who are struggling to maintain their personal identity and integrity within the confines of an elaborate set of rules.⁴²

In the context of the biblical world, which is primarily patriarchal, women have no status. In the larger ancient Near East society, which is a male-dominated culture, women are placed at the very bottom of the society. They do not have autonomy in the family and society, but depend totally on male members of the family in terms of economic means and decision making. In the story of Ruth, there seems not to be a single man who can provide a means of survival to Ruth and Naomi. In the case of Ruth, her status is ever lower, because she is both a foreigner and a widow. As childless widows, they are grouped among the poorest of the poor. In the biblical tradition, they are qualified as the subjects of charity, as found in the Book of Deuteronomy, which cites the Law Code four times on the care of the widow, orphan, and the sojourner.⁴³ However,

⁴¹ Unterman, 650-51.

⁴² Mishael Maswari Caspi, ix-x.

⁴³ The texts of Deuteronomy cite the law of the care of the widow, orphan, and sojourner are: Deut. 14: 28-29; 15: 7-11; 24: 17-22; 26: 12 (NRSV).

these two women undergo a dangerous journey characterized by insecurity and uncertainty. Through their initiative and cooperation, they bring about not only their own personal transformation; they also reap blessings for the nation in the form of the continuance of the lineage that eventually gives rise to David. Thus, the story of Ruth is still relevant to women of all ages as they strive for justice, peace, and right relationship in the world. Ruth also becomes a model of women's spirituality, which calls for women's integral transformation.

II. Women's Spirituality

This subsection contributes a considerable part to the study, which intends to propose a spirituality grounded in biblical tradition for the religious women of southwest China. The main task here is to read meaning out of the selected texts of Ruth, with the hope that they could offer a concrete expression of women's spirituality that is embodied in biblical women's life experience. Prior to this exegetical work, it is necessary to specify what I mean by women's spirituality. When talking about women's spirituality, one initial question would be asked "what is spirituality?" Thus, it is appropriate to start with this fundamental question.

What is Spirituality?

Christian spirituality "has in recent years emerged as a distinct academic discipline in universities, colleges, and theological schools throughout the English-speaking world."⁴⁴ The term "spirituality" seems to have been originated within a

⁴⁴ Arthur Holder, *the Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), 1.

Catholic context that is first evidenced in the 5th century, and it refers to the Pauline sense of life according to the Spirit of God.⁴⁵ Over the centuries, the term “spirituality” had been mistakenly perceived to be exclusively Christian and non-academic not more than thirty years ago. Nevertheless, it seems to have gained general acceptance as an appropriate designation of academic discipline.⁴⁶ This implies that spirituality is no longer exclusively Christian, and it is not even an exclusively religious term.⁴⁷ Today, many people who consider themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” Thus, spirituality becomes a more inclusive word, which is not necessarily associated with belief in a God or some other supernatural being, and it does not exclude such a belief either.⁴⁸

What does the term spirituality mean? Consulting any recent works on the subject, one will find all definitions of the term that are different from each other. There are not two definitions are exactly the same, and no one definition of spirituality is accepted by all Christian traditions. The complexity of the subject requests approaches from various perspectives, and with careful attention to the historical and cultural contexts in which

⁴⁵ Walter H. Principe, “Spirituality, Christian,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 1993), 931.

⁴⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, “The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline,” *Studies in Spirituality* (January 1998): 39.

⁴⁷ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Feminist Spirituality: Christian Alternative or Alternative to Christianity?” *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, 2nd ed. ed. Joann Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 30.

⁴⁸ David B. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 18.

spirituality receives its particular manifestations.⁴⁹ This explains why Barbara E. Bowe labels spirituality as the “all-too-difficult word.”⁵⁰

The word “spirituality” has a broad range of meanings. Philosophers speak of spirituality as human capacity for self-transcendence. Psychologists refer to spirituality as the aspect of personal essence that gives a person power, energy, and motive force. For religious persons, spirituality is the actualization of human self-transcendence by whatever is acknowledged as the ultimate reality.⁵¹ Some understand spirituality as the process of becoming a person in the fullest sense.⁵² Others consider spirituality as “the expression of a dialectical personal growth from the inauthentic to the authentic,”⁵³ “the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms of self-transcendence toward ultimate values one perceives,”⁵⁴ “the unique and personal response of individuals to all that calls them to integrity and transcendence.”⁵⁵ In Christian context, the term “spirituality” refers to the “intimate loving relationship between God’s Holy Spirit and

⁴⁹ Holder, 2.

⁵⁰ Barbara E. Bowe, *Biblical Foundations of Spirituality: Touching a Finger to the Flame*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 6.

⁵¹ Joann Wolski Conn, ed. *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 3.

⁵² John Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality*, 2nd ed. (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1992), 40.

⁵³ Edward Kinerk, “Toward a Method for the Study of Spirituality,” *Review for Religious* 40, no. 1 (1981): 6.

⁵⁴ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Spirituality in the Academy,” *Theological Studies* 50, no. 3 (1989): 684.

⁵⁵ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?” *Horizons* 13, no. 2 (1986): 264.

the spirit of believers, a relationship that can be characterized both as kinship and as communion.”⁵⁶

Etymologically, the word “spirituality” derives from the Latin *spiritualitas*, an abstract word related to *spiritus* and *spiritualis*, which were used to translate Paul’s *pneuma* and *pneumatikos*.⁵⁷ The verb form in Latin is *spirare*, which means to breathe, to live. In Jewish tradition it is God’s own breath, which calls forth humanity. It is the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit in Christian faith.⁵⁸ The apostle Paul refers flesh and spirit, not to a body/soul dualism, but to life apart from or life rooted in the living Spirit of Jesus Christ. To the extent that the whole being—body and soul—of persons participates in the reality of the Triune God, such persons are *pneumatikoi* (1 Cor 3:1; Gal 6:1). Thus the NT language has a holistic orientation, which encompasses physical, emotional/ psychic, and ethical/social dimensions of persons’ lives, as well as their relationship with God. However, over the centuries the term “spirituality” carried connotations of body-denying or otherworldly private interiority.⁵⁹ In the English-speaking contexts, “spirituality” in contemporary Christian understanding has generally

⁵⁶ Holder, 1.

⁵⁷ Walter H. Principe, “Spirituality, Christian,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MI: the Liturgical Press, 1993), 931.

⁵⁸ Reinhild Traitler, “Feminist and Orthodox Spiritualities: ‘Women’s Spirituality,’” *The Ecumenical Review* 60, no. 1 – 2 (Jan - Apr 2008): 16.

⁵⁹ Lisa E. Dahill, “Spirituality,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* 5, Erwin Fahlbusch, Jan Milic Lochman, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 159.

come to reflect a world and body-embracing reality, a turn toward the original Pauline inflection of the term.⁶⁰

Contemporary scholars have distinguished three levels of spirituality. The first refers to a person's primal, conscious experience of participation in ultimate reality. The second refers to the articulation or expression to their first-level experience. The third level is the scholarly investigation of the first and especially of the second levels of spirituality.⁶¹ The third one is the academic discipline of Christian spirituality. Therefore, it is appropriate to say that the study of spirituality appropriately involves a focus on experience. Such experience is not limited to extraordinary moments of ecstasy or insight, or to explicitly devotional experiences. An authentic spirituality includes the whole of life: politics, economics, art, sexuality, and science, as well as whatever is explicitly religious.⁶²

As noted, no one definition of either spirituality or Christian spirituality is accepted by all Christian traditions. The attempt to define spirituality can only be made possible by suggesting working definition as presented below:

Spirituality is the actualization of the basic human capacity for transcendence and the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the horizon of ultimate value one perceives.⁶³

⁶⁰ Dahill, 159.

⁶¹ Walter Principe, "Toward Defining Spirituality," in *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader*, Kenneth J. Collins, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 47-8.

⁶² Holder, 2.

⁶³ Sandra M. Schneiders, "Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, 16.

Spirituality refers to the totality of human life energized by an inner drive for self-transcendence, that is, for moving beyond self-maintenance to reach out in love, in free commitment to seek truth and goodness. When this basic human capacity for spirituality is believed to be actualized by the holy, there is religious spirituality and when this capacity is experienced in relation to the divine mystery as Source, and Incarnate Word, and Life-giving Spirit there is Christian spirituality.⁶⁴

Christian spirituality is the daily, communal, lived expression of one's ultimate beliefs, characterized by openness to the self-transcending love of God, self, neighbor, and world through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵

There is much more to be said about Christian spirituality. However, given the limited space of this study, it is not my task to go any further in defining the term, and these working definitions could serve the purpose of basic understanding of spirituality. The following will address the related theme of this study, women's spirituality.

What is Women's Spirituality?

Attention to women's spirituality originated within the context of the feminist movement, a movement that is based on women as the most exploited group, often includes both men and women in fighting for change in the patriarchal structures. Those women (and men) have become conscious of living in an androcentric and patriarchal cultural system, which is characterized with patriarchal control at the material and ideological levels of the aspects of women's lives, in the family, at the working place, in

⁶⁴ Joann Wolski Conn, "Dancing in the Dark: Women's Spirituality and Ministry," in *Women's Spirituality*, 9.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Dreyer, "Spirituality," in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, 1st ed., R. McBrien (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 1216.

religious matters, and in society.⁶⁶ The consciousness of shared experience generates an ideology that affirms of women's full equality with men, and therefore eliminates all forms of domination. This ideology is called feminism, which has been identified as the cornerstone of women's spirituality because of its embedded drive that is meant to transform the world of all structures of oppression and injustice.⁶⁷

Therefore, women's spirituality is a spirituality of liberation, a spirituality infused with feminist consciousness.⁶⁸ Women's spirituality is feminist oriented spirituality, which is different from feminist spirituality. The former is exclusively female relationship to the divine in contrast to the male, while the latter is the spirituality of those women and men who have experienced feminist consciousness-raising. Women's spirituality might be studied across particular historical periods, or within particular religions, or racial, cultural groups and certain "female" characteristics delineated.⁶⁹ In contrast to male spirituality, women's spirituality might be described as more related to "nature and natural processes than to culture; more personal and relational than objective and structural; more diffuse, concrete and general than focused, universal, abstract; more emotional than intellectual." Despite their differences, both male spirituality and women's spirituality can be feminist oriented spiritualities, which seek to eliminate several underlying dichotomies: mind/spirit and body, transcendence and immanence,

⁶⁶ Monica J. Melanchthon, "Women's Spiritualities: Resource for Mission," *International Review of Mission* 98, no. 389 (Nov 2009): 308.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 309.

⁶⁹ Anne Carr, "On Feminist Spirituality," in *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 382.

rational and intuitive, intelligence and emotion.⁷⁰ Such notion of dichotomy is dominant in our societies today, and has constructed a hierarchical culture and society. Within the hierarchical system, women's lives and experiences are made different from those of men. This difference is not biological one, but what has been made of it in our social, political, and religious tradition, which categorize women with powerless and inferior, while men are described as powerful and superior.

Even the Christian tradition, especially Catholic tradition, has taken a measure of justification to arrangement between the sexes. In his interpretation of scripture, Thomas Aquinas argued that woman partially shared the image of God, while man was authorized by the male Christ and thus takes control of woman. For centuries, Christian theology has served to justify women's oppression, which is undeniable.⁷¹ Under the oppressive power structure, women's lives have been shaped by their social roles. The experience of powerlessness and the harsh reality that having a women's body meant being vulnerable and having few choices, all of which had, and continue to have a profound influence on their spirituality.⁷² Women pay attention to the needs of others but sacrifice and give up the self. There is a need to empower women to articulate their own situations and wishes, to express their own spiritual needs.

Therefore, women's spirituality has to be truly holistic. It must speak to all those parts of us that make us women, as well as the parts that make us human. As women, we

⁷⁰ Melancthon, 308-9.

⁷¹ Traitler, "Feminist and Orthodox Spirituality: Women's Spirituality," *The Ecumenical Review*, 19.

⁷² *Ibid*, 19-20.

need a spirituality that guides our emotions, instincts, our thinking, and shows us meaning in our everyday lives. We need to develop such spirituality, though the task requires courage to take the risks.⁷³ In so doing, we need to develop what has been suppressed in ourselves. We acknowledge our limitation but also demonstrate our capacity.

Sandra M. Schneiders identifies five major characteristic features of women's spirituality: 1) Women's spirituality is rooted in women's experience, especially their experience of disempowerment and re-empowerment. Women's empowerment is made possible by the sharing of experiences, which creates awareness and solidarity among and between women. 2) Women's spirituality honor and celebrate the body especially reproduction and childbirth, menstruation, which are bodily functions that have been viewed as inferior and polluting. 3) A profound concern with nonhuman nature, with an ecological approach to the vision of a single organic universe. 4) The emphasis on participatory of ritual, a spirituality that is committed to re-envisioning of ministry, liturgy, theology, teaching community building, and ecclesiastical. 5) Feminist spiritualities are committed to the belief that there is an inherent relationship between personal spiritual growth and the pursuit of social justice.⁷⁴

Conn illustrates three reasons that make women's spirituality problematic: women's humanity/spirituality is restricted, Christian tradition has legitimated women's

⁷³ Theresa King O'Brien, ed., *The Spiral Path: Essays and Interviews on Women's Spirituality* (Minnesota: YES International Publishers, 1988), ix.

⁷⁴ Sandra M. Schneiders, "Feminist Spirituality," *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 399-401.

restriction, and the detrimental effects of prevailing God-images.⁷⁵ These issues have deeply affected women's ministry. Therefore, women need to use both internal and external resources to achieve a mature and holistic spirituality, which consequently improve our ministry. A holistic spirituality is a celebration of the lives, lifestyles and values of women, women's participation in the cycles of the earth and universe, and women's working toward making a better world.⁷⁶

i. The Theme of Solidarity (Ruth 1:8-18)

The theme of solidarity forms a significant part of the first chapter of the book of Ruth. It is manifested particularly through the interaction among three desperate women (Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah). Solidarity is an essential element in religious life. It also explains the essence of community life for religious persons. It suggests a spiritual kinship among the members of religious communities. In a religious community, solidarity does not mean everyone doing the same thing all the time, but having a core vision about what each member is doing that binds the community together.

What is solidarity? It is not so much about political campaigns or social movements, but a deep kinship that unites people. It expresses an unconditional bond between persons, often based upon similar circumstances (especially in times of difficulty or challenge), beliefs, identity, or situations they have to face, around which they become united. This is, however, one of the essential aspects lacking among the sisters in the religious communities of southwest China. Solidarity is also a choice to recognize our

⁷⁵ Joann Wolski Conn, "Dancing in the Dark: Women's Spirituality and Ministry," in *Women's Spirituality*, 11-14.

⁷⁶ Diane Stein, *The Women's Spirituality Book* (Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 1991), 1.

commonness with others and to be in kinship with another by whatever binds us. This is what we see in Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah in the first chapter of the Book of Ruth. Though they have each suffered a deep loss in their lives, they seek the best for one another.

The Context of the Passage

This text is about the “departure for Bethlehem.”⁷⁷ The narrative presents the dialogue between Naomi and her two daughters-in-law upon the matter of returning home. This passage is placed right after the prologue of the story (vv.1-7), which provides the setting and introduces the main characters, specifies their relationships, and describes their plight.⁷⁸ What follows is the account of the journey taken by Naomi and Ruth and their arrival in Bethlehem (vv.19-22). In this account, a family of four leaves Bethlehem for Moab during a time of famine, and returns as a family of two at the beginning of the barley harvest.

The narrator briefly recounts the migration of a man, Elimelech, together with his wife Naomi, and their two sons, to the country of Moab, because of the famine in Bethlehem of Judah, their homeland, in hope that Moab would provide for them enough food and a better future (v.1). Nevertheless, what awaits them is tragedy in Moab. Within the span of a few verses, death claims the lives of all three men, leaving three widows, Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth (vv.3-5). In a patriarchal society, the security of husband and children is no longer with Naomi. The narrator shifts the readers’ attention from

⁷⁷ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999), 21.

⁷⁸ Tribble, 166-67.

Elimelech to Naomi, from a male to a female character. Once Naomi followed her husband's decision—now it is Naomi, the only survivor of the family, choosing her own future. Beginning with the departure from Bethlehem, the Prologue ends when the prospect of food prompts Naomi to return to Bethlehem (vv.6-7).⁷⁹ These two verses serve as a transition between the setting of the scene in verses 1-5 and the beginning of the main action of the story. It is a transition that leads the reader from the land of Moab to the land of Judah and from narrative to dialogue.⁸⁰

The larger context is connected to Israel's history, which is explicitly indicated at the beginning of the opening verse, and the last line of the book. The story is located “in the days when the judges ruled” (v.1a) and ends with a genealogy, which includes the name of the great king of Israel, David, who descends from Ruth (4: 22b). Thus, the story is situated between the days of the judges and the days of the Israelite monarchy.⁸¹ The book of Judges is a historical account of the Israelite pre-monarchal period (1250-1050 BCE), which spans two hundred years, and consists of cycles of religious apostasy and punishment. Judges are temporary military leaders who are appointed by God to rescue the Israelites from oppression during this period. In the final chapters of the Book of Judges, the narrative account presents a disastrous war within the Israelite tribes elicited by acts of rape. The narrator repeatedly declares that “there was no king in Israel” (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21: 25), and, in the last line of the book, states that “everyone did what

⁷⁹ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 3.

⁸⁰ Tribble, 168.

⁸¹ Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, *Ruth and Esther*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 2.

was right in their own eyes” (21:25). The Hebrew name *אלימלך* (Elimelech), which means “my God is king,” reinforces that the narrative takes place “in the time of Judges.”⁸²

The chaos described in Judges found its relief in the book of Ruth, which is pervaded with extraordinary kindness. The kindness leads to individual and national transformation that occurs in the course of the book’s narrative. It ultimately leads to David, Ruth’s descendant, who clearly embodies Israel’s image of kingship.⁸³

The First Dialogue: Naomi Urges Orpah and Ruth to Return Home (vv.8-10)

As mentioned above, after the deaths of all the males of the family, women take over the story. In the rest of the first chapter, no men are present. Women become the central characters. They alone speak and act as the story continues. The narrator relates that the three women have begun to return to Bethlehem of Judah. The return does not take place, however, before a meaningful conversation occurs among them. In this conversation, Naomi blesses her daughters-in-law, hoping that they will receive Yahweh’s *חסד* (loving kindness). On their way to Judah, somewhere between Moab and Judah, the three widows find themselves at a crossroads. The narrative shifts to dialogue for the first time, giving voice to each of these women.⁸⁴ With her loving concern for their future, Naomi initiates the separation as she tries to persuade each of her daughters-in-law to return to their homes:

⁸² Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 4.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Tribble, 169.

- A Go back each of you to your mother's house.
B May the Lord deal kindly with you,
C as you have dealt with the dead and with me.
B' The Lord grant that you may find security,
A' each of you in the house of your husband.

In her emotional speech, Naomi speaks and dominates the conversation. She speaks directly to her two companions and begins by giving a command. She tells each of the young women to go back to the household of her mother, which is in Moab, where they may find rest in the house of a new husband.⁸⁵

In line A, the phrase “mother’s house” is unexpected in a patriarchal culture. It appears in only two other places in the Bible, both similarly connected to a strong female person. One is found in the narrative account of Genesis 24: 28, where Rebekah runs to her “mother’s house” to report the arrival of Abraham’s servant. The other is the woman in the Song of Songs, who speaks of taking her beloved to her “mother’s house” for safety or pleasure (Songs 3:4 and 8:2).⁸⁶ It is more common that widowed women without children return to their “father’s house,” as found in other texts (Gen.38:11; Lev. 22:13). The phrase “father’s house” is not simply a physical location, but refers to a social and economically integrated unit representing the basic element of the organization of Israelite and other ancient Near East societies.⁸⁷ Since Naomi has been the head of the household of three after the deaths of her husband and sons, she thus demonstrates that women could and did manage households. The phrase “mother’s house” may be the natural choice of Naomi, for she has been independent of men for a period of time.

⁸⁵ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 27.

⁸⁶ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 10.

⁸⁷ Schipper, 91.

Therefore, Naomi is projecting her own experience on her daughters-in-law, encouraging them to return to their own mother's house. A life at home with their own mother is a better choice than a life abroad with their mother-in-law. Furthermore, the narrator of Ruth 1:8 may have wanted the text's original audience to understand that Naomi's intention in sending back the women to their mother's house is that they may find security in the house of a new husband (line A').⁸⁸ Her genuine concern for the welfare of these young women suggests her unconditional bond with them and her desire for their wellbeing. Such concern speaks of more than kinship. It narrates a keen solidarity between the three women where the most vulnerable one moves past her own needs in order to be for the wellbeing of the others.

In line B, Naomi invokes the *ḥesed* of Yahweh. Her invocation is not based on Yahweh's past action, which has meant only famine, displacement, and death. Rather, it is based upon the gracious hospitality of her daughters-in-law, as she indicates in line C: "as you have dealt with the dead and with me." This is at the center of Naomi's speech both in structure and in meaning.⁸⁹ The kindness of Orpah and Ruth elicits Naomi's prayer affirming that Yahweh's *ḥesed* is available even beyond the borders of Israel and to non-Israelites.⁹⁰ Naomi wishes divine blessing for her daughters-in-law that Yahweh would show as much *ḥesed* towards them as they have shown towards Naomi and her family. It could imply that these women have become models of *ḥesed* for Yahweh. They have shown the deity a more excellent way. Therefore, the past loyalty of human beings (even foreign

⁸⁸ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 28.

⁸⁹ Tribble, 169.

⁹⁰ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 30.

women) is a paradigm for the future kindness of the divine being.⁹¹ Line B' shows Naomi's stated wish that Orpah and Ruth find security in the house of a new husband. Such is the best manifestation of Yahweh's *ḥesed* towards them.

Naomi ends her speech with a kiss, which is clearly intended to be a farewell gesture (cf. Gen. 31:28; 1 Kgs. 19:20). These young women, however, are not easily to be dismissed. They weep aloud and insist: we will return with you to your people (v.10). Such a statement emphasizes their selfless commitment to Naomi, situating Naomi at the center of their concern, without counting the consequence of their decision.⁹²

In the frame of this first exchange between Naomi and her daughters-in-law, both Naomi's directive and the young women's vows are matched with each other. Each of the three has a heart for the wellbeing of the other. This frames the exchange with two options for Ruth and Orpah: they could choose to either return to their mother's house or return with Naomi to her people.

The Second Dialogue: Turning Point for Orpah and Ruth (vv.11-14)

The resistance of Ruth and Orpah elicits Naomi's remarkable speech in verses 11-13. She counters their resistance by reiterating her exhortation and attempting to release these young women from any binding attachment to her or her family.⁹³ Considering that it is not beneficial for them to return with her to Bethlehem, Naomi repeatedly urges them to "turn back" (vv.11a, 12a), and elaborates the reason for sending her daughters-in-law

⁹¹ Tribble, 70.

⁹² Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 12.

⁹³ Ibid, 13.

home (vv.12b, 13a). She wants them both to find security in the house of a new husband, and she is by no means the source to provide for them security or husbands.⁹⁴ Her speech suggests that despite her own desperate situation, she makes the welfare of her daughters-in-law her primary concern.

In her second speech, Naomi attempts, in an intensive manner, to persuade the young women to return to their lives in Moab. Naomi's address to Orpah and Ruth in verses 11-13 is more tightly constructed than her speech in verses 8-9. She shifts from the mode of blessing to that of lament, insisting that there is only bitterness if they remain with her. In these verses, she adopts the tight rhetorical questions to convey the airtight nature of the argument.⁹⁵ The speech shifts toward matters of practical advice that no longer involve Yahweh. None of her rhetorical questions suggest that Orpah and Ruth will have Yahweh's assistance in finding rest in the household of a new husband.⁹⁶ Her tortuous speech moves from one hypothetical condition to another, in which she imagines herself becoming a wife and mother again, all of which seem to be desperately impossible for her.⁹⁷ Aware of this reality, Naomi cannot see any hope herself, because she is "too old to have a husband" and to bear a son (v.12). Influenced by the values and customs of patriarchal culture, Naomi must have learned how to fit in the male-

⁹⁴ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 35.

⁹⁵ Linafelt, 13.

⁹⁶ Schipper, 103.

⁹⁷ Lee, 144-45.

dominated system. She thus believes that a woman's future lies only in the security provided by a husband and sons in a patriarchal household.⁹⁸

In her attempt to dissuade her daughters-in-law from accompanying her, Naomi imagines circumstances which reflect some form of the levirate marriage practice. As noted, the practice of levirate marriage is that a childless widow marries her brother-in-law in order to sire an offspring who will inherit and transmit the family status, rights, and property of the deceased childless man, which enables the widow to remain within her late husband's family. According to the casuistic legal unit in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, it is the obligation of the brother-in-law to carry out the practice in such circumstances.⁹⁹ In her speech, Naomi speaks theoretically of two ways that could make levirate marriage possible for her daughters-in-law. First, she implies that if she were already pregnant with sons (v.11b), they may grow up to become husbands for her daughters-in-law, and thus could take the levirate duty. Secondly, she is very much aware of her bereft situation. Not only is she deprived of husband and sons, she is an aging woman, and thus, the hope of a new husband and offspring is no longer possible (v.12). Even if she could have a husband and bear a son tonight, it would be a waste of their youth for the young women to wait until her sons had grown up (v.13a).

Naomi acknowledges the fact that her bitterness is shared by Orpah and Ruth, for they have lost their husbands and are left childless. However, their bitterness is much less than that of hers, for she has lost both husband and sons. While they have the hope to find a new husband, she is too old to remarry and produce another husband for each of these

⁹⁸ Ibid, 145.

⁹⁹ Campbell, 83.

women. All of Naomi's conditional statements are subject to uncertainty because of the word "tonight," which signals their impossibility.¹⁰⁰ Her point is that she can no longer provide what they need. Therefore, the women should go back to their home country to find new husbands under whose protection they may obtain security.¹⁰¹

Explaining her situation to her daughters-in-law, and the consequent reminder of her own hopelessness, causes bitterness in Naomi and she turns to blame Yahweh.¹⁰² This is the second time that she references Yahweh. In verse 8 she prays for Yahweh's kindness to her daughters-in-law; here in v.13c she tells them that the hand of Yahweh has turned against her and caused her suffering.¹⁰³ She believes that Yahweh has become her enemy, acting against her willfully and harmfully. However, though Naomi relates her losses to Yahweh, the text does not make explicit any form of suffering as a consequence of wrongdoing. As James McKeown notes, "While Yahweh is the source of everything, Naomi does not name the hardship as punishment for sin."¹⁰⁴ It is through the shared experience of loss that these three women are bound together. Hence, not only their concern for one another but also their shared suffering constitutes their solidarity.

The response of Orpah and Ruth to Naomi's urging begins not with words but tears: "they wept aloud again" (v.14a). Their tears speak the tragedies which Naomi and the young women have undergone, especially Naomi's great losses. She has lost husband

¹⁰⁰ Linafelt, 14.

¹⁰¹ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 13.

¹⁰² James McKeown, *Ruth*, The Two Horizons OT Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 24.

¹⁰³ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 37.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

and sons, the possibility of the continuation of the family line, and the support of Yahweh.¹⁰⁵ The tears of Orpah may reflect her painful decision, which severs her bond to Naomi and Ruth. Just as Naomi's kiss signaled farewell (v.9b), Orpah takes the initiative to kiss her mother-in-law (v. 14b), which reveals her decision to return to her home. Although following the advice of Naomi, Orpah is the one who ultimately makes her own decision and chooses her destiny as a mature human being.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, Ruth does not need to kiss Naomi, for she chooses not to leave her mother-in-law, but remains in the bond of kinship with Naomi. The narrator reports: "Ruth clings to her" (v.14 c).

With their different responses to Naomi, Ruth and Orpah differentiate themselves from one another. This implies that they have now become separate individuals. They both show their steadfast love to their mother-in-law through distinctive decisions. Orpah chooses the expected, while Ruth chooses the unexpected.¹⁰⁷ Although they have things in common such as age, nationality, and the crisis they face, they finally decisively take different paths. There is no need of evaluation on the part of the reader—neither praise nor blame is necessary. Although both Rabbinic *Midrashim* and modern interpreters have taken a negative view of Orpah in her decision to return to Moab rather than accompanying Naomi to Judah, the narrator does not offer any clue of condemnation. Indeed, Orpah is acting in accordance with Naomi's instruction to leave, which manifests her loyalty to Naomi. Hers seems the reasonable course of action by custom, while Ruth's commitment to Naomi, an extravagant gesture of solidarity, may be seen as unreasonable

¹⁰⁵ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 37.

¹⁰⁶ Tribble, 171.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 171-72.

by comparison.¹⁰⁸ For solidarity does not bind persons together by each making the same decision. Rather, it is a deeper bond that allows freedom for each to make a different decision, each in the spirit of love and care. Orpah's decision is one of obedience to Naomi. Ruth's decision is one of direct support to old Naomi. Naomi urges both women to go to a place that provides a future for each. Thus, their solidarity is not expressed as sameness of decision but sameness of love and care for each other in what each one decides.

Moreover, the word "cling" that describes Ruth's gesture toward returning with Naomi, is not uncommon in Hebrew. One of the primary contexts of the word is related to love and marriage. The same word is found in Genesis 2:24, "a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife. . ." Therefore, it could be that the narrator uses "cling" to describe Ruth's kinship to Naomi as "abandoning one's birth family and clinging to a new party in the same terms that Genesis 2:4 uses." When Ruth steps forward to "cling" to Naomi, she binds the lives of these two vulnerable widows together in a new solidarity.¹⁰⁹

The Third Dialogue: Ruth's Statement of Solidarity (vv.15-18)

As soon as Orpah leaves, Naomi speaks again directly to Ruth, once again attempting to persuade her to follow her sister-in-law, to return to "her people and to her gods" (v.15a). She has argued on the basis of marriage opportunity in Moab, which does not convince Ruth to return, but rather chooses to "cling" to Naomi. Further reasons are

¹⁰⁸ Linafelt, 15.

¹⁰⁹ E. John Hamlin, *Surely There is a Future: A Commentary on the Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 19.

required for persuading Ruth not to follow her back to Judah. Naomi now stresses Ruth's tie to her people and her religion.¹¹⁰ She employs the actions of Orpah as the example and commands Ruth to follow.

In spite of Orpah's departure and Naomi's logical arguments, Ruth refuses to leave her destitute and desperate mother-in-law, and continues to "cling" to her.¹¹¹ In this third dialogue, Ruth breaks her silence and speaks as an independent person. In verses 16-17, she takes Naomi's arguments and responds to them with a vow of lifelong commitment:

Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!

In her best-known and impassioned speech, Ruth declares solidarity with Naomi. She ties her destiny to that of Naomi in life and in death. Instead of finding rest in a new husband's home in Moab, Ruth is determined to accompany Naomi in her return to Judah. Instead of turning back to her people and her god, Ruth decides to make Naomi's people and God her own. She even vows to be buried with Naomi, which implies that she will remain in Israel permanently.¹¹² Ruth's words manifest that she ties her own future to an old widowed woman, who by her own claim, has no future.

¹¹⁰ Nielsen, 48-49.

¹¹¹ McKeown, 25.

¹¹² Edward Allen Jones, *Reading Ruth in the Restoration Period: A Call for Inclusion* (New York: Bloomsbury T and T Clark, 2016), 27.

Ruth's reply begins with a negative command (v.16a) and concludes with an oath of self-imprecation in the name of Naomi's God (v.17b). The center of Ruth's speech is the series of positive assertions in between, which dramatically underlines the depth of her commitment to Naomi.¹¹³ Each statement of solidarity follows quickly upon the previous one, without explanation or transition.¹¹⁴ Each statement consists of the repetition of a verb, first in the second person (you go/lodge/die; your people/ your God) and then in the first person (I go/lodge/die; my people/ my God). The series of repetitions culminates in the final phrase (where you die, I will die), adding a third term, "there I will be buried," which communicates a statement of perpetual solidarity. It implies that "Ruth's commitment to Naomi extends beyond the borders of death." This is strengthened by the oath that closes Ruth's speech, in which she vows that "not even death will separate us."¹¹⁵ By her declaration, Ruth seems to assume the possibility that Naomi and Ruth will both be buried in the family tomb of their husbands and will thus remain together even after death.¹¹⁶

In the beginning of her speech, Ruth requests of Naomi not to insist that she forsake her or turn back from following her; instead, she should give up all her attempts to persuade Ruth to leave her, because she will never succeed, as Ruth has already

¹¹³ Scott N. Callaham, "But Ruth Clung to Her: Textual Constraints on Ambiguity in Ruth 1:14," *Tyndale Bulletin* 63 no. 2 (2012): 179.

¹¹⁴ Linafelt, 16.

¹¹⁵ Linafelt, 16.

¹¹⁶ Saul M. Olyan, *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), 65.

determined to follow her.¹¹⁷ Naomi's response to Ruth's declaration of intimate solidarity is that she "said no more to her" (v.18b). Such a passive reaction is ambiguous.¹¹⁸ Naomi does not reveal her inner thoughts and emotions by her silent reaction; however, she no longer attempts to persuade Ruth to return to her people.¹¹⁹ Her silence terminates the dialogue and leaves Ruth's commitment unanswered. It is thus the task of the reader to contribute to the meaning of the story, by reading the mind of the characters.¹²⁰ The narrator asserts that it is when Naomi sees that Ruth "is determined to go with her" that she ceases to speak (v.18a).¹²¹ This reading suggests that by her silence, Naomi accepts Ruth's companionship, thus maintaining their bond of kinship and the sharing of their lives. Moreover, it could also suggest that such an expression of solidarity leaves Naomi speechless.

Ruth declares her love and fidelity to Naomi, and vows to identify with what marks Naomi's identity: her location, her people, and her God, and even her burial place.¹²² It is Naomi to whom she wishes to cling rather than a new husband. Therefore, she chooses to leave behind her people and her god, as well as her family in Moab, and to embrace the ethnicity, culture, and religion of Naomi and assimilate into her community in Judah. Most crucially, Ruth sacrifices the security of her mother's house and the

¹¹⁷ Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 117.

¹¹⁸ Nielsen, 50.

¹¹⁹ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 43.

¹²⁰ Linafelt, 17.

¹²¹ Tribble, 173.

¹²² Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 40.

possibility of a bright future in the household of a new husband in her home country, risking the uncertainty of an unknown future with no guarantee of a happy ending in the foreign land.¹²³

There is no obvious advantage in following Naomi, for she is a desperate childless widow. In ancient Israelite society, widows are in a precarious situation due to the lack of material support from the spouse or other male members of the family. As Naomi returns from years of voluntarily living in a foreign land, she may be at extreme risk for social rejection and severe poverty.¹²⁴ In her speeches, Naomi presses Ruth to understand that Naomi is neither a source of material support nor hope for the future. However, Ruth still aggressively insists on accompanying Naomi to her native place.¹²⁵ Her vow of solidarity is a radical commitment, for it shows that Ruth's love and concern for Naomi are primary factors in her decision.

Trible argues that in the ancient Near Eastern culture, which is patriarchal in nature, Ruth has chosen death over life. She has renounced the solidarity of family and abandoned her national and religious identity. Her radical decision is extraordinary—“only Abraham matches this radicality” in the history of Israel.¹²⁶ In comparison to Abraham, who has a call from God with a divine promise (Gen. 12:1-5), Ruth has no God who calls her, but nevertheless chooses to follow the impoverished Naomi; Abraham is a

¹²³ McKeown, 25.

¹²⁴ Carolyn J. Sharp, “Feminist Queries for Ruth and Joshua: Complex Characterization, Gapping, and the Possibility of Dissent,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 28, No. 2 (2014): 241.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 241-42.

¹²⁶ Trible, 173.

man with a wife and servants, as well as other possessions accompanying him, whereas Ruth has no one at her side. Even Naomi, to whom Ruth commits, keeps distant from her. Therefore, it is appropriate to say that not even Abraham's leap of faith surpasses Ruth's decision to be in solidarity with Naomi.¹²⁷ In this case "one female has chosen another female in a world where life depends upon men."¹²⁸ However, despite Ruth's radical commitment, Naomi reacts by withdrawing from Ruth. Nevertheless, such alienation does not discourage Ruth from binding herself to her mother-in-law.

In sum, it is through the sharing of the same circumstances that Ruth, Naomi and Orpah are united. In their shared experience of tragedy, they deepen their bond of kinship. Ruth is not the only one who exemplifies solidarity; rather, each of them has demonstrated solidarity by making the wellbeing of the other her own primary concern. Even Oprah's decision is painful and takes some coaxing from Naomi, thus suggesting her solidarity with them. Naomi blesses them that they may receive God's *ḥayim*, by which she expresses her unconditional and steadfast love for them. This blessing signals a wish for their wellbeing with their future husbands, which reflects a form of solidarity that seeks the good of the other over one's own selfish concerns. The commitment of solidarity culminates in Ruth's statement of solidarity to Naomi. Thus, the relationships among these three women can serve as a model of kinship for the religious women of southwest China, who are bound together by their religious vocation. Solidarity could become one of the bases of spirituality where God's *ḥayim* binds these religious women

¹²⁷ Tribble, 173.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

together. And that bond itself becomes a manifestation of God's presence among them as community.

ii. The Theme of Initiative (Ruth 2: 1-17)

There are many cultural factors that discourage women from taking initiative and from making decisions to act on their own. In particular, religious sisters in southwest China are subject to the authority of the local bishop. As noted, these sisters, lack the autonomy to initiate any new form of service on their own within the local church. Rather, their decisions and plans are to be in line with the bishop's wishes.

The term "initiative" is a personal quality that shows the willingness to take responsibility and get things done. A person with initiative is motivated to do things. He or she often takes the first step, either in action or strategy, intending to resolve a problem or improve a situation, which is often voluntarily done without the influence of another. It is not about authority or status, but about courage and the desire to take responsibility. It is the ability to take the first step on one's own. Taking the initiative can be risky, so one must be willing to suffer the consequences. Facing a problem, one does not wait for others, but deliberately takes the first step to solve the problem. Initiative implies one's ability to exercise autonomy.

Initiative, as a sound but risk-taking strategy, manifests itself in the interaction of the main characters throughout the book of Ruth, but especially in the second chapter of the story. Ruth independently chooses to follow Naomi returning to Judah, and tries her best to improve the desperate condition of Naomi and herself. Despite her dependent position, she does not wait for Naomi to provide for food. Rather, she voluntarily takes

the initiative to become breadwinner, providing for their sustenance. Therefore, she rightly determines to respond to the need, risking herself, as a foreigner, to glean in the field.

My focus here is to deal with a particular passage, namely, Ruth 2: 1-17. This chosen passage introduces Ruth, the Moabite, who initiates the work of gleaning the field, and her subsequent encounter with “a rich man,” Boaz, who is a kinsman of Naomi’s late husband, Elimelech (v.1). Prior to this passage, the narrator indicates that it is the beginning of the barley harvest, when Naomi returns to Bethlehem, together with her daughter-in-law, Ruth, the Moabite (1:22), which provides the setting of the scene. Furthermore, the beginning of the barley harvest implies the possibility of fullness, which tempers the threat of famine, and gives hope for the future to the two women.¹²⁹

In this passage, the reader finds Ruth in the field belonging to Boaz. The latter advises Ruth to glean only in his field and provides food for her to eat during the day. The result of Ruth’s labor of the day brings Naomi “an ephah of barley” in the evening. Filled with gratitude and the joy of hope, Naomi says a prayer of blessing, and attributes “kindness” to both Boaz and Yahweh, declaring that the Lord’s kindness “has not forsaken the living and the dead” (v.20a). She now reveals that Boaz is one of their close relatives, one with the right to redeem them from their destitution (v.20b).

Coping with Emptiness: Ruth Initiates the Gleaning of the Field (vv.1-3)

The scene shifts from the road to the village of Bethlehem in Judah. By introducing “a prominent rich man,” Boaz, the fourth main character, the narrator

¹²⁹ Tribble, 175.

provides a clue that Naomi has a family connection to a certain man, who could be of great advantage to her.¹³⁰ It seems that Naomi has more resources than she even knows or acknowledges, and is not completely bereft of family in Bethlehem. However, the narrator does not indicate any male member of the extended family of Elimelech's clan. This suggests that Naomi and Ruth have been living in isolation upon arriving in Bethlehem. Neither the neighbors nor the wealthy kinsman has offered to help these two women.¹³¹

With help from no one, Ruth states her determination to address their poverty. She seems to have found the solution, proposing a concrete action to “go out to the field and glean among the ears of grain” (v.2a). Gleaning is a common agricultural activity. To glean is to follow behind, bending over to pick up what others leave in the harvest field.¹³² This is not a light labor but entails standing all day long in the field and enduring the burning sun. It is worth noting that despite her clinging to Naomi, Ruth's status as Moabite has not changed since she joined Naomi. Her name “Ruth” is still attached to an adjective modifier “the Moabite,” which signals that she may not have been accepted by Naomi's people in Bethlehem. The repeated mentioning of Ruth's Moabite identity highlights the hardships she faces as she enters into an unfamiliar territory.¹³³

Nevertheless, although Ruth is still considered a “Moabite” when she resides in

¹³⁰ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 27.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Jennifer L. Koosed, *Gleaning Ruth: A Biblical Heroine and Her Afterlives* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 6.

¹³³ Ibid, 28.

Bethlehem, she does not seem to be concerned about her foreignness. What really concerns her is to find resources for their sustenance. She sees an opportunity for survival and takes initiative to act upon it.¹³⁴

According to the prescriptions of gleaning, landowners are obliged to practice a form of charity in which the poor, and those on the margins of society, namely, the orphan, the widow, and the alien, are provided the legal right to gather the agrarian products left by the harvesters. Furthermore, the edges of the fields are not to be harvested, and the gleanings of the harvest are not to be gathered, for they are to be left for the poor (Lev.19: 9-10; 23: 22; Deut. 24: 19-22).¹³⁵ Ruth seems to be under the rights of each category of the laws of the disadvantaged groups. She is a widow, a foreigner, and can also be considered an orphan, at least in the sense of resemblance.¹³⁶ However, Ruth's knowledge of the field rights for the vulnerable is not stated in the narrative. It is not certain whether Ruth knows the law or not. Her statement for the request to glean is based on her assumption that she may find favor in someone's sight (v.2b), rather than on the basis of the law of provisions for the disadvantaged to glean.¹³⁷ Such a statement embodies both initiative and determination.¹³⁸

Ruth desires to glean for food and to seek permission from the landowner in whose field she might glean peacefully. Although Israelite law provides the right of the

¹³⁴ Tribble, 175.

¹³⁵ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 59-60.

¹³⁶ Joshua Berman, "Ancient Hermeneutics and the Legal Structure of the Book of Ruth," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 119, no. 1 (2007): 29-30.

¹³⁷ Schipper, 115.

¹³⁸ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 61.

poor to glean in the fields, Ruth feels the need to seek the permission of the landowner before doing so. Her notion of seeking favor may imply that Ruth is not certain of her safety when gleaning among the residents of Bethlehem. There is no reason to assume that they will observe these laws in a just manner, especially considering that not even Naomi's relatives have stepped forward to support the two widows.¹³⁹ Because such laws of protection were instituted, there is reason to believe that frequently the poor, the alien and others were not provided for or were even subject to harm. Thus laws had to be developed to protect them. Whether the laws were observed is difficult to ascertain. The seeking of favor may also signal Ruth's awareness that gleaning in the field involves risk.¹⁴⁰ It would be more dangerous for Ruth, as she fits all three categories of the vulnerable people who are the subjects of charity. She has no one to defend her, no other ties to the community in Bethlehem except Naomi, and thus no social safety net in times of hardship such as the present.¹⁴¹

Despite her awareness of risk, Ruth is determined to dedicate herself to providing for them both. She asks for Naomi's consent to glean in the fields, which shows her willingness to help and to submit to her mother-in-law's authority. In response to Ruth, Naomi approves the plan straight away, and says, "Go, my daughter" (v.2c). She calls Ruth "my daughter," which suggests that she may have acknowledged their being bound together and sharing the same desperate situation. Now, the relationship between the two

¹³⁹ Schipper, 115.

¹⁴⁰ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 29.

¹⁴¹ Linafelt, 27.

of them seems to be cordial and characterized by mutual respect.¹⁴² One may wonder why Naomi does not go together with Ruth in the fields to glean. It would be more convenient if the two glean together, so that they could take care of each other. Naomi could defend Ruth if the latter were in danger, and thus reduce the risk that Ruth may encounter when she ventures out alone into an unfamiliar situation to seek help from people she does not know.¹⁴³

In verse 3, the narrator briefly reports that Ruth does precisely what she plans: “she went, she came, and she gleaned” (v.3a). These three verbs are good evidence of a woman taking action, exercising initiative. The story unfolds with the narrator’s report that Ruth arrives in Boaz’s field: “as it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz” (v.3b). The phrase “it happened” creates ambiguity. It is often considered an indirect reference to God’s providential guiding of Ruth’s footsteps.¹⁴⁴ However, the text itself uses only “it happened,” which does not ensure the providential view with any certainty. Therefore, the phrase may simply mean a stroke of good luck. It leaves the reader to decide which perspective he or she is inclined to follow. Furthermore, the phrase may also strengthen the idea that Ruth was not intentionally seeking Boaz, nor has Naomi spoken about his existence to her daughter-in-law.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² McKeown, 39.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Linafelt, 27.

¹⁴⁵ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 66.

Edward F. Campbell asserts that “all the action takes place in the presence of the unobtrusive chief character of the entire story.” According to him, God is always present and behind all the scenes. The Hebrew Bible attributes all that happens to God—“few things if any happen by chance.” Therefore, Campbell argues for the existence of providential guidance in the book of Ruth.¹⁴⁶ Through the lens of our faith in God, we involve God in Ruth’s initiative to glean, assuming that it is God who directs Ruth to glean in Boaz’s field. While recognizing the work of divine providence, it is essential to acknowledge the primary importance of human action.¹⁴⁷ It is the initiative of Ruth to take responsibility to provide for the family that invites God’s response of providential guidance, which in turn leads to Ruth’s success in gleaning. Even Ruth’s good luck is not without God’s intention. As Tribble remarks, “within human luck is divine intentionality.”¹⁴⁸

As a unit, this brief section begins and ends with a chiasmic construction, which emphasizes the family connection between Elimelech and Boaz. Boaz is introduced as a “prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech” in the beginning. At the end of verse 3, the narrative stresses his identity as a relative by repeating, “Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.” The need for Ruth to find favor is presented in between.¹⁴⁹ The subsequent events are situated within this framework.

¹⁴⁶ Campbell, 112.

¹⁴⁷ Linafelt, xvii.

¹⁴⁸ Tribble, 176.

¹⁴⁹ Boyd Luter, and Richard O. Rigsby, “The Chiasmic Structure of Ruth 2,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 3(1993): 53.

Gleaning in the Field: Encounter with Boaz (vv.4-17)

This scene recounts what happens while Ruth is gleaning in the field belonging to Boaz, a relative of Naomi's late husband. It consists of three units: Boaz inquires as to Ruth's identity (vv.4-7), the first conversation takes place between Ruth and Boaz (vv.8-13), and Boaz provides Ruth food and protection (vv.14-17).

Boaz Inquires as to Ruth's Identity (vv.4-7)

Coincidentally, Boaz arrives from Bethlehem right after Ruth's arrival to his field. As he enters the scene, Boaz greets his hired workers with a blessing, and seeks information about Ruth's identity from his servant in charge: "to whom does this young woman belong?"(v.5b). In the patriarchal culture of the ancient world, women were not expected to be independent persons. A young woman must belong to someone—she could either be wife of, daughter of, or a servant of a male member in the household.¹⁵⁰ She is a possession rather than an autonomous person. Instead of asking who she is, Boaz investigates the identity of her owner. To his surprise, Boaz's question does not apply to Ruth, who does not have a family connection to any male. She is an independent woman who subverts the patriarchal system.¹⁵¹ Moreover, it is not only her lack of familial connection or status as a non-Israelite that situates her outside the typical categories of a female in patriarchal society. It is also because she as a woman in this culture has acted upon her own initiative to work in the field.

¹⁵⁰ Sakenfeld, 41.

¹⁵¹ Tribble, 176.

In response to Boaz's inquiry, the servant cannot identify Ruth based on her family affiliation. He therefore responds with a distinct emphasis on her ethnic origin and her relation to Naomi: "She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab" (v.6).¹⁵² He does not specify the exact familial relationship between Ruth and Naomi, as he emphasizes only Ruth's foreignness by highlighting her Moabite identity, referring to her as the one who comes from Moab.¹⁵³ In addition, he also emphasizes her initiative to request permission to work in the field. The servant describes to Boaz what Ruth requested and what she has been doing. The multiplicity of possible translations of the Hebrew creates difficulty in the interpretation of this verse.¹⁵⁴ According to his report, Ruth is requesting not only the permission "to glean," but also to "gather among the sheaves behind the reapers" (v.7a, NRSV). However, Jeremy Schipper translates the verse as "let me glean (ears of grain) please and gather (them) into bundles behind the harvesters." He suggests that what Ruth is requesting is merely what the law has already allowed. The object of "glean" is implied for "gather," which is "the ears of grain."¹⁵⁵ Therefore, it is possible that Ruth has merely requested to glean within her rights.¹⁵⁶

Scholars find problematic the servant's description of what Ruth has been doing between her arrival and that of Boaz (v.7b). The uncertainty of the Hebrew text suggests a

¹⁵² Linafelt, 31.

¹⁵³ McKeown, 43.

¹⁵⁴ Linafelt asserts that the verse is "undoubtedly the most difficult Hebrew in the whole book," that 7a is readable but confusing, and 7b is "simply unreadable," Linafelt, 31.

¹⁵⁵ Schipper, 119.

¹⁵⁶ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 73; Tod Linafelt suggests that Ruth is requesting to collect grain from among the bundles, which goes beyond what is usually permitted in Israelite law, see Linafelt, 31.

variety of possible interpretations. This reading follows the NRSV, which portrays Ruth's character as diligent and deferential, suggesting that the servant granted Ruth's request prior to Boaz's arrival. Her subsequent action is the gleaning itself, from which she seems to have not taken a break since she arrived in the field.¹⁵⁷ The servant's answer gives Boaz additional information about Ruth. His comments about her work in the field reveal that Ruth takes initiative to work according to her plan as exhibited by her determination and commitment in clinging to Naomi.¹⁵⁸

The First Conversation between Ruth and Boaz (vv.8-13)

Following his inquiry from the servant, Boaz approaches Ruth and speaks directly to her for the first time (vv.8-9). This is the first of two conversations between the pair, and the second takes place on the threshing floor in the third chapter of the book. It is the first time Ruth meets Boaz, which happens in an open field during broad daylight, and surrounded by witnesses. Boaz initiates the conversation by directing Ruth to glean in his field for the sake of her well-being.¹⁵⁹ In terms of its chiasmic structure, this unit emerges as the centerpiece of the entire chapter, which reaches the climax in verse 10, where Ruth, with her face to the ground, bows down before Boaz, asking why she has found grace in his eyes, for she is a foreigner. This question is the pivot of this chapter.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Linafelt, 32; the phrase "on her feet" may suggest that Ruth stood in the field waiting for the permission from the landowner, and rest for a while, see Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 33.

¹⁵⁸ Judy Fentress-Williams, *Ruth*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 72.

¹⁵⁹ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 33.

¹⁶⁰ Luter and Rigsby, 55.

Shifting from the words of inquiry about Ruth to the words addressed to her, Boaz initiates his conversation with Ruth: “Now listen, my daughter.” The language indicates an age difference and his assertion of his superior cultural status.¹⁶¹ By addressing her as “my daughter,” Boaz adopts a protective and caring attitude toward her.¹⁶² In his instruction to her, Boaz uses four imperatives: do not go into another field, do not leave my field, keep close to my young women, and follow behind the reapers. In doing so, he is trying to narrow the space that Ruth is to glean and thus to reduce the risk of harassment.¹⁶³ He even invites her to drink water from the common vessels provided by his young men.¹⁶⁴ Such gleaning privilege granted to Ruth is far beyond what is required of him by the custom of gleaning.¹⁶⁵ The narrative does not indicate what is behind Boaz’s motivation to take responsibility for protecting Ruth. Perhaps he is doing this because he is truly taken by this woman who has, against cultural norms, assumed such initiative for the good of another. Indeed, he says as much (2: 8-11). Though he is protective in a typical male way, it would seem that he is motivated by what Ruth has already done—her initiative in the field already that day—and the initiative she had taken on behalf of Naomi.

¹⁶¹ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 34.

¹⁶² McKeown, 45.

¹⁶³ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 77.

¹⁶⁴ Scholars refer the scene of “drink water” to the “type scene” in biblical narrative, in which encounters at the well lead to betrothals. They propose that the story of Ruth rotated 180 degrees in terms of gender and geography.

¹⁶⁵ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 78.

The privileges afforded to Ruth exceed what she has expected from the landowner. Ruth is overwhelmed by such unexpected favor that she responds with a gesture of humility and gratitude. She falls prostrate with her face to the ground, by which she expresses excessively her gracious acknowledgement of Boaz's kindness. Her response indicates Ruth's awareness of the difference in status between herself and Boaz.¹⁶⁶ She expresses her wonder, which is shared by the reader: "why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?"(v.10). Her verbal response echoes her earlier statement to Naomi in verse 2, which implies that her desire to find favor in someone's eyes has been fulfilled.¹⁶⁷ At the same time, she is very much aware that despite her foreign status, she has found favor in the eyes of this landowner of Judah. Thus, her question is not just an expression of gratitude, but a genuine question probing his motives for showing her "favor" and special "attention."¹⁶⁸ By initiating a question, Ruth draws Boaz into an extended conversation in which he is compelled to reveal his motivations.

In his response to Ruth, Boaz discloses that he has heard about all she has done for her mother-in-law, thus admitting that he knew of Ruth and Naomi's arrival in Bethlehem.¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, he has not stepped forward to protect his bereft relatives. He simply acknowledges Ruth's loyal commitment to Naomi after the death of her husband.

¹⁶⁶ Schipper, 129.

¹⁶⁷ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 79.

¹⁶⁸ Linafelt, 36.

¹⁶⁹ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 80.

Hence he praises her for her unprecedented initiative taken on behalf of another that was against cultural mores. Boaz expresses his wish that Yahweh will repay her for her voluntary deeds of loyalty to her mother-in-law and for seeking refuge under Yahweh's "wing" (v.12). By invoking divine protection, Boaz hands over his responsibility to the Lord for rewarding Ruth more fully, rather than to himself.¹⁷⁰ In contrast to Ruth's initiative and subsequent actions, which bespeak loyalty and responsibility, Boaz seems to attempt to rid himself of his responsibility. Nevertheless, as the story unfolds, Boaz shall have occasion to remember and make his prayer a reality.

As Tribble observes, Boaz's description of Ruth's loyalty in verses 11-12 specifically echoes God's call to Abraham: "Go from your native land and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you (Gen.12: 1). Both Ruth and Abraham break from the past by leaving their "native land," and receive a blessing for the future. But differences remain.¹⁷¹ Instead of being called, Ruth chooses to abandon the past herself without the promise of divine blessing. The blessing extended to her comes not directly from God but through a human being.¹⁷² Instead of waiting to be chosen, Ruth takes the initiative to choose Yahweh, the God of Israel and of all nations. Her initiative and actions invoke divine providence. At this moment, Ruth responds to Boaz with characteristic deference (v.13). Despite Boaz's prayer for divine protection on her behalf, Ruth responds by repeating her desire that she may continue to find favor in the eyes of

¹⁷⁰ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 38.

¹⁷¹ Tribble, 177.

¹⁷² Ibid.

Boaz, whom she addresses as “my lord,” a title with which Israelites address their God.¹⁷³ When opportunity presents itself, Ruth takes up the occasion to exercise her initiative. Thus, she shifts her focus from God to Boaz, emphasizing that it is not Yahweh but Boaz, who is the one providing her protection. Apparently, her ability to glean in the harvest field depends on Boaz’s favor rather than on his legal obligation.¹⁷⁴ She states that she has found comfort by his kind words, and decisively refers to herself as “your servant,” deftly reminding Boaz that she is in need of his favor. At the end of verse 13, Ruth concludes their first conversation through her final statement of deference and humility, indicating that she is lower than the lowest servant. Moreover, her statement carries a potentially double meaning: the term “servant” with which she refers to herself could possibly mean “I would not be merely like one of your servants.” This could imply that she intends to be more than a servant.¹⁷⁵

Boaz Provides Ruth Food and Protection (vv.14-17)

When mealtime arrives, Boaz initiates the contact once again. He invites Ruth to join his harvest workers to share his bread and sour wine along with them (v.14). Therefore, Ruth is no longer an outsider on the margins but becomes increasingly integrated into the farm community.¹⁷⁶ She joins Boaz and his workers at the table. Boaz himself hands her food, thus bringing her closer to himself both physically and

¹⁷³ Nielsen, 60.

¹⁷⁴ Schipper, 130.

¹⁷⁵ Linafelt, 37-38.

¹⁷⁶ Nielsen, 61.

symbolically.¹⁷⁷ Boaz is depicted as continuously showing his generosity by offering Ruth more bread and wine than she is able to consume.¹⁷⁸ There is no conversation over the meal. The narrator states merely that Ruth eats to satisfaction, and anticipates bringing the surplus portion to her mother-in-law when she returns home (v.18).¹⁷⁹

After the meal, Ruth gets up to glean for the rest of the day. Boaz instructs his young men directly regarding Ruth. Not only are they told to allow Ruth to glean among the standing sheaves without reproaching her (v.15), but they are also expected to pull out some handfuls from the bundled grain for her to glean as well, and not to rebuke her (v.16). In doing so, Boaz assures Ruth that her gleaning will be fruitful.¹⁸⁰ On the other hand, the special privileges granted to Ruth could separate her from his workers and other gleaners, which may create in them envy towards Ruth. Furthermore, this isolation between Ruth and others makes Ruth appear more vulnerable and thus could reinforce her dependence solely on Boaz's protection.¹⁸¹

With the special privilege, Ruth keeps on working hard. She gleans in Boaz's field peacefully until evening (v.17a). Her work is well rewarded, as she returns to Naomi with about an ephah of barley. The exact calculation of "an ephah" is uncertain: it could

¹⁷⁷ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 40.

¹⁷⁸ Tribble, 178.

¹⁷⁹ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 87.

¹⁸⁰ Schipper, 130.

¹⁸¹ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 87-88.

possibly sustain Ruth and Naomi for five days or for several weeks.¹⁸² In either case, an ephah represents an unexpected amount for one person to glean.¹⁸³

As a woman of initiative, she has exceeded what she set out to do. Thus, her voluntary decision and corresponding action, and perhaps divine providence, have resulted in abundance. Consequently, the most pressing problem, their lack of sustenance, is resolved for a short period.¹⁸⁴ Ruth's hard work enables her to become the breadwinner for Naomi, who is customarily supposed to be the one responsible to provide food for Ruth. However, Ruth does not wait passively for her daily bread, but takes the responsibility to procure food for the two of them. Therefore, her active response not only satisfies her own needs, but also results in bringing abundance to Naomi.

It is that her initiative to take a risk and glean in the field leads to further abundance, gaining favor with Boaz. Thus she finds the fulfillment of her desire, which results from her own decision. Ruth's initiative on behalf of another as doing God's work and cooperating with divine plan. It is Ruth's initiative that transforms her desperate situation and Naomi's bitterness.

Her meeting with Boaz and finding favor in his eyes open the possibility of her and Naomi's long-term survival.¹⁸⁵ This will come to its realization as the story unfolds.

¹⁸² Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 42; Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with A Philological Commentary and A Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 55.

¹⁸³ Linafelt, 40.

¹⁸⁴ Nielsen, 62.

¹⁸⁵ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 88.

Ruth's initiative to act on the best interest of another has resulted in divine providence, which in turn benefits herself as well. Therefore, Ruth is inviting us to cultivate a spirituality that is grounded in the staff of human existence, which implies that women need to step out of the cultural norms of passivity in taking initiative, in so doing to care of the other which is therefore in concern with the providence of God. Women's initiative, of acting, of choosing, of working, of even doing that which is counter cultural when motivated by care of another. Thus, despite the potential risk, she acts fearlessly for the sake of wellbeing of another.

iii. The Theme of Integration (Ruth 3:6-15; 4:13)

Traditionally being defined by the Hellenistic conceptual dichotomy of the physical and spiritual realms, Christian tradition continues to reflect this dualism. The dualistic element of Christianity mirrors certain tendencies within Chinese culture, notably within the Chinese Church itself. These conceptual dichotomies have reinforced in Chinese Christians a disintegrated spirituality that divides flesh and spirit. The sisters of southwest China have been formed by this dualistic anthropology, which elevates the spiritual realm and devalues the physical dimensions of the human person.

Conversely, from the perspective of spirituality, integration indicates wholeness. Spiritual integration implies that one feels at home with all the elements—physical and spiritual—that constitute the person as a whole. Thus, every dimension of the person is equally important to personal wholeness, wellbeing, and development, and the physical element is as sacred as the spiritual one. We must therefore consider that every activity, whether cleaning, cooking, eating, spending leisure time, praying or worshipping, is

necessary and of equal importance to human flourishing. One can worship the divine in every moment of life and through every human activity, whether physical or spiritual.

The story of Ruth reveals a spirituality that reflects the integration of flesh and spirit, thus teaching us to relinquish a dualistic mentality which separates the spiritual and the physical realms. Here the term “integration” is understood from the perspective of women’s spirituality, one that manifests an alternative image of God, and coincides with women’s activities. Women’s every activity, from the most sublime to the most mundane, from the realm of the spirit to that of the flesh, is to be considered an integral part of herself. Therefore, in order to affirm the integration of spirit and flesh, women must reject this dualistic mentality. In so doing, they foster a holistic spirituality that manifests itself in every activity, no matter how mundane. This means that an authentic spirituality is grounded in every moment of life. We worship God not only within the chapel, but in everyday activities and through every caring human relationship.

The character of Ruth gives us an example of a life that is integrative of all human activities, including the endurance of the death of her husband, working in the field, going to the threshing floor, and later, conceiving, birthing, and nursing a child. These ordinary human activities are not less sacred in the eyes of God; rather, they hold the potential to become occasions in which the divine incarnation continues to unfold. Indeed, as the narrator states, it is Yahweh who makes Ruth conceive (4:13). It would seem that God is always working in and through her every activity in her struggle for survival, leading Ruth towards her personal redemption. In this study, I have selected two passages which reflect this integration in Ruth’s life: her encounter with Boaz on the threshing floor (3:6-15), and the conception and birth of her child (4:13).

Meeting on the Threshing Floor (3:6-15)

This is the central passage of the third chapter of the book. Both passages prior to and following involve the conversations between Ruth and Naomi at home. The preceding passage concerns a plan of action that directs Ruth to go to the threshing floor. The harvest season has come to an end (2: 23), and they are confronted with the question of survival once again. How will these women survive now that there are no longer gleanings to sustain them?¹⁸⁶ Remembering the kindness of Boaz, Naomi begins to avail herself of his favor, seeking wellbeing and security for her Moabite daughter-in-law, which could potentially benefit her as well.¹⁸⁷ Therefore, Naomi does not wait for God's miraculous intervention of providing daily bread. Instead, she moves forward to become an agent of change and challenge.¹⁸⁸ She informs Ruth of her plan, which she expects will bring them security and wellbeing (3:1b). According the plan, Ruth is to dress in her finest clothes and go alone at night to the threshing floor, where Boaz is. She is to approach him and uncover his feet and lie down beside him (vv.3-4). What Naomi intends to propose is uncertain. Although the idea of marriage is implicit in her plan, there is no clear evidence that the expression "uncover his feet and lie down" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse as some would suggest.¹⁸⁹ Whatever Naomi intends to

¹⁸⁶ Jones, 40.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Tribble, 182.

¹⁸⁹ Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Ruth*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 49.

achieve, it is a necessary coping strategy of a desperate woman in her struggle for long term survival in a patriarchal culture.

Ruth Solicits Boaz on the Threshing Floor (vv.6-9)

The narrative portrays Ruth as cooperative and collaborative, following what her mother-in-law has instructed her to do for the most part. She dresses herself and goes down to the threshing floor. She observes Boaz, waiting until he has eaten and drunk, is in a “contented mood,” and is lying down at the end of the heap of grain (v.7a). The narrator makes Boaz’s actions rightly coincide with Naomi’s plan up until this moment.¹⁹⁰ Ruth then “stealthily comes and uncovers his feet, lying down” (v.7b), in order to avoid awakening him. The term “stealthily” also connotes that Boaz is blissfully unaware of what happens or will happen.¹⁹¹ The narrative recounts that Ruth uncovers the feet of Boaz, lies down at his side, and is discovered by him. Thus, all the actions show a physical encounter between the two persons, though we do not know whether there is sexual involvement or not, as the text does not indicate exactly what happened.

The narrator reports that in the middle of night, Boaz wakes up suddenly, trembling with fear. Something is unclear, which has frightened him. The narrative states that he “turns over” (v.8a). It seems that Boaz, in response to the cold, shivers and drowsily rolls over.¹⁹² Consequently, as he is rolling over, he touches another person and

¹⁹⁰ Fentress-Williams, 93.

¹⁹¹ Linafelt, 51.

¹⁹² Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 210-11.

is now fully awakened by his surprising discovery, and he is shocked at what he sees: “a woman lying at his feet” (v.8).

He then exclaims: “who are you?” (v.9a). His question is different from the one he asked the first time in his field (2:5). Rather than inquiring about her social placement, he asks for her personal identity. Likewise, Ruth does not put on her Moabite status, but states her independent identity: “I am Ruth, your servant” (v.9b). She refers to herself as “your servant,” an expression of politeness and her attitude of respect for Boaz.¹⁹³ Ruth’s response not only reveals to Boaz who she is in relation to him, but also reminds him who he is in relation to her.¹⁹⁴ Ruth seems to remind Boaz of his responsibility as a kinsman to help the two women. Since he has not done anything for them after the barley harvest, she takes the initiative to persuade him to act on their behalf.

After she identifies herself, Ruth continues to speak by instructing Boaz to “spread your cloak (wing) over your servant, for you are a kinsman redeemer” (v.9c). Her words connote that she places her hope in Boaz as the one who would redeem the two women.¹⁹⁵ Not only is she following Naomi’s instruction, but Ruth does more than that. Instead of waiting for Boaz to tell her what to do, Ruth tells him what he should do. She calls upon him to make good on his prayer for her blessing in their first meeting (2:12).¹⁹⁶ It is easy to say “May God bless you!” Nevertheless, a verbal blessing alone is not

¹⁹³ Waard and Nida, 52.

¹⁹⁴ Schipper, 154.

¹⁹⁵ Fentress-Williams, 101.

¹⁹⁶ Tribble, 184.

enough. A good prayer implies action that concretizes the blessing announced in the prayer. Hence, Boaz must make his prayer a concrete reality by engaging in action that accords with his verbal blessing.

By calling Boaz a kinsman redeemer, Ruth alters Naomi's plan, and directs Boaz by making the situation into a public arrangement bound by the law of redemption.¹⁹⁷ Thus, not only does Ruth want an heir, she wants marriage.¹⁹⁸ She recalls and adopts Boaz's own language (כנף, "cloak" or "wing"), which can be understood as a metaphor alluding to both protection and embrace.¹⁹⁹ Ruth uses this term to challenge Boaz to be the occasion of divine blessing in her life—to marry her, for marriage is that blessing for Ruth. She needs both protection and offspring.²⁰⁰

Washed, anointed, and dressed, Ruth goes to the threshing floor alone at night, offering herself to Boaz. Her daring decision and action are not without risk, however. Despite the danger, Ruth takes the initiative to seek life under the threat of death.²⁰¹ Ruth's strategy brings herself and Naomi redemption in terms of the security needed for survival. From a wider perspective, it suggests that in her coping with the desperate situation, Ruth works according to God's plan, which results in the personal

¹⁹⁷ Kristin Moen Saxegaard, *Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 139.

¹⁹⁸ Nielsen, 17.

¹⁹⁹ Saxegaard, 140.

²⁰⁰ Tribble, 184.

²⁰¹ Saxegaard, 139.

transformation of the two women, as well as the salvation of the nation of Israel.²⁰²

Through the physical actions on the threshing floor, Ruth insists that Boaz must transform the spiritual intention of his prayer into a concrete reality here and now. It is he, and not someone else, not even God, who is responsible to help her and Naomi, and to preserve the family line of Elimelech. Boaz needs to work out the divine blessing for Ruth and her mother-in-law. God's blessing is at work in and through human activities. Therefore, the physical and spiritual realms are interdependent, and thus inseparable, all of which contribute to a person's integration.

Boaz Responds (vv. 10-15)

Once again, Boaz responds with a warm and spiritual speech, which is the longest one in the entire story. It seems that Boaz understands what Ruth wants, and he is grateful and flattered by Ruth's request. He offers her blessing, reassurance, and promise.²⁰³ He is appreciative of Ruth's actions and request, upon which he invokes divine blessing. In other words, Boaz confirms to Ruth that she is worthy of divine blessing because of what she has done and said. In so doing, he is adding an element of religiosity to the whole affair.²⁰⁴ Thus, in the physical elements lie spiritual realities. He praises Ruth, telling her that this "last instance" of her loyalty is even greater than the first, for in this one, Ruth has chosen him rather than gone after "young men, whether poor or rich." Regarding the first instance of loyalty, he may be referring to Ruth's solidarity with Naomi and her

²⁰² Saxegaard, 183.

²⁰³ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 61.

²⁰⁴ Linafelt, 56.

initiative to provide for the two of them.²⁰⁵ His response indicates that Ruth could have gone after other men, that she is not legally obliged to bind herself to a relative. Therefore, she comes to him not because he is the only one who could marry her, but because he is Naomi's kinsman,²⁰⁶ which might indicate that Ruth puts Naomi's wellbeing over her own rights. The spiritual essence is integrated in her self-sacrifice for the sake of Naomi and her dead husband, which goes beyond cultural norms.

Boaz ultimately agrees to do all that Ruth says (v.11), just as Ruth has previously agreed to do all that Naomi has said (v.5). He indicates that the entire townspeople acknowledge Ruth's value, that she is a "woman of worth." Adrien J. Bledstein suggests that in this story, the phrase could mean a woman of "sound judgment, wholesome values, and energetic pursuit of what is important."²⁰⁷ By employing the phrase, Boaz affirms that Ruth has won her good reputation among the most influential people in Bethlehem, and that she is a woman to be desired.²⁰⁸ He thus affirms his willingness to redeem Ruth. However, he is not the only near kinsman. Boaz tells her that there is another member of the clan who is a closer relative than he is (v.12).²⁰⁹ This second kinsman has the priority

²⁰⁵ Laffer and Jill-Fleckman, 115-16; whereas Adrien J. Bledstein states that the "first instance" is her proposal of marriage, and the last one is her consideration of Naomi's future, see Adrien J. Bledstein, "Female Companionships: If the Book of Ruth were written by A Woman..." *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, c1993), 124.

²⁰⁶ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 62.

²⁰⁷ Bledstein, 124.

²⁰⁸ Schipper, 154.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

to exercise his rights and obligation as a redeemer. Only if he refused could Boaz become involved.²¹⁰

Following their conversation, Boaz invites Ruth to stay on the threshing floor until daybreak. He may be concerned about Ruth being seen or caught alone in the middle of the night, or perhaps he wants to keep her longer. The verb translated “to remain” or “stay,” literally means “to lodge,” and is the same verb used in 1:16. Boaz tells Ruth to “lodge” with him, which, according to some scholars, does not carry sexual undertones.²¹¹ However, it is strange that Boaz lets her remain rather than sending her home under the cover of darkness. Indeed, the sexual ambiguity returns when Boaz tells Ruth to “lie down” until morning (v.13c). Ruth says nothing to negate Boaz’s instructions. Rather, she follows his instructions, and “lay at his feet until morning.”²¹² She is not afraid of staying with Boaz at night, even though it is considered scandalous behavior in a patriarchal culture in which women are not supposed to have private contact with any male outside the family. Thus, the narrator reports that Ruth remains next to Boaz until morning. There is no indication of precisely what else happens in the remainder of the night on the threshing floor, which sustains the mystery and ambiguity of the scene in the dark night for the reader.

Ruth rises up before dawn in order that their encounter might remain in the secrecy of the darkness (v.14a). This is according to Boaz’s statement, that “it must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor” (v.14b), by which he wishes to preserve the

²¹⁰ McKeown, 59.

²¹¹ See for example, Laffer and Jill-Fleckman, 121; McKeown, 59.

²¹² Laffer and Jill-Fleckman, 12.

privacy of the occasion, ensuring that no one knows of her visit.²¹³ This apparently is a matter of guarding their reputation.²¹⁴ Boaz's statement indicates that Ruth's visit is compromising and needs to remain private. It also highlights the risky nature of this nocturnal visit for Ruth's position within society.²¹⁵ Before Ruth returns home, Boaz offers her a gift, "six measures of barley," and places it on her back (v.15b). This gift may be an indication of Boaz's acknowledgement of the purpose of Ruth's visit, and hence may be construed as a betrothal gift for her mother-in-law.²¹⁶ It could also be understood as a metaphor for the "seed" or gift of procreation that will be given to Ruth at the end of the story.²¹⁷

Overall, because of Boaz's denial of his responsibility as kinsman, Naomi and Ruth resort to their coping strategy. Following Naomi's plan, Ruth goes to meet Boaz, the kinsman redeemer. Her bold action is not without the risk of sexual abuse. Ruth, however, is willing to take the risk. Although directed by her mother-in-law, she acts independently, with personal authority. She does not hesitate to confront the obliged redeemer, reminding him of his responsibility to preserve the family line of Elimelech. She is not afraid, nor is she subservient. She alters Naomi's plan, constraining Boaz to concretize his pious prayer by marrying her, thus steering the situation into a public, binding

²¹³ Tribble, 185-85.

²¹⁴ Yehezkel Kluger, *A Psychological Interpretation of Ruth* (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Daimon, c1999), 80.

²¹⁵ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kendky, 65.

²¹⁶ Kluger, 81.

²¹⁷ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 124.

arrangement.²¹⁸ Such arrangement may permanently keep both impoverished women from misery. In so doing, Ruth integrates the physical and spiritual realms. Her strategy is incredibly outspoken and daring.²¹⁹ She is a counter-cultural woman, one who knows what is most important and necessary and is therefore willing to sacrifice her reputation for a greater good. Her self-sacrifice is primarily for her mother-in-law's benefit and for the preservation of her husband's clan. Thus, her daring and selfless actions evoke the *hesed* of Yahweh.²²⁰ The Lord in turn will bring her desire to fulfillment.

Marriage between Ruth and Boaz (4:13)

In one verse, the narrator reports the marriage between Ruth and Boaz, showing Yahweh's active role in Ruth's pregnancy.²²¹ The marriage happens immediately after the ceremony at the town gate (4:1-12), where Boaz gathers the nearer kinsman-redeemer and a quorum of elders to work out his oath to Ruth with regard to redemption (3: 13b). Ironically, it is a group of men that negotiates a family affair involving the welfare of women, and yet, not a single woman is present.²²²

The deliberation initially centered on the redemption of Elimelech's property, to which Boaz ties marriage to Ruth, for the preservation of the "dead man's name upon his inheritance" (4:5b). Although this dual responsibility is unprecedented in biblical law,

²¹⁸ Saxegaard, 139.

²¹⁹ Mieke Bal, "Heroism and Proper Names, or The Fruits of Analogy," *Feminist Companion*, 45.

²²⁰ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 242, cited in *Character Complexity*, Siebeck, 185.

²²¹ Siebeck, 185.

²²² Tribble, 188.

Boaz and the elders seem to accept it, whereas the nearer kinsman is no longer interested in land redemption.²²³ Consequently, Boaz succeeds in acquiring the legal right of redemption and thus of marrying Ruth, which seems to be his primary interest. The assembled elders bear witness to this transaction. They conclude the ceremony by blessing Ruth, who is becoming the wife of Boaz, calling to remembrance the ancestral roots and invoking the history of fertility with the hope of bringing it into the present.²²⁴

Verse 13 serves as the conclusion to the proclamations at the gate. It also introduces what happens next.²²⁵ This verse consists of five brief expressions which describe the events followed by the ceremony at the gate.²²⁶ Among these expressions, the narrator declares that God makes her conceive and bear a son, thus bringing to the fullest articulation the integration of the physical and spiritual realms.

First, the narrative shows that as soon as his right of marriage to Ruth has been legalized, Boaz takes Ruth (as his wife). The language used here is the standard biblical terminology for marriage, and thus underlines the legality of the marriage. There is no description of the wedding ceremony.²²⁷ One can imagine that with a very simple ritual, Boaz comes to Naomi's home, leading Ruth and Naomi to his own home. The second expression, Ruth "becomes his wife," indicates Ruth's specific relation to Boaz as wife. It suggests not only the legality of her new status but also her active role in making their

²²³ Lee, 148.

²²⁴ Fentress-Williams, 114-15.

²²⁵ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 86.

²²⁶ E. John Hamlin, *Surely There is A Future: A Commentary on the Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 67.

²²⁷ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kendky, 86.

marriage a reality. This emphasis may relate to Ruth's being an adult who enters the relationship on her own accord.²²⁸ The third expression speaks of their sexual union: "they come together," suggesting a mutuality of sexual relations.²²⁹

The fourth expression is a faith statement by the narrator: "the Lord makes her conceive." From the physical dimension, we know it is Boaz who makes Ruth conceive. The narrator, however, attributes Ruth's conception to the Lord, which indicates that the gift of life is from God through the natural process of human reproduction. Hence, this is a perfect expression of the integration of the physical and spiritual dimensions of the human person. With the final expression, the story is brought to its climax: "she bore a son," which seems to be the main purpose of their marriage. The child is the one to carry on the "dead man's name upon his inheritance" (v.10), to provide protection and security for Naomi (v.14), and to give Ruth and Boaz a place in the history of the people of God (v.17).²³⁰

The gift of conception is one of the two acts in the entire book that the narrator explicitly attributes to Yahweh.²³¹ We have learned from the earlier passage that Yahweh acts to end the famine in Israel (1:6), and now, Ruth conceives through divine intervention (4:13). Thus, the text here shifts from the actions of Ruth (and the other characters depicted in chapters 2 and 3) to Yahweh's agency in causing Ruth to

²²⁸Eskenazi and Frymer-Kendky, 87.

²²⁹ Hamlin, 68.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Schipper, 182.

conceive.²³² The narrative may suggest that Yahweh gives fertility to both the earth (1:6) and the woman (4:13).²³³ It seems that whether a woman conceives or not is in Yahweh's hands. This is well explained in the case of Ruth. Although she did not conceive during her ten years of marriage to Mahlon, now she is pregnant and gives birth to a child.²³⁴ However, the divine intervention is not without human desire and human action. The narrative does not indicate if childbearing is Ruth's own desire. It could have been the desires and prayers of Naomi and Boaz that this newly married couple be blessed with fertility and procreation.²³⁵ Thus, the birth of the child is the result of both human actions and divine blessings. It is through the physicality of the encounter on threshing floor that Ruth and Boaz are brought together in marriage. All these human activities and spiritual expressions of human desire through prayer result in the birth of their child.

As the story of Ruth comes to its happy ending, the reader discovers that Ruth is a brave, uncomplaining, hard-working, and self-sacrificing woman.²³⁶ She is a character of perfect loyalty as the wife of a dead man and daughter-in-law of an old, widowed woman. She takes responsibility for and creatively copes with her desperate situation. In the end, Yahweh enables her to conceive and bear a son, who will lift up Naomi's spirit and

²³² Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 144.

²³³ Koosed, 81.

²³⁴ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, 144-45. The possible reason that she did not conceive in previous marriage may be that Mahlon is infertile.

²³⁵ Nielsen, 30.

²³⁶ Saxegaard, 105.

provide for her old age.²³⁷ Through her new-born son, Ruth becomes the ancestor of David, the greatest king in the history of Israel (4:17, 22).

Therefore, out of the physical encounter on the threshing floor, Ruth calls on Boaz to make good on the prayer he uttered in the field. She asks him to be responsible to fulfill his obligation as kinsman redeemer, insisting that he should not call others to redeem her, because he has the right of redemption. She thus takes his spiritual blessing and brings it down to the physical realm, persuading him to concretize it here and now through the physicality of providing for her and Naomi. Thus, it is not enough for Boaz to say spiritual things; he must *do* spiritual things. It is easy to utter a prayer of blessing, but prayer alone will not bring blessing to Ruth. Rather, spiritual expression of prayer is to be concretized by the accompaniment of physical action. This union of physical and spiritual comes to its fullest theological articulation in their marriage. The narrator asserts that it is God who makes her conceive. Such is the narrator's synthesis of this union of the physical and spiritual realms. Thus, integration of the physical and the spiritual dimensions could be an alternative model for women's spirituality, one which helps the religious sisters of southwest China to reject the dualistic mentality that dichotomizes the human person into spirit and flesh. And the spirituality of integration may bring us to the awareness of our human nature, based on which we strive for holistic transformation.

²³⁷ Olyan, 69.

CHAPTER THREE

Conclusion: How the Story of Ruth Contributes to the Spiritual Formation of the Religious Women in Southwest China

This study of the life and ministry of the religious women in southwest China has raised an awareness of the existing problems of the sisters and the urgent need for spiritual renewal. I have demonstrated that the main cause of the problem is the lack of foundational formation and a deep spirituality of religious life, needs which must be taken seriously. Reading the story of Ruth, I have discovered that the spiritual principles of solidarity, initiative, and integration at the heart of the Book of Ruth could serve as a model for a spiritual foundation that can somehow address the needs of the sisters of southwest China. Such foundations could foster a spirituality rooted in biblical tradition, leading to a kind of formational renewal of spiritual life, emphasizing unity in community life, and confirming religious identity.

As demonstrated in the first chapter, the religious women of southwest China are not able to live out their religious identity and the gospel values of religious life to the full. This is due to the unique historical reality of China, particularly the prohibition of religion imposed by the Cultural Revolution after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The Catholic Church in China was banned for nearly three decades. Consequently, religious communities retreated from public life until the 1980s. During the time of its revival in the 1980s and early 90s, the Catholic Church concentrated on pastoral work and the construction of church buildings, ignoring the formation of

religious women in these decades. Thus, the lack of foundational formation and institutional spiritual core is a critical fact that affects women's religious life. One of the consequences is that the majority of these religious sisters who have been inadequately trained are not able to provide adequate ministerial services. Thus, they seem to have become insignificant to the mission and evangelization of the local churches. Hence, some local church authorities consider the sisters an added burden to the Christian communities. A major consequence of this is that the sisters are subject to discrimination and oppression within the hierarchical structures of the Church. This situation often results in the diminishment of their initial passion for commitment to religious life and the loss of religious identity and purpose. They find themselves discouraged from continuing their religious vocation.

As one of this group of religious women, I find that the themes of the biblical story of Ruth analyzed in the second chapter are particularly relevant to addressing the root of the problems and providing an effective resolution. The cultivation of solidarity, initiative, and integration could help the sisters to develop a spiritual foundation rooted in the biblical tradition, and thus to address the incomplete constitutions of their respective religious institutes and fill the spiritual vacuum in religious life. In this regard, these three spiritual features as derived from a study of the Book of Ruth could serve as a role model for the religious women of southwest China, helping us to build communities marked by solidarity, affection, and kinship, and to form a biblically-based religious identity.

First of all, in the story of Ruth, the relationship of solidarity among the three desperate women reflects what should be the essence of the religious community. These women share a connection to the family of their dead husbands, one which binds them

together in common circumstances. Although each has undergone the tragedy of personal loss, each woman seeks the wellbeing of the others. In the same way, the women of the religious communities of southwest China are bound together by religious vocation. We have left our own families and joined a religious community, in which all the members need to cling to each other and concretize our relationship with God through spiritual kinship with one another.

After the loss of their husbands, these three widowed women stand at the bottom of the Ancient Near Eastern society, which is characterized by male domination. Similarly, the religious sisters of southwest China are subject to the authority of the local bishop and consigned to the bottom rung of the hierarchal structure of the Catholic Church of the twenty-first century. We lack the autonomy to initiate new forms of service, and have no role in leadership or voice in the decision making of the diocese. Because almost all of us have received inadequate religious formation and very little theological training, we are not able to perform effective ministry. This in turn assigns us to a lower status in the local church. The bond of kinship among Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah can teach us to unite ourselves within a Christ-centered religious community, and to make the common wellbeing of the community our own primary concern. In so doing, we could create a loving and affectionate community, one in which the sisters support one another in a common struggle to prosper despite the patriarchal structures of the Church in China.

The scene of Naomi and her daughters-in-law at the crossroads is very affectionate.¹ The character of Naomi parallels the role of the superior in a religious

¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "The Book of Ruth," in *Feminist Communion*, 21.

community. Naomi entrusts her daughters-in-law to God's divine blessing through her prayer for them. She reminds those in leadership positions of their task to care for the sisters who are entrusted to them, not only through instruction, but through prayers and loving care. The superior's primary concerns must be communal wellbeing and the personal development of the sisters, essential elements in building up a Christ-centered religious community. Aware that life with her will mean poverty and privation in a foreign land, Naomi does not want the two women to give up the potentiality of their young lives for the sharing of hardships with her.² Despite the fact that the bereft Naomi has no future due to her advanced age, she is concerned with the futures of these young women. Naomi's concern reflects the qualities of solidarity, kinship, and unconditional, steadfast love, qualities which could be instructive for the religious sisters of southwest China as they seek to grow in relationships of love and responsibility for one another. This selfless concern for the other is an important element of community life.

Ruth and Orpah's affection for their mother-in-law parallels the attitude of the religious sisters toward one another and to their superiors. At first, Ruth and Orpah are determined not to turn away from their mother-in-law. Rather, they put Naomi at the center of their concern, and are willing to tie their future to Naomi's without counting the consequence of such a selfless decision. Likewise, we religious sisters should be aware that our future as a community is shaped by our own collective effort, and cannot depend on people outside the community, not even the bishop. Therefore, we are to support one another in the community, being concerned for the wellbeing of the community as an

² Stanton, 21.

inseparable unit, not for a few individuals. Although each sister has her own spiritual gift, it is for the common good rather than her own personal success. Like Orpah and Ruth, though they choose their individual responses to Naomi's command, they both in their own way show their loyalty to their mother-in-law.³ Orpah confirms and obeys Naomi's commands. She is prepared to do what Naomi asks her to do.⁴ Despite her decision to return home, Orpah's steadfast love and loyalty to Naomi are not in question. Rather, her decision to abide by Naomi's advice, as she leaves with tears, is a completely unwilling action, suggesting her solidarity with the other two women.⁵ Indeed, Orpah goes beyond her own desire and follows Naomi's advice, which expresses the essence of the religious vow of obedience. And thus Orpah could serve as a model for the sisters of southwest China to fully embrace the vow of obedience, which means that after having dialogue with her superior, the sister must follow the superior's final decision with respect, even if she still lacks the desire to do so.

While Orpah shows her alliance with Naomi by following her advice, Ruth decides to remain in unity with Naomi by her opposition to the words of her mother-in-law. Thus, as a solidarity of circumstances, kinship, and sympathy grows, Ruth's commitment deepens, culminating in her statement of solidarity to Naomi. Ruth's vow of radical commitment to Naomi exemplifies her heartfelt concern for her bereft mother-in-law and maintains their kinship ties even beyond death. Therefore, Ruth clings to Naomi and

³ Tribble, 172.

⁴ Saxegaard, 130.

⁵ Ibid, 69.

expresses her decision to put her commitment into concrete action. Her statement of solidarity with Naomi exemplifies the spiritual kinship possible among the religious women of southwest China. Through Ruth's example, we come to realize that as religious, we must cling to one another and act with one accord, for we are bound to one another in community. Without being with the others, our religious life will lack the support of the human community, and most especially, it will lose its purpose of giving witness to the mystery of the communion of the Holy Trinity.⁶ Furthermore, Ruth's articulation of her love for and radical commitment to Naomi reminds us of our religious commitment to the love of God and participation in the mission of the religious institute.

Secondly, the portrait of Ruth in the second chapter of the book exemplifies her initiative through her life-giving actions. Ruth's initiative on behalf of another indicates that she is doing God's work and cooperating with the divine plan. Responding to the reality of their lack of food, Ruth does not wait for Naomi to provide for her. Rather, she takes it upon herself to provide for them both. Her coping strategy in responding to their plight is to risk herself to glean in the field. As a role model of initiative, Ruth inspires the religious sisters of southwest China to become the agents of their own lives and ministries. As mentioned in the first chapter of this research, these religious communities do not have the autonomy to initiate new forms of ministry. Moreover, in facing difficulties and problems, the sisters tend to depend on authority figures to resolve them. Such management patterns are a consequence of the Confucian culture and the traditional understanding of religious life. From ancient times, obedience has been considered one of

⁶ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (1996), #41, accessed April 23, 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html.

the contact norms for women in China.⁷ This is reinforced by a superficial understanding of the religious vow of obedience. Hence, the virtue of obedience has prevented the sisters from taking initiative and making decisions to act on their own, especially during times of difficulties. Because of the lack of experience, few of these religious women have the capacity to deal with difficult situations on their own.

Now that Ruth has provided an example for these religious women, the positive outcome of her initiative could encourage each of the sisters to fearlessly take responsibility in bringing forth coping strategies and acting for the improvement of communal life. Facing limited space and resources, these sisters cannot afford to wait passively for help from outside, for no one will help us if we do not help ourselves. Thus, it is better for us to take the risk of acting upon our own initiative as much as possible. We must do what we can and God will take care of the rest. As Ruth's initiative has elicited the support from the rich patriarch Boaz, the religious women who take the initiative to address the existing problems may be able to find support from the local bishop. And more importantly, our initiative may invite a divine blessing, which will fulfill our desire.

Just as Ruth chooses to remain in the bonds of kinship with Naomi, and tries her best to improve their desperate condition, the religious sisters may also keep their spiritual bond with each other, taking responsibility to improve the unsatisfactory conditions of their religious life. Moreover, all the community members are encouraged to take the initiative to act for the improvement of the community, not only the superior.

⁷ *Confucian Classics* required that a woman was to obey her father before marriage, her husband during married life, and her sons in widowhood.

Rather than waiting for support or direction from a higher authority, the sisters are called to initiate the change. Every member of the religious community is responsible for contributing her part to the development of the community.

On the other hand, Ruth's initiative is not without risk, for she is a foreigner with no relational network in Bethlehem. Nevertheless, her desire to provide for both of them is far greater than the concern for her own safety. Her willingness to take risks has invited divine providence, which enables her to successfully become the breadwinner for her family, thus transforming the bitterness of their desperate situation. Furthermore, because of her initiative, Ruth opens for them the possibility of a better future. In the same way, the religious women of southwest China must give priority to the interests of the community over their own individual desires. The courage to step forward and the desire for greater communal wellbeing could invoke divine providence. Through our acts of initiative, God may be pleased to bestow on us divine blessing, fulfilling the desire for improvement materially and spiritually, personally and communally. Ruth's initiative reminds the religious women of southwest China of their call to full participation in the life and mission of the Church and to effective witness of the Gospel.

Lastly, the story of Ruth also suggests to these religious women a spirituality that integrates flesh and spirit. The Chinese sisters have been formed by a dualistic anthropology which elevates the spiritual and devalues the physical dimensions of the human person. This dualistic mentality has had a deep impact on Christian spirituality, causing the religious women of southwest China to embrace a disintegrated spirituality which favors the spiritual dimension of the person. Such spirituality diminishes the intrinsic value and dignity of human nature, which is the starting point of holistic

transformation. In her struggle for survival in a patriarchal environment, Ruth integrates the spiritual element within the physical, thereby embracing a holistic spirituality that leads to transformation.

In her physical encounter with Boaz on the threshing floor, Ruth deftly reminds Boaz of his responsibility as a kinsman redeemer to her and Naomi, for he has done nothing on their behalf since the end of the barley harvest. Given the context of the patriarchal culture, women have to rely on support from men for their means of survival. Therefore, Ruth's coping strategy is to call on Boaz to make good on his own prayer which he uttered in the field, in the hope that by proposing marriage to him, the seed of their union will maintain the family line of her dead husband. She insists that Boaz should not call others to redeem them, not even God. Rather, he himself is to be the agent of the spiritual blessing he has uttered by concretizing it through actions of providing sustenance for Naomi and Ruth, here and now. Ruth thus embodies the life of a holistic person who knows how to balance the spiritual and physical dimensions of human existence.

In the twenty-first century, the religious women of southwest China share a similar situation to that of Ruth in ancient times. Because they belong to a diocesan religious institute, as religious women, they have little freedom to take charge of their own lives and ministries within the Church's hierarchal structure. They remain at the bottom of the structure and are struggling for wellbeing and spiritual development. Therefore, Ruth's coping strategy for survival in the biblical tradition could inspire the contemporary religious women of southwest China to strive for improvement of religious life and spirituality. While respecting the authority of the local bishop and following his

instruction, the religious sisters should take the initiative to call on the bishop to take responsibility to care for the wellbeing of the sisters. We must request that the bishop act for the sake of the holistic development of the sisters by providing financial support for on-going formation and the opportunity for theological training. Thus, the bishop himself could become a real blessing to the religious institute in his diocese, which would lead to a positive result rather than to his anger towards the sisters when they fail to meet his expectations.

On the personal level, Ruth integrates Boaz's spiritual blessing into the physical realm, insisting that he should act on her behalf, to help her and Naomi with daily bread, as well as to redeem the family property of their husbands. Her integration of the spiritual and physical dimensions has been reinforced by the union of their marriage. It is stated in the narrative, that "God makes her conceive." Such is the fullest articulation of a theological proclamation, that God becomes involved in human actions with divine blessings. Her integrated spirituality may suggest to the religious sisters of southwest China an alternative model of women's spirituality, one which could help them to discard the dualistic mentality. The story of Ruth tells us that both the physical and spiritual dimensions are of equal importance—that the physical dimension is as sacred as the spiritual. Rather than emphasizing one over the other, we need to keep body and spirit balanced. Hence, an authentic spirituality is rooted in the integration of the physical and spiritual dimensions of the human person.

Influenced by dualism, Chinese religious women are accustomed to thinking that only the things of the spiritual realm are sacred, and can make a person holy. On the other hand, the things from the physical realm are considered obstacles to personal holiness.

We thus fail to see the sacredness of daily activities. Consequently, it seems that we can only relate to God during times of prayer and worship in the chapel, leaving God during the rest of the day when we are outside the chapel. Ruth's story suggests that we need to reject these conceptual dichotomies and raise the awareness of God's presence in our midst here and now. Thus, we need to cultivate a vision for seeing the divine presence embodied in the physical activities of our daily lives. Whatever we do, it is in the name of the Lord. Indeed, our entire life is with the Lord, in the Lord, through the Lord, and for the Lord. Therefore, we can worship God in the work we are doing. In so doing, we may begin to embrace an integrated spirituality, one that manifests an alternative image of God and coincides with each of our physical activities. Thus, we may be able to find God in all things and worship the divine Mystery in every moment of life and through every human activity, both physical and spiritual. And in so doing, we may bring forth the presence of the incarnated Mystery.

Overall, the story of Ruth offers to the religious women of southwest China a source of inspiration, one which can be of great help in the process of exploring the charism and spirituality of our religious institutes. Ruth's qualities of solidarity, initiative, and integration, which reflect a biblical spirituality, can provide a spiritual model for the formation of the religious women of southwest China. Such a model could help us to fashion an integrative transformation of religious life, one that binds us together in solidarity and kinship, and renews our passion for the love of God and the service of God's people.

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