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THE BIBLICAL BOOK OF RUTH:
A FEMINIST LITERARY READING

by

Kaija Helena Anneli Ranta

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of Religious Studies
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ABSTRACT

The book of Ruth has been widely accepted as being a
positive text for and about women in the Hebrew Bible. Fre-
quently described as being 'delightful' or 'whimsical', it
is regarded as a fine example of a short story with full and
complete characters. Naomi's perseverance, Ruth's faithful-
ness, as well as the deity's providence are examples of this
view. The book is seen as one of only a few remnants of
women's experience recorded in the patriarchal book of the
Hebrew Bible.

Through careful re-reading, I revealed hidden com-
plexities contained within this text. In the process,
inconsistencies of the characters, including the character
of the deity, and the unresolved and ambivalent ending of
the story were examined.

This process led to an examination of the purpose and
composition of the text. I dis-assembled the story to
reveal possible origins of the present text. The purpose of
the thesis was to examine the process of closely re-reading
a well-known text to discover if previous assumptions of the
positive portrayal of women were valid. Using a close re-
reading influenced by feminist assumptions, I showed that
this approach could yield different interpretations of the
text. At the same time, I demonstrated the utility of this
process for other scriptural texts.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to all women who glean in alien fields.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE BIBLICAL BOOK OF RUTH: A FEMINIST LITERARY READING

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I will be examining the biblical book of Ruth, as well as evaluating previous and current scholarship on the text. I have a specific feminist and literary focus to my evaluation. I have chosen this text to work on since relatively little feminist scholarship has been done on this text.[1] Current work includes Amy-Jill Levine's chapter in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Newsom and Ringe, 1991, pp. 78-84) and Athalya Brenner's edited collection *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (1993). I feel that this is an opportunity to reflect upon previous Ruth scholarship and to propose ideas for further scholarship and understanding of this text.

Previous scholarly readings of the book of Ruth will not be immediately accepted as being accurate interpretations of the meaning of the text. These interpretations will be examined and critiqued. Often these interpretations are inaccurate because they are encumbered with preconceived notions as to the meaning of the text, the function of

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[1]Greater attention has been paid by feminist biblical scholars to perceived problematic texts such as Genesis 2-3, Genesis 16 and 21, II Samuel 13, Judges 11 and 19, as well as numerous texts referring to women in the New Testament.

characters and the conclusions of the text.[2] Each reader
and scholar brings his/her understanding to the text and in
turn takes understanding from the text. The impact of the
text on the reader cannot be anticipated, for each reader
develops and interprets the meaning of the text differently
according to his/her gender, socio-religious context and
previous knowledge of this text. My goal is to instruct
readers to be aware of what it is that they bring to the
text, what influences them as they read, and what they take
from the text.

I am also interested in this text because of the
presence, or lack thereof, of the deity in a biblical narra-
tive. Close attention needs to be paid to the character of
YHWH,[3] because, unlike other narratives in the Hebrew Bible,

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[2]It is understandable that each reader will bring certain
understandings to the reading of each text, yet when
inaccuracies are produced as a result of unfounded opinions,
they must be examined and questioned. I will discuss this
further in Chapter One, under the sections "Preliminary
Observations" and "A Specifically Gendered Commentary".

[3]When making reference to the deity the Tetragrammaton YHWH
will be used throughout, except when the term Shaddai is
required by the text in Ruth 1:20-21 (Biblia Hebraica
Stuttgartensia, 1967/1977, p. 1321) which Brown, Driver and
Briggs translate as 'almighty' (1951, pp. 994-995). I have
not altered uses of the divine name in sources I have
quoted; however the reader is asked to note this preference

the book of Ruth does not afford a prominent role to YHWH in
the text. The deity is virtually only talked about. The
name of the deity is invoked on four occasions: as Naomi
blesses her two daughters-in-law (1:8-9, YHWH), as Naomi
bemoans her bitter status (1:20-21, Shaddai and YHWH), as
Boaz interacts with his workers (2:4, YHWH), and as the
women of Bethlehem bless Naomi (4:14, YHWH). As an actor in
this text YHWH acts only twice, giving the people food, and,
causing the conception of Obed. "Then she started to return
with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she
had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had con-
sidered his people and given them food." (1:6)[4] "So Boaz
took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together,
the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son".(4:13) From
this perspective this text is similar to that of Esther
which does not once mention the name of the deity. The
opinions of scholars vary greatly on the theological content
of this text.[5]

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for YHWH whenever God, LORD, or Lord are used.

[4]All English biblical quotations are from the *New Revised
Standard Version Bible* (1989).

[5]Refer especially to Ronald M. Hal's *The Theology of the
Book of Ruth* (1969), Danna Nolan Fewell's and David Miller
Gunn's *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the
Book of Ruth* (1990) and Francis Landy's "Ruth and the
Romance of Realism, or Deconstructing History" (1994, pp.

Concerning the deity, Danna Nolan Fewell and David Mil-
ler Gunn in *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in
the Book of Ruth* write:

> Almost exclusively absent as a character (4:13 is God's
> only direct appearance), God nevertheless pervades the
> story. Evoked in numerous blessings, God is a pro-
> tector and a redeemer for the pious, the Boazes of
> Bethlehem. And that is important for people who must
> work out their own redemption. (1990, p. 104)

It appears that the reader of this text must possess
some prior information concerning the deity in order to
understand the complexities of the text. If readers of this
text are familiar with the function of YHWH recorded else-
where in the epic of the Hebrew people then their
understanding of YHWH will be well established. On the
other hand, for readers who have read little or none of the
Hebrew Bible and are currently reading this text, their
understanding of the role of the deity will be informed only
by what they read in this text, and, therefore, limited.[6]
This subject will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

285-317) for discussion on the theological content of the
text. Hals offers a traditional theological interpretation
while Fewell and Gunn, and Landy offer discussions of divine
blessings enacted on a human level.

[6]I recognize that most readers of the book of Ruth will be
familiar, not only with this text, but with many portions of
the Hebrew Bible and possibly the Christian New Testament.
This could be through participation in congregational serv-
ices (either Jewish or Christian), religious education or

In this thesis the text will be read several times, with the intention of locating and uncovering assumptions and inconsistencies within the narrative and subsequent textual commentaries, as well as pointing out misrepresentations and misinterpretations of characters.

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

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the academic study of biblical texts. However, I am interested in learning the understandings of readers who read this text for the first time, with no prior knowledge of either the story of Ruth in particular or the Hebrew Bible in general. In the final chapter I will propose a project to garner the responses of various groups of readers of the text.

The aim of this thesis is to provide an overview of the
text and its difficulties, and to examine it within genre
critical (Jack M. Sasson), source critical (Athalya Bren-
ner), and narrative critical (Mieke Bal) frameworks.

Chapter One will provide a fuller explanation for the
selection of this text for a feminist review. I will offer
general commentary on the nature, purpose and date of the
book of Ruth and provide examples and comments on what I
have named "specifically gendered commentary" of the text.
To conclude the chapter I will comment on two alternative
readings: Phyllis Trible's "A Human Comedy", in *God and the
Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1988, pp. 166-199) and Ilana Pardes'
"The Book of Ruth: Idyllic Revisionism" in *Countertraditions
in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (1992, pp. 98-117).

An evaluation and critique of Jack M. Sasson's com-
mentary on the book of Ruth will form the second chapter of
this thesis. Sasson's *Ruth: A New Translation with a
Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Inter-
pretation* (1989), offers a critical re-reading of the text
with an emphasis on the actions and motivations of the
characters. Sasson's examination of the text in the genre
of folk tale is helpful in illuminating difficulties within
the text and offering possible solutions. Sasson utilizes
Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp's categorization of the
functions of characters and applies them to the book of
Ruth. By using Proppian categories, Sasson feels that the

function of the major characters present in this text can be identified, anticipated and described.

Sasson maintains that understanding the story correctly depends on recognizing its generic affinity with the folk tale (1989, pp. 197-202). Yet contrary to Sasson's assertion, complications are introduced which are then left unresolved, and expectations are indeed nurtured which are ultimately left unfulfilled (1989, p. 216). Sasson's primary assumption of the genre of this text will be evaluated and challenged.

In Chapter Three, the argument for viewing the book of Ruth as a single, seamless, literary unit is challenged and examined. Possible sources of the text as well as the functioning of the two heroines of Naomi and Ruth will be discussed. A solution to the problem of two main characters sharing a single, short text is to recognize that the author of the text was actually a creative redactor.

Athalya Brenner, in "Naomi and Ruth" (1983), challenges the commonly held understanding that the book of Ruth is the product of a single literary source. What would be the ramifications of viewing the narrative as a composite work of two separate and pre-existing narratives which have in common the theme of the reversal of fortune? Brenner attempts to disassemble and reassemble this story to reveal possible origins of the book. Recognizing that the characters of Naomi and Ruth alternate in the role of heroine, and that the text contains several inconsistencies that cannot

be overlooked, Brenner examines the book as a compilation of
two previously known distinct but similar stories; one of an
older heroine Naomi, and the second of a younger heroine
Ruth.

Brenner maintains that the seams which combine the two
stories are still discernible to the alert reader (1983, p.
385). Some of these seams are: the exchange of dominant
roles, the confusion over motherhood, inconsistencies
regarding levirate marriage, and the genealogy recorded
through Boaz and Perez and not Mahlon and Elimelech as
originally indicated. Once the narrative has been separated
we can discuss possible reasons for the editor of a text to
compile one story about two dominant women characters
instead of maintaining two separate stories of individual
women in a male-dominated collection of scripture.

The work of narratologist Mieke Bal provides the founda-
tion for analyzing the text of the book of Ruth as narrative
in Chapter Four. Bal provides a unique style of evaluating
the art form of the narrative that draws telling conclusions
from biblical texts. Intense scrutiny of characters,
detail, nuance, proper names, and movement provides the
reader with a thorough evaluation of this text.

Bal maintains that biblical characters, their proper
names and their actions, are identifiable and predictable
because the text not only has an existence on the printed
page and within the canon, but it also has an 'afterlife' or
interpreted meaning within every reading community. Close

attention will be paid to the acceptance and validity of characters within the story. Literary characters will succeed only if they are accepted by the reader as being representatives of society and being reflective of problems and achievements within culture. Bal proposes that "it is time to examine in more detail the typical narrative art of the biblical love stories and the way that art exposes specific attitudes toward sexuality"(1987, pp. 68-73). Bal's critical examination of narrative reveals themes, voices, metaphors, and symbols which are indicative, and interpretative, of socially relevant issues such as gender distinction and patriarchy.

In a discussion on the Bible as literature, Bal addresses the attempts of biblical scholars to critique literary theory and gender in the Bible. She states that

> ...the relation between fiction and reality is more fundamental than a simplistic 'mimetic' theory of fiction assumes. It shows that gender is poetically relevant, and that fiction is socially relevant, as two indissociable aspects of the one problematic of the place of texts in society. If interdiscursivity, voice, and focalization are poetic issues, they entail insight into social differences, from the status of women to the image of God. (1991, p. 72)

I will use the findings of Bal from her *On Story Telling* (1991) and "Heroism and Proper Names, or the Fruits of Analogy", in *Lethal Love* (1987, pp. 68-88; also in Brenner, 1993, pp. 42-69) in discussing the book of Ruth.

Chapter Five will be an evaluation of the tasks set out in this introduction. I will provide a summary of my findings in chapters one through four and propose new develop-

ments in research in the book of Ruth. I will also propose
the use of a reader's survey tool to document readers'
understandings of the text. Finally, direction will be
given for the application of evaluative methods in the read-
ing and interpreting of other biblical texts.

I recognize that this study, while lengthy, will be nei-
ther exhaustive nor complete. The purpose of the study will
be to make contributions in two areas. The first is a con-
tribution to biblical scholarship in the recovery of women's
voices in the Hebrew Bible. Since the stories and voices of
women are rare and most often negative, it is important to
examine a source such as the book of Ruth, which contains
women's roles that have most often been interpreted as posi-
tive. The second will be a contribution to current feminist
scholarship. While the focus of this work will be in the
area of feminist biblical research it also addresses the
wider application of feminist analysis to the patriarchal
structure of religion and society.

CHAPTER ONE

EXAMINING THE TEXT AND ITS INTERPRETATIONS

Many pericopes and texts in the Hebrew Bible have been acknowledged as being misogynous, depicting, in many cases, hostile and violent behaviour towards women. These texts have included descriptions of such violent acts as rape and sacrifice, as well as murder and dismemberment.[1] What is even more unsettling than the presence of such texts within sacred literature is the apparent condoning of such violence by the deity, by members of the author's community, and by centuries of biblical readership.

Amongst these negative texts, and, indeed, amongst the entire patriarchal structure of religion and society depicted within the Hebrew Bible, are found certain texts which apparently break with the status quo and show women to be administrators of the blessing of the deity. These texts do not represent the sum total of women's experiences, but are representative of women's activities and remnants of women's voices (Pardes, 1992, p. 12) recorded in the patriarchal texts. A few strong female characters are to be

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[1] 2 Samuel 13:1-14 records the incestuous rape of Tamar by Amnon, Judges 11:29-40 records the human sacrifice of a young woman by Jephthah, her father, and Judges 19:1-30 records the gang rape, murder and dismemberment of a woman. For a full treatment of these texts see, for example Trible (1984) and Bal (1988a and 1988b).

found amidst the more stereotypical representations of women as the source of evil and as the victims of violence in the Hebrew Bible.

Throughout this thesis I will be examining the book of Ruth, its place in biblical studies and modern feminist and literary trends in scholarship on the book of Ruth. In this chapter I will provide an introduction and an overview to the study of the book of Ruth. I will also provide an overview of how several biblical-critical exegetes have assessed the book of Ruth and, with the support of several sample passages, display how many commentators have assigned limited and gender-specific interpretations to this text. I will also question the assumption that the book of Ruth is a unified text. After discussions of gendered commentary and difficulties present within the text, I will present briefly the contributions to Ruth scholarship of Phyllis Trible (1988) and Ilana Pardes (1992) in an attempt to show alternative methods of exegeting the text.

THE BOOK OF RUTH: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

The book of Ruth is one of two books in the Hebrew Bible that bear a woman's name.[2] It has often been considered a

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[2]The books of Ruth and Esther in the Hebrew Bible as well as Susanna and Judith in the Apocrypha bear women's names. There exist no books in the New Testament that bear a woman's name.

positive and laudatory text for and about women, while its theological content has been debated. Contrary to the examples mentioned above, there exist no rape, murder, dismemberment or other forms of violence in this text. Many commentators and readers have eagerly stated that, compared to violent texts involving women, this is a positive text about strong women in Israel's history. For example James Cleland, commenting on the proclamation to Naomi made by the women of Bethlehem in the book of Ruth (4:15), reveals his surprise at the message he perceives to be contained in this texts when he comments, "A daughter-in-law better than seven sons! This is the book of the O.T.[3] for women!" (1953, pp. 850-851). Whether this has indeed been or ever can be a book for women will be discussed in the pages of this thesis.

As with any text, opinions about the purposes and goals of the author and the text vary greatly. The book of Ruth

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[3]Use of the term "Old Testament", while still common, implies superiority of the Christian New Testament, is outdated, and is considered exclusivistic within biblical scholarship. For this reason the term "Hebrew Bible" will be used throughout this thesis when referring to the biblical documents that form the canon of the law, prophets and writings. Once again, the reader is asked to note this preference when the term "Old Testament" appears in sources quoted.

is no exception. In the following five paragraphs I provide a sampling of scholarly opinion concerning the purpose of this text.

Many scholars believe that the aim of this book is to show that YHWH unexpectedly displays covenant faithfulness (hesed) to the community through a woman. To this point in Israel's history, males, in the form of patriarchs, prophets, judges and kings have been the administrators of YHWH's activities. Exceptions to this fact have been the leadership roles of Miriam and Deborah, and to a certain extent, Sarah. Further, it shows that a foreign woman could willingly choose to become a proselyte and serve as an example of faith to the Israelite community and be the progenetrix of one of their great spiritual and civic leaders, David.[4]

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[4]These sentiments are expressed in many commentaries including Gray, 1977, pp. 296-298, Cundall & Morris, 1968, pp. 239-243, and Knight, 1966, p. 21. See also Rowley, 1965, pp. 171-194, for a comprehensive overview of the purpose and date of the book of Ruth, and Pfisterer Darr, 1991, p.71, for comment on the date of composition. Further, consult Lacocque who places great importance on an understanding of a pre- or post-exilic date for this text. He states that the purpose and even genre of the text is dependent on the date of composition (1990, p. 84).

Similar in focus is the position that the content of the book of Ruth centers upon the actions and allegiances of Ruth the Moabitess, who, following the death of her husband, chooses to remain with Naomi, her mother-in-law, and to go with her to Bethlehem. Ruth 1:16-17 is the celebrated, all encompassing vow of Ruth to Naomi. John Gray comments on the magnitude of the reality of Ruth's vow: "Ruth sacrifices all that an ancient Semite could -- home, kindred, her native religion, in short all guarantees of protection and even burial with her people, and that for a destitute and aged widow who had nothing to offer her"(1977, p. 306). In this vow she verbalizes her dedication to her mother-in-law, to Naomi's home, people and deity.[5] As a result of this uncalled for devotion to Naomi and her

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[5]These eight Hebrew words of prose have become some of the most celebrated lines of poetry in the English language. An entire thesis could be written on the impact of this vow including the misuses of it. A classic mistake in popular usage of this text is the transference from the original female to female context to a female to male context in its use as a wedding vow in Christian marriages. Recently, womanist and lesbian theological groups have reclaimed this vow in the female to female context and have found it affirming of a lesbian relationship in the Hebrew Bible. Melanie Morrison has utilized this understanding in her theological discussion group *Leaven*, in Lansing, Michigan.

expressed allegiance to Naomi's deity, YHWH, Ruth is blessed
by YHWH with the security of a husband, home and son, and
given a place in the Davidic genealogy (Pfisterer Darr,
1991, p. 72). Addressing the character Ruth's allegiance to
YHWH and Israel's customs, laws and traditions, Étan Levine
states that "Ruth is regarded as the proselyte par
excellence, who accepts the law unreservedly" (1973, p. 1).

Alice Laffey, commenting on the nature and purpose of
this text, approaches it from a socio-economic perspective.
She notes that

> some scholars suggest that the story [of Ruth] is about
> God's empowering the powerless. Since there was no one
> more powerless in Israel than a childless widow, and
> since Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah all belong to that
> category, the story is about how God vindicates them.
> (1988, p. 208)[6]

To these elements of powerlessness is also added the fact
that Ruth was a foreigner in Bethlehem. Ilana Pardes writes
of Ruth's status as that of being "...doubly other -- both a
foreigner and a woman" (1992, p. 99). These interpretations
resonate with the language of modern liberation theology,
with its understanding of YHWH's preferential option for the
poor of the world.

Some scholars have understood the book of Ruth to have
been written to show that YHWH's care and protection could

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[6]Unfortunately, Laffey does not supply footnotes or
references to give us indications as to who these scholars
are.

reach beyond the confines of the house of Israel. This inclusion extended even to the Moabites who were despised by the Israelites because their forbearers, the women who were the daughters of Lot, had secured their progeny through incestuous sexual relations with their father (as recorded in Genesis 19:30-37). In the book of Ruth a Moabitess is not only accepted by YHWH, she becomes an example of faithfulness.[7]

The historicity of this text is also discussed among scholars. One opinion expresses that this text was written in the fifth century B.C.E., and that it circulated as a tract to protest the strict legal reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah (as recorded in Rowley, 1965, pp. 173-174). Such a tract would address the proposed and practised reforms concerning mixed marriages. Israelite men who had married foreign women were now obliged to sever the marital relationship and send away the foreign wives with their children (Ezra 10).[8] In the same vein, great debate is held concern-

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[7]Pfisterer Darr (1991, pp. 55-57), Cleland (1953, pp. 851-852), and Lacocque (1990, pp. 85-86) are three commentators who address the implications of David's heritage through Ruth, including the perceived scandalous Moabite connection.

[8]The practise of keeping a race or society ethnically pure by restrictive marital practises and by ridding itself of foreign spouses is neither unique to Judaism nor outdated. Modern examples of prohibited inter-racial and inter-ethnic marriages can be found, for example, in Egypt, Jordan, and

ing the genealogy in the book of Ruth 4:18-22. It has also been discussed that the genealogy was later attached to this story as a matter of interest and as an attempt to document David's family history and establish a link to the land of Moab (I Samuel 22:3-4), whose king David sought in securing protection for his parents (Gray, 1977, pp. 298-299).[9]

While many of these interpretations may have some validity, none captures the essence or purpose of the narrative, nor fully explores the character development. These difficulties with the text will be addressed in chapters two through four.

A SPECIFICALLY GENDERED COMMENTARY

It is fascinating to note that the book of Ruth, a text about two strong female characters, is overwhelmingly described as being "delightful", "charming", "lovely", "beautiful", "little", "gentle", "slight", "slender",

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the United States.

[9]Leon Morris also offers five purposes of the book of Ruth but categorizes them as follows: universalism, friendship, the genealogy of David, levirate marriage, and the sovereignty of God (Cundall & Morris, 1968, pp. 239-242).

"attractive", "simple" and "exquisite".[10] While such des-
criptions have been readily and unquestioningly accepted by
a multitude of scholars to describe this text about strong
female characters, such adjectives would never be used to
describe a biblical narrative about strong male characters.
This point will be elaborated upon shortly.

This point is clarified further in the following exam-
ple. The biblical story of Naomi and Ruth has been compared
to another significant book of Hebrew scripture, to the book
of Job. "She (Naomi) has been viewed as a feminine counter-
part of Job, who passed from happiness to sorrow, and whose
faith was rewarded by increased happiness" (Cleland, 1953,
p. 852). The themes of the perseverance of a faithful
Israelite, despite severe hardship and the reversal of for-
tune are key to the books of Ruth and Job. "Naomi, like

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[10]A cursory reading of any number of commentaries results in
finding the following and other diminutive adjectives
applied to the book of Ruth and the title character:
"delightful" (Hubbard, 1988, p. 1), "charming" (Hubbard,
ibid.) (Bachrach, 1973, p. 6) (Gottwald, 1989, p. 554)
(Hals, 1969 p. v), "lovely" (Cleland, 1953, p. 852),
"beautiful" (Campbell, 1975, p. 3), "little" (Cundall &
Morris, 1968, p. 229), "gentle" (Hubbard, ibid.), "slight"
(Cleland, ibid.) "slender" (Cleland, ibid.), "attractive"
(Knight, 1966, p. 15), "simple" (Rowley, 1965, p. 171)
(Knight, ibid.) and "exquisite" (Gottwald, ibid.).

Job, accepts her lot as given by God, grieving only for the sake of her daughters-in-law (Smith, 1953, p. 836). If the character of Naomi is to be compared with the character of Job, how is it that the importance of the narrative is trivialized with epithets such as "delightful", "whimsical", and "charming"?

Never has the book of Job been described as being "delightful", "whimsical" or "charming". At the heart of each story are the workings of God, who in each of these two texts is named <u>Shaddai</u>, participating in the loss of livelihood, spouse and children of the character, followed by the restoration of a happy future to each in the concluding verses. Given this similarity in content, why is the book of Ruth continually being described as "charming", "idyllic" and "delightful"?

Returning to the original point of specifically gendered commentary and the book of Ruth, observe the following four quotations which serve as examples of this widely accepted treatment of the book of Ruth. These statements, spanning a period from 1953 to 1988, serve as examples of this gendered critique. Bachrach's statement reflects a Midrashic understanding of the text, Cleland's is drawn from the Interpreter's Bible Commentary Series, and Hubbard's from an independent volume.

> Ruth is an absolutely delightful little book. Mention its name and Bible readers gently smile, warmly praise its beauty, and quietly tell what it means to them personally....The book is profoundly human....They [the readers] empathize readily with poor Naomi, battered by life's tragic blows -- famine, exile, grief, loneliness

-- and recall their own bitter bruises. They quickly
admire charming Ruth, her commitment, courage, and
cleverness. (Hubbard, 1988, p. 1)

Ruth is a little book, a lovely little book. It is too
slight to carry the weight of many disquisitions.
(Cleland, 1953, p. 852)

The book is a slight, though exquisite, piece of work.
It is a cameo, a miniature;[11] and the equipment used to
pry open the secrets of the writings of an Ezekiel or a
Paul will shatter what Goethe calls the 'loveliest
little whole, that has been preserved for us among the
epics and idyls'....From the literary point of view it
is a gem, a gracious and beautiful short story...a
slender volume. (Cleland, 1953, p. 832)

Now Samuel himself succeeded in disseminating the
knowledge of [the] law, and in glorifying it in Israel
for all generations. He, however, accomplished his
purpose peacefully and forthrightly, writing this
charming and idyllic Book of Ruth the Moabitess,
portraying her as she really was, in essaying her first
steps as she entered the community of Israel and showed
her merit and receiving her reward in full measure from
Hashem, God of Israel, under Whose wings she had come
to take refuge. (Bachrach, 1973, p. 6)

The commentators' frequent use of words such as

"slight", "lovely", "beautiful" and "slender" leaves the

reader with the overwhelming impression that these men are

describing not a scriptural text, but a woman, and, more

specifically, an image that they have of 'Ruth', rather than

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[11]Clelands's use of the word "miniature" is interesting

since the miniature was an art form that women specialized

in. Cleland may be implying that the author of the book of

Ruth was a woman. Phyllis Trible (1988, pp. 168, 179, 186)

casually raises the possibility of the author of the book of

Ruth being a woman, as do George A. F. Knight (1966, p. 21)

and David Rosenberg (1991, p. 337).

the text of the book of Ruth. Edward Campbell has himself
alerted us to this reality as he states that "...some have
found more in *her* than perhaps they ought" within his dis-
cussion of Dante's, Bunyan's, Milton's and Keat's portrayal
of the title character of this text (1975, p. 3 [italics
added]). Campbell's telling use of the term "her" rather
than "it", "the book" or "this text" is an example of the
gendered readings of which I speak.

It appears that the commentators listed above, and many
others like them, are reflecting on and writing about the
role of Ruth through their interpretation of women, or are
commenting on their perception of the role of women through
their interpretation of the character in the book of Ruth.
Perhaps such an obviously gendered approach to textual
criticism might be acceptable if the exegetes had stated
that such was their intent. Since they have given us no
such indication, it must be assumed that this tendency in
their commentary has gone past them unnoticed and operates
largely on the sub-conscious level. We have but scratched
the surface of the problem of gendered commentary, yet we
must leave the area of secondary texts and look at the pri-
mary source itself.[12] Throughout the thesis I will be read-

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12Specifically gendered commentary on biblical texts could
be an area of study for a research paper. Time does not
permit the analysis of the language used in commentaries of
other biblical books which bear a woman's name or to compare
it to language used in biblical commentary generally and in

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ing and examining the text from many angles and perspectives. Through these examinations, and with the support of established scholars on the book of Ruth, I will be addressing problems which are inherent to the text itself. It is the question of the book of Ruth as a unified text to which we now turn.

THE BOOK OF RUTH: A UNIFIED TEXT?

The book of Ruth has been regarded as a short story with strong, complete characters. It has also been heralded as a fine example of an original and compact literary unit. Yet these readings overlook the apparent conflict concerning the pivotal role of heroine, or leading character, in the narrative. There exists confusion over the lead role of heroine. At times Naomi is understood to be the heroine, yet frequently Ruth fulfills this role. The following quotations reflect the opinion that there are no inconsistencies present within the text.

> The account is of one piece, without any seams or signs of combining or adding. (Fuerst, 1975, p. 5)

> But what a story! Work of a master story-teller, to Goethe it is the most beautiful 'little whole' in the Old Testament. (Campbell, 1975, p. 3)

> There is general agreement today that the book of Ruth is essentially a unity. Increasing appreciation of the book's literary structure has effectively set aside

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commentaries which bear a man's name.

earlier literary-critical attempts to find later additions within it. (Hubbard, 1988, p. 8)

No complications are introduced which are left unresolved; no character is given a role that remains ambiguous. Heroes find their mates, villains meet their fates, dispatchers find their ultimate reward, and donors fulfill their obligations. It is not surprising, therefore, that as a tale that hews closer to folktale patterns than most Biblical narratives, Ruth has constantly found favor in the eyes of a variegated audience. (Sasson, 1989, p. 216)

While these scholars' opinions seem to present a solid case for a unified text, upon closer, intentional observation of the text one can detect where literary fault lines exist. There are unexplained inconsistencies within the narrative and ambiguities within the presentation of its characters. Contrary to the opinions of Hubbard, Cleland, Bachrach, Fuerst, Campbell and Sasson (cited above) my opinion is that the story contained in the book of Ruth is not always charming, delightful, or complete. Complications are introduced that are not resolved, gaps in the story are evident, inconsistencies in major characters exist, and ulterior motives of certain characters are apparent. The character of Ruth and the narrative story that bears her name are not allowed to develop fully; indeed, her voice is silenced and her character suppressed. Her place is usurped initially by Naomi and, ultimately, by the motives of the narrator and the author of the text. The character of Ruth is not allowed to be as active, vocal or present as the alert reader would expect. Neither is the character of Naomi as valiant as one would initially assume her to be.

An examination of the major characters in this story reveals that certain characters demonstrate a motivational ambivalence not always in the best interest of Ruth. The role of each character will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two, yet I include an example. Characters who ostensibly act in favour of Ruth are subsequently revealed to be protecting their own interests at Ruth's expense. Naomi, for example, withholds critical information that would have been beneficial to Ruth, such as: the facts that the possibility of levirate marriage exists for Ruth, and that Boaz is one of Elimelech's next of kin and eligible to play the part of the levir and redeem her (2:1), the danger of being bothered/molested by the servants while winnowing in the fields (2:21-22), and Naomi's own desire to procure a son for herself and redeem her own future (4:16-17). Through these actions Naomi proves that she is motivated by her own interests to secure her future and not by a strong bond of love or loyalty to her daughter-in-law Ruth. It is interesting to note that although Ruth pledges her allegiance to Naomi, and to Naomi's people and to YHWH, Naomi need not make any such allegiance to Ruth or a radical commitment to their future together. After all, Naomi is returning to her home while Ruth is leaving home.

Given this evaluation of Naomi, the team of Ruth and Naomi may not be as harmonious as Athalya Brenner would suggest: "Whatever the internal shifts in the balance of power may be, they are in the struggle for survival together and

thus co-operate"(1983, p. 396). I would argue that it is the tension, and not the harmony, between Naomi and Ruth which propels the narrative.

Inconsistencies also exist with the character and interpretation of Ruth. Boaz advises her when gleaning in his fields to stay close to his young women (2:8). Yet, when she reports to Naomi, Ruth informs her that Boaz told her to keep close to his servants [the young men] (2:21). It is at this point that Naomi counsels Ruth on the dangers in the field.

In popular interpretations of the book of Ruth, the title character is portrayed as being a benevolent, loving person, acting to the point of self-sacrifice, especially regarding her departure from Moab and her care of her mother-in-law.[13]

In their study, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth*, Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn offer a pragmatic interpretation of Ruth's actions. Her departure from Moab to go to Bethlehem may

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[13]Educational materials, songs, bible study materials and popular literature written within the Christian church often emphasize the (perceived) sacrifices which Ruth made in going to Bethlehem, as well as the role that Ruth, David and the town of Bethlehem play in the birth of Jesus, the Christian messiah. Jensen (1978, pp. 54-60) is but one example.

have been the only option available to Ruth after the death
of her husband. In light of her mixed marriage with an
Israelite, Ruth the Moabitess might have faced rejection by
her family and community if she remained in her country
(1990, p. 97), and her opportunities for remarriage might
have been few. Returning to their mothers' houses might not
have resulted in a secure future for Ruth or for Orpah.
Pfisterer Darr cites the speculations of rabbis concerning
the plight of Orpah, who followed Naomi's instructions and
returned to Moab and her mother's house. They propose that
Orpah was gang raped on the day that she left her mother-in-
law, that her four sons who were warriors were killed by
David and his men, and that her son Goliath was slain by the
young David (1991, p. 62). Considering this proposed fate
of Orpah, it becomes easier to see Ruth's actions in a realm
of self-preservation and not sacrifice. The move to
Bethlehem may have been a survival tactic and not a self-
giving act of devotion to her mother-in-law and her dead
husband Mahlon.

The purpose of this brief overview is to accentuate the
inherent difficulties within this text which have often been
overlooked by biblical scholars. The alert reader of this,
or any, biblical text must begin to interrogate the narra-
tive and the function of its characters and confront the
question as to whether this is a positive biblical text or
not. While the book of Ruth might not be described as a
text of terror, as Phyllis Trible has described the stories

of Hagar, Tamar, an Unnamed Woman, and the Daughter of Jephthah (Trible, 1984), this text must not be prematurely judged as being positive for women. It is a text fraught with difficulties and inconsistencies. In subtle ways the power, voice, and presence of the character of Ruth are diminished until she disappears entirely from the narrative. The motives of the character Ruth are undermined by those of the narrator/author of the story, and his/her agenda which includes a concern for the documentation of a patriarchal accounting of lineage, initially presented as the genealogy of Mahlon (4:10) but ultimately that of Boaz (4:18-23).

These are examples of difficulties within the text which will be examined in light of Jack Sasson's and Athalya Brenner's work in chapters two and three respectively.

THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES

Not all biblical commentators have fallen into the trap of categorizing the book of Ruth as a nice little story. Several contemporary critics have demonstrated great sensitivity to and awareness of the intricacies in the text in their interpretations. They have examined the theology of the text as well as addressed many of the complications inherent in the text. While it is not possible to evaluate all of the current scholarship on the book of Ruth, I will examine recent relevant contributions to this area of biblical scholarship.

While it is true that the book of Ruth is unusual among so many of the biblical narratives involving women in that

there are no acts of violence, we need to be aware that the character of Ruth is, nevertheless, violated. While there is time to, figuratively, laugh and dance with the character of Ruth, we must also "weep and mourn" for her (Trible, 1985, p. xiii). We 'weep and mourn' for her lost voice, dignity, child, and very presence in the narrative that bears her name. To be able, fully, to 'laugh and dance' with Ruth, one must reclaim a rightful ending for the narrative that bears her name.

A feminist alternative reading of the book of Ruth would maintain the narrator's focus on the actions of Ruth (starting at Ruth 1:14) and would develop her character and storyline to reach an ultimate and logical conclusion. If we recognize the character of Ruth, and not that of Naomi, as the heroine of this story, then as modern readers we can provide a complete and more satisfying conclusion to the story that might include the following elements: 1) Ruth and Boaz, and not YHWH, conceive the child, 2) Ruth names the baby, and not the women of Bethlehem, 3) Ruth, not Naomi, is the baby's nurse, 4) it is stated not that a son has been born to Naomi, but to Ruth, and 5) Ruth is listed as the ancestress, not Boaz and Perez.

For the book of Ruth to be understood and retrieved as being a positive text for and about women, which can be a goal for some feminist biblical critics, a re-working of the text that utilizes a critical analysis must be done. Such a critical analysis and reworking is the goal of this feminist

literary approach to the book of Ruth. We turn now to two significant contributions made to the study of the book of Ruth.

ALTERNATIVE READINGS

Phyllis Trible's (1988, pp. 166-199) analysis of the book of Ruth has proven to be a pivotal study in the areas of biblical literary criticism and in feminist biblical studies. Trible examines this text (and several others in the Hebrew Bible) and reveals the patriarchal setting and agenda in which they are set. At the time of researching and writing *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1988) she set as her goal to discover the traditions and themes that lay behind dominant readings of biblical texts and in so doing she seeks the remnant of womens' experience and meaning. Trible describes her method and task as follows: "Using feminist hermeneutics, I have tried to recover old treasures and discover new ones in the household of faith" (1988, p. xvi).

This goal she accomplishes in her study of the book of Ruth by highlighting the courageous actions of Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi; independent women fighting for their redemption in a man's world. She explains the radicality of Ruth's vow as being not only equal to but exceeding that of Abraham (p. 173). She also expands on the meaning of Naomi's blessing of her two daughters-in-law by indicating that their examples of human hesed (covenant faithfulness) towards her are models for divine hesed to be displayed by YHWH (p. 170).

Discussion of the development of the character of Ruth from her status as property of a man to that of an individual is framed within the questions of who and whose Ruth is (pp. 176, 183).

Trible's strongest points are by far in her literary critique of the text. Through the use of literary critical methods Trible illuminates the cyclical nature of the text moving from life to death and returning to life, as well as the development from famine to sustenance to plenty. Also highlighted are the recurrent chiastic constructions, the role of the narrator in dictating the character's status from the third person to first person and back to third person existence (pp. 166-167, 187). The themes of reversal and irony such as famine in Bethlehem (the house of bread), the overriding concern for dead males in a narrative about living females, and humans incarnating the blessings of YHWH, are emphasized (p. 177).

Trible begins her treatment by stating that "the book of Ruth presents the aged Naomi and the youthful Ruth as they struggle for survival in a patriarchal environment" (p. 166). She concludes that the women not only survive but challenge and transform the patriarchal culture within which they live (p. 196).

Ilana Pardes, in her book, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach*, has criticized the work of Phyllis Trible as being too idealistic in attempting to rid the text of patriarchal influences and interpretations.

"...[H]er readings of the Bible turn out to be the most problematic insofar as they efface its patriarchal stamp and endorse an idyllic reconciliation between 'Biblical faith and women's liberation'" (1992, pp. 2-3).

Pardes views the importance of the book of Ruth in the context of the unexpected female voices which we discover, and the continuation and completion of one unresolved narrative with another. She is referring specifically to the character grouping of Ruth and Naomi as complementing and completing the story of Rachel and Leah. Pardes considers the book of Ruth to be an antithetical completion of Genesis (1992, p. 5). Her discussion begins with the curious blessing in the final chapter, where the people at the gate and the elders (presumably all men) offer the following affirmation and blessing to Boaz upon the announcement of his acquisition of Naomi's/Elimelech's land and of Ruth: "May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel." (Ruth 4:11). At least three curious elements are present in this blessing. While the order of names given in the book of Ruth is Rachel and Leah, this is a reversal of the order given in every citation in Genesis, which represents the actual birth order. Also, this blessing implies that Rachel and Leah worked together as co-wives of Jacob without jealousy. Thirdly, it is astounding that two women are invoked as being "builders of Israel" since this title is usually reserved for patriarchs (p. 99). Pardes summarizes:

In evoking Leah and Rachel as the two *cobuilders* of the house of Israel, the Book of Ruth both highlights the brief moments in which the two matriarchs manage to cooperate and calls into question the emphasis put on rivalry in the story of Leah and Rachel as well as in the scarce representation of relationships between women elsewhere in biblical narrative. (p. 101)

Pardes is convincing in her presentation of an antithetical completion of the Leah and Rachel account in Genesis. One could put forth the argument that the book of Ruth was either written or edited to reflect this amplification of women's voices and a re-writing of Leah's and Rachel's story.

Pardes cites other examples of the surprising elements found in this text as compared to other biblical texts as follows: the presence of a female heroine where a male hero is expected, a doubling of the female character where a single character is expected, and the place of women in the public domain (pp. 100-101). She also discusses in depth the importance of the author's use of the verb dbq, meaning to cling and to cleave, which has its foundation in Genesis 2:24. Pardes highlights the usage of the critical phrases "leaving one's mother's and father's house" and "shall cleave" as a theme connecting the Genesis and the Ruth texts. Never before has the verb dbq been used to describe the actions between two female subjects. In so doing it has introduced a new concept of female bonding (p. 102).

While many scholars have discussed the element of Ruth's status as foreigner and Naomi's feelings of bitterness, none have compared and contrasted them as Pardes has. She has

combined these two themes and writes of the estrangement of both characters. Ruth is the stranger since she is a foreigner. This fact is reiterated by the author's constant reference to Ruth as a Moabitess, despite her vowed conversion to the culture, customs, and religion of Naomi and her people. Ruth is the stranger, yet she eventually becomes rooted with the people and the heritage of Elimelech's family. It is Naomi, the native Judahite, who is in a condition of estrangement. Naomi is estranged from her people, her land, her husband's family, and, above all, from herself (pp. 112-115). Understood in this context, the narrative is concerned with bringing the stranger and the estranged into community.

Pardes' contributions to research on the book of Ruth have brought insight and innovation to the understanding of this text and of its connections to another narrative in the Hebrew Bible.

Despite the fact that Trible's and Pardes' treatments of the text differ considerably, both scholars have drawn our attention to critical details evident in the text. Without bringing previous assumptions and stereotypes to their evaluations of this texts and its characters, they were able to present their readers with methods of critically reading the texts and discovering the rare voices of women's experiences in the book of Ruth.

What follows in the next three chapters are detailed evaluations of the diverse treatments of the book of Ruth by

Jack M. Sasson, Athalya Brenner, and Mieke Bal.

CHAPTER TWO

THE IMPORTANCE OF GENRE CLASSIFICATION

This chapter will address the important role that genre
classification plays in textual interpretation by the
reader. This is followed by an overview of Jack M. Sasson's
work on genre and the book of Ruth. Sasson adapts the work
of the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the
Folktale* (1968) to Ruth scholarship. Propp identifies ele-
ments and functions present in texts that are fairy tales.
I have chosen to focus on Sasson's work since his
*Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a
Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* has made a unique con-
tribution to Ruth scholarship.

Propp's classification of elements of plot and functions
of character has been foundational in understanding the
breadth and depth of the uniformity of the fairy tale genre.
Propp's categories have been utilized in the analysis of
fairy tale material from various countries, as well as being
applied to biblical literature. This is similar to Hermann
Gunkel's approach to biblical texts as evident in *The Folk-
tale in the Old Testament*. This has spurred modern biblical
scholars, such as Jack M. Sasson, to adapt Propp's research
to a biblical text.

Accordingly, the fifth chapter of Sasson's book *Ruth: A
New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a
Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* presents an explanation
of Vladimir Propp's categories of characters as well as Sas-

son's application of these categories to the book of Ruth.
His work is reviewed in this chapter in light of Pamela
Milne's article "Folktales and Fairy Tales: An Evaluation of
Two Proppian Analyses of Biblical Narratives" (1986) and
book *Vladimir Propp and the Study of Structure in Hebrew
Biblical Narrative* (1988). I will include my own critique
of Sasson's application of categories to characters in Ruth
as well as offering areas of improvement in understanding
the competing roles of hero/heroines and the heretofore
unexamined character and function of YHWH in this text.

INTRODUCTION TO THE FUNCTION OF GENRE

When one begins reading a newspaper article one expects
to learn facts and details. When one reads an editorial in
the same newspaper one expects to read of someone's pas-
sionate and reasoned response to something that has aroused
his or her attention. When one reads a textbook one expects
to read and understand concepts and approaches to learning
the chosen subject. A great deal of a reader's understand-
ing is based on his/her anticipation and classification of
the text into a category of genre. Most recently, Terry
Eagleton in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983, pp. 1-
16) discusses the importance of the reader's expectation in
determining the interpretation of a text.

When one reads a story that begins with 'Once upon a
time', one alters his/her mindset and anticipates certain
fixed aspects of the story. When reading this type of
story, the reader does not anticipate learning facts, dates,

statistics or theories. What the reader does anticipate is entering into a realm where the ordinary laws of nature are suspended and the impossible becomes possible for the hero. The reader also anticipates that the main character is a good person who somehow gets into trouble, that the villain causes this trouble, that a sudden saviour assists the protagonist to escape from his difficulties, and that there will be a successful outcome. This is what is called a 'happily ever after' ending in the genre labelled 'fairy tale'.

Provided that the story follows this pattern, the reader is comfortable in the genre and can accept the calamity which befalls the hero, the rescue attempts made, as well as the successful conclusion. Children's stories and movies follow this pattern and thus enjoy the benefits of immense popularity. In these fairy tales a prince figure portrays the hero, and the princess figure portrays the person who is sought after.

There are, however, alternatives available. Robert Munsch's children's story *The Paper Bag Princess* (1980) is an exception to the regimen that proves the rule of the genre. In Munsch's story the roles are reversed. The princess is the hero/ine who fights the villain/s in her life and seeks after the prince. Unexpected difficulties complicate the pursuit of the prince by the heroine. The princess defends and rescues *herself* from danger since there is no capable donor or helper willing to assist her. The ending

is indeed a 'happily ever after' one, yet not on the anticipated terms. The heroine recognizes the prince figure for what he is, with his flawed character traits and selfish motives, and she concludes the story, and enters into the afterlife of the story, happy and alone. What is evidenced in this text is the genre of a female-fairy tale and not the anticipated heroic fairy tale.[1]

[1]The 'folktale' is a general category for orally transmitted and written literature, while the 'fairy tale' is only one sub-section of this larger category. Fairy tales may have a male or a female protagonist. When the protagonist is male the genre is labeled 'heroic fairy tale'. A term used for fairy tales which feature a female protagonist is 'female fairy-tale'. Thus far, 'female fairy-tales' have not been researched to any great extent. It is frequently seen in scholarship, that when the term 'heroic fairy tale' is intended, the general term 'fairy tale' is used most often. The use of the generic term may cause confusion to the readers. Part of the difficulty inherent in Sasson's work stems from the fact that Propp's survey is based on heroic fairy tales which Sasson applies to the book of Ruth, which is not an heroic fairy tale. Sasson made this decision fully recognizing that the story of Ruth was neither a nineteenth-century folktale nor fairy tale (Sasson, 1979, p. xiii), as has been studied by Propp (Milne, 1988, p. 146). Further, "Not only did Sasson not appreciate that Propp had insisted that the validity of his model was limited to fairy

In this chapter I will argue that, contrary to Sasson's application, the book of Ruth, while appearing to follow the pattern of an heroic fairy tale, is, like *The Paper Bag Princess*, an exception to the rule of that particular genre of fairy tale. In both of these narratives the protagonists are women.[2]

I turn now to an introduction of Vladimir Propp's categories of functions of plot and character classification.

VLADIMIR PROPP'S *MORPHOLOGY OF THE FOLKTALE*[3]

Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968) is a comprehensive guide to understanding the ancient structure of the genre of heroic fairy tales.

> In *Morphology of the Folktale* Propp described the structure of one hundred Russian fairy tales and, on the basis of these descriptions, developed a model

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tales alone, he also did not have benefit of Jason's insight that Propp's model was only valid for heroic fairy tales (Jason and Segal, 1977:4)" (Milne, 1988, p. 153).

[2]One may argue that the book of Ruth features two heroines, Ruth and Naomi. I will discuss this further in this chapter, as well as in Chapter Three.

[3]The title of this book is misleading. While Propp himself was referring only to fairy tales, his editor incorrectly titled the book *Morphology of the Folktale*.

which he believed represented the structure of all
tales belonging to the fairy-tale type. (Milne, 1988,
p. 11)

Understanding this pre-existent structure, and the author's

adherence to it, explains to the reader why he or she can

anticipate the movement of the plot and thus feel comfort-

able with the progress and outcome of the story. Folk tales

and fairy tales exist in many cultures and languages, for

example, Hans Christian Andersen's tales from Denmark, "The

Thousand and One Nights" of Arabia, and tales of the

Brothers Grimm from Germany. Propp's examination of one

hundred Russian fairy tales led him to discover that certain

characteristics of plot development were evident in each of

the tales.

Propp recognized that certain patterns within the plots

of fairy tales could be detected, and he began to identify

the smallest units of plot as functions performed by charac-

ters or <u>dramatis personae</u>. He made four observations which

form the framework of his detailed study of the structure of

a fairy tale.

1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant
    elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom
    they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamen-
    tal components of a tale.
2. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is
    limited.
3. The sequence of functions is always identical.
4. All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their
    structure
(Propp, 1968, pp.21-24, 19-78).

Of prime importance in reading his work is comprehension

of the fact that for Propp, recognizing how the functions

operate within a fairy tale was the key to understanding the

genre. It was not of great importance that characters performed the same function in each tale, so long as the functions were performed by one or more character. When discussing characters or dramatis personae he is really discussing how the functions are distributed among the various performers of a fairy tale. He recognizes seven 'spheres of action' and labels them as follows: 'villain', 'donor' ('provider'), 'helper', 'princess' ('sought-for person') and 'her father', 'dispatcher', 'hero' and 'false hero' (Propp, 1968, pp. 79-80).

Propp was aware of the vast amount of previous scholarship in this broad field. He also recognized that there existed not just one genre of 'folktale'. Rather, Propp cites Wundt's classifications of folktale material in *The Psychology of the People* as follows: 1) mythological talefables; 2) pure fairy tales; 3) biological tales and fables; 4) pure animal fables; 5) "genealogical tales"; 6) joke tales and fables; and 7) moral fables (Propp, 1968, p. 6).

Even though Propp recognized the plurality of form of the folktale, the title of his books suggests otherwise. While the title of Propp's book implies the general category of 'folktale' he is actually focussed on a single, specific sub-category. He speaks only of "the so-called fairy tales, that is, tales in the strictest sense of the word" and states that "this study is dedicated to the study of fairy tales" (Propp, 1968, p. xxv, 193).

While biblical scholars, specifically Jack M. Sasson and Joseph Blenkinsopp, have applied Propp's work generally to

identify folktale patterns within biblical texts, it is
important to recognize that this use of his categories was
never intended by the author. Pamela Milne clarifies the
problem in her excellent evaluation, "Folktales and Fairy
Tales: An Evaluation of Two Proppian Analyses of Biblical
Narratives" when she writes:

> ...despite his book's title, Morphology of the Folk-
> tale, Propp did not study, and did not intend to study,
> folktales in general. His objective was to investigate
> plot structure in one specific kind of folktale which
> he identified as the 'fairy tale'. It has since been
> shown that Propp's model is even more limited: it is
> actually valid only for the type of fairy tale in which
> the hero is male. This type is commonly called the
> heroic fairy tale. It is extremely important to recog-
> nize that Propp did not develop a model for all types
> of folktales but, rather, a model for one very specific
> folktale type. His model is genre-specific not gen-
> eral. (1986, p. 38)

Both Sasson and Blenkinsopp would have benefited from
Milne's insight and, in hindsight, would not have forced
such a rigid application of Propp's categories onto biblical
texts.

As we shall see when we examine Propp's categories as
they have been applied to the book of Ruth, Sasson's attempt
is unsuccessful. The categories have been applied liberally
to the characters, gaps have been ignored, and a crucial
mistake in naming the genre of this text has been made.
While Sasson's approach may aid the readers in understanding
the movement of the folk tale and the development of this
plot, the inconsistencies present in the text are not
explained.

SASSON'S APPLICATION OF PROPPIAN CATEGORIES

How do readers approach the book of Ruth? What do readers expect to read and learn when reading this book in the Hebrew Bible? How a reader approaches the text contributes greatly to what he or she apprehends and understands from the text. For Jack M. Sasson, the most important decision to be made when analyzing the book of Ruth is its placement within a specific category of genre. In the fifth chapter of his commentary on the book of Ruth, Sasson lists several options for genre that commentators have suggested as being the appropriate genre for the book of Ruth. They are saga, tale, romance, idyll, folktale, novella and short-story (1989, p. 197). While each of these genre classifications has its advantages in facilitating understanding this text, "placing Ruth within a specific literary category is not merely an exercise in classification. As we shall try to show, a successful search for a form to which Ruth could be assigned will yield important results" (1989, p. 197).

Sasson argues that only the genre of 'folk tale' is appropriate to the book of Ruth.[4] To support his claim he utilizes Propp's identification of the units of function and the categorization of the characters and analyzes the text

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[4]I will discuss Sasson's major mistake under the conclusions at the end of this chapter. See also the first footnote of this chapter.

from the perspective of plot development. He identifies the major characters in the book of Ruth and assigns them to one or more of Propp's seven character roles or spheres traditionally found in fairy tales. I have developed the following chart which lists Propp's character elements for a fairy tale and Sasson's designation of characters from the book of Ruth (as based on Sasson, 1989, pp. 200-202). At this point it is to be recognized that there are problems with Sasson's application of Proppian categories to the book of Ruth. I will here present Sasson's character designations and then further discuss each character in the order presented and give my critique where required.

Propp's categories	Sasson's designation of characters in Ruth
1. villain	- the state of 'lack', i.e. hunger, childlessness - poverty - insecurity - [the cause of this lack could be understood as Shaddai]
2. donor (provider)	- Boaz
3. helper	- Boaz, who will also be assigned as the new hero - for Boaz the hero, the character of helper is fulfilled by YHWH
4a. sought-for person	- the go'el, the next-of-kin who serves as redeemer - Obed [and David] are the ultimate sought-for persons in the narrative
b. (Its father)	- [this character does not exist in Sasson's evaluation]

5. dispatcher   - Naomi

6. hero (seeker or victim)   - Ruth

7. false hero   - "Mr. So and So" [Sasson's
                                         translation of
                                         peloni'almoni for the
                                         next-of-kin who does not
                                         redeem Naomi or Ruth].[5]

EVALUATION

Through his application of Propp's categories to the
characters of Ruth, Sasson has greatly assisted the readers
in understanding the plot and the flow of the story line.
Yet this analysis is not without its difficulties or over-
sights. It is to these difficulties which I now turn.

Sasson states that he will not assign roles to the fol-
lowing figures which appear in the text: Mahlon, Chilion,
Orpah, the women of Bethlehem, Boaz's overseer, and the
women and neighbours associated with Naomi, or Elimelech
(1989, p. 201). He adopts this approach since he believes
that their roles do not develop the plot. He includes that
"Elimelech's role is crucial only to what Propp calls the
'initial situation'" (ibid.) Yet I would assert that the
need to maintain the names and legacy of Elimelech and
Mahlon is significant in driving the narrative through to
its conclusion. Naomi and Ruth are concerned with levirite
marriage as a means of survival, and this involves keeping

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[5]Peloni 'almoni has also been understood as the equilvalent
of "John Doe".

the name of Mahlon and the lineage of Elimelech alive. It
is interesting to note that while this is stated as an
objective throughout the text, the names of Elimelech and
Mahlon are nowhere to be seen in either one of the
genealogies (4:17b, 18-22). By contrast, Boaz and his fore-
fathers are listed in both genealogies.

I believe that the women of Bethlehem also play an
important role in this folk tale. They are the ones who
engage Naomi in conversation and prompt her to speak at her
return to Bethlehem in 1:19-21. They also play a crucial
and unusual role at the conclusion of the folk tale. They
appear at 4:14-17 to confer blessing on Naomi as well as to
name the 'sought-for person', the child born to Ruth and
Boaz. This appears to be an unusual turn of events, for
within the texts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament,
the naming of a child is very important. In each instance
of the naming of a child, the child named is always male.
The one very unusual exception to this rule is that of Job's
naming his daughters (Job 42;13-14). The naming of a child
usually follows one of four distinct patterns:
1) YHWH provides the name for the child. The case of YHWH
providing a name occurs only when the child is a son. The
announcement coincides with the announcement of conception
often under an unusual condition such as barrenness or con-
ception outside of sexual relations. Thus, YHWH announces
to Abraham that "...your wife Sarah shall bear you a son,
and you shall name him Isaac" (Genesis 17:19), and the angel

Gabriel announces to Mary of Nazareth that "...you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus" (Luke 1:31).

2) The mother names her son, as is the case with Hannah. The father either approves or says nothing: I Samuel records, "In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked him of the LORD'" (1:20).

3) The father names the child/ren, as in the cases of Job and Zechariah. "He [Job] also had seven sons and three daughters. He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Kerenhappuch" (Job 42:13-14).[6]

Concerning the dispute over the name of Elizabeth's and Zechariah's child, Elizabeth has a voice in the discussion and proposes the name of John, yet it is Zechariah whose decision is binding:

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[6]The conclusion of the book of Job is worth feminist commentary on three significant events. 1) Verse 13 lists that Job had seven sons and three daughters. The text does not record the names of the sons, yet lists the names of the daughters Jemimah, Keziah, and Kerenhappuch (42:14). 2) The sparse commentary on Job's children is devoted to the daughters: "And in all the land there were no women so fair as Job's daughters" (42:15a). 3) Verse 15b explains that the daughters also received Job's inheritance along with their brothers.

> On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child,
> and they were going to name him Zechariah after his
> father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called
> John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has
> this name.' The they began motioning to his father to
> find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for
> a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all
> of them were amazed. (Luke 1:59-63)

As well as showing that the mother and father name the child together (this example could also be placed in the next category), it also displays the attempt of the neighbours and kinsfolk to name the child. This is perhaps the only example approaching what occurs in the book of Ruth where the women of Bethlehem name the child.

4) The mother names and the father renames the child after the mother's death, as in the case of Rachel and Jacob. "As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin".(Genesis 35:18)

I have included these examples to show that the naming of a child, especially a future hero or otherwise special child, is very important in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The naming is almost always performed by YHWH or by men. The fact that the women of Bethlehem are granted the privilege of naming the child born to Ruth is unusual. The collective of the women of Bethlehem functions as 'providers' or 'helpers'.

In his character categorization Sasson ignores the place of YHWH. He neither includes YHWH as a character nor dismisses YHWH as being unnecessary. In so doing Sasson does not address Naomi's assessment of YHWH or Shaddai in 1:6,

20-21 and 4:13. Dana Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn in *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth*, address the place of YHWH in this way: "Almost exclusively absent as a character (4:13 is God's only direct appearance), God nevertheless pervades the story" (1990, p. 104). They recognize that the narrator probably intended that the reader understand the function of YHWH in situations such as causing famine, providing relief from famine, providing blessing, and causing conception. The role of YHWH as causing lack will be examined below under the category of villain.

I will now examine the categories that are most problematic in Sasson's analysis, those of villain, the sought-for person, hero and dispatcher.

VILLAIN

Sasson lists the villain as a "state of lack", i.e. hunger, childlessness, poverty and insecurity, yet he does not explain who or what caused this lack. Naomi states that Shaddai caused her emptiness:

> She said to them, 'Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty [Shaddai] has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the LORD [YHWH] has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the LORD [YHWH] has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty [Shaddai] has brought calamity upon me?' (1:20-21)

Naomi reports that she has received nothing from Shaddai except for the state of lack of food, her husband and sons. Very little of what we have heard in this folk tale informs

the reader about the nature of YHWH or _Shaddai_. Although

YHWH is mentioned on occasion, the author and narrator

obviously assume that the reader is already familiar with

the workings of YHWH and _Shaddai_ amongst the people of

Israel. In this text YHWH and _Shaddai_ who have often pro-

vided blessings of sustenance and life, are introduced as

withholding these blessings and, instead, providing famine

and death. Only in the conclusion of the narrative does

YHWH resume the anticipated role of providing life and

blessings with the conception and birth of Obed (4:13a).

Since the deity is not listed by Sasson as fulfilling one of

the roles in Propp's categories and since no further

explanation is provided for a 'state of lack', I would sug-

gest that for Naomi, _Shaddai_ assumes the role of 'villain'

and YHWH fulfills the role of 'helper'.

SOUGHT-FOR PERSON

A 'sought-for person' is the name for the goal or the

prize which the hero strives to attain. In many heroic

fairy tales this is a princess. In this tale the 'sought-

for person' is a child. Sasson applies the category of the

'sought-for person' to the offspring of Naomi or Ruth, that

is, to Obed. But if we suspend our classification of the

'sought-for person' until the completion of the genealogies,

(and beyond the text and see its place in the history of

Israel), then the category of the sought-for person is ful-

filled, instead, by David, who is hailed as one of Israel's

greatest leaders. "The Book of Ruth not only highlights the

devotion and faith of a foreign woman, but it also makes the remarkable claim that the great King David descended from a Moabite great grandmother". (Hauer & Young, 1993, p. 187)

Taken beyond its context in the Hebrew Bible and into the realm of Christianity, the role of sought-for person is hyperextended twenty-eight generations later to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. This application is witnessed in the genealogy that appears in selected New Testament gospels[7] and in commentaries and devotional writings intended for Christian audiences.[8]

Aside from this failing, Sasson has ignored a specific aspect of Propp's explanation of the sought-for person as a princess and a future bride. Propp discusses this category and claims that it is essential to the analysis.[9] It is obvious in this text that if Ruth is the hero of this tale

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[7]See the examples of Matthew 1:5-17 and Luke 2:4.

[8]This interpretation is evident in the conclusion of Mary E. Jensen's play "Ruth".

> Ruth lived in the days of the judges of Israel. She did not know about the Messiah. The promises from the prophets came much later. But Ruth and Obed played a role in God's plan nevertheless. Ruth's son, Obed, became the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of King David. Obed was indeed a special baby, one for whom God had special plans in salvation history. (1978, p. 60)

[9]Propp discusses the 'sought-for person' as a princess in chapters four and seven (1968).

then there exists no princess and no bride for her. Once again this obstacle points to the problem mentioned earlier, which will be mentioned again: Propp's work is specific to heroic fairy tales and should not be applied generally to other forms of folk tale.

Sasson is aware of Propp's specific use of the term 'bride', yet switches it when he states, "The 'lack' in this case is that of a husband for Ruth" (1989, p. 207). The only possible explanation for the switch from bride to husband is that Boaz becomes a second hero in the tale when his actions and dialogue are given a prominent role. Yet Sasson does not provide any explanation. The difficulty here is that Ruth is not allowed to fully regain her role as hero/ine at the conclusion of the story. No longer a hero/ine she now functions as 'dispatcher' and 'helper' to both Boaz and Naomi. The ambiguity in characters assigned to roles is evident in Sasson's brief explanation of the resolution of this area of the plot. Sasson's heading states: "The *Hero* is wedded: Ruth (or Boaz) is wedded" (1989, p. 213). Confusion is evident in the fact that either Ruth or Boaz is the hero.

This difficulty points once again to the fact that Sasson is willing to overlook and reverse characters and categories whenever necessary so that the characters of the book of Ruth fit Propp's categories. It is to the character of hero/ine that I now turn.

HERO

Confusion may exist within the mind of the reader of the book of Ruth concerning the role of hero or heroine. Although the English translation of Propp's categories always refers to the hero as male, Sasson does not hesitate to assign this role to Ruth. He deals with Ruth's absence from a large part of the story by acknowledging that later in the text when the character of Ruth is all but dismissed from the story, it is Boaz who becomes a new hero (1989, pp. 210-211).

Yet I would argue that if Sasson seeks to assign the role of hero to a female character, and if the role of hero is to be shared, then Naomi must also be included in that role. Sasson cites Propp in stating that "the hero of a folktale tends to be present at the early moments of the tale" in the "initial situation" (1989, pp. 201-203). Despite this reference, Sasson assigns this role to Ruth and not to Naomi. It is Elimelech's and Naomi's plight, presented in the opening of the first chapter that is the initial situation. It is Naomi's despair that is presented in the opening of chapter one. Her experience of death of the male members of her family, as well as her concern for her survival are also presented. Need for redemption through a grandson and the survival of her deceased son's name is the setting which this heroine is in.

Although Naomi plays a dispatcher role in the second and third chapters, she returns as heroine in the conclusion of

the fourth chapter. Her life, well-being and future are redeemed to a much greater degree than her dead husband's name, her sons' names, or her daughter-in-law's future. It is on a note of triumph for Naomi that this story ends. The women of the neighbourhood (Bethlehem), who surround Naomi after Ruth gives birth to the baby, name the child and rejoice for Naomi. The reader is summoned to acknowledge Naomi's good fortune, or blessedness from YHWH (4:14-17). While Sasson notes "that the dispatcher tends to be the ultimate beneficiary of the hero's activities" (1989, p. 201), the role of Naomi goes far beyond simply benefiting from Ruth's activities. One must accept that the reader could easily understand Naomi to be the heroine at the conclusion of the story, as they would recognize her as the heroine at the outset of the folk tale. It must be acknowledged that the role of hero/ine is shared equally by Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. The role is not shared simply by Ruth and Boaz as Sasson suggests. Neither do we have one single character filling the role as hero/ine throughout the folk tale.

Sasson addresses the delayed arrival of Ruth as the heroine after the introductory chapter. Not until this point is Ruth clearly seen and understood to be the heroine. Sasson states:

> We have no hesitation to assign this role to Ruth. It is she whose movements are charted in almost the whole length of our narrative; it is she who sets out on journeys, quests, or searches, aiming to resolve the difficulties of the dispatcher, Naomi. (1989, p. 202)

It is upon Ruth's situation that the reader's attention is focussed during a great deal of the text. It is at her victories that the reader cheers, and it is at her disappointments that the reader empathizes. The reader recognizes Ruth's role as a heroine after even a cursory reading. It is her motives and actions that are examined in far greater detail than those of Naomi's and she is granted far lengthier dialogue opportunities. For example, Naomi is not given voice as she experiences the difficulties of immigrating to Moab and the death of her husband. Ten years of her sons' lives and the event of their deaths are summarized in a few short words. Naomi receives her voice and becomes a full character only at the point when she confronts her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, and pleads with them to leave her. To Ruth, however, is given more dialogue, and her actions are meticulously documented in 1:16 to 3:9, which narrates, in essence, the story of which she is the heroine. Ruth's actions are ultimately to help Naomi out of a desperate situation. It is for this reason that Ruth's role decreases dramatically after she confronts Boaz, and Naomi's role increases when the results of the confrontation are brought to light. "[It] is she who sets out on journeys, quests, or searches, aiming to resolve the difficulties of the *dispatcher*, Naomi" (Sasson, 1989, p. 202).

Ruth is the heroine from her appearance as a full character at 1:16 until she is suddenly removed from the

text at 3:17 to return only as a dispatcher for the hero and heroine, Naomi and Boaz, at 4:13-17.

Boaz's character needs less assessment. Within his participation in the story he is allowed to fulfill two roles, that of the donor and of the helper. These characters assist the hero in fulfilling their mission and attaining the person whom they seek. Sasson gives Boaz a third role, that of an additional hero.[10] In fulfilling all of these roles, Boaz, like Naomi, finds himself the beneficiary of Ruth's actions, and his importance in the story increases as the folk tale draws to a close.

DISPATCHER

The apparent inconsistencies of the appearance of three heroes/heroines in the narrative are remedied by Sasson's explanation of Propp's characters. Naomi fulfills the role of the dispatcher and instructs Ruth to confront Boaz to achieve the sought-for person, a son.

> It is the dispatcher who, by means of command or urging, sets the hero on a quest or on a search. Furthermore, it is to be noted that the dispatcher tends to be the ultimate beneficiary of the hero's activities. (Sasson, 1989, p. 201)

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[10]It is unprecendented to assign each of the three major characters (characters who have significant speaking and acting parts) the role of hero/ine. Sasson seems to be grasping at straws in an attempt to hold his evaluation intact.

Readers who have suspected that Naomi would benefit from Ruth's actions have their curiosities satisfied, according to Sasson's analysis. While Naomi was instructing Ruth how to secure her (Ruth's) future in a marriage to, and a child with, Boaz, she was ultimately securing her own future and the redemption of her dead husband's name. She, indeed, is the ultimate beneficiary of Ruth's activities. Marrying Boaz would ensure that Ruth would be secure, and in her security provide for Naomi in her old age. Ruth was also bound by the impassioned vow that she made to Naomi before leaving Moab:

> '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!' (1:16-17)

Ruth made a vow to remain by Naomi's side and let nothing separate them. Ruth's good fortune and her vow to Naomi led to Naomi's ultimate benefit from Ruth's activities. At the conclusion of the story, Naomi has regained much: her future, her joy, the respect and envy of the women in Bethlehem, and a son. In essence, she becomes the heroine in place of Ruth.

CONCLUSIONS

Sasson, by using this method of character and function analysis, satisfies many of the problems raised from a

critical reading of the book of Ruth. The function of the

character of a dispatcher explains the apparent competition

between the characters of Naomi and Ruth. Ruth's role of

hero/ine, which acts to help fulfill the needs of others,

explains her diminished capacity in the conclusion of the

story. Finally, Boaz's fulfilling of two roles explains his

increased importance and presence in the narrative. Sasson

is confident that the popularity of the book of Ruth is due

to its flawless function as a literary text in the genre of

fairy or folk tale.

> It is not surprising, therefore, that as a tale that
> hews closer to folktale patterns than most Biblical
> narratives, Ruth has constantly found favor in the eyes
> of a variegated audience. It is not merely that Ruth
> is brave and loyal, for other OT heroines are equally
> valorous; it is not just that Boaz is kinder than other
> Biblical ancestors; it is not even that Noami is more
> deserving of God's ultimate favor than other
> matriarchs; it is simply that these protagonists fully
> carry out assignments that were perfected generations
> before Ruth. (1989, p. 216)

Sasson's confidence in the book of Ruth as a folk tale

is relentless. He claims that "no complications are intro-

duced which are left unresolved; no character is given a

role that remains ambiguous....[A] folktale leaves nothing

that is unresolved, it becomes a self-contained entity"

(ibid.) Yet while the character of Ruth functions well as a

heroine for a large part of the narrative, the very presence

of a heroine in the role of the hero is inconsistent with

traditional folk tales. To interpret a female character in

the main role of a heroic fairy tale results in ignoring the

validity of Propp's work, or, making the mistake of applying

it to other types of tales. Sasson relies on Isidore Levin
and makes the following mistake: "Although Propp's work
evolved from the study of fairy tales, it is clear that the
listings of functions and the types of character roles are
equally applicable to folk tales (Levin, 1967: 32-49)"
(1989, p. 201). In fact, they are not applicable.

In the preface Sasson recognizes that while Propp's
categories will have to be refined and redefined in order to
apply them to biblical and other Near Eastern texts, he
feels justified in applying them to the form first proposed,
and he assumes that the book of Ruth is of this form (1989,
p. xi). Milne addresses Sasson's misunderstanding of
Propp's focus on the individual units of plot development as
well as his general approach to the method of application.
She critiques Sasson for not addressing the task which he
indicated was necessary, the refinement and redefinition of
categories. Sasson "himself did not undertake any such
refinement: he chose instead to use Propp's model in its
original form" (Milne, 1986, p. 41). Also, Milne locates
Sasson's difficulty by assessing the reversal of the use of
Propp's method in his analytical approach:

> Whereas Propp first identified tale functions and then
> saw how those functions joined together into certain
> spheres of actions from which tale roles could be
> identified, Sasson first identified roles in the text
> and then identified functions. By assigning roles
> first Sasson may have prejudiced the way in which func-
> tions were identified. (1986, p. 45)

Although Milne recognizes several positive elements of
Sasson's work, her conclusion remains that he has

incorrectly applied Propp's categories due to his misunderstanding of the focus on plot development and not characters, and the genre-specific nature of Propp's work. In a general summary in Milne's *Vladimir Propp and the Study of Structure in Hebrew Biblical Narrative*, she states that

> *Morphology of the Folktale* was not intended by its author to be so much a definitive work as a directive one. Propp wanted to show, by way of a specific example (i.e., the structural analysis of fairy tales), the direction narrative research should take. The task remained, and largely still remains, for other researchers to assess the usefulness of Propp's approach and to develop functional models for other narrative genres of folklore and literature. (1988, p. 88)

We cannot leave this discussion of folk/fairy tales without recognizing the fundamental difference between Jewish tales and Russian fairy tales, or, for that matter, fairy tales from elsewhere other than the western world. Propp recognizes that in heroic fairy tales the hero encounters difficulties in his life due to misfortune and circumstances that are beyond his control. Jewish tales represent another reality when the hero is confronted with difficulties and misfortunes. Jewish tales are embedded in religious texts, i.e. Talmud, Mishnah and Aggadot, and thus are intrinsically linked to moral and ethical considerations. In a traditional Western fairy tale misfortune often befalls the hero as a function of chance. In Jewish thought, however, misfortune is often seen as a function of

a state of sinfulness and it is regarded as a punitive measure to expiate sin.[11]

This view is supported by Yehoshua Bachrach in *Mother of Royalty*. In a section entitled "The Sin of Selfishness" Bachrach addresses the fundamental problem of the misfortune that Elimelech's family experiences, worded in the terms of punishment and retribution, for the sin of leaving the land of Israel and settling in the land of Moab (1973, pp. 8 - 18). Through the commentaries of rabbis throughout the ages he gleans the following:

> What grave transgression had they committed, that their retribution was so severe? Was it for having deserted Eretz Israel and going elsewhere? (1973, p. 10).

> A heinous crime is committed by anyone who leaves the land of Israel, and great is the iniquity of anyone excluding himself from the community. Yet the punishment befalling Elimelech's family: death, widowhood, childlessness and excision, still seem inordinately severe to us. (1973, p. 13)

> Now in the days of trouble, Elimelech's family had deserted its relatives and run away. Elimelech's family was very wealthy. Their fields, they left behind, but their gold and silver, they took along with them to Moab. There, they would be able to live in peace and quiet. No hungry relatives would see or disturb them. (1973, p. 15)

While one must recognize that these commentaries contain extrapolations that may or may not have been based on the book of Ruth or elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, one

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[11]Dr. Linda Feldman, an adviser on the thesis committee, has instructed me to appreciate this fundamental difference in the functioning of biblical folktale material.

understands the line of thought that is presented here and must be taken into consideration in any analysis of this text in the genre of folk tale. It is in the broader, cultural context that one must understand the tales of folk-lore found in the Hebrew Bible.

In this chapter I have presented and evaluated Jack M. Sasson's application of Vladimir Propp's work to the characters and plot of the book of Ruth. I have raised critical issues confronted when attempting to force this text into the mold of a 'heroic fairy tale' or a folk tale of the western world. In the next chapter I will examine the nature of the book of Ruth as a uniform text.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BOOK OF RUTH: A PRODUCT OF ONE SOURCE OR TWO?

Following the detailed examination of the genre of the book of Ruth in the previous chapter, we now step back to consider the origins of the text. In this chapter I will address the question of whether this text is based on one source or two. The predominant scholarly position is to approach the text as a single literary unity, while a minority of scholars discern in it multiple strands or layers. I will discuss briefly scholarly comments supporting both sides of the argument. I will then focus on the work of Athalya Brenner who has provided a plausible reconstruction of the text's sources. She initiates the process by highlighting the unexplained difficulties which exist in the text. These problems include the doubling of the female subject, the confusion over motherhood, and the confusion over who is redeemed by the levirate marriage. In "Naomi and Ruth", Brenner proposes that the narrative is a compilation of two narratives, and that the difficulties present in the text are the seams which reveal the redactor's work (1983, pp. 385-397, and 1993, pp. 70-84).[1] I will present Brenner's findings and evaluate them, as well as discuss my own considerations on this topic.

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[1]Brenner's text appears in two sources(1983 and 1993). I will refer to the 1983 printing.

TWO POSITIONS

Many scholars maintain that the book of Ruth is a single, seamless literary unit. They also express that the story is uniform without complications. Some of these scholars exclude one or both of the genealogies from the statement, stating that they were added on at a later date, while others regard the genealogies as the culmination of the original text. The following quotations reflect both opinions:

> The account is of one piece, without any seams or signs of combining or adding except for the genealogy in 4:18-22. (Fuerst, 1975, p. 5)

> But what a story! Work of a master story-teller, to Goethe it is the most beautiful 'little whole' in the Old Testament. (Campbell, 1975, p. 3)

> There is general agreement today that the book of Ruth is essentially a unity. Increasing appreciation of the book's literary structure has effectively set aside earlier literary-critical attempts to find later additions within it. (Hubbard, 1988, p. 8)

> [Naomi and Ruth] belong together and cannot be separated ....[and] the one would be nothing without the other. (Eissfeldt as quoted in Brenner, 1983, p. 385)

> No complications are introduced which are left unresolved; no character is given a role that remains ambiguous. Heroes find their mates, villains meet their fates, dispatchers find their ultimate reward, and donors fulfill their obligations. It is not surprising, therefore, that as a tale that hews closer to folktale patterns than most Biblical narratives, Ruth has constantly found favor in the eyes of a variegated audience. (Sasson, 1989, p. 216)

> It is a beautifully crafted short story....The story represents the stream of openness to the world, a stream running deep and wide in the OT. (Achtemeir, 1985, p. 886).

> And so our unknown author writes a clever, pointed and yet most attractive little 'historical novel'. (Knight, 1966, p. 21)

It is indeed a splendid example of the storyteller's art and it is more than a little interesting to find in this book which comes down from remote antiquity a tale which conforms so exactly to the standards looked for in a good story in modern times. (Cundall & Morris, 1968, p. 229)

I have used extensive examples to show how widespread the support for this position is. Certainly this is the dominant view which most scholars and most readers bring to the text. If they are satisfied with this understanding when they process the information of the text, then they will retain this interpretation when they have completed their evaluation of the text. There are, however, alternatives to this view.

Several scholars support the position that the author has functioned more as a redactor who worked with borrowed material. There exist at least three possibilities: 1) the text is not an original work but has gone through numerous editorial phases (over several centuries); 2) the text is not an original tale from Israel but is borrowed from neighbouring cultures; or 3) the text is a compilation of two separate stories. The following citations reflect these respective opinions.

Jacob Myers, commenting on the linguistic and literary forms of the book of Ruth, regards the first phase of the text as a poetic tale in the oral tradition and the second phase as a written prose version (Campbell, 1975, p. 7). While not producing a scholarly commentary, David Rosenberg nonetheless elaborates on this position: "I'm convinced that

it was originally written as a poem when I hear the vestigial elements of poetic parallelism, together with a rhythm of key images and word patterns" (1991, p. 337). Wesley J. Fuerst expands these positions and proposes that the present text has gone through three phases of development. The first version was in oral form as an old poetic tale from the time of the Judges. The second was a written prose version from the ninth or eighth century, with the final edition (Masoretic Text) composed at a post-exilic date (1975, pp. 6-7).

Hermann Gunkel, in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart Reden und Aufsätze*, has advocated foreign origins of the text. He argues that texts such as the book of Ruth and Genesis 38 (Judah and Tamar)[2] are based on earlier folk-tales from Egypt. The original tale featured only one actor, Naomi, and a later manifestation of the story added Ruth to it. Other changes to the original included the cleansing of pagan aspects of the story (Campbell, 1975, p. 6). A Caananite text from fourteenth century BCE Ugarit has been cited as another foreign source for the narrative (Fuerst, 1975, p. 10)

Margaret Crook in "The Book of Ruth: A New Solution" (1948, pp. 155-160) proposes that two strands are present in the text, one from the time of the Judges and the other from

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[2]The connection of the Tamar story and the Ruth story is elaborated by Ilana Pardes(1992) and Gray(1975).

the time of the eighth century reign of Judah's only queen,
Athaliah. Crook believes that Jehoiada, chief priest at the
time of Athaliah's reign, was the composer of the second
strand of the text and that it is marked by a polemical pur-
pose against her.[3]

John Gray casually raises the possibility of the story
focussing on the actions of either Naomi or Ruth. It is
with a portion of the following quote that Brenner begins to
formulate her argument of two separate stories for the
origin of the text. Gray writes:

> The source of the story is probably a popular local
> saga (Eissfeldt, op. cit., p. 592), and indeed, we
> think, a family saga, perhaps a straightforward story
> of the return of the widow Naomi and her levirate mar-
> riage (Gressmann, op. cit., p. 592) or that of her
> daughter-in-law Ruth, and that there is no reasonable
> doubt that it is to be localized in Judah, as the
> reference to the clan of Perez indicates, and particu-
> larly at Bethlehem. (1977, p. 301)

Gray is proposing that the text records the story of either
Naomi or Ruth. He could also be stating that while the
original story is about the both of them, perhaps the
levirate marriage of Boaz could just as well have been to
Naomi as it was to Ruth (as recorded in the MT). Yet after
raising the possibilities of such potentially significant
issues, Gray discusses the matter no further. He has,

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[3]Since Crook's position in its original form was not avail-
able to me I have compiled this information from the follow-
ing sources: Rowley, 1965, p. 174; Campbell, 1975, p. 6; and
Achtemeier, 1985, pp. 79, 451.

however, given scholars, such as Brenner, the opportunity to elaborate on his comments and has provided them with the impetus to reconstruct two possible stories that were combined to form the current text. Brenner has developed a two-source theory and in "Naomi and Ruth" proposes a reconstruction of each of the two stories. She maintains that the text is a compilation of two pre-existent stories of two strong female characters, one an older heroine Naomi, and the other, a younger heroine Ruth.

Before we proceed with an outline of each of the stories, I will address the difficulties in the text which lead Brenner and myself to seek alternative solutions.

PROBLEM AREAS IN THE TEXT

While discussing the options of the book of Ruth as a unified or fractured text, Brenner states her intentions as follows:

> The purpose of this article will be to try to explore the second possibility - namely, that the Book of Ruth is composed of two still distinct strands, a Naomi story and a Ruth story; that each of the two strands originally belonged to a separate, although parallel, folk-tale or novella (Eissfeldt); and that the seams which combine them are still discernible. (1983, p. 385)

The "seams" which Brenner refers to are the doubling of the female subject, confusion over motherhood at the conclusion of the fourth chapter, and the confusion over who and what is redeemed. I would add to this list an expansion of the inconsistencies evident regarding levirate marriage, and the possible tension that exists between the two characters

indicated by the amount of silence that exists between the characters. Also, I will comment on the fact that Naomi does not respond verbally to the vow of Ruth nor to the unusual acclamations that the women of Bethlehem make to Naomi about Ruth.

DOUBLING OF THE FEMALE SUBJECT

Ruth is usually considered to be the main character of this story from whom others benefit. No doubt this opinion is influenced by the fact that the text bears her name regardless of whether or not she is the heroine of the story. Yet upon closer examination of the text, one realizes that Naomi's role becomes equal to that of Ruth, and she is actually a second heroine in the text.

Jack M. Sasson argues that Ruth is the hero of the tale (at least until the fourth chapter), yet his assertion is based on an inaccurate interpretation.

> According to Propp (1968: 74-77), the *hero* of a folktale tends to be present at the early moments of the tale. We have no hesitation to assign this role to Ruth. It is she whose movements are charted in almost the whole length of our narrative; it is she who sets out on journeys, quests, or searches, aiming to resolve the difficulties of the *dispatcher*, Naomi. (1978, pp. 201-202)

While Sasson may rely on the conditional phrases "tends to" and "almost the whole narrative" to support his view of Ruth as the sole hero/ine, I would argue that Naomi also fits the above description of the hero and Ruth of the "dispatcher". It is Naomi whose actions are documented from the outset and whose story is concluded in the end of the text. Her

character does not gain voice until 1:8, but once estab-
lished, she speaks 225 words of dialogue, compared to Ruth's
124 words of dialogue (Johnson, n.d., Appendix B).[4]

Brenner proposes that Naomi and Ruth are interchangeable
heroines in the text. "Naomi is undoubtedly the central fig-
ure in chapter 1." (1983, p. 386) Brenner acknowledges
Ruth's part at the conclusion of the chapter, 1:16-17, but
does not feel that this elevates Ruth to the status of
heroine (ibid.) It is interesting to note that Naomi does
not acknowledge Ruth's vow and does not respond verbally to
her commitment to her. The commentary of the narrator is
ambiguous at this point: "When Naomi saw that she was
determined to go with her, she said no more" (1:18). Naomi
chooses to respond to the vow with silence. Of course one
may interpret the silence as a result of Naomi being over-
whelmed with emotion by Ruth's commitment, yet she also
could have been ignoring Ruth and choosing to go the dis-
tance to Bethlehem in silence.[5]

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[4]Johnson also documents that Boaz, with 284 words, has the
most dialogue of all the characters (Appendix B).

[5]Refer to Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn for their
interpretation of Naomi's silent withdrawal from Ruth.
"'She ceased to speak to her' says the Hebrew text. Indeed
she speaks not a word either to, or about Ruth, from this
point to the end of the scene in the arrival of
Bethlehem".(1990, p.74) Naomi is reluctant to have Ruth
accompany her and would rather rid herself of the connection

Neither does the silence ease up once they arrive in
Bethlehem (1:19-21). Not only does Naomi not introduce
Ruth, but, while Ruth is at her side, she claims to the
women of Bethlehem who greet her that she is empty. Once
again, arguments for Naomi forgetting that Ruth was with her
that are based on Naomi's weakened and emotional state are
unconvincing. "...Naomi categorically states that she is an
empty vessel (i 21), a widow without hope. No mention is
made of Ruth as a present or future means of consolation and
change". (Brenner, 1983, p. 386) Naomi does not acknowledge
Ruth nor speak to her again until Ruth leaves to glean in
the fields (2:2b) at which time Ruth becomes the dominant
character.

The second chapter brings a second heroine and a
reversal of the roles. Naomi is now the auxiliary charac-
ter, present only in a consultative role. Chapter two
belongs to the heroine Ruth, who relies on her own actions
to secure sustenance for the two of them. Brenner con-
tinues, "Ruth....takes the initiative and starts acting
independently. Ruth manages to look after herself and her
mother-in-law until the end of the harvest season without
further instruction" (1983, pp. 386-387). This is truly
where the story of the heroine Ruth begins. It continues
through chapter three but concludes abruptly when she no

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to Moab (ibid.)

longer has a voice or actions. The few places that she is mentioned in chapter four are when she is acted upon or spoken about.

In the opening and closing verses of chapter three we witness the return of Naomi to the heroine role. In this chapter Naomi and Ruth appear in concurrent heroine roles. Together they conceive and execute the plan to make an impression on Boaz that he might take the part of the redeemer and marry Ruth. Naomi prepares her and Ruth acts. Brenner comments that "while [it] is true that Ruth occupies the centre of the stage, she nevertheless – and in con-tradistinction to her previous mode of behaviour (ch. ii) – follows Naomi's scheme" (1983, p. 387).

The second half of the closing chapter sees the return of Naomi as the heroine. Ruth ceases to be the heroine after 3:18. She is silenced, acted upon or spoken about.[6] Her voice is taken away as is her son. It is Naomi who is the focus of attention from 4:14-17 and who resumes the sole role of heroine at the conclusion of the narrative. It is the predominance of Naomi at the birth of Obed which can leave the reader with the impression that Naomi is the

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[6]Ruth is bought (4:10), her fertility spoken about (4:11-12), wedded to and bedded by Boaz (4:13), given conception by YHWH (ibid.), gives birth (ibid.), and is praised by the women of Bethlehem (4:15).

heroine of the story. It is to the confusion over mother-hood which we now turn.

THE CONFUSION OVER MOTHERHOOD

At the conclusion of the fourth chapter there is confu-sion over the maternity of Obed. While Ruth conceives and gives birth to the child (v. 13) Naomi takes the child to her bosom (v. 16) and the women claim that a son has been born to Naomi (v. 17). One could argue that Naomi adopted her grandchild and he became her own child, yet it is not convincing without any indication from the text. Neither is Ruth's sudden departure from the text a convincing move on the part of the author.

> One imagines that the portrayal of Ruth as a more dominant character, together with an ending which posits her as the centre of attention and a prologue which establishes the special relationship between the two women would convince us equally well. (Brenner, 1983, p. 387)

Ruth could have resumed her role as heroine if given the opportunity to act or to speak. Perhaps her absence could be rectified with commentary such as the following: "And after she had given birth Ruth took her first-born child and brought him to Naomi and laid him at Naomi's bosom. 'Here', she said, 'he is dear also to you for he will keep alive your son Mahlon's name. Care for him and be his nurse, and whatever you name him, I will agree to, for you know the customs of your land'."

Similarly, if Ruth is not to be returned to the status of heroine then one could accept the actions of Naomi and

the speech of the women of Bethlehem more easily if they were worded so that the distinctions of mother and grand- mother remained clear. For example verse sixteen could read: "Then Naomi took her grandchild and laid him in her bosom and cared for him as if he were her own son, for he would secure her future". Also, the women of Bethlehem could be recorded as saying: "A son has been born to the offspring of Elimelech and Naomi", or "A grandson has been born to Naomi". While these amendments are not factual, they do provide a glimpse of how the meaning of the current texts are ambiguous and could cause confusion.

There is no doubt that both women benefit from the birth of the child. Ruth has a husband in Boaz and both Naomi and Ruth gain security from the birth of a son who will care for them in the future. In light of our task at hand, it appears that one conclusion fits both of the proposed stories, and it is possible that both women could have con- cluded their own stories with the birth of their own child.

> Ultimately, both achieve a reversal of the problem of livelihood (not only Naomi); and there is no clear-cut distinction as to whose child the new-born is: it is as if he belongs, directly and simultaneously, to both of them. (Brenner, 1983, p. 391)

With the discussion of the marriage of Ruth to Boaz and the birth of Obed to both of them comes the question of redemp- tion through levirate marriage. I will now turn to this issue.

THE QUESTION OF REDEMPTION: WHO IS BEING REDEEMED?

With his actions in 4:9-10, Boaz buys and redeems both
Naomi's land and Ruth herself. Naomi's future is tied up
with Ruth's and if Ruth is redeemed, then so is Naomi her-
self. "Although Ruth is the one who marries Boaz and gives
birth to a son and heir, Naomi is 'redeemed'." (Brenner,
1983, p. 385) Yet the question can be raised why Naomi her-
self did not marry one of Elimelech's relatives and give
birth to yet more children.

Naomi herself raises the possibility of marriage and
childbirth in a rhetorical question in her speech to Ruth
and Orpah:

> Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I
> still have sons in my womb that they may become your
> husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I
> am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there
> was hope for me, even if I should have a husband
> tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they
> were grown? (1:11b-13a)

Whether levirate marriage for herself was a real possibility
or not is unknown, for as quickly as Naomi introduces the
possibility she also dismisses it. In the first two phrases
Naomi apparently regards herself as being too old to remarry
and have children yet later insists that her daughters-in-
law would not wait that long. The reader will never know
the age of Naomi or whether a possibility existed for
levirate marriage for her. Since two relatives of Elimelech
were available could not one have married Naomi and the
other Ruth? Or, since Naomi was older, and the text seems

to indicate that Boaz was older (Ruth 3:10), could not Boaz and Naomi have married?

However, if only Ruth were to marry again, further questions remain. Why didn't Naomi mention that the possibility of levirate marriage for Orpah and Ruth existed in Bethlehem while they were all still in Moab? Or, once in Bethlehem why didn't Naomi mention to Ruth the possibility of levirate marriage to Elimelech's relative Boaz or the other next of kin? Apparently Naomi knew that Boaz was a relative of Elimelech yet did not tell her of the possibility of either gleaning in his fields or marriage to him, and she chose to say nothing to Ruth.

THE SILENCE BETWEEN NAOMI AND RUTH

One final seam that needs to be mentioned is the apparent lack of dialogue between Naomi and Ruth. Earlier in this chapter I have mentioned that Naomi does not respond verbally in any way to Ruth after Ruth makes her vow except by her silence. Also, in Bethlehem, Naomi does not acknowledge or introduce her daughter-in-law to the women of Bethlehem who greet her. The silence continues over the possibility of levirate marriage and concludes with silence after the women of Bethlehem extol the virtues of Ruth to Naomi, claiming that she is more to Naomi than seven sons.[7]

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[7]Fewell and Gunn make extensive comments on the silence between Naomi and Ruth. However, they are not proposing that this results from two stories existing within the text. Rather, they are extending the possibility that greater ten-

The silence could be explained as animosity yet there could be another explanation. Unanswered dialogue could be the result of the amalgamation of two separate stories. While the dialogues match at several places in the text, there exist the occasions, mentioned above, when interaction between responses is nowhere to be found. It could be an indication that the editor left several aspects of the stories unresolved. It is to the unresolved stories that we now turn.

TWO TALES OF NAOMI AND RUTH

What follows is Brenner's proposal for two tales of the reversal of fortune of their main characters. She proposes that each story, containing a single, female heroine, was later crafted by an editor into the current text. Below I have included a table of Brenner's proposed reconstruction of the elements of plot and details of the characters which form the stories of Naomi and Ruth. (1983, pp. 391-392)

	A. The Naomi Story	B. The Ruth Story
Heroine	Naomi (Judahite)	Ruth (foreigner; link by marriage).

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sion than harmony existed between the two women, and that Naomi's silence is equated with her disapproval of Ruth. See especially (1990), pp. 29-33, 74-76, 105.

Marital status	elder widow, bereaved mother, in exile.	young and childless widow, in own homeland.
Economic position	destitute, but still has some land in Bethlehem.	destitute -- no land, no apparent source of income, no protection.
Starting point	return (alone from Moab to Bethlehem.)	spontaneous migration from homeland to the unknown--dead husband's land.
Expecta-tions	reversal of fortune (to previous position of wife and mother).	change -- re-union with late husband's unknown family.
Addi-tional diffi-culties	long absence.	lack of recognition and connections.
Plot	Naomi comes back, is recognized; still has title or rights of sorts to family's land, and must be redeemed or released from ties. She calls on Boaz, who redeems her and her land after discouraging the other go'el. A Son is born--family line and estate are retained and Naom: ˌ fortune is fully reversed.	Ruth appears at the unknown land. Using courage and initiative, she manages to intro-duce herself to hus-band's family and become a retainer. (Sasson, pp. 48-57). She seduces Boaz, thus securing a husband and later an heir, and redeeming her late hus-band's line and--possibly--land she has not heard about until coming to Bethlehem.
Outcome	satisfactory solu-tion.	satisfactory and sur-prising.
Main themes	reversal of fortune (status and land). The older woman is reinstated and becomes a mother.	reversal of fortune. A young, defenceless widow becomes a foremother of a dynasty. A stranger joins Judaite society and religion voluntarily, and becomes integrated through her wit, efforts, looks [sic] and faith.

Brenner's proposed reconstructions are plausible ones, for they address several of the irregularities that exist in our present text while maintaining the general themes put forth there. Brenner discusses the prevalence of a dual source tradition for texts in the Hebrew Bible where certain duplication of information has been left standing while at other times it has been deleted (1983, p. 394). From the combining of these two stories certain unique elements from each story remain. These include Ruth's Moabite heritage and the names of Naomi's deceased husband and sons Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion, as well as the location of Bethlehem in Naomi's story.

I do, however, have a few difficulties with the details of Brenner's analysis. She states that integration into society is one of the themes in the Ruth story. "A stranger joins Judaite society and religion voluntarily, and becomes integrated through her wit, efforts, looks and faith". (1983, p. 392) To a large extent Ruth does not become integrated and is almost exclusively referred to as the Moabitess. While integration is desired, separation and an emphasis on her foreignness is, instead, expressed. Perhaps Ruth's integration into society and Boaz's family is achieved but not until the conclusion of the story. The final two times that Ruth is referred to (once as "Ruth" and the other as "the woman"), the term Moabitess is not

used. A dropping of this ethnic term could, indeed, then signal her integration into society.

However, the terms on which she is integrated could be disputed. While Brenner states that it was through her wit, efforts, looks and faith, perhaps the final deciding factors were her marriage to a prominent citizen and the birth of her son. I would argue that nowhere in the text are Ruth's looks[8] mentioned and that this is an anachronistic comment based on later commentary, both written and artistic. Also, scholars' opinions differ on the extent to which Ruth's conversion to faith was a factor in her integration. Some argue that Ruth's conversion to belief in YHWH is crucial to the text, while others see it as a secondary or tertiary issue.

I also object to Brenner's use of Boaz in both of the reconstructed stories. It confuses the issue of the separateness of the stories if both women marry the same man.[9] I would propose that Boaz could be the husband of either one and arguments could support his marriage to either woman. Naomi could have married him since they were both older characters, yet she knew that at least two of Elimelech's

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[8]I assume that by looks Brenner means beauty.

[9]Polygamy is, of course, a possibility, yet Brenner would have to indicate that the two stories blended when the two heroines became co-wives.

relatives were in a position to redeem her. She could
easily have married another redeemer.   Ruth could have
married him, but in the outcome of the story it does not
matter who she marries as long as her fortunes are reversed.
I suspect that it is for the name recognition of Boaz and
his family, that he is included in the story and the family
of Perez documented in the final genealogy.

Yet these are minor points of disagreement in a strong
case for the reconstruction of the two stories. Brenner,
however, seems to back away from her thesis, calling it
"admittedly hypothetical" in the conclusion of her article,
and comments on the narrative as a unified text. For exam-
ple:

> Naomi and Ruth function harmoniously as a team.
> Whatever the internal shifts in the balance of power
> may be, they are in the struggle for survival together
> and thus co-operate....In that sense Ruth is a unique
> character, a symbol of unconditional love and loyalty.
> The impact of this love-motif on the reader is so
> strong -- that in the last analysis -- it lends the
> story depth and credibility, and serves as a focal
> point which unites the various strands of the plot.
> (1983, pp. 396-397)

This is a disappointing conclusion to an otherwise
strong thesis. I would propose that it is the tension and
not the harmony that propels this narrative through the many
awkward sections in it. Certainly it is important to recog-
nize that the female characters work together in this com-
bined text to fight for their survival and redemption in a
male dominated society, but to state that they are a
harmonious team is a trite summary of potentially full

characters. In the next chapter I will examine the text and the characters from a narratological perspective.

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CHAPTER FOUR

NARRATOLOGY AND THE INTERPRETATION OF ART FORMS

The work of the literary scholar Mieke Bal, and her work in biblical scholarship will form the basis for this chapter. Bal, a narratologist, has recently crossed over from the discipline of literary study to bring her expertise to the study of biblical texts. She has written extensively on literary theory and narratology as well as on feminist readings of biblical texts, in particular love stories.[1]

In this chapter I will analyze her treatment of the book of Ruth entitled "Heroism and Proper Names, or the Fruits of Analogy", a chapter in *Lethal Love* (Bal, 1987, pp. 68-88; also in Brenner, 1993, pp. 42-69). For the remainder of the chapter I will adopt Bal's interdisciplinary approach to the interpretation of biblical texts, and, with it, conduct an experiment in the interpretation of the book of Ruth through visual art.

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[1]The bulk of her biblical scholarship appears in three volumes. She has also written several articles in scholarly journals such as *Semeia*. Please see *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (1987), *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death* (1988), and *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (1988).

HEROISM AND PROPER NAMES, OR THE FRUITS OF ANALOGY

Bal has included this essay in her work on biblical love stories. She focuses her attention on the use of proper names in the book of Ruth to develop characters and to advance the narrative. As we shall see, biblical characters are destined to act out the roles that have been assigned to them through the giving of their names.

RUTH

I will begin with a name that Bal does not include, that of Ruth. Ruth is widely recognized as being the main character of the narrative that bears her name. Whether this position is warranted or not is the subject of great debate. Bal comments that "subjectivity is not, by priority, assigned to Ruth", and, "Ruth reaches full textual subjectivity in the metatext [the interpretative afterlife of a text] only" (1987, pp. 78-79). Other characters are at least as important as Ruth in this narrative. Yet, in this text, and in the collective understanding of the meaning of the text, Ruth is the subject.

In the Hebrew language, the proper name Ruth is also the feminine noun defined in English as friendship (Brown et al., 1951, p. 946). If one understands this name, then one comprehends that it is Ruth who will be a friend to those she encounters. Her friendship will extend to the individuals in Elimelech's family, particularly to Mahlon and Naomi. Indeed, she exceeds the normal limits of friendship in her relationship to her mother-in-law, for Ruth vows to Naomi

her future. She will also be a friend to Boaz. It is through the meaning of her name that their relationship is shaped and they are destined to be lovers. As we will explore later, Ruth befriends Boaz and Boaz befriends her.

Ruth is also a friend to Israel. Although an unlikely candidate, she proves to be an example of faith and will assist in restoring the house of Israel through the Davidic dynasty. Finally, Ruth extends her friendship to all foreigners and those who are marginalized. Through her example she makes it possible for proselytes to find acceptance in Israel.

ORPAH

Ruth's sister-in-law does not fare so well. Orpah's name is based on the noun for the back of the neck (Brown et al., 1951, p. 791) and because of this name she will always be remembered for turning away from Naomi and Ruth. Despite following Naomi's command of remaining in Moab and returning to her family, Orpah is interpreted as a betrayer of friendship and trust. Bal argues that the character Orpah was destined to play out the part that her name dictates:

> Receiving the name, the little girl was not yet "the one who turns the neck," but she was already defined as such. She is subjected to her name, determined by it. It is because she has this name that she will remain her whole life "the one who turns the neck," until history will finally allow her to do what is expected from her. (1987, p. 74)[2]

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[2]At this point one need not become involved in an argument for either the historicity or fictionality of the text. This quotation is used to illustrate the power of the proper

Despite attempts by commentators to justify Orpah's actions, the predominant interpretation evaluates her negatively. As a tool of the narrator, this character acts in contrast to Ruth so that Ruth's actions may be viewed positively.

NAOMI/MARA

Naomi is the only character that attempts a change of name (Ruth 1:20). Dissatisfied with her plight, she takes it upon herself to adopt a name that reflects, more accurately, her dire circumstance. Naomi is the proper noun meaning pleasantness or delight (Brown et al., 1951, pp. 653-654).[3] At one point this character's life may have been pleasant and delightful, but now, in circumstances of poverty, barrenness and insecurity, she cannot bear the irony of her name.

In a speech in which she blames Shaddai for her misfortune (Ruth 1:20-21), Naomi introduces herself to the women of Bethlehem as Mara. The spelling of the word in the Hebrew text depicts decay and rottenness (Brown et al., 1951, p. 597) while the footnotes of the text provide an

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name in this text.

[3]Bal translates Naomi as 'sweet'. This is the adjectival form referring to sweetness of musicality in voice (Brown et al., 1951, p. 654).

alternative spelling indicating the less severe meaning of bitterness (Brown et al., p. 600). Regardless of the definition chosen, it is abundantly clear that the reversal of her fortune from good to bad is reflected in her choice of names.

Bal comments on Naomi's name change as a lack of confidence in the meaning of her name and the disbelief in the eventual outcome of her plight.

> But Naomi, however justified her decision may seem at the moment she makes it, does not take the narrativity of her name into account. For within the narrative order, it is the case that if she has the name of Naomi the sweet, that is because, sooner or later, she will be Naomi the sweet. The name, which seems to have become irrelevant at a certain point, has not lost its predictive force....History corrects the character who had not enough faith in her name. (1987, p. 74)

The narrator does not allow Naomi to write the conclusion to her own story. Naomi must live out the story that has been written about her.

BOAZ

The final character with a proper name to appear is Boaz. While Brown, Driver and Briggs discuss strength as a definition for Boaz, they also include the possibility of quickness. Bal refers to the definition 'powerful/potent' but does not document her sources (1987, p. 75). A number of possibilities exists for the interpretation of this character into which all the alternatives listed above can be accommodated.

Boaz is the one possessing strength in this narrative. He is able to redeem Naomi and Ruth from their plight and

secure their future. He is also powerful or potent, execut-
ing legal transactions at the city gate, a public arena in
which women are not allowed to participate and thus are
powerless in determining their legal futures. And, finally,
Boaz is quick in responding to the possibility of levirate
marriage once he is approached by Ruth during the night. He
is also quick-witted in approaching the next-of-kin and dis-
couraging him from redeeming Naomi's land and Ruth.

Yet Bal refutes this interpretation of Boaz and offers
an alternative: "Boaz the powerful/potent is, in fact, Boaz
the sleeper, the weak, the impotent" (1987, p. 75). It is
to this interpretation of Boaz as weak that we now turn.

VICTOR HUGO'S "BOOZ ENDORMI"

In this same article Bal examines a poetic work to dis-
cover how the author of the book of Ruth has presented and
provided an alternative interpretation of Boaz. Bal enters
the discipline of poetic literature and presents one verse
of Victor Hugo's poem "Booz endormi".[4] From this verse she
explores a detail which indicates Boaz's vulnerability. In
her chapter "Description as narration," Bal explains the
critical function that details perform in giving meaning to
a text. "My working premise is functional. Every detail is
related to the whole; nothing is superfluous; nothing is

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[4]His beard was silver like a spring brook
his sheaf was neither miserly nor spiteful.
When he saw some poor gleaner passing by
he said: "drop ears on purpose".
(Hugo recorded in Bal, 1987, p. 69)

irrelevant; nothing is meaningless". (1991, p. 132) Most

interpretations of the book of Ruth (including Sasson and

Brenner) have presented Boaz as the strong one, as his name

suggests. Bal illustrates, however, that there is much to

be gained in viewing this character from a reversed vantage

point in the text. From this viewpoint it is Boaz who is

seen as vulnerable and Ruth as strong.

> Victor Hugo's poem features here the possibility of
> ideological variation; although his poem is not without
> connections to the general modern view of sexuality, it
> is based on aspects of the biblical book that have
> remained unnoticed in Christian reception, buried as
> the story has been under morality and the need for
> male, individual heroism. (1987, p. 69)

This perspective is detected in Boaz's speech to

Ruth: "May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; this

last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you

have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich" (3:10).

Boaz makes this speech upon waking from his sleep. He is

flattered that Ruth has come to him, and not gone to other

men to seek redemption.

Boaz is flattered at Ruth's actions and words because,

despite his wealth and status in the community, he is

insecure. The reasons for Boaz's insecurity are many: his

fear of dying childless, loneliness, fear of loss of sexual

potency, and fear of old age (Bal, 1987, pp. 69-73). Ruth

comes to Boaz, and by comforting him in his anxieties she

serves as his donor/provider. This element of reversal is

powerful in reinterpreting familiar texts. "He [Hugo]

changes the story of Boaz's generosity into that of Ruth's

generosity, and he changes the very meaning of the concept: while Boaz gave what he possessed, Ruth gives what she is". (Bal, 1987, p. 71)

It appears that the closer one looks at this text the more fault lines are discovered. Through these cracks one comprehends an entirely different perspective on the narrative and its characters. Bal maintains that "works of art conceived after this source give a more interesting account of possible readings" (1987, p. 72). It is to an interpretation through visual art that we now turn.

THE BOOK OF RUTH THROUGH THE EYES OF MARC CHAGALL:
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

In the manner of Mieke Bal's comparative critique, I will now proceed to interpret certain visual interpretations of the book of Ruth in search of additional insights into this text. In her article "Lots of Writing" (1992), Bal interprets the narrative and characters of the book of Esther through two paintings based on the text by the artist Rembrandt van Rijn. Bal argues that paintings are a valid medium for the interpretation of written texts for they contain insights which the artist has firstly acquired and secondly applied to canvas. "The paintings help us read the text by demonstrating how it has been read already". (1992, p. 79) The work of the artist's mind and hand through oil onto canvas is simply an incarnation of the metatext as understood by that particular individual.

Zefira Gitay in "Ruth and the Women of Bethlehem" (Brenner, 1993, pp. 178-190) and Cynthia Ozick in "Ruth" (Brenner, 1993, pp. 191-214) also use visual art as a medium of interpreting a biblical text, this time the book of Ruth. Gitay examines the interaction of the women with Naomi and with Ruth through the paintings of Leonard Baskin, William Drost, Jean Francois Millet and Arthur Szyk, while Ozick offers a personal reflective interpretation of a familiar painting from her childhood. What follows in the remainder of this chapter is my interpretation of the five-painting series on the book of Ruth by the artist Marc Chagall.

A prolific artist, Chagall, who was born in 1887 in Vitebsk, White Russia, spent most of his life living and working in France. These paintings are part of his second series of drawings for the Bible, completed in 1958-1959 and published the following year.[5] By using the styles of interpretation presented by Bal, Gitay, and Ozick, I will interpret these paintings. During the process of interpretation I will glean certain meanings that Chagall has put forth in his work, either intentionally or unintentionally.

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[5]While these paintings and lithographs of Ruth are not readily available I was fortunate to have access to them at an exhibition at the Ataneum Gallery in Helsinki, Finland, as well as to Fernand Mourlot's publication *The Lithographs of Chagall: 1957-1962* (1963, pp. 74-77) in the rare book room at the Lakehead University library.

Symbols found in the paintings will give us insight into the interpretation that Chagall has given to the Ruth story.

Before analyzing the paintings individually, I will offer some preliminary comments on this series of drawings for the Bible. It is important to note that Chagall focuses extensively on several female characters of the Bible in his second series of paintings. Of the twenty-four biblical depictions, fully seventeen of them portray women either predominately or exclusively. He has included Eve (three portrayals), Sarah (two portrayals), Hagar, Rachel, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth (five portrayals), Michal, Vashti, and Esther. I feel that he has contributed a great deal to biblical interpretation, and that greater work could be done in the analysis of his work within feminist biblical scholarship.

Since Chagall has devoted five of these pictures to the character of Ruth, he has provided substantial material with which to work. It is of interest to note which characters Chagall has focussed upon in his work on the book of Ruth. He does not depict Elimelech, Mahlon, Chilion, the women of Bethlehem, the elders, nor the birth of Obed. Rather, he focuses narrowly on Ruth (she appears in each of the five works) as well as the interaction and relationship between Ruth and Boaz (depicted in three of the works). Also of general interest is the predominance of the colour red in four of the works, and the changing colour of certain physical features of the characters portrayed. The names of the works are as follows: "Naomi and Her Daughters-In-Law",

"Ruth Gleaning", "Meeting of Ruth and Boaz", "Ruth at the Feet of Boaz", and, "Boaz Wakes Up and Sees Ruth at His Feet". I will now proceed with a description of and commentary on each work.

NAOMI AND HER DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW

In this work Chagall portrays the older woman Naomi in the centre of the picture with her daughters-in-law one on either side of her. The meaning of the verb dbq ('clinging') is clearly depicted with the daughters-in-law embracing Naomi and clinging to her as they express their desire to remain by her side. This clinging reflects a closeness among Naomi and the younger women and their regret at the thought of departing from her. Nothing differentiates one daughter-in-law from the other, so Orpah and Ruth are equals at this point of the narrative.

The predominant colours in this work are the earth tones of browns, grays and blacks representing sorrow and grief over the departure. The only exception to the earth tones and neutral colours is a red disc in the sky which possibly represents a setting or a rising sun. A setting sun signifying the closure of Naomi's and her family's sorrowful sojourn in Moab, or a sunrise signifying the advent of her solo journey back to Bethlehem, are both plausible interpretations.

A unique feature is a two-thirds depiction of a small animal, possibly a lamb, portrayed in the bottom left-hand corner. Once again, the representation of either hope or

despair may be implied. Hope could be represented in the
presence of young cattle and the return of crops (fecundity)
to the homeland of Naomi, while despair could be represented
in the portrayal of a scapegoat (alienation and death) in
this narrative. One could argue that Orpah is scapegoated
in this text since she, although following the wishes of her
mother-in-law, is seen as opting for the easier way out of a
difficult situation. Not only does Orpah make an early exit
from the narrative, the continuation of her husband's name
is of no importance to the narrator. Francis Landy in "Ruth
and the Romance of Realism, or Deconstructing History"
(1994) raises the issue of the lack of concern over the
future of Chilion's legacy. "...Chilion is left behind in
Moab, without hope of redemption" and, "for Chilion, death
is irretrievable and beyond YHWH's hesed" (p. 306).[6]

This first work portrays the dire situation in which
these women find themselves. Poverty, temporary barrenness
and insecurity are what these women have in common.

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[6]Landy also refers to the ambiguity regarding the preserva-
tion of Mahlon's name. While this was of concern to the
narrator until Ruth 4:10, in the final analysis Mahlon
appears nowhere in the genealogy. "His name is transmitted
only to sink again into the textual unconsciousness". (p.
312)

RUTH GLEANING

In this work Ruth takes centre stage as she is depicted
in her work of gleaning the grain. She is standing tall in
her work of harvesting, although a common portrayal of a
harvester is that of one who is bent over. It is clear that
she is successful at her gleaning since she carries on her
left shoulder plentiful sheaves of wheat. An air of inde-
pendence and strength is transmitted through this Ruth. She
lacks the timidity and coyness common in other portrayals
and commentaries.

The colour red is predominant in this picture,
representing vibrancy, hope and life. The despair of the
first depiction has vanished and is replaced with the prom-
ise of success evident in this picture.

Of particular interest is the presence of a clearly
human frame in the lower left portion of the work. This
figure is seated amidst and within the grain from which Ruth
gleans. Clearly, there exists something else to be gleaned
by Ruth apart from grain that provides temporary sustenance
for herself and Naomi. It is possible that Boaz himself is
being depicted, for in this interpretation it is Boaz who is
unsure of himself and the possibility of a relationship with
Ruth. Boaz will be the object of Ruth's gleaning, and it is
Boaz himself, and not his fields, which he offers to Ruth.
Boaz is depicted as the coy one in need of affirmation.
Ruth stands above him and is portrayed as having superiority
over this figure.

MEETING OF RUTH AND BOAZ

In his third work, Chagall places Boaz in the centre
with Ruth to his left. The colour scheme is set in earth
tones of browns and dark grays with significant additions of
red. An unusual feature which appears in each of the
remaining three works is the hyper-extension of the arm,
this time by Boaz, up and over his head. Boaz is depicted
as wearing a full length robe in earth shades of brown. His
facial features give insight into his reaction to this con-
frontation and introduction to Ruth. One notices a redness
in Boaz's face depicting blushing, a sign of embarrassment.
His eyes are wide open as is his mouth. He is obviously
caught off guard and is shocked and aghast by this
encounter.

Ruth is once again shown confidently with a strong,
raised left arm. She is shown wearing a full length robe
accented with red swirls and splashes, signs of vibrancy.
Her hair is depicted as being brown. Once again Chagall
refrains from depicting a shy Ruth.

On the left of the picture is a large, red disc. In
this case it is too large to depict the sun, but possibly
represents a millstone used in grinding wheat. This would
be appropriate since it is around the harvesting and
processing of grain that Ruth and Boaz meet and become
intimate.

Of interest is the figure, positioned, once again, in
the lower left hand corner of the work. A trio of persons

is faintly depicted (almost hidden) in a horizontal posi-
tion. The three figures could be a representation of the
first picture, that of Naomi, Orpah and Ruth. Since these
figures are somewhat out of sight it could represent the
replacement of the grief and sadness that all three women
experienced before coming to Bethlehem. A more plausible
explanation would be that the trio represents Elimelech,
Mahlon and Chilion, whose legacy will be replaced by that of
Boaz who is depicted here for the first time. The three
figures are placed under the large red disc (the grinding
stone), possibly representing them being crushed or
eliminated from the picture and from the remembrance of this
text.

The potential developing in the relationship of Ruth and
Boaz is clearly evident in this picture and from it one
could predict the outcome of the narrative.

RUTH AT THE FEET OF BOAZ

This work, depicted in earth tones, is unusual since the
figures occupy a much smaller space than previously, approx-
imately the bottom third of the painting. It is as if
through the characters' limited presence much is being sup-
pressed. Night is conveyed by the shades of darkness but
also by a figure of the moon in the phase of the last
quarter superimposed on a full moon. Sheaves of grain, most
likely barley, are evident.

Boaz is predominant and in a horizontal resting posi-
tion. He is covered by a dark robe to his feet and it is

obvious that he is sleeping. The feature of the curved arm
is once again evident in Boaz, yet this time it is in his
right arm. An element of calm is presented in Boaz,
expressing that he is unaware of the presence of Ruth at his
bed.

Only a portion of Ruth's body is portrayed. She is
lying at the feet (not the genitals) of Boaz, at the right
of the picture. While she is reclining, it is not obvious
that she is sleeping. She is partially clothed with her
shoulders bare and her breasts protruding. Once again her
hair is brown.

While Ruth was instructed by Naomi to uncover Boaz's
feet (Ruth 3:4), it is, in fact, Ruth who is uncovered and
Boaz who is covered in this depiction.

BOAZ WAKES UP AND SEES RUTH AT HIS FEET

Bright colours replace the earth tones of the previous
work, depicting the new day and the new reality that Ruth
and Boaz have awakened to. A red disc is an obvious
portrayal of the early morning sun. The sheaves are promi-
nent, now adorned with blue, yellow and white flowers.

Ruth is portrayed as being relaxed and lying on the
ground. She is naked and appears to be comfortable with her
sexuality and her nakedness. Her hair is now blue, signify-
ing a change within her, and it is evident that a necklace
or trinket is around her neck. The feature of the curved
arm is once again portrayed, but this time it is in Ruth not
in Boaz, in her left arm. Boaz is also in a horizontal

position, but elevated far above Ruth. All that one sees of him is his head and one of his arms, which now, reflecting a change in him, is blue. A secondary figure is hovering above him and clinging to him. A tertiary image, possibly of Ruth, is in front of him in a vertical position. This image carries with it a faint depiction of a mother and child, a representation of Boaz's future. With his blue arm he embraces this image and will try to make it his own. The secondary figure is, possibly, the next of kin who figuratively grasps at what Boaz might have with Ruth.

Anxiety is evident in Boaz as he is worried that someone will lay claim to his vision. Clearly, he is preoccupied about his future. Meanwhile, Ruth's future is secure and she is contented with the outcome. Landy's description of the awakening is also appropriate in summarizing Chagall's portrayal. "Boaz wakes to find who he is and what he really wants; Ruth comes to the end of her quest". (1994, p. 296)

SUMMARY

The examples of comparative exegesis displayed by Bal, Gitay, and Ozick have provided biblical scholarship with additional methods of analyzing biblical texts. While the examination of visual art is not a literary study, it is, however, a textual study. The metatext, or the life of the story beyond the text, is portrayed through the craft of the artist and is available for interpretation. The examination of Marc Chagall's five-work series on Ruth and Boaz has

revealed nuances and details which offer insight into the characters and narrative of the book of Ruth.

In the final chapter we will turn our attention to the role of the reader and explore possibilities for greater participation in the reading process.

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES

At the outset of this thesis I proposed a method to examine and critically evaluate a biblical text, the book of Ruth. After explaining why this narrative is important to feminist and biblical studies, I proceeded to evaluate a sampling of previous scholarship of the text. The findings in chapter one of a (random) sampling of commentaries proved to be indicative of many of the attitudes held by various commentators concerning this text. The text has been both glorified and belittled, and, most often, tainted with specifically gendered overtones. The studies of Phyllis Trible and Ilana Pardes were presented and critiqued as alternative readings to traditional interpretations.

The direction of the thesis was to critically examine and evaluate the book of Ruth within genre critical, source critical and narrative critical frameworks. As the text was studied in each of these areas critical evaluations were made.

In chapter two, after reviewing Jack M. Sasson's evaluation of genre, plot direction and characters, I concluded that while his method was informative, his conclusions were based on false assumptions. This could be an indication that biblical texts cannot be readily categorized in the genres of Western literature, and that attempts, such as Sasson's, simply by their nature, cannot succeed. Sasson's work allowed us to recognize several gaps and shifts in the

texts such as confusion over the hero/heroine, the question of the maternity of Obed, and the roles that the women of Bethlehem and the deity play in this narrative.

The task indicated in chapter three was to evaluate the text in a source critical framework and to test Athalya Brenner's two-source hypothesis. Problem areas such as the doubling of the female subject, the confusion over motherhood, and the confusion over who is redeemed by the levirate marriage were discussed. Brenner's thesis proved sound despite her own lack of confidence in its relevance.

In chapter four I analyzed the text in a narratological framework. Mieke Bal's literary study of this text was analyzed for its scrutiny of the use of proper names and for its attention to detail. The focalization of her study, that is, reading the text through Boaz's eyes (with the help of Victor Hugo), was a revealing exercise. Mieke Bal's, Zefira Gitay's and Cynthia Ozick's methods of biblical criticism through visual art were presented and subsequently utilized. The chapter concluded with my analysis of Marc Chagall's visual commentary of the book of Ruth.

The tasks set forth at the outset of the thesis are now complete. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to discussing the participation of the reader in the reading process, proposing a project to garner the responses of readers to this text, and offering written alternatives to awkward and inconsistent passages in the narrative.

READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM AND THE BOOK OF RUTH

While completing the research for this thesis I received unsolicited and solicited comments from individuals on the meaning, purpose and subject of the book of Ruth. Opinions varied greatly, as did the levels of satisfaction with the experience of reading the narrative. My own experiences of reading this text changed dramatically over the course of researching and writing this thesis. I began to develop a project in which readers could evaluate and document their understandings and interpretations of this text. Individuals could thereby actively respond to their reading of this text.

Reader-response criticism has been a relatively recent development in literary-critical biblical scholarship and is generally limited to the Christian New Testament, specifically to the gospels.[1] While discussing the recent interest in literary approaches to the Bible, Bal warns both literary

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[1]Robert M. Fowler's study *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (1991) provides a cursory introduction intended for biblical scholars and theologians interested in this area of literary criticism. The lack of studies based on the Hebrew Bible is evidence of the fact that biblical scholars have not as yet utilized reader-response criticism on these texts, or, that reader-response criticism is not an effective critical framework for evaluating texts of the Hebrew Bible.

and biblical scholars to establish clearly their motivations
for studying a biblical text as literature.

> It will be my contention that the confrontation between
> literary scholarship and the Bible should, but does
> not, challenge the traditional acceptance of social and
> theological ideologies that are assumed to underlie
> biblical literature. Several motivations bring
> literary scholars to the Bible, and biblical scholars
> to literary theory. If the latter have become more
> aware of the need to account for biblical texts as lit-
> erature, since, whatever its other readings, the Bible
> is undeniably literature, the former come to the Bible
> with more diverse and less conspicuous motivations.
> (1991, p. 59)

In this essay, Bal evaluates the works of literary and bib-
lical critics Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg and Phyllis
Trible (1991, pp. 59-72).

With Bal's warning firmly established, I state my
motivation in garnering the responses of individual readers
to the book of Ruth as follows: to document various readers'
experiences of reading this text. A reader-response survey
would be completed by participants of the study after having
read the entire text. Survey questions would include the
following:

- What do you think the purpose of the book of Ruth is?

- Is this purpose the same throughout the narrative?

- Who is the subject of the text?

- What role does the deity play?

- Who is the narrator of the story?

- Who is the author of the text?

- What is the genre of the text?

- Evaluate the following characters according to what they contribute to the text and how they interact with the subject of the narrative: Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, Chilion, Orpah, Ruth, the women of Bethlehem, the women in the fields, the men in the fields, Boaz, the next of kin (peloni almoni), the elders of Bethlehem, Obed, the deity, and the narrator.
- What are the purposes of the genealogies?
- When examined critically, do you regard this as a positive text for women? Why or why not?
- If you participate in a faith community, is this a text to be kept in its canon?
- Would you make any changes to this text?

The responses to this survey would then be recorded and documented. A wide range of responses could and should be anticipated especially if participants are from varied backgrounds.

I recognize that many readers of the book of Ruth would be familiar, not only with this text, but with numerous sections of the Hebrew Bible and possibly the Christian New Testament. Familiarity could be acquired through participation in congregational worship, religious education or the academic study of biblical texts. However, I am also interested in studying the experiences of those who read this text for the first time, with no prior knowledge of either the story of Ruth in particular or the Hebrew Bible in general.

Participants for the survey could be invited from the following groups: various denominations of Jewish clergy and laity, various denominations of Christian clergy and laity, university students in Women in the Hebrew Bible, Western Religions, or Literature courses, as well as other interested individuals. Other factors influencing an individual's reading of the text could include the following: the age of the participant, his/her sex, his/her sexual orientation, his/her engenderment of the narrator's voice, which character(s) he/she relates to, and prior understanding of the Hebrew Bible and the culture it depicts, including attributes ascribed to YHWH, the Davidic dynasty, the significance of Bethlehem, attitudes towards Moabites, and the practice of levirate marriage.

The study could also be expanded to include the reading of a commentary on the book of Ruth following completion of the survey. Commentaries could include a condensed version of this thesis, or Phyllis Trible's, Ilana Pardes', Athalya Brenner's or Mieke Bal's evaluations of the text. The participant would then complete the survey a second time to document whether or how their experience of reading the text had changed.

THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVE READINGS

At various stages throughout this thesis inconsistencies and gaps in the text have been highlighted and discussed. The alert reader has at least two options if he/she is to address these problems. One option is to recognize that the

narrative is an inconsistent and unsatisfactory portrayal of the characters in the text and to reject it. Another option would be to rethink and rework the narrative so that it forms a balanced and consistent representation of the fabula. As I have discussed in "In Search of Portrayals of Valiant Women in the Hebrew Narratives" (1994, pp. 87-88), if the option to reject is chosen, then the path of action is clear and one may search elsewhere for portrayals of balanced, feminist texts. The second option, however, is more involved. This process involves examining how one reads a text, what impacts one's understanding of the text, and how s/he evaluates the text during and after the reading of it.

When interacting with a text, readers almost always rely on previous knowledge and assumptions of a text to assist them in formulating conclusions about it. Interpretations of biblical texts through religious education, sermons and biblical commentaries are three sources which impact greatly on one's understanding of texts such as the book of Ruth. For example, if an individual has been taught that Ruth was self-sacrificing and that Naomi acted only in the best interest of Ruth, then he/she will interpret the narrative as portraying Naomi and Ruth as such, regardless of the fact that the text may or may not portray these characteristics. In an attempt to make unencumbered evaluations, one must read the text as if he/she were reading it for the first time. In so doing one pays constant attention to how one

reads and understands the text and how the narrator/storyteller has put forth the characters in the context of the narrative.

One should feel free to question why the author has chosen to elaborate on some areas of the text and why he/she has left the description of other areas painfully brief. For example, one may ask the following questions: Why were the characters of Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion not given any character development or dialogue? Why did Naomi not mention Boaz as a possibility for levirate marriage when they came to Bethlehem, or before they left Moab? Why does Ruth not have any dialogue in the fourth chapter, and why is Ruth's and Boaz's wedding not elaborated upon? A need for brevity alone cannot be the reason why these areas and others are not elaborated upon by the author, for dialogue is extensive and at times duplicated in other areas of the narrative. An active reader can take his/her clues from the text and go on to develop the story of the Naomi and Ruth characters to a fuller extent.

To accomplish this, one must venture from the canon and from tradition. Using a style similar to midrashic commentary one could elaborate on the development of the characters of Naomi and Ruth and the facets of their stories that are told or left untold in this narrative. For example, one could expand on Naomi's and Ruth's journey from Moab to Bethlehem, Ruth's and Boaz's wedding night, and the birth and naming of Obed.

By creating full voices for the characters and by giving equal development to both Naomi and Ruth, one can fill in the gaps that are evident in the portrayal of these characters.

What follows are reconstructions and creations of dialogue and narration based on elements present in the book of Ruth. The vocabulary and style remain consistent with those present in the biblical text. The first example addresses Naomi's silence towards Ruth on their departure from Moab. If Naomi knew that at least one member of Elimelech's family was eligible to redeem herself, Orpah or Ruth, and if she knew that she was entitled to land in Bethlehem, would she not have shared this with her daughters-in-law? This example of a conversation between Naomi and Ruth could be inserted at Ruth 1:18:

> And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her she said, "Come then my daughter. If you are willing to leave your homeland of Moab and journey as a stranger to Bethlehem in Judah, then we shall go together. It may be that you will find greater joy there. There are relatives of my husband Elimelech who may redeem my land and take you in levirate marriage. Together we can secure our future."

New elements are not introduced in this created text. The information revealed is already present throughout the body of the biblical text. This monologue simply introduces the feature of increased communication between Naomi and Ruth and a sharing of Naomi's relevant information.

A second reworking of the text demonstrates how confusion over motherhood can be avoided and how Ruth can main-

tain subjectivity until the completion of the narrative.

The following conversation could be inserted after 4:13:

> And after she had given birth to her son, Ruth took her
> first-born child, the child for whom she had endured
> greater than ten years of barrenness, and presented him
> to Naomi and laid him in her bosom. "Here is our
> future and our hope. Take him and care for him for he
> is dear to you. He will keep alive the names of
> Elimelech and Mahlon. Care for him and be his nurse,
> and whatever you and your companions name him, I will
> agree to it, for you know the traditions of your land."
> And the women of Bethlehem rejoiced with Naomi and
> named the baby Obed; Obed was the father of Jesse, and
> Jesse was the father of David.
>   Now these are the descendants of Elimelech and
> Naomi. Elimelech and Naomi begat Mahlon and Chilion.
> Mahlon begat Obed through Ruth and Boaz. Obed begat
> Jesse, and Jesse begat David.

Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn in *Compromising
Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (1990,
pp. 23-66) have also reconstructed dialogue and narration
for the book of Ruth. Their approach differs radically from
the previously mentioned examples in their departure from
the language and literary style used in the biblical text.
In addition, they have added numerous details, extensive
dialogue and enhanced perceived attitudes of the characters.
They have also woven the accounts of the Tamar and Judah,
and Rachel and Leah stories throughout the Ruth, Naomi and
Boaz story. Tamar, Judah, Rachel, and Leah are mentioned in
the blessings upon Boaz in the fourth chapter of Ruth:

> May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your
> house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the
> house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah
> and bestow a name in Bethlehem; and, through the chil-
> dren that the LORD will give you by this young woman,
> may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar
> bore to Judah. (vv. 11b-12)

The inclusion of these references into their expanded text proves to be an effective and satisfying way of incorporating related texts into the narrative.

On first reading, this four-act play with literary-critical reading may not appear to be a scholarly work. Yet, behind the use of colloquialisms and slang, is a detailed and finely crafted commentary on the story of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. In a bold departure from the biblical text, Fewell and Gunn have created a play that conveys authenticity in its portrayal of an ancient rural myth.

The following four selections from the play provide examples of Fewell and Gunn's artistry in filling in the gaps of the biblical text. By alternating the focalization of the story, they provide commentary from the perspective of each of the three main characters.

The first selection elaborates upon the silent journey of Naomi and Ruth to Bethlehem (Ruth 1:22). Since silence can convey either acceptance or animosity, it is not clear from the biblical text whether Ruth is accepted or rejected by Naomi. Fewell and Gunn have interpreted the relationship of Naomi and Ruth as one based on tension rather than harmony. The monologue is delivered by Ruth:

> Naomi said nothing else to her, though she matched
> Naomi's every step. It was Naomi's way of getting back
> at her, Ruth was quite sure. Since she couldn't
> achieve physical distance, she substituted emotional
> distance instead. So be it, thought Ruth. (1990,
> p. 33)

The second selection is told from Boaz's perspective and elaborates upon the meal that is shared between his workers,

Ruth and himself (Ruth 2:14). Boaz's anxiety and his expe-
rience of love to which Francis Landy (1994, p. 307) and
Mieke Bal (1987, pp. 69-73) refer, are elaborated upon by
Fewell and Gunn:

> She sat beside him and ate with relish the food he
> offered....She met his eyes with a smile of gratitude,
> relief and something else -- he wasn't sure what.
> There was an openness about her face that seemed to
> reach toward him. He had never had anyone look at him
> that way, for that matter. He suddenly felt off
> balance and struggled to reestablish the proper dis-
> tance. (1990, pp. 43-44)

The third selection elaborates upon the night at the
threshing floor (Ruth 3:6-7). The passage is told from
Ruth's perspective. Her thoughts reflect ambivalence
towards Naomi which she feels as she approaches the thresh-
ing floor. She calls upon Boaz himself to enact the bless-
ing which he had spoken to her (Ruth 2:12).

> Ruth hurried down the dark road, keeping in the
> shadows....Naomi is so funny, she thought, making this
> out to be all for my benefit. I know she's more
> worried about herself than me. Why can't she just
> admit it? And this Boaz scheme shows just how
> desperate she is....
> She took a deep breath and went softly to him. She
> uncovered his legs and lay down beside him. No
> response. Just deep, rhythmic breathing. He was
> asleep....
> "I am Ruth, the woman in your debt." Her heart was
> beating fast. "Spread your skirt over me for you are
> my rescuer." You, do you hear? Not your god. I don't
> want your piety. (1990, pp. 52-53)

The final selection provides insight into the problems
of the birth of Obed and the resultant confusion over the
identity of the mother (Ruth 4:14-17). In this text, Fewell
and Gunn continue to present the animosity which Naomi feels
towards Ruth. The passage is told from Naomi's perspective.

It was a boy.

Naomi showed him off to all the women who came to visit. All the appropriate things got said. Suitable words of blessing were addressed to God for arranging things so satisfactorily for Naomi....What a name he would have in Israel. And the women gave him that name. Obed. Naomi's son. Their words matched her mood. She was so proud of the boy.

Some other words found their way through the excitement and the congratulations and blessings.

"Your daughter-in-law who loves you is more to you than seven sons," someone ventured.

Naomi ignored the remark and put the child to her breast. (1990, p. 65)

These excerpts represent a cross-section of Fewell and Gunn's literary reworking of the narrative. Through a combination of humour, sarcasm and irreverent dialogue, they have succeeded in offering readers a convincing analysis of the text. This commentary will certainly offend some readers and leave others uninspired. They have, however, provided an example of literary creativity in the redevelopment of an ancient text.

CONCLUSIONS

It is unlikely that the results of a reader-response survey, such as the one outlined above, or the recreations of the biblical text by myself or Fewell and Gunn will have a permanent impact on the formulation of the book of Ruth within the canon, or the manner in which the majority of readers interpret it. However, the format and the tools made available in this thesis can provide a method for biblical scholars and students to read critically and to analyze any biblical text. The procedure developed in these chapters of first reviewing and evaluating previous scholar-

ship for predominant trends, then examining the text within

genre critical, source critical and narrative critical

frameworks provides the scholar with a thorough and

meticulous inquiry.[2]

The interpretation of narratives and their characters

has never been a simplistic nor a one dimensional endeavour,

although it has often been presented as such. The process

of reading and interpretation is a constantly changing tri-

alogue between the author's intentions at the time of writ-

ing the text, the text itself, and the participant's experi-

ence of reading a text.

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[2]Other scholarly tools such as historical-criticism,

redaction-criticism and various other facets of literary-

criticism will obviously be used when required.

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