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Journeying with Ruth on a Mission

Expositions in the Book of Ruth
from an African Perspective

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	-	Anchor Bible Commentary
ABCS	-	Ariels Bible Commentary Series
<i>AJET</i>	-	<i>African Journal of Evangelical Theology</i>
<i>AJSLL</i>	-	<i>The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures</i>
<i>AJSR</i>	-	<i>American Journal of Sociological Research</i>
ATIS	-	Africa Theological Interpretation Series
BCBC	-	Believers Church Bible Commentary
<i>BDB</i>	-	<i>The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>
<i>BSac</i>	-	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BST	-	The Bible Speaks Today
<i>CBQ</i>	-	<i>The Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
EBC	-	The Expositor's Bible Commentary
FOTL	-	The Forms of the Old Testament Literature
<i>GCAJS</i>	-	<i>Gratz College Annual of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>HALOT</i>	-	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
<i>HBT</i>	-	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
IDB	-	Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible
<i>Int</i>	-	<i>Interpretation: Journal of Bible and Theology</i>
Int	-	Interpretation
<i>JAAR</i>	-	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JACT</i>	-	<i>Journal of African Christian Thought</i>
<i>JBL</i>	-	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JBQ</i>	-	<i>Jewish Bible Quarterly</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	-	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSup</i>	-	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement</i>
<i>JTSA</i>	-	<i>Journal for Theology for Southern Africa</i>
<i>MSJ</i>	-	<i>The Master's Seminary Journal</i>
OBT	-	Overtures of Biblical Theology
<i>OTE</i>	-	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
NAC	-	New American Commentary
NICOT	-	New International Commentary of the Old Testament

- NIDOTTE* - *New Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*
- NSBT - New Studies in Biblical Theology
- Presb* - *Presbyterion*
- Psy Bul* - *Psychological Bulletin*
- R & E* - *Review and Expositor*
- REC - Reformed Expository Commentary
- SJOT* - *Scandinavian Journal of Theology*
- STR - Southeastern Theological Review
- TDOT* - *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*
- TOTC - Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
- TJCT* - *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology*
- USQR* - Union Seminary Quarterly Review
- WBC - Word Biblical Commentary
- ZAR - Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte
/ Journal for Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Law
- ZAW - Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

Dedication

To a mother in the Lord

Prof Mercy Amba Oduyoye,

A matriarch of African Women Theology

“At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.”

Colossians 4:3-4

PREFACE

There are those whose beginnings are small. They start little, they seem nothing, but their endings are huge and significant. The impact they make is enormous. They become an everlasting name. While some are loud and make the greatest noise, Ruth is a little book with a great impact.

The way of transformation from a nobody to somebody is what lies at the heart of the book of Ruth. Reading the book of Ruth with a critical mind unlike that of the characters will lead you to a new level, prepare you for greater heights and make your forehead big.¹ Absorbing the minute power that was inherent in the book of Ruth and deciding to follow the God of Israel will make you a witness to a situation of redemption, and appropriate the prophetic words: be famous in your Bethlehem (Ruth 4:11). Generations will come later and remember your name for the very little step you made, the commitment you took, and the favour that came upon your life.

Christ, the Redeemer of the world was born in Bethlehem, a little city of no great value. The Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Saviour of the world, comes from the great-great-great...-grandmother Ruth, the Moabitess who was not worth taking notice of. God will make someone take notice of you if you are ready to start again, serve with all your will, might, strength, and heart. Such a prophetic message motivates the writing of these expositions.

The book of Ruth is not simply a beautiful story, it is God's word.² Through this "prophetic witness", God desires that everyone would be redeemed from hopeless situations and that everyone encounters favour and meets a redeemer, during the spiritual harvest. The story in the book of Ruth is actually a missionary story. The book tells about the "Missionary God" at work in the lives of ordinary people – women who are not so conspicuous in society yet gain a lot of prominence in life.

The request from students of preaching to have examples of expository preaching influenced the writing of these expositions. Certainly, they spring from an African well, so the waters are expected to be drawn from a deep that gives an African taste. The waters are not distilled but raw.

1 A Ghanaian expression that is a proclamation of blessing. it can mean "it will make you happy" or "it will fill your head with knowledge".

2 Some may consider the Writings division of the Old Testament to not be on the same level as the Pentateuch and the Prophets, but I do not believe this to be so.

However, they point to how God uses women in God's mission.

The expositions are elaborate with critical exegesis. The intention is to give out timeless resources that can be used to develop sermons for the church. It offers a blend of scholarly interpretations and ordinary readings.

If the word of God can really transform lives, then it has to focus on the objectives. In this case, the good works expected from Christians, as Paul intimates in 2 Timothy 3:16–17, are founded on changing mindsets, educating hearts, and preparing the soul for a Christian journey. The good works of the characters in the book of Ruth need to be praised.

Would you also like to glean after those who are harvesting in the book of Ruth, walk behind them and collect the leftovers? Would you accept the divine favour that would count you among the reapers, that you reap more than you deserve, stay among the top people even as you pick the leftovers, sit at the table with the called, and also enjoy abundant spiritual grains in your life?

Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer; and may His name be praised for this little gift.

All quotations are from the NRSV unless stated.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the past, the book of Ruth does not seem to have received a great deal of attention. Scholars usually pass it by as of small value. It is not worthwhile to squeeze the juice from so small a fruit. The beauty is all on the surface. The outer skin is so transparent that all the seeds can be detected without opening.¹

This comment by W. E. Staples portrays a vivid picture of the place of the book of Ruth in Christian history. Can the value of the book of Ruth be seen by preaching it in the African church? Can the expositions from the book of Ruth help understand Christian mission?

There is no denying the fact that throughout history, the book of Ruth has been viewed with a suspicious eye and has not featured prominently in the lectionary. The church hardly reads this Scripture, if one is to judge by the lectionary. Some cannot imagine why a Gentile woman would have so much recognition among Israelites. And why should an Israelite marry a Gentile woman, Ruth? Hmm! These women in the story! Women, Yes! Women. And the night episode at the threshing floor!

Reading the book of Ruth

Those who read the book of Ruth usually prefer to address the seeming issues using allegorical interpretations. The point was that allegory helps to resolve the Bible's apparent tensions and contradictions so as to produce a consistent message in tune with the gospel message. However, Ruth is especially seen in a good light because she is an ancestor of the Messiah of the world. Can African Christians also see her as such?

For the Church Fathers, when a biblical text conflicted with their way of interpreting the gospel of Jesus, it must be interpreted allegorically. The Church Fathers, for instance, said Ruth prefigures and represents the Gentile church. St Augustine once said:

So first of all we must point out the method of discovery of an expression is literal or allegorical. And here, quite simply, is the one and only method:

1 W. E. Staples, "The Book of Ruth", *AJSL* 53:3 (1937), 145.

anything in the divine writings that cannot be referred either to good, honest morals or to the truth of the faith, you must know is said allegorically.²

Reading the book of Ruth allegorically may problematize our view of the strength of the characters in the book of Ruth and see them solely as infallibly spiritual as long as they are linked to David or the Messiah. These characters who are fulfilling the plan of God even though from the human point of view they can be considered as not perfect. But they are human beings. (It is tempting to ask what anyone playing a role in this drama would do.) And God uses the ordinary, mundane, fallible, and culturally unacceptable actions of human beings to glorify Himself. That is to say, this book seeks to affirm the nature of God and expose the ideological underpinnings of inclusivity to unearth lessons that do not resonate with our cultural sensibilities. It also shows that the world of the text is far removed from our world. This is the God we know. Seeing Christ and the mission of Christ from the book of Ruth is a deep well that can give the needed resources for mission.

Our human limitations in knowledge may account for the quick move to spiritualize every text in Scripture. Of course, some of the biblical texts are difficult to understand. That does not mean one should quickly transpose the text to suit personal views and not take into account why God gave that text in the first place. Allegorical interpretation somehow does not take into account what God is saying in the text to humanity. It does not consider what the text really means. It even does not see how the text can be a template for Christian praxis. In fact, Justin Ukpong sees allegorical interpretations as biased and uncritical in a modern sense.³

Similarly, one might be tempted to take a Marcionite approach and simply determine that this Old Testament book or story has nothing to say to Christians and cannot be taken as God's word. To do that would be a grave mistake.

Typology is another way to read a biblical text. It is a way of looking at specific persons, objects, and certain events as pointing to something beyond what we can trace and recognize. Such a reading sees one concept, theme, or personality as parallel to another, or foreshadowing another story.

2 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 3.10; 3.12.

3 Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions", in *The Bible in Africa: Trajectories and Trends*, edited by Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 11.

Hence one text illuminates another, providing a full and more meaningful interpretation of another. That is to say, a text cannot have a meaning in its own light unless it is linked to another. Should the book of Ruth be read typologically?

More so, contextual readings have come to stay. It is important to recognize that this work reflects on the book of Ruth from a Ghanaian Christian perspective using the African Contextual approach to offer exegetical and homiletical reflections that can speak to the life of African Christians. The task in this homiletic exercise is to develop interpretive voices from the perspective of an Akan reader, placing the worldview of African people side by side with the text, and setting up a dialogue in the interpretation. It is a way to discover the “good news” of the biblical text from the Akan margins, and explore participatory approaches of expositing and preaching the Bible for empowerment. The eye is directed towards historical and literal issues in the text that parallels contemporary issues, and made to engage the texts that have been used historically and temporarily to “overlook” real-life situations so that their meaning only becomes clear in conversations having similar examples of solidarity today. That is to say, it is possible to dwell on what has been traditionally promoted as the meaning of the text and enter a space where fresh dialogue can take place between both cultures and experiences. The issues at stake are what would expository sermons from the book of Ruth look like and what lessons can be drawn from a contextual reading of the book of Ruth for African Christians?

The objective is to show how the Old Testament speaks to African people in the midst of the various challenges the continent is facing. Thus, a mutual relationship between how the Bible is understood and Christian praxis in the contemporary world is sought. Another objective is to show how the Old Testament speaks to African people. Such is what the mission of God is about. The Old Testament has always been so relevant in African Christianity. It provides wonderful stories of hope that resonate with African ethos and life. African Christians see the Old Testament as words of tender comfort from God in the midst of the various challenges the continent is facing, and offer words of commitment and praise to God with hope for a transformed future. Kwame Bediako asserts that for Africans the Scripture is not simply a holy book from which we derive teaching and biblical principles but a story that speaks to the core of our being within which we participate because Africans have a strong sense of pre-Christian jour-

neys.⁴ Reading the Old Testament challenges Africans whose worldviews are similar to that of the Israelites to see new possibilities, and imagine pathways to shape the Christian moral and ethical responsibilities. Moreover, the Old Testament offers building blocks for the understanding of the entire work of Christ. This is what the expositions based on the book of Ruth seek to do.

This book is in three parts. Part One is the introduction and discussions on some themes derived from the book of Ruth and how they typify Christian mission, classified as Chapters 1 to 3. The introduction explains the African Contextual approach used for the discussions and the significance of expository sermons. The key theological themes gleaned from the book of Ruth are briefly explained from a contextual perspective to set the foundations for the expository sermons. Nevertheless, some of the themes are re-examined in the sermons. Chapter two gives a rationale for mission, establishing that the book of Ruth has at its background lessons for missions. The thematic areas reflected upon in chapter three include God, migration and poverty, security and redemption, gender roles and identity, ethnicity, mentorship, favour, and loyalty. More so, the explanations are interlaced with homiletical reflections from a biblical theological perspective. As Scripture, the book of Ruth speaks and has lessons for you and I. To read it alone, paying attention to the world behind the text, may not help the present-day reader to identify with the issues, nor the humanness of the characters and how God uses ordinary ways in history.

Part Two (Chapters 4 to 13) is made up of ten sermons. Chapter 4 focuses on the significance of God's visitation to His people and what people can encounter beyond the visitation of God. Chapter 5 draws on how Naomi sought to break the family ties between her daughters-in-law, and proposes lessons and implications for keeping family ties. It explores ways to build family ties so each member would acknowledge the usefulness of the other. Chapter 6 reflects on how to build a Christian identity based on the vow of Ruth to Naomi. It looks at what it means to break from the past and old ways so that Christians can cultivate a new identity, and reconsiders the vow Ruth made. Chapter 7 highlights on the lessons that can be drawn from acts of favour in the book of Ruth. It approaches the discussion from the idea that the undeserved can position themselves to attract and win favour. Chapter 8 delves into how Ruth attracted compassion from Boaz. It

4 Kwame Bediako, "Scripture as the Interpreter of Culture and Tradition", in *Africa Bible Commentary*, edited by Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006), 3, 4.

discusses what compassion is within the context of human relationships and encourages all to cultivate a heart of compassion in our world that is compassionless. Chapter 9 is a sermon that surveys how Ghanaian women and girls become victims of gender-based violence because of social constructs. It reflects on how Christians can help to protect women and girls against violence and the actions that can be taken. Chapter 10 is a character study of Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth, and how Christians can be the kind of people God wants them to be. Chapter 11 explores the gesture of generosity in our contemporary world. Chapter 12 deals with how God uses human beings to fulfil His purpose and the place of children in our families. It highlights the acts of God in making people fruitful. Chapter 13 admonishes Christians to focus on how God changed the story of Ruth and what lessons can be drawn.

Part three offers a Christocentric and Christotelic hermeneutic example to the preaching the book of Ruth. It affirms the parallels, echoes, types and pointers of Christ in the book of Ruth. Christian mission can never be possible unless rooted in Christ. One should, however, bear in mind that the Bible stories were written in a context that needs to be understood and respected. Reflecting on the stories in our own contexts can significantly help to recognize what was there before our time. Hence, what the text means to me as an African and a Christian matter a lot. It opens up the possibility of learning an old custom, culture, and language, without which the dialogue that needs to take place between the present and the past is a broken one. Somewhere in the meeting point of these two worlds, God speaks.

Ruth as Scripture

The story narrated in the book of Ruth is a masterpiece even if it is veiled. The narrator has created a master work that can easily miss the ordinary eye. D. F. Rauber appropriately points out:

The work is not a charming trifle; rather, we are impressed by its great resonances. It is indeed a gem, but gem in the sense of a gathered and concentrated power, a bright clarity beneath a somewhat deceptive setting of lyric grace and simplicity.⁵

The events of the story take place around the time of the Judges to highlight the trajectory and significance of being a gem in the midst of way-

5 D.F. Rauber, "Literary Values in the Bible: The Book of Ruth", *JBL* 89 (1970), 35.

ward people. The judges were simply redeemers who fought against the oppressors and redeemed the people of Israel. At that time, “there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 17:6, 21:25). Ruth lived around this time of spiritual darkness; a time when God’s covenant was not obeyed. Apostasy and anarchy were the order of the day.

One may be surprised to find that the words from Ruth 1:16b–17, often heard at weddings, are not about the joys of beginning a new life together but a self-curse spoken out of pain:

Do not urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me (Ruth 1:16–17; *NIV*).

In my wildest imagination, I do not think that a serious person would joke when making such a significant vow. These words of affirmation from Ruth to her mother-in-law, Naomi, after a series of losses that devastated their family are words of commitment to accepting the worst. Naomi’s God has turned against her because she lost her husband and sons, but Ruth who has also lost her husband makes a commitment to follow Naomi’s God no matter what.

In order not to disconnect from the text, a critical and exegetical reading of the book of Ruth is undertaken. Some Hebrew words are transliterated to facilitate the exposition and to make it readable for those who are not familiar with the Hebrew language.

Reading with a view to highlight the reader’s participation and affirm the intentionality of an African Contextual approach has certainly revealed subtle examples of ironical views that illustrate Africanness and the gospel, a perspective that also reinforces the ideology of reader response.

Much the same way, preaching the book of Ruth not only ends with an interpretation of the text. It moves towards the application of the text; the story becoming flesh and dwelling among us. Clearly, this book tries to emphasize good works (2 Tim 3:16–17).

The book of Ruth is a part of the collection within the Jewish canon known as the Scrolls, or *Megillot* (Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Ruth, and Esther), which is associated with various Jewish festivals like the harvest and the Festival of Pentecost, or the festival of Weeks (*Shabuoth*), that occurs fifty days after the second day of Passover in the synagogues.⁶ The book comes under the third division of the canon, that is, the Writings (*Ketubim*) in the Hebrew Bible. Probably, its inclusion took place due to the connection with David.⁷

Originally, the book of Ruth was considered an appendix to the book of Judges, and so it was not given a title of its own in the earlier Septuagint. However, in later editions of the Septuagint, the phrase *telos ton kriton* was inserted, which means “the end of Judges”, thus indicating a break between the two books, Judges and Ruth. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, states that Ruth was put at the end of Judges to ensure continuity and that Judges and Ruth were actually together in a single book. It shows that the Hebrew-speaking Jews and the Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews had similar views as to the place of Ruth in the canon, with most of them following the order as found in the Septuagint.⁸ The English Bible in our times follows the order of the Septuagint, with Ruth coming after Judges. Beyond this capacity, some scholars believe the message of the book of Ruth fits into what is called “Wisdom literature” within the Old Testament.⁹ The actions of Ruth clearly mark her out as a wise woman, for she made the right choices at the right time. Of course, Elimelech and his family made choices. Orpah made her choice after listening to Naomi. Naomi’s choice of parting ways with her daughters-in-law seems strange for my liking. And Boaz made a choice to find rest for Ruth.

The picture painted in the book of Ruth reflects a realistic story about poverty, loss, risk, and survival. It is a story that hints at every aspect of the cyclical human experience from marriage to the loss of spouse and children, and to the reality of childbearing. It proclaims a remarkable story

6 Louise Pettibone Smith and James T. Cleland, *Ruth*, The Interpreter’s Bible Vol 2 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), 829.

7 Brevard A. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 565.

8 G. A. Cooke, “Ruth”, in *IDB*, Vol 4, edited by George A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 134.

9 R. K. Harrison, “Ruth”, in *Baker Commentary on the Bible*, edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 179–181; Bruce Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 850.

from despair to hope, rejection to acceptance, seduction to claiming of rights, fate to destiny, famine to abundance, and emptiness to fullness. It also reveals the precarious life of widows, and single life to remarriage and childbirth, from working as a labourer gleaning in the fields (picking leftover grains after the workers have harvested) to becoming a wife of a landowner. It begins with famine and death, loss and rejection. Nevertheless, its happy ending overshadows the uncompromising and graphic threats as well as the precariousness of Ruth and Naomi's situation. To be sure, the book offers many uplifting themes including loyalty and companionship, as well as kindness, compassion, and grace. Yet, the book of Ruth has only four chapters. It is a short story but heavily loaded with themes and meanings. This is a story for Africans.

The book is like a novella when considering the happy ending. It seems they lived happily forever.¹⁰ Brevard Childs also affirms the highly influential work of Hermann Gunkel in the latter part of the nineteenth century which says that the book of Ruth is to be thought of in terms of a novella.¹¹ Similarly, Tod Linafelt asserts that biblical narrative like storytelling makes use of limited vocabulary, avoids using metaphors and other sorts of figurative language.¹² Interestingly, one metaphor or figurative language that the book of Ruth where Ruth visited Boaz at night and uncovered his feet can light up the touch to appreciate the complexity of the plot of the story.

Some scholars prefer to see the book of Ruth as a "historical short story".¹³ According to Edward Campbell, the genre has four characteristics. Firstly, a distinctive literary style that uses prose, elevated prose and semi-poetic, rhythmic elements, especially in speeches. Secondly, its content includes typical people and important figures. Thirdly, the purpose of the story is to entertain and to instruct. Finally, the audience can delight in the author's creative marriage of message and literary artistry in the story.¹⁴ LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush note that the book contains "highly artistic,

10 Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes and Esther*, FOTL Vol 13 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 85.

11 Brevard S. Childs, *An Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 562.

12 Tod Linafelt, "Narrative and Poetic Art in the book of Ruth", *Interpretation* (April 2010), 117-118.

13 Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing company, 1988), 47; Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 132.

14 For further reading see, Edward F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth*, ABC Vol 7 (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 3-4.

almost poetic, rhythmic prose”.¹⁵ Can all these descriptions influence the way sermons are crafted from the book of Ruth?

Author and dating

The author of the book of Ruth is not named in the text, leading to much conjecture and speculation. For instance, some Jewish traditions suggest that Samuel is the author of the book of Ruth because the language is similar to the books of Judges and Samuel. In fact, the Babylonian Talmud says that Samuel wrote his own book as well as the books of Judges and Ruth. The Talmud states:

And who wrote all the books? Moses wrote his book and a portion of Bil'am [Numbers, xxii.], and Job. Jehoshua wrote his book and the last eight verses of the Pentateuch beginning: "And Moses, the servant of the Lord, died." Samuel wrote his book, Judges, and Ruth. David wrote Psalms, with the assistance of ten elders, viz.: Adam the First, Malachi Zedek, Abraham, Moses, Hyman, Jeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korach. Jeremiah wrote his book, Kings, and Lamentations. King Hezekiah and his company wrote Isaiah, Proverbs, Songs, and Ecclesiastes. The men of the great assembly wrote Ezekiel, the Twelve Prophets, Daniel, and the Book of Esther. Ezra wrote his book, and Chronicles the order of all generations down to himself. [This may be a support to Rabah's theory, as to which, R. Jehudah said in his name, that Ezra had not ascended from Babylon to Palestine until he wrote his genealogy.] And who finished Ezra's book? Nehemiah ben Chachalyah.¹⁶

To suggest that Samuel is the author means pushing the date of the composition back to probably 1030–1020 BCE. How then could the author anticipate that King David would be born in that family and include it in the genealogy at the closing verses of chapter 4? We may be quick to say that the prediction of David's birth is prophetic or foretold. However, that is not attested in the way the text is written and cannot be proven. Admittedly, the one who inserted other names of persons including David's names in the genealogy had some evidence and used records available at that time to write that genealogy. So, it was written after the individuals lived. In short, contemporary scholars do not take seriously the tradition of Samuel as an author any more.¹⁷ The position of this book is that the author is unknown.

15 William LaSor, David A. Hubbard, and Frederic Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 524.

16 Michael L. Rodkinson, *New Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*, Vol 13 (New York: New Talmud Publishing Company, 1902), 45.

17 F. B. Huey, *Ruth*, EBC Vol 3 (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 510; Hubbard, *The*

Tischler proposes that the author of the book of Ruth was a woman because the language indicates a concern for women. Yes, the story is about women playing the key roles and may plausibly be the handiwork of woman. She says it is “an elegantly wrought classic version of the rags-to-riches story, of hard work and proper reward, told from the point of view of women.”¹⁸ Even though the proposal that the author is a woman may be apt, Tischler also admits that men are also sympathetic and can write women stories well. So, her hypothesis that the author is a woman is not strong.¹⁹ The unknown author may be a man or woman, and that does not take away the fact that the person ideally is one who God used. In fact, one may suggest or speculate but each of the proposals need some evidential fact. We do not know who wrote the book of Ruth, because God does not want us to know. All God wants us to know is the story that would be of help to our lives.

The date for composition of the book is also not certain. Some scholars are dating the book of Ruth at around the early monarchy, others prefer the pre-exilic period, while others favour the post-exilic periods. Several factors including political factors, customs, and language in the book seem to match or support the suggestion for all three periods. In fact, the diverse methods used to provide a date of composition typically revolve around the following: internal references in Ruth 1:1 and 4:7 indicate unequivocally that the retelling takes place sometime later than the time of David.²⁰ Again, the presence of a variety of Aramaic expressions and linguistic problems (archaisms, Aramaisms, for example in Ruth 1:20) supports the argument for late authorship – that is, a post-exilic date. Again, the legal customs and literary forms evident in the book reflect the situation of the post-exilic period. According to the book of Ruth, the story occurs in the previous era of the judges (Ruth 1:1), which is around 1373–1049 BCE. Since David is believed to have begun ruling in 1010 BCE, some believe Ruth lived in the latter part of the twelfth century. Moreover, Ruth’s canonical location in the Writings supports a post-exilic date.²¹ Others argue that the spellings used in the book are some of the oldest spellings in the Bible, outside the Torah. It uses the long “o” that usually comes with a Hebrew

Book of Ruth, 23.

- 18 Nancy M. Tischler, “Ruth”, in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, edited by Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 151.
- 19 Dillard and Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 131.
- 20 Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translators’ Handbook on The Book of Ruth*, 2nd edn (New York: UBS, 1992), 1.
- 21 Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 30.

waw. In post-exilic books, such as Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zechariah, the name of David is spelled with a *hireq-yod*, but in the book of Ruth, we do not find it that way. Also, the mixed marriage in Ruth that was acceptable in those days was not acceptable in Ezra–Nehemiah.²²

Those who suggest earlier dates locate it around the eighth century BCE. Campbell and Hubbard, for instance, argue for a date around the monarchic period – that is, around 950 to about 700 BCE.²³ Bledstein suggests that “we think of this narrator as Tamar, the daughter of David, who could have written during the latter part of David’s and the early years of Solomon’s reigns”.²⁴ Notwithstanding this, some say the final composition of the book came later, with some suggesting the same period for the composition of Ezra–Nehemiah (464–358 BCE).²⁵ I agree with Fruchtenbaum that whoever wrote the book was not an eyewitness to those events. The person would have lived to have known Perez from the family of Judah.²⁶

It is uncertain exactly where Ruth falls into the timeline of the book of Judges because the time span of the Judges is long, about 350 years. The period “in which the judges ruled” Israel began from the death of Joshua (Judg 1:1, 2:6–10) to the time of Eli, the priest at Shiloh. If Boaz was the son of Salmon and the prostitute Rahab, then it is probable that Boaz was born sometime after the conquest of Canaan – that is, early into the Judges period, perhaps after the time of Israel’s oppression under King Eglon of Moab in Judg 3:7–30. Moreover, Judg 6:4 hints of famine around the time of Gideon, but it is not explicit that Elimelech travelled with his family around that time to the land of Moab. The evidence is not solid. So, it is difficult to conclusively determine exactly where Ruth falls in the book of Judges.

Background

The story of Ruth begins in Bethlehem before travelling to Moab and back to Bethlehem. In the book of Judges, the city of Bethlehem is portrayed in a very negative light. First, we encounter Ibzan of Bethlehem who judged Israel for seven years. He had thirty sons and thirty daughters and he gave

22 S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1892), 455; Craig Davies, *Dating the Old Testament* (New York: RJ Communications, 2007), 383–388.

23 Campbell, *Ruth*, 23–28; Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 23–35.

24 Aldrien J. Bledstein, “Female Companionship: If the Book of Ruth were Written by a Woman...”, in *Ruth, Feminist Companion to the Bible Vol 3*, ed., Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 132.

25 F. W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther, WBC Vol 9* (Dallas: Word Books, 1996) 18–35.

26 Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Judges and Ruth*, ABCS (Texas: Ariel Ministries, 2007), 270.

his daughters away to men outside his clan. For his sons, he brought women outside his clan to marry them, all against the laws of Moses (Judg 12:8–10).

Second, Judg 17–18 recounts a time when a young Levite living in Bethlehem became a private priest for Micah to minister before his gods. Again, this young Levite, later named Jonathan the grandson of Moses (Judg 18:30), became the hired priest for the tribe of Dan and continued his idolatrous practice.

The final one makes reference to Bethlehem in Judges 19:1 with another Levite, although not necessarily in a negative light. A Levite from Ephraim decided to take a concubine from Bethlehem to be his wife and this woman fled from the Levite back to her home in Bethlehem. The Levite pursued her and took her from the father's house. On their return to Ephraim, they stopped in Gibeah of Benjamin and in the night the men of the city brutally raped the woman till she died. The woman's "fault" was to go back to her father, not knowing why she took that action, and the Levite's "fault" was by forcefully giving her to the mob led to the death of this woman. These three stories have led scholars to observe a "Bethlehem Trilogy".²⁷

Fruchtenbaum also sees eight comparisons and/or contrasts between the book of Judges and the book of Ruth:²⁸

1. While Judges frequently highlights immorality, Ruth highlights fidelity, righteousness, and purity.
2. While Judges points out idolatry among the Israelites, Ruth points to the worship of God only.
3. Judges shows decline and disloyalty while Ruth shows devotion.
4. Judges depicts lust but Ruth depicts love.
5. Judges is about war but Ruth is about peace.
6. Judges shows cruelty but Ruth shows kindness.
7. Judges shows disobedience leading to judgment but Ruth shows obedience leading to blessing.
8. Judges points to spiritual darkness while Ruth illumines spiritual light.

27 Walter C. Kaiser, *History of Israel* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998) 197; Israel P. Loken, *The Old Testament Historical Books: An Introduction* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2008), 96. Kaiser attributes the origination of the title "Bethlehem Trilogy" to Merrill C. Tenney.

28 Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Judges and Ruth*, 274.

Both Judges and Ruth show a contrast between the tribes of Judah (King David's forefather) and Benjamin (King Saul's forefather), and a contrast between Bethlehem (David's birthplace) and Gibeah (Saul's birthplace). It serves as an introduction to the books of Samuel and provides the family background for King David.²⁹ No wonder the book of Ruth demonstrates that God's grace included the Gentiles, and presents the superiority of the house of David to the house of Saul.³⁰ In the book of Ruth, however, Bethlehem is seen to be filled with faithful worshippers of God, including Boaz and his servants (Ruth 2:4), the elders of the city (Ruth 4:12), and the women of Bethlehem (Ruth 4:14).

The Gospel of Matthew presents Bethlehem in a positive light showing that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, contrary to the fact that no good thing can come out of Bethlehem (Matt 2:1). Politically, the book of Ruth stands to be more appropriate for the Davidic kingdom and the Messiah's reign – that is, contributing to the larger Christological plan of God.

Structure

1:1–2	A1	Elimelech's family
1:3–5	B1	Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah lose husband and children
1:6–18	C1	Ruth remains loyal to Naomi
1:19–22	D1	Women in Bethlehem welcome Naomi
2:1–17	E1	Ruth meets Boaz at the harvest field
2:18–23	F1	Naomi interprets the kindness of Boaz
3:1–15	E2	Ruth meets Boaz at the threshing floor
3:16–18	F2	Naomi interprets the kindness of Boaz
4:1–12	C2	Boaz is loyal to Naomi and marries Ruth
4:13	B2	Boaz and Ruth have a child
4:14–7	D2	Women in Bethlehem blesses Naomi
4:18–21	A2	The genealogy of David

Approaches to the discussions and expositions

The basic approach to the exegetical and hermeneutical discussions in this book is African Contextual hermeneutics. "Contextual readings afford the opportunity for all that matters to the reader to be voiced; all that influences meaning must be brought on board."³¹ In that light, the reader draws

29 Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Judges and Ruth*, 274.

30 Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Judges and Ruth*, 279–280.

31 Mark S. Aidoo, *Leadership in the book of Esther: An African Contextual Hermeneutic*, ATIS Vol 1 (Accra: JEM Publishers, 2020), 4.

from a worldview and experiences within a particular context to provide tools for interpretation. According to Mercy Oduyoye, contextualization “expands to include the politico-economic aspects of life and seeks to produce symbols and language that are universal and inclusive of Africa’s reality ... It is a theology that aims to comfort society with the Bible and intends to read the Bible from the perspective of the people.”³² That is to say, contextual interpretations embrace all aspects of life to empower people.

As a black person from Africa, I can only hear properly what emanates from my context. And I believe in my voice as a gift from God that enables me to speak. I stand for what I am, yet bear in mind that others are speaking. I express what informs my belief and what is resonates with my situation. The faith I profess is a universal one yet it is from where I stand, unless where I stand cannot fit into the world of theology. To contextualize a biblical text, I take care not to merely synthesize the content of the gospel with my particular cultural context. I give all the possibilities of interpretation that come up as a result of my reflections. I have stated elsewhere that Contextual hermeneutics is more of a pragmatic analysis that requires more intuitive and inspirational approaches to provide divergent opinions and voices as the text encounters a new context.³³ Hence, one particular interpretation cannot stand at all times. Drewes posits that:

The concept of “contextualisation” gives clearly an openness towards local, national as well as global influences in the dynamics of present developments. Obviously “context” understood in this way becomes a broad concept comprising the whole world in which people live. So not only social-economic relationships, but also cultural and religious traditions belong to the context.³⁴

Hence, the contextual readings here will inculcate the language of and ethos of the Ghanaian.

The primary context for this discussion is the Akan worldview. The Mfantse and Asante Twi are the two major dialects among the Akan of Ghana. “Akan” refers to the people as well as their language, that is to say, it has ethnographic and linguistic perspectives. Ghana has more than seventy ethnic groups, with the major groups being Akan, Mole-Dagbon, Ewe,

32 Mercy Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Accra: Sam-Woode, 2000), 54.

33 Aidoo, *Leadership in the book of Esther*, 5.

34 Barend F. Drewes, “Reading the Bible in Context: An Indonesian and a Mexican Commentary on Ecclesiastes: Contextual Interpretations”, *Exchange* 34.2 (2005), 121.

Ga-Dangme, Gruma, Guan, Grusi, Kusaasi, and Konkomba peoples. Each ethnic group is made up of people groups that speak different dialects. The dialects are usually mutually intelligible but with some differences. In the Ghanaian national population census conducted in 2010,³⁵ it was recorded that 47.5% of the population was Akan, spanning across the Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions, greater parts of the Central, Western, and Eastern regions, and a small area in the northern part of the Volta region – and even some are found in La Cote D’Ivoire. The language groups include the Adansi, Akwamu, Akwapim, Akyem, Asante, Assin, Bono, Buem, Denkyira, Mfantse, Twifo, Wassaw, and Sefwi.³⁶

Contextualization in the Akan perspective, as opposed to decontextualization, takes into account what it means to be an Akan. To Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, decontextualizing is the act of

ignoring the full historical and literary contexts, and often the individual narrative, people concentrate on small units only and thus miss interpretational clues. If you decontextualize enough, you can make almost any part of Scripture say anything you want it to.³⁷

As such, attention will be given to the literary and historical context of the text to unearth the meanings based on the clues given.

The exegetical aspect of the work is on literary studies while the contextualization aids the hermeneutics. Elizabeth Mburu makes a critical observation about African hermeneutics. She uses the four-legged stool familiar in Africa as an analogy that points to that which supports our weight. The four legs, hermeneutically perceived, “are (a) parallels to the African context, (b) the theological context, (c) the literary context and (d) the historical context. These four legs support the seat, which represents the final stage of interpretation – the application.”³⁸ That is what my perspective of contextualization offers.

The sermons are expository. The primary reason for the recovery of expository preaching since the 1980s is the need for preaching to be biblical once again. John Stott explains it this way: “Properly speaking ‘exposition’

35 The 2021 Population and Housing Census has not been released as of March 2022.

36 Kofi Agyekum, “The Ethnopragsmatics of Akan Advice”, *Pragmatics* 29:3 (2019), 310, 311.

37 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to read the Bible for all its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, revised edn (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 99.

38 Elizabeth Mburu, *African Hermeneutics* (Plateau State, Nigeria: Hippo Books, 2019), 65.

has a much broader meaning. It refers to the content of the sermon (biblical truth) rather than its style (a running commentary).³⁹ Hence, what is experienced in this book is not simply a commentary on the text but the revelation of an aspect of the gospel truth from the text. In these expositions, the introductions of the sermons are not well developed since that is not where the emphasis is placed. Much attention is placed on the body of the sermons.

The word “exposition” comes from two words: *ex* (out) and *pono* (place). Literally, it means “placing out”. It has to do with opening up or unfolding and explaining a unit of Scripture. In other words, it has to do with extracting and unfolding a message from a unit or units of Scripture. Let us consider some definitions of expository preaching:

Haddon Robinson says,

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers.⁴⁰

Walter Kaiser says,

Expository preaching is that method of proclaiming the Scriptures that takes as a minimum one paragraph of biblical text (in prose narrative or its equivalent in other literary genre) and derives from that text both the shape (i.e., the main points and subpoints of the sermon) and the content (i.e., the substance, ideas, and principles) of the message itself.⁴¹

James Braga says:

An expository sermon is one in which a more or less extended portion of Scripture is interpreted in relation to one theme or central idea. The bulk of the material for the sermon is drawn directly from the passage and the outline consists of a series of progressive ideas centered around that one main idea.⁴²

39 John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 125.

40 Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 21.

41 Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Crisis in Expository Preaching Today”, *Preaching* 11.2 (1995), 4.

42 James Braga, *How to Prepare Bible Messages* (Portland: Multnomah, 1969), 36.

From the above definitions, expository sermons take the Bible seriously, stay close to the text, and insist that the structure and flow of the interpretation and application are directly following the text. It is very scientific in that it considers the historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage. It is also a spiritual exercise in that the hermeneutics, I believe, rely on the illumination of the Holy Spirit. And it is intentional, for what is said is what should be heard in the reading and preaching process. The guiding principle is, “it that what the Word of God is saying?”

Broadus distinguishes between text-sermons and expository sermons. He says the divisions of a text-sermon, like expository preaching, come from the Scriptures but they are not the same. The difference lies in “the *proper handling of the details*. If we simply take the topic and the heads which the passage affords, and proceed to discuss them in our own way, that is not an expository sermon, but a text-sermon.”⁴³ In that case, the expositions in this work will focus on the meaning of the words in the text rather than what other supporting texts bring to the table. Words are understood in context.

While reading the text faithfully can be a great start, it is also important to approach the Bible appropriately under the illumination of the Holy Spirit and within prophetic Christianity. It is easy to get into a habit of trying to focus only on application when reading the Bible, at the expense of what the text says to my life as well as how it will bless my future as a child of God. Sometimes, preachers can make applications that are forced or unintended, or do not reflect what the text is saying when carried off by the Holy Spirit. Admittedly, the prophecies can be beyond what is imagined. Yet, it is absolutely necessary for the Christian to exegete the text faithfully to apply the Bible to his or her life. No wonder John Stott says:

authentic Christian preaching is both *biblical* and *contemporary*, relating the ancient text to the modern context; both *authoritative* and *tentative*, distinguishing between the infallible Word and the fallible interpreter of the Word; both *prophetic* and *pastoral*, combining faithfulness and gentleness; both *gifted* and *studied*, necessitating a divine gift and human self-discipline; and both *thoughtful* and *passionate*, allowing your heart to burn when you open the Scriptures to others.⁴⁴

43 John A. Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, ed., Edwin Charles Dargan (Cambridge: University Press, 1898; reprint, New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1906), 329.

44 John Stott, “The Paradoxes of Preaching”, in *Preach the Word: The Call and Challenge of Preaching Today*, ed., Greg Haslam (Lancaster: International Bible Teaching Books, 2006), 50. Emphasis in original.

Preachers should not be quick to erroneously assume that the books in the Scriptures were written only for us. Yes, they are our Scriptures and they have a message for us, but they were originally written to a people for a reason. Therefore, the preacher should try to have an idea about, “What does the message mean to the people of old, especially Israel?” “What issues or messages was the text addressing?” and “What are the convergences or divergences between the world of the text and our world?”. From these, preachers can ask, “What is God helping us to understand in the text?”

Certainly, there is a firm belief that a text gains its meaning by the illumination of the Holy Spirit and through a purposeful act of interpreting, not by what the ancient people who first received the text thought or said about it. How the first recipients understood the text cannot be known to us since there is no documentation to that effect. God continues to speak to us. It cannot be overemphasized that God did speak in times past.

The Bible is about God but it also gives us glimpses of the characters of human beings who participate in the biblical story. The individuals and people in the stories are not meant for us to learn about them. They show us how they related to God. Our approach then should be, “What does a passage teach me about God?” and then, “How did God relate with so-and-so?” When we tell the story of others that we see in the Bible, we see ourselves telling our stories. We see ourselves going through the ups and downs of life where God is present. Our stories become His-stories of men and women, young men and young women, for whom God speaks or acts on their behalf. It is from such premises that we can deal with how it affects our lives. Brueggemann and Linafelt rightly assert that the theology of the book of Ruth is less traditional but not simplistic because it refuses to see the human characters in the drama as puppets of God’s providence and as such proves more relevant to the modern world than we might suppose.⁴⁵

Beyond the theological import of the stories, there are the behaviours of human beings that confront us and require hermeneutical analysis. Sometimes, the call is for us to be real. The way the biblical characters are portrayed can help us see ourselves in the stories. Some of the people that we find in the Bible took certain actions that are not appealing to contemporary readers of the Bible. Biblical scholars, past and present, have deployed several strategies to come to terms with the ethically problematic pas-

45 Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imaginations*, 2nd edn (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 357.

sages of the Bible that are likely to offend the moral sensibilities of the contemporary reader, and in most cases try to justify the actions.⁴⁶

I have argued elsewhere that the theological task of turning to the Old Testament to engage in character studies is based on the belief that the Old Testament is a story that provides paradigmatic ideas. Africans believe that stories are not linear, but follow a path and cast shadows, and are knit by a web of strings that contribute variously to the ongoing movement of life. The people of the past are not different from us although the circumstances and environment are different. Hence, all the pathways and circumstances become examples for us and help in the meaning of our life's stories. In effect, Africans do not discount the descriptive approach to the reading of the Old Testament that would help bring out the meaning of the text to our world today and for the future. We can only take a cue from what happened in the past.⁴⁷ Indeed, the past has useful lessons for us in the present and also for the future. The Akan says, *tsetse wo bi ka, tsetse wo bi kyere* (lit. the past has something to say; it has something to teach).

It appears that Christians tend to read the Bible with our eyes that judge the behaviour of the biblical characters, and do so with our present-day moral standards. Christians see the Bible as a prescriptive code, making moral decisions for us, but this is not ideally the case. For example, the Ten Commandments were given to the people of old but it is still relevant to us in a way. The commandments were fit for their age, culture, and worldview. Our technological age, culture, and lifestyle may challenge parts of the commandments like "remember the sabbath day and keep it holy". There were also dietary instructions, animal sacrifices, specific feasts like the Feast of Tabernacles, etc, that were context and people specific. In all, the writings may be outmoded but not the intent or spirituality behind the text. Significantly, the Bible is an important resource for us as long as we do not make it a prescriptive code. Through the import of the messages, we find it providing standards, practices, and norms fit for our world, and a guide for the way we make our decisions. The experiences of people in the past can serve as lessons for us today.

Traditional African ethics emphasize what it means to be a good person. The Akan saying *ɔye nyimpa* (lit. she/he is a person) captures this thought.

46 Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Biblical Ethics* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 1.

47 Mark S. Aidoo, "The Old Testament as Resource for Progressive Ethics: An African Perspective", *Sacrum Testamentum* 1 (2020), 2-3.

A person is someone who can be relied on as part of the community. The traditional African ethic is thus human-centred rather than God-centred. It is social rather than personal. It is rooted in culture, customs, and traditions, and given meaning in context. Hence, the proverbs, wise sayings, maxims, and myths are not timeless. Each has its proper time and place. However, it should be noted that African Christian ethics affirms commitment to God's will and word.⁴⁸

The Old Testament stories and characters do not appear in isolation but are firmly embedded in Israel's theological history. The traditional approach that distinguishes between moral, civil, and ceremonial laws is critically important because such identification allows believers to know whether a particular law applies to them. Another approach has been to see how the Holy Spirit wants us to learn through semiotics or symbolization.

Moral foundations are ethically and contextually situated. Ethics can be seen as the disciplined reflection concerning moral conduct and character. Most of the time, Christians read the Old Testament to search for specific ethical ways that the stories can be applied in their lives. They look for models in the Bible to emulate, or for those who led an exemplary life. They explore how the passages impact or answer questions in our lives. But these approaches are incomplete because it is like beginning to look for what the passage reveals about the character of human beings rather than the character and purposes of God.

I agree with David Clines that the biblical text is a product of a community as well as a commodity made for consumption.⁴⁹ It is a finished product, yet it takes on new flesh as it enters every community for its people to consume something new. Let us not cross our arms, standing idle and not taking part. Let us engage the text and speak to the text. As God speaks, so we speak. And what I say, in prayerful request to the Almighty, should make sense. Humbly, let us all consume these sermons.

48 Samuel Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics* (Nairobi: Hippo Books, 2008), 66.

49 David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 98.

2 Toward a Perspective of Mission in the Book of Ruth

Mission is rooted in the history of God's relationship with humanity. It rehearses God's plan in the cultural and traditional contexts of Israel and her neighbours. God's mission to all humanity is a way of bringing humankind into a personal relationship with Him. The history begins with the story of creation in the Old Testament within the context of worship and runs through the whole Bible. To Kaiser, the theme of a mission to the whole world frames the whole Bible like one giant envelope, and that the New Testament writers "never viewed his mission to be something that was brand-new and unattached to what God has been doing in the past or what he wanted to continue to do in the present."¹ Christopher Wright also explains that the Old Testament contains "the roots" of mission.²

Since the Bible gives a record of God's mission in the world, a faithful understanding of the Bible is key to all missions. A missiological interpretation of the Bible should underly mission. Hermeneutics, therefore, requires not only holding the Bible in the hands as one goes out to witness but understanding how God related with the people of the past so that we can chart a pathway for the present and future. The Bible cannot simply be a symbol that the messenger on mission carries; it should not simply lie on the altar in the church or on the table in the living room for others to see as we talk about God's mission. It must be read and interpreted faithfully for mission to be complete. According to Tim Carriker, "The Bible as the *story* of God's mission, and consequently, as the *history* of the missionary call of God's people, then launches us into the complicated field of hermeneutics. We are proposing 'the mission of God' as a key to the interpretation of the Scriptures."³

The biblical stories tell how God is leading humankind to participate in mission. As the biblical characters were called to join God's mission, we

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- 1 Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, (2000), 75.
 - 2 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 2006), 18.
 - 3 Tim Carriker, "The Bible As Text For Mission," in *Bible in Mission*, eds., Pauline Hoggarth et al (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2013), 31.

have no option but to share a part of the plan, and move from our comfort zones to where we live as foreigners or resident aliens. Sharing in God's mission is about being faithful in moving out, trusting God who opens new horizons, and accepting that we have been called to join in the harvest. All these are incomplete when the gospel in the Bible is muted.

In the book of Ruth, sharing in mission is about hearing from others that God has visited a distant land, and its people are ready to encounter that visitation. Ruth's decision to worship the God of Israel becomes the starting point. She could not have professed to worship God if she did not understand who God is. As Bosch has noted, "If there is a missionary in the Old Testament, it is God Himself who will, as his eschatological deed par excellence, bring the nations to Jerusalem to worship him there together with his covenant."⁴

A key aspect of the mission of God in the book of Ruth is how foreigners become part of the people of God and are counted as key actors to the salvation story. Losing her husband and travelling to live in Bethlehem serves as a missiological ploy to see the plan of God in the life of humanity. In the view of M. Daniel Carroll R., sensitivity to the decisions of desperate migrants can offer an appreciation of mission. He looks at the hunger in the land of Canaan that prompted Abram to migrate to other places where the indigenes would provide and care for his family and their animals.⁵ He also mentions death, disobedience, and disappointed hope as the context in which *Missio Dei* takes shape, and avers that God does not choose a nation in all cases but selects an individual from whom a new people of God would be created with a different purpose and ethos.⁶

Oftentimes, women are at the margins and most at risk. They become prey for rape and physical abuse as they try to move into new spaces. Women also courageously participate in deception, if necessary, for the sake of their families' future.⁷ Ruth found herself at the margins yet grace located her, making it possible for her to enjoy security. She had to use what can be seen as an unorthodox approach to influence Boaz to marry her. Unlike Joseph who became an assimilated foreigner and lived as an Egyptian,

4 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 19.

5 M. Daniel Carroll R., "Biblical Perspectives on Migration and Mission: Contributions from the Old Testament," *Mission Studies* 30 (2013):13.

6 Carroll R., "Biblical Perspectives on Migration and Mission," 16

7 Carroll R., "Biblical Perspectives on Migration and Mission," 14.

Ruth never forsook his cultural roots. She was always described as “Ruth the Moabite.” Even though she was not given full recognition among the women of Bethlehem, she enjoyed some privileges and great hospitality. When she gave birth to Obed, it was Naomi who received all the praise. Carroll proposes that,

the church should extend hospitality to the strangers within their midst. The challenges of racial and ethnic engagement and integration go beyond the Old Testament; they run throughout the Gospels and the epistles of the New Testament. One of the hardest transitions of the early church was the change from being primarily a Jewish movement to one with Gentile prominence.⁸

In other words, mission revolves around inclusiveness, and that is what the book of Ruth teaches. Carroll also argues that since human frailty rears its head in discrimination and intolerance, Christians should not lose sight of the fact that the clearest proof of the love of neighbor is love of the stranger.⁹

Christian mission finds its relevance in the incarnation – God becoming flesh (John 1:11-14). It defies dependence on our egos, tempers, and self-righteousness. It is birthed in humility. Nothing should get in the way of humble relationships and genuine openness to another if mission is to be effective. The humble nature of Jesus Christ is the underpinning force for all missions. It is in a similar vein that Kvarme avers,

This biblical perspective on God’s mission not only prevents us from thinking that we are in control of creation, history and the salvation of humankind. It makes us rest in the gifts that he gives, at the same time both more humble and more alert with regard to his leading. It heightens our expectation and surprise at what he is doing in the lives of individuals, in contemporary movements, in creation.¹⁰

An aspect of mission has to do with going out to new spaces. In the book of Ruth, Elemelek, Naomi, and the sons went to Moab making them foreigners and migrants. Similarly, Ruth follows Naomi to Bethlehem and she

8 Carroll R., “Biblical Perspectives on Migration and Mission,” 23.

9 Carroll R., “Biblical Perspectives on Migration and Mission,” 23.

10 Ole Christian M. Kvarme, “The Bible In Mission – And The Surprising Ways Of God,” in *Bible in Mission*, eds., Pauline Hoggarth et al (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2013), 19.

becomes a foreigner and a migrant. They all make a fresh start away from home. Such theologies of migration should attract the concerns of the present-day church and society. The situation in Bethlehem shows how prepared it was to receive others, unlike the unpreparedness of the church to visible migrant communities and the inadequacy of the church to respond to the needs of migrants and refugees.

The book of Ruth teaches that mission to migrants should amply be demonstrated in resistance to life-denying practices effectively, for when the good news of the Lord comes, it releases people from captive, open the eyes of the blind, and sets the oppressed free (Luke 4:18). Hence, the book of Ruth is a reflection of resilience and creativity of the people of God in their struggles in life within the context of identity defined in a new creation and inclusivity. It is also linked to processes of 'othering' within the framework of transformation that makes those on the fringes of society become part, with some having new names, gaining prominence and seen more, depending on place, time and status.

The story of Ruth embodies the radical theology of resistance against family disintegration, poverty, disloyalty, and childlessness. The story makes such lived realities concrete through Ruth's body. Her identity creates avenues for theologies not just of solidarity and diakonia, but theologies that interpret one's identity with Jesus Christ. Such identities are vehicles through which individuals find their place in society. They provide ways for socialisation and naturalisation into new contexts. They reveal alternative gender roles not distinguished as male or female, no matter how gender is constructed. Since the starting point of mission is within a hermeneutical exploration, the goal of reading the book of Ruth should involve an understanding of the cooperation between different peoples and ideas. Mission thrives in collaboration with others, and not one part trying to develop the other, or build the other. Edelman defines 'othering' as "a psychological strategy for establishing and reinforcing individual or group identity through separation and the establishment of boundaries of difference."¹¹ Otherness gives way to inclusivity which is prominent in the Book of Ruth. How to break such barriers and give room to all should be the hermeneutical task.

11 D.A. Edelman, "YHWH's othering of Israel," in *Imagining the other and constructing Israelite Identity in the early Second Temple Period*, eds., E.B. Ben Zvi & D.V. Edelman (London, UK.: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 41.

Mission is about the visitation of God to eradicate poverty. Even if poverty is self-inflicted, the favour and grace of God can transform situations. Poverty reveals an unjust and divided world of the haves and the have-nots. That is why mission should address God's concern for the poor, and build the caring arms of believers.

The mission of God in the book of Ruth aims at a new creation where everyone becomes part of the family of God. An understanding of such family carries connotations beyond blood relations and ethnic bonds. It is established in marriage, and as such critical attention should be placed on marriages. The family imagery also reinforces the requirements of solidarity and responsibilities toward one another. As long as Jesus transforms the master-disciple model into a friend-to-friend model, the church as a family of God should exemplify a community where there is friendship, *koinonia*, reciprocity, and compassion, and where each one becomes the other's keeper. As Omenya observes, the church should be a place where fellowship, warmth, emotion, mutual caring, and philanthropy exist to create a sense of belonging.¹² It is not only those on missions who possess the power of interpretation, but also the ones who are the "target" of missions. As in life, as the Akan alludes, the left bathes the right hand and the right hand bathes the left hand. Likewise, God's wisdom is not in one's person's head. An understanding of how Ruth becomes a blessing to the family of Naomi and Boaz and how Naomi and Boaz become a blessing to Ruth attests to that fact.

The question of power, of course, is always present in mission. There is a dialectic between the one going into a new space and those creating the space. Such power is not supposed to be in an individual's hand, for the church does not create spaces where power plays a role. The relationship between old people and young people is what the book of Ruth depicts. If God's mission is a hermeneutical construction through the old-young discourse, then it must exist within friendly conversations where every voice matters.

Mission involves ongoing relationships; moving across race, class, and possibly geographic boundaries to live out a life as messengers and witnesses of God's good news to build a new community. In that light, mission takes love of the neighbour, transformation of life, radical generosity, and being

12 Cephas N. Omenya, "Essential aspects of African Ecclesiology: The Case of the African Independent Churches," *Pneuma* 20.2 (2000): 237.

on the side of the poor seriously. Cynthia Holder Rich observes that some women were attracted to serve in God's mission due to social, cultural, and demographic issues. Others were encouraged to join in missions because they had no source of sustenance and the cost of keeping them at home was an economic burden. As such, white women in international mission service focused on the meaning and nature of Christian womanhood, extolling the superiority of Western cultures, which they understood and named as Christianity, that women's activity and work were by nature unpaid and in the home.¹³

Christian mission in Africa rather took the form of colonialism and a way to perpetually eradicate cultural and religious identities. It aimed at destroying, changing, and transforming indigenes. There was no room for any dialogue between missionaries and locals, no crossing boundaries or dynamic exchange. Such a mission created Euro-Christian culture focussing on radical otherness and Westernisation. The story in the book of Ruth challenges such notions and reveals open cultures where each becomes ready to embrace the other. By so doing, we find the "translation" of the Gospel in reality – both in its literal and in its symbolic meaning.

How, then, can an understanding of mission in the book of Ruth help African Christians to be attentive to others and position themselves so that they can attract the attention of others? How can African Christians forge partnerships and be involved in mutual conversations and relationships with diverse peoples in new spaces as they participate in the mission of God?

13 Cynthia Holder Rich, "White Women in Protestant Mission in Africa," *Africa Theological Journal* 38. 1 (2021): 9,12.

3

Themes in the Book of Ruth

i) God

The book of Ruth uses three names of God: the tetragrammaton, *YHWH*, meaning “Lord” is found seventeen times; *Elohim*, meaning “God”, is found three times; and *Shaddai*, meaning “Almighty”, is found twice. References to God and God’s actions are usually presented from the point of view of the characters, rather than the narrator. For example, Naomi hears that the Lord has given food to God’s people in Judah (Ruth 1:6), and she later attributes the bitterness of her life to the hand of the Lord (Ruth 1:13, 20, 21). And Naomi uses the title “Almighty” (Ruth 1:20).

God does not appear in the same way as we find it in earlier biblical stories, that is, from Genesis to Judges. In essence, God does not speak directly with any of the characters in the book, nor are God’s actions foregrounded with any detail. However, the fact that God controls all that happens to humanity, the way they live or die, work or rest, gain or lose wealth, is key in the book of Ruth and is foundational in Old Testament belief. In the book of Ruth, we learn about God who visits Israel and can bless people from other nations. We learn that God controls natural disasters, like famines. We are not told from this book that the famine in Israel comes from God, but God causes it to come to an end (Ruth 1:6). He is the God not only of living persons but also the dead (Ruth 1:8, 2:20). Naomi prays that God gives, rest to Ruth, as did Boaz, and it happens (Ruth 1:8, 2:20, 3:10). God takes care of widowers and foreigners and restores their lives (Ruth 3:11–12, 4:15).¹ The narrator directly attributes Ruth’s pregnancy to God and not to Boaz (Ruth 4:13). In fact, the God-language of Ruth paints a religious and cultural backdrop for the narrative, inviting readers to focus on the Lord who is behind all human experiences. So, the book teaches God’s sovereignty and control over the affairs of humanity.

The book of Ruth affirms that God’s grace continues to extend to those who lose faith in Him. When tragedy hit Naomi, she tells her daughters-in-law that God has treated her unfairly. When Naomi arrives at Bethlehem, she laments to the women, “for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call

1 Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing company, 1988), 67.

me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me” (Ruth 1:20–21; ESV).

The name “Naomi” means sweet. She now prefers the name *Mara*, meaning bitterness, because that is how she sees herself. Her life is not sweet any more but bitter. To Naomi, God is the one who has brought calamity upon her even though she is coming back to Bethlehem upon God’s visitation. Naomi has lost hope, yet still depends on God’s visitation.

Ruth also loses her husband and perhaps, not being an Israelite, could not blame God for what happened. She does not support Naomi’s stance that God brings sorrow into life. She is hopeful and perhaps focused on the God who had visited Judah. Even if she does not attribute whatever happened in her life to God, the story builds on that principle. Through the providence of God, Ruth “happened to” go to the field of Boaz and picks enough grain for herself and Naomi. This phrase, “happened to” (Ruth 2:3), could mistakenly be taken to indicate some sort of luck or happenstance, or a lack of divine orchestration – but people of faith know it is the work of God working out His purposes that makes things happen. God orchestrates the events that transpire and play out through ordinary means for Ruth to bring home food.

Although Naomi loses hope in the Lord due to her loss of family, she continues to iterate the existence, sovereignty, and providence of God and blesses Ruth in the name of the Lord (Ruth 1:8–9). Whether she does that out of faith is another matter. She also blesses Boaz when Ruth recounts her experience during the gleaning on the farm: “May the Lord bless him whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead” (Ruth 2:20).

God’s favour and mercy are continually relied upon in the book of Ruth. Boaz bestows upon Ruth a benedictory prayer seeking the sign of God’s great kindness and mercy (Ruth 2:11, 12). The prayer of Boaz to God “begins the process of fulfillment, which is taken further in verse 20, where Naomi sees Boaz’s action as a demonstration of divine *hesed* [kindness], the keynote of the book. This kindness will eventually issue in the rest to be provided under David.”² God graciously honours the faith of Ruth to make Naomi’s God her God, and transforms her story of bereavement and desperation into a story of joy. She ends up giving birth to Obed and places

2 William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 275.

him in the arms of Naomi, the boy's transformed grandmother (Ruth 4:16). This baby turns out to be a very important person who becomes the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David (Ruth 4:17-21), ancestor of the true Redeemer, Jesus Christ (Matt 1:5-6). Only God could so move these events from grief to the fullness of joy.

The book reveals that God integrates those who are outsiders into the fold of the people of God when they display faith in God. Ruth's confession of faith makes her become a matriarch in Israel (Ruth 1:16). God mercifully accepts a Moabite into the fold, displaying the preponderance of loving grace over law and historical background. The Moabites had a checked history with Israel (Gen 19:36-37; Deut 23:3-5; Judg 3:12-14), and at a point became bitter enemies, yet God overlooks all and compassionately accepts her. Truly, God uses unexpected means and unpredictable people to bring about His plan and to show His love. This is how He has shown Himself throughout all redemptive histories. The story of Ruth shows us that God is still working even through the unanticipated, mundane, ordinary, and unfortunate aspects of our lives to make everyone count. God accepts all in spite of who they are and what they have done. In the words of Brueggemann and Linafelt, "by the time of this narrator, Israel's sense is that YHWH is best understood at work in and through social interactions, or perhaps we should say in and through rhetorical operations – either way now a God intrinsic to the lived processes of the human community".³ Yet there is no point in time one can say God was not active in the lived experiences of life.

What God did for Ruth was not just for that generation but for generations to come – even after Jesus the Christ. No one should see herself or himself as not worthy or outside the covenant love of God. The message for the church is that 1) all can be a part of God's people; 2) every action we take does have repercussions and historical consequences, but God is still in control; 3) even if we leave the space where God has placed us, our willingness to turn to God can change everything in the present and the future; 4) a virtuous and sacrificial life to God brings favour and blessing, that is, there is a reward for being a good person; and (5) we need to be generous to all, because of what God has done for us.

If we can accept all these and follow them, God can make us somebody.

3 Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imaginations*, 2nd edn (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 356.

We find the grace of God working mightily in the closing stages of the book of Ruth. It was the Lord's active role by which Ruth became pregnant, a statement that is so explicitly made in the book: Ruth's pregnancy is not attributed to her husband, Boaz, but to the Lord (Ruth 4:13).

God works through hidden ways to accomplish His purposes for the coming of David. Sometimes, God's purposes being hidden is interpreted as God having abandoned His people. Sakenfeld rightly notes that "the book of Ruth presents God's working as hidden and mysterious, like yeast at work in a loaf of bread, until all is transformed. God is at work through the everyday actions of faithful people seeking to manifest divine loyalty in their loyal interactions with those around them."⁴

The Akan cosmologies reveal a clear idea of a supreme being, *Nyankopon* or *Nyame*. There are other deities serving as the lieutenants of *Nyankopon*. For the Akan, the supreme being is the Most High God, and is approached through the lesser gods. The Akan usually adds the title "Nana", meaning king, to the name of the supreme being, thus *Nana Nyankopon*. The supreme being rules over all and is in control of all. Notably, some Africans share in the same cosmology while other African cosmologies, like the Yoruba, do have a concept of a supreme being. *Olorun* or *Oludumare*, the creator god of the universe, is empowered by the various *orisa* (deities) to create the earth and carry out all its related functions, including receiving prayers and supplications. Without the deities, *Oludumare* cannot function well.

While the earth is feminine, the Akan conception of God is not feminine or masculine. God has the qualities of both genders. Oduyoye's understanding of God is closely connected with the theme of liberation. Oduyoye explains that since in most parts of Africa there are no images of God, there are no gender-specific pronouns and as such God is supra-gender.⁵

God orders the universe and ensures everything takes its nourishment from Him. Since God ensures the continuance of life, evil is not attributed to God but the deities. When humanity lives in harmony with God and the deities, moral order and goodness will prevail. Thus, everything is not completely unpredictable and chaotic. God is the protector of all forms

4 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, Int (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 47.

5 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 42.

of life, both human and non-human, and no evil can be attributed to God. Those who encounter evil look up to God for deliverance and protection, since it is believed that *Aboa oni dua Onyame na ɔpra no ho* (literally, God is the protector of the tail-less animal).

The Akan simply acknowledges that every facet of human life, and therefore African religion, cannot be separated from everyday experiences. Although God is in control of all, there is always a shift in thought from God's involvement when disaster strikes. When life's purposes are smooth, it is the hand of God at work. The Akan believes in the existence of a mystical, invisible, hidden, spiritual power in the universe, diffused in the divinities, spirits, and ancestors. The spiritual or invisible powers rule the physical world. Their powers originate from God and are distributed hierarchically to divinities, spirits, and the living dead. God has also given some human beings powers in varying degrees, although every old person is said to have some special power in speech.

To the Akan, God is invisible to humankind but omnipresent, and such an idea is established in the Akan maxim, "If you want to speak to God, talk to the wind."⁶ That is to say, where ever the wind is felt, God is present. Although the Akan uses the *Nyamedua*, a tree, as a form of association with the supreme being, it does not confine the supreme being to the tree. In the view of Agyarko, *Nyankopon* "is acknowledged especially on the individual level in contrast to the other spirit beings that are recognized in family and tribal worship respectively".⁷ Elsewhere among the Gikuyu of Kenya, the supreme being is associated with sacred mountains.⁸

The God African people have known and worshipped is the God who revealed Himself in the Bible and whom Christians have worshipped. What the missionaries proclaimed was the name of Jesus Christ. That is why Mbiti argues that there is a commonality between the African cosmologies and the Christian concept of God.⁹

6 Robert Owusu Agyarko, "God of life: Rethinking the Akan Christian concept of God in the light of the Ecological Crisis", *The Ecumenical Review* 65.1 (2013), 53.

7 Agyarko, "God of life", 52.

8 John Mbiti, *Concept of God in Africa* (New York: SPCK, 1970), 5.

9 John Mbiti, "The Role of the Jewish Bible in African Independent Churches", *International Review of Mission* 93.369 (2004), 228.

ii) Migration and poverty

One of the themes in the book of Ruth is migration which is closely linked to poverty, that is, traveling to settle in another place. The story in the book of Ruth begins with “A man from Bethlehem of Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to sojourn (Hebrew *gēr*) in the country of Moab” (Ruth 1:1). The four people move from Bethlehem in Judah to Moab, and one of them eventually returned to Judah again.¹⁰ The Hebrew term *gēr* “sojourn” conveys the basic idea of a foreigner, that is, a person (or group) is residing in another country, either temporarily or permanently. The person is not in his/her hometown, hence dependent on the “goodwill” of new community for sustenance. Thus, the term “sojourner” also connotes several meanings including “resident alien”, “immigrant”, “foreign resident”, “client”, “foreigner”, and “stranger”.

The Latin word *migrāre* means to move from place to place. The root word leads to words like *migrant* and *migrate*. A *migrant* is a person who is settling in a new place. A *migrant* does not necessarily mean the person is settling in a new place permanently. Some may consider migrants to be persons always “in transit”, even if they have spent a long time in their host country, and this is not ideal. Immigration is considered the act of settling in another country or region while emigration is the act of leaving a country or region.

Migration is often much more dynamic in reality. The aspirations underlying migration depend on people’s general perception of life. Some believe that their aspirations can be fulfilled if they travel from home to live in another country where they think there are better opportunities and images of greener pastures. For others, they aspire to travel no matter what, so they do not have any good reason than to try other places to see new things. Other move from a place with improves access to goods and services to places where there are obvious challenges and poverty. Some migrate from high income countries to low-income countries, especially in Africa. Notice that Ruth identifies herself when she first met Boaz in the field as a female servant and not as a foreigner (Heb: *nokriyyāh*), perhaps with the view that she is moving to a place with brighter opportunities.

It is common knowledge that African countries and low income nations are struggling with internal and external social pathologies, such as unemploy-

10 See Tod Linafelt, *Ruth*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999) for a detailed look at how both literal movement and metaphorical movement (that is, transformation) are structural and thematic features of the Ruth narrative.

ment, hunger, poverty, terrorism, trafficking, educational facilities, political instability, ecological crises, and unstable economic conditions, etc, influencing the citizens to move to other countries in search of jobs, protection, security, and greener pastures. Hence, the number of people of African descent who are migrating to Europe, America, Asia, etc, cannot be overemphasized. Sometimes, Ghanaians migrate through bizarre routes like travelling through the desert on land, using boats to cross the Mediterranean and other turbulent waters, or even sneaking into ships as a stowaway.

The 1996 television film *Deadly Voyage*¹¹ tells a story of eight Ghanaians who on 24 October 1992 stow away in a cocoa-beans-loaded ship, the *MC Ruby*, a Bahamian-flagged, Ukrainian-crewed cargo ship bound for New York. This true story was about Kingsley Ofori and other Ghanaians, including his half-brother Albert Codjoe, who want to travel to Europe to seek greener pastures. Six days into the journey, their hideout's water container is broken, forcing them to begin moving about the ship in search of water. As a result, they are discovered by the ship's crew, stripped of all their belongings, and beaten. To avoid the heavy fine, they would face for transporting illegal immigrants into another country, the crew shoot them and throw them overboard somewhere off the coast of Portugal. Ofori is the only survivor.

In the Bible, Abraham travels from his hometown and at a point in time sojourned in Egypt (Gen 12:10) and then in Gerar due to famine (Gen 20:1). Abraham's son, Isaac, also sojourns in Gerar (Gen 26:1). Jacob and his sons and their descendants sojourn in Egypt also due to famine (Gen 47:4; Isa 52:4); and a Levite sojourns in Judah and Ephraim (Judg 17:7-9, 19:1). The prophet Elijah sojourns at Zarephath due to famine and because God asked him to do so (1 Kgs 17:7-24). Traveling to sojourn in another place is not wrong per se. It is what motivates a person to migrate that needs to be reflected upon. It is the motivation to migrate from one place to another that matters.

Many stories of famine prompt families to make decisions they would later regret or make choices that are fraught with danger. Abram and Sarai, for example, leave Canaan to sojourn in Egypt, where Sarai is abducted into Pharaoh's house (Gen 12:1-20). Abram is prepared to "spare" or "loan" his wife because of famine. Elisha asks the woman whose son he raised from the dead to sojourn in another country for a while due to famine. The

11 Written by Stuart Urban, directed by John Mackenzie and produced by Union Pictures and John Goldschmidt's Viva Films."

woman travels to the land of the Philistines for seven years and comes back to Shunem, her home (2 Kgs 8:1–3). Sojourners were expected to be treated well, especially the “widow, orphan, and sojourner” (Deut 10:17–18, 19:33; 27:19), as well as the Levite (Deut 14:29, 24:19) for the very fact that Israel was a sojourner in Egypt (Lev 19:34; Deut 24:5). Sojourners were expected to join in religious festivals and worship (Lev 22:17–18). They could marry and have families in the new settlement (Lev 25:45). Elimelech and Naomi must think the disgrace of facing starvation at home outweighs the significant perils of migration. Eventually, Elimelech dies there, as do his sons (Ruth 1:1–3).

It is common knowledge that many African migrants in South Africa are usually mistreated. In 2019, hundreds of other African nationals living in South Africa became victims of xenophobia and were evacuated from South Africa after their homes and businesses were looted or destroyed by the indigenes. The anger and frustrations of Black South Africans towards other African immigrants have been escalating for a long time. The natives of South Africa felt the migrants were taking over their hope and future. Such attacks nearly strained relations between most African countries and South Africa. Many African heads of state have reacted to deplore the treatment South Africa has inflicted on people of the continent who went there in search of a better life. The South African government, in fact, did not support what the indigenes were doing, and often warned that those planning xenophobic attacks will be given harsh punishments. So, the issue is not about being a migrant outside the African continent.

According to Andrew Walls, “migration often stands for dispossession, loss of patrimony or habitat. Adam loses Eden, Cain loses the security of the group, Israel loses land, kingdom and temple. In all these cases, migration is punitive, the result of wrongdoing, leading to dislocation and deprivation.”¹² That is to say, the experiences of regret and disappointment far outweigh the moments of joy. It is the aspiration of the African Union that by 2025, all forms of illegal migration by the youth of Africa will cease. So help us, God. The journey by Elimelech and the family to Moab is driven by hunger. Ironically, they leave Bethlehem, which in Hebrew means “house of bread”, to find bread in Moab, a land whose people are reviled due to a past historical event (see Gen 19:30–38; Deut 23:3–6).

12 Andrew F. Walls, “Mission and Migration: The Diaspora Factor in Christian History”, *JACT* 5.2 (2002), 3.

The Hebrew root word that translates “Moab” connotes something like “the seed of the father”. The Septuagint explains that the name “Moab” means “he is of my father”, a perpetual reminder of Moab’s incestuous beginnings. Moab was located on the east of Jordan and the Dead Sea, and south of the Arnon, on a high geographical plateau directly east of the Dead Sea, between Edom and Ammon (Num 21:10–14, cf 2 Kgs 3:25). Moab, a small kingdom in central Transjordan, is a familiar setting in the Bible. A narrative about Moab reveals that one day, Lot becomes drunk and his two daughters seduce him so that he sleeps with them. The daughters become pregnant and have children, and the oldest daughter names her son Moab, from whom the Moabites descended (Gen 19:30–38).

Before arriving at the boundary of the promised land during the exodus, the Israelites enter the plains of Moab. There, Israel has to fight against Sihon, king of the Amorites (Num 21:21–23), and then Og, king of Bashan (Num 21:33–35), and defeats them. After that, Balak, king of Moab, tries to coerce the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites but God does not permit Balaam to do so. Instead, God uses Balaam to bless the Israelites (Num 22–24). At Moab, Moses reiterates the laws, ordinances, statutes, and commandments the Lord has given to the people of Israel and nominates Joshua as the subsequent leader of the Israelites (Deut 29–33). Later, Moses dies there and is buried at Moab (Deut 34:1–6).

There is no hint in the text to show that Elimelech or Naomi is materially poor or that Naomi becomes poor when she becomes a widow. However, Naomi comes back to Bethlehem “empty” (1:21), echoing how some sojourners come back home with nothing. Coming back home to Bethlehem as a widow is a big blow, especially to Naomi. In the words of Madi-poane Masenya, both Naomi and Ruth are in a perilous state:

Given her male-identified identity in a patriarchal context, Naomi then became poor also in terms of self-worth and self-identity. It may be speculated that in that setting, widows were not only socio-economically poor, their social standing in the community was also impoverished by the lack of husbands. These women were poor because they lacked male partners to make them normative adults.¹³

13 Madi-poane Masenya (ngwan’a Mphahlele), “Struggling with Poverty/Emptiness: Rereading the Naomi-Ruth Story in African-South Africa”, *JTSA* 120 (November 2004), 49.

In Ghana, to travel outside the country and come home with empty hands is a curse. Such a person is considered worthless. The Akan describes such a person *sansanyi*, a compound word made up of *nsa+nsa+nyi*. The repeated *nsa+nsa* (hand + hand) is an idiom literally meaning “empty hands” while *nyi* means a person. Hence, *sansanyi* is someone with nothing in their hands, or a good for nothing. To Naomi, coming back home without any children or grandchildren is a bitter experience.

iii) Security and redemption

Human needs are far more sophisticated than physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization, as Maslow proposes. Needs are also not limited to material goods or services acquired. These needs are fundamental, yet they do not show up the same in all cultures. Each society and culture provides its own way of satisfying fundamental human needs. An individual’s own internal securities may be varied, and may not align to what society offers. How one would show oneself to be self-actualized may not be the same in another context. Generally, whether or not people’s needs are actually met depends upon the social and family systems pertaining to society. Poverty in family systems can be one of the root causes of society not being able to provide for the needs of its people, no matter how self-actualized one is, and that in turn distorts the security of individuals to maintaining a good life.

The people of Moab opened their doors to foreigners like Elimelech and the family, and allow the two sons of Elimelech to take Moabite women as wives. Life seems to have been pleasant and secure for the family of Elimelech, including the Moabite women, until the death of Elimelech and the sons. Naomi and the two Moabite women become empty and without any man to assist them. There are times in one’s life that the services of other women may be needed and there are times when men would be needed. These women do not have men, and are in a sense exposed to security risks.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how porous the security system of nations can be. The disease can slip through sophisticated security systems. It has also driven economies and families towards hardship. Africa with no sophisticated security system was, however, less hit. With a population of 1.38 billion at the end of December 2021, it recorded total cases of 7.25 million with total deaths ever 155,857, as compared with Europe with over 170 million cases, America with 90 million, and Asia with 130 mil-

lion cases.¹⁴ In Ghana, over 1,200 people have lost their lives as of February 2022.¹⁵ A cursory view will reveal that high income countries with well-developed systems for their security are more hit than Africa.

Security crises also have an influence on how life is managed. Such crises always were, are, and will be from a variety of factors. In the Bible, the period of the judges is characterized by many problems. The land supposed to be flowing with milk and honey for the Israelites does open them to situations of insecurity because of violations of the covenant requirement. It had been made clear to them that they would get everything for free, but if they disobeyed the word of the Lord they would be oppressed by neighbouring nations. Falling into the hands of those they had defeated and their land being taken from them is a great form of insecurity. This is what happens to Israel. Moses had warned them on the other side of the Jordan before they were about to cross over to the promised land that what they would receive would be out of sheer grace, a gift for satiation. It cannot be compared to what they ate in Egypt. It is more guaranteed than what they encountered in the wilderness. It would make them satisfied, in fact “it is for guaranteed satiation”.¹⁶ Maybe when things go well for people, they tend to overlook their security. Walter Brueggemann also explains that guaranteed satiation can make people complacent. Hence, the land becomes a threat to the people of God because of its abundance. In the new land are the Canaanites, those giants who make Israel consider themselves like grasshoppers (Num 13), and it is in the presence of these enemies that their tables are prepared (Ps 23:5).¹⁷

If God gives us everything that we need freely, the tendency to misuse and treat the graces with contempt is high. Forgetfulness is one of the key factors that make human beings ungrateful. We forget our histories. When all things go well for us, we forget where we had come from and what we had gone through. Moses tells Israel that they run the risk of losing all that God had graciously prepared for them if they forget that it is the Lord who has made them what they are and given them the power to get wealth (Deut 8:18). Moses warns the people before he dies that there will be blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience:

14 <https://www.afro.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus-covid-19>

15 <https://www.who.int/countries/gha/>

16 Walter Brueggemann, *Land*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 48, 49.

17 Brueggemann, *Land*, 67, 68.

“Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and with gladness of heart for the abundance of everything, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the Lord shall send against you, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and lacking everything. He will put an iron yoke on your neck until he has destroyed you”

(Deut 28:47–48; ESV).

Some people do not use well what they suffered to gain. In many instances, some do not value what they did not suffer to gain. It is when a crisis occurs that people sit up and make efforts to address needs; necessity is the mother of invention. Some people start to look for solutions when their needs stare at them, while others take “shortcut” solutions which end up not providing real satisfaction. Such is the attitude that fuels disobedience.

African countries like Ghana seem to be working on their security challenges but are always exposed due to the number of coups and other economic problems. They always use shortcuts that lead to short-term impacts, mainly through higher commodity prices that the citizen cannot afford, making the interventions not acceptable by the people. Such policies lead to dependency on other developed countries and multinational companies so that life continues with huge debts. They rely on remittances from those who live outside the country, etc. All these lead to insecurity and financial instability. They always go after weak structural transformation policies that do not lead to growth in exports and weaken investment, demotivating the citizen from using coordinating skills to build themselves up, thus exposing security issues. Hence, those who find it difficult to cope with these turbulent economies prefer to travel outside the country for respite. Emigration could be one such “shortcut” solution. Generally, there is nothing wrong with emigration, or seeking greener pastures elsewhere. But where it is motivated by an escapist mentality and consumer attitude towards life, the “love of life” will end up making us lose a life. The question is: Are there really green pastures out there? Can the needed securities be provided out there?

The book of Ruth simply opens with the view that in a bid to survive the food shortage in Bethlehem, Elimelech and his family travelled to Moab (Ruth 1:1–3). The lack of further and better particulars raises lots of questions. For example, was Elimelech the only person affected by the famine in Bethlehem? Could Elimelech and his family not simply buy food from Moab and go back to Bethlehem to enjoy it as the sons of Jacob did when

there was a famine in the land (Gen 42:1–2)? Do some of the other inhabitants of Bethlehem also travel to other places to settle there so as to flee from the famine? The economic crisis is given as the reason but there could be other reasons why Elimelech decides to sojourn in Moab. Maybe they go there for greener pastures, a motif that makes people stay on even after they acquire some wealth. Maybe it is a shortcut solution. No wonder his children “took Moabite women” (Ruth 1:4). Maybe they are not ready to go back home, and this gives them an excuse.

Naomi cannot enjoy the leisure, affection, understanding, participation, identity, and freedom she anticipated due to the death of her husband and sons. Before returning to Bethlehem, Naomi expresses concern for Ruth and Orpah’s economic security, telling them she had no other sons to offer in marriage, not even in their wildest hope (Ruth 1:11–13). Behind Naomi’s words lie the levirate custom, which dictated that a childless widow’s brother-in-law must marry her and that the first son of a union would become the deceased man’s heir (Deut 25:5–6). Since Naomi’s children do not have any other brothers, what we find in the book of Ruth does not follow the strict laws of levirate marriage.¹⁸ Moreover, the Hebrew *yavam*, meaning, “to perform the duty of the brother-in-law”, does not appear in the context of Ruth. Rather, the concept of kinsman-redeemer, which is that of the *ga’al*, meaning “to redeem” or “to act as a kinsman”, or *go’el* meaning “kinsman-redeemer”, is what appears in the book of Ruth. Therefore, it could be that there is a combination of both concepts of kinsman-redeemer and levirate marriage in play or a custom that combines the law of redemption with the law of levirate marriage.¹⁹ Levirate marriage is supposed to provide the needed security for Ruth and Orpah but Naomi does not see how this can be possible.

Naomi’s life moves from pleasantness to bitterness and from bitterness to pleasantness, living up to the meaning of her name (see Ruth 1:20). For Ruth, finding a husband is a form of security but it lasts only for ten years (Ruth 1:9). Boaz prays for Ruth prophetically: “May the Lord reward you for your deeds and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge” (Ruth 2:12; NRSV). So, Ruth comes to Israel to find security under the wings of the Lord. Although the prayer was for the Lord to protect Ruth, it takes Boaz to redeem the plight of Ruth so that Naomi can be redeemed, thus becoming an answer to his own prayer. For Boaz, redeeming what Naomi was selling, if only

18 Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Judges and Ruth*, ABCS (Texas: Ariel Ministries, 2007), 276.

19 Huey, *Ruth*, 514.

that was actually the case, becomes a way to provide security for her. The empty wombs of the two widows find fullness in the child Obed, whom Ruth bears and set in Naomi's arms, making the women of the village say, "A son has been born to Naomi" (Ruth 4:17).

The Moabite woman who seems to be such a liability for Naomi at the beginning of their journey has become the means of her redemption. As Robert Williamson writes, "For Naomi, who has throughout the text identified security with attachment to a male, the women's words serve as a reminder that it is ultimately Ruth's commitment to her that has restored her life. This Moabite woman has given her more security than seven sons."²⁰

In contemporary times, marriage is sometimes seen as a social union that provides security, especially for some women. Whether the men they marry are financially strong to contribute to the home or not does not matter. Their presence in the home adds to the security some women need in their lives – at least, the women will not feel empty if they can identify themselves with a man. The recognition is that marriage is more of a "security partnership" than an "economic partnership", with a gendered division of labour. In Ghana, for example, in such situations the wife contributes to the family by tending to the home, the children and the elderly within the family. It is when the husband provides "economic partnership" that her "reward" would be to partake in the income and assets of the husband. In marriage, the husband and wife are to share the family house; they share an identity and status. In contemporary times, long-distance marriages are becoming the norm. Others simply want the ring on their finger with no responsibilities in the marriage. In ideal cases, they also share together the earnings of each other but that is always difficult. In Ghana, the system ensures that women marry men not only for their well-being but to bear children. Children make the marriage more secure than assets/properties which the parties to the marriage have acquired during the marriage. In contemporary times, having children rather exposes the security of women, since they cannot pursue their dreams and desires. There is the possibility for them to have to endure rather than enjoy raising their children.

What lessons, then, can the issues of security in the book of Ruth teach us mission?

20 Robert Williamson, *The Forgotten Books of the Bible: Recovering the Five Scrolls for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 58–59.

iv) Gender roles and identity

Paul makes it clear that in Christ there is neither male or female (Gal 3:28). Blurring the boundaries of gender thus lies at the heart of mission. Gender is a dynamic continuum in reference to the social and cultural – rather than biological – differences between males and females. Usually, notions of gender tend to focus on women and are therefore synonymous with women. Society tends to construct various images to fit women. Musa Dube asserts, “As a social construct, gender is neither permanent nor unchangeable nor uniform. Since it is a construct, every society tends to construct its members differently according to other social categories such as class, race, age, sexuality and religion, among others.”²¹ The Bible affirms that God created both male and female in His own image (Gen 1:26, 27). In Christ, there is neither male nor female for all are one (Gal 3:28). Being a woman is a gift of God to the world and should be treated with dignity and respect in the same way men are treated, since God does not discriminate (Acts 17:26).

The story in the book of Ruth is about women who put their lives on the line to secure hope for their future. It is about women who lose it all only because they lost their husbands, and gain it all only because a son was born. Such was the identity of women and such was the way the Bible captures the socially constructed characteristics and roles that are associated with women with reference to their sex and sexuality. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld notes that Ruth and Naomi stand out as women acting on their own, making decisions, taking initiative, and cooperating with one another in a world that was almost entirely dependent upon men.²²

Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah all become widows and had no men to depend on. The biblical laws, as well as the socio-cultural system in the ancient Near East, concerning widows were provided because the lives of such people were precarious. They were treated as non-productive individuals in society. The wife, and her minor children by extension, are all dependent upon the husband. Thus, widows had no opportunities to work to support their family. However, men who lose their wives can continue to work and start another family. Such an ideology favoured males than females, and promoted the productivity of male labour.

21 Musa W. Dube, “Gender and the Bible in African Christianity”, in *Anthology of African Christianity*, eds., Isabel Apawo Phiri, Dietrich Werner, Chammah Kaunda and Kennedy Owino (Louisville: Fortress Press, 2016), 144.

22 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 37.

Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah find themselves in the male-dominated world where their identity as widows placed them in a very awkward position. However, these women play major roles and become the central characters in a Bible story of ancient Israel. The Hebrew word for “widow” also connotes a state deprived of its king. Widows were helpless. Whether Orpah does feature much in the story or acts as a foil does not matter: she makes the story complete and, without her, certain virtues cannot come out. Orpah goes back to her mother’s house with nothing. She goes there with no clue as to who would take care of her. These widows must make their way, of course, in the midst of men and the male-dominated world of ancient Israel because they lacked men by their side. Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah as widows have few options: 1) return home 2) remarry or 3) live by the charity from the protection of the temple or care of the community. As such, they all have to make strong decisions and become resolutely committed to them. They must take paths that would sustain them, for life is what you make it.

Some women in the Bible are known to have changed the course of history and altered the male-dominated interpretations of life. They take matters into their own hands and bring about changes that make the plan of God come to fruition. Renita Weems is right in her observation about the Egyptian midwives who made a difference: “After all, it is not only the midwives, but all the women in Exodus who shrewdly defy the Pharaoh’s edict and lay the groundwork for the liberation of the people of Israel.”²³ Through the heroic actions of the midwives, Moses is born and becomes the hero of the people of Israel (Exod 1:15–21, 2:1–10). Whereas some books of the Bible, such as Ezra–Nehemiah, speak against intermarriages, the book of Ruth counters such an arrangement. The death of Naomi’s children may be seen as a punishment for intermarriage yet the marriage between Boaz and Ruth was a sure blessing that far outweighs all other notions. In fact, Louis Jacobs states, “On this latter theory, the book of Ruth is a gentle protest against Ezra’s opposition to intermarriage, Ruth being a Moabite woman.”²⁴

The book of Ruth narrates a story centred on the lives and experiences of women. It draws attention to some difficulties faced by women, and especially by widows. It focuses on the fact that marriage is the only sure way

23 Renita J. Weems, “The Hebrew Women are not like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender, and Reproduction in Exodus 1”, *Semeia* 59 (1992), 30.

24 Louis Jacobs, *Ruth: A Concise Companion to the Jewish Religion*, Oxford Reference Online, Duke University School of Law (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t96.e584>

for a better future. When Naomi is with her husband she is “full”, and when she loses her husband, she sees herself as “empty” (Ruth 1:21). When Naomi suggests to Ruth and Orpah to go back to their “mother’s house” the idea was for them to start all over again so that they could have husbands. So, Naomi asks: “Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?” (Ruth 1:11). For Naomi she could be of help to Ruth and Orpah if she could have a husband and have children again. What she fears is that it would take a long time for the male children to grow up to become men who would marry these women (Ruth 1:13). Naomi is not empowered enough to stand by herself as an old woman to give hope to the young women.

When Naomi entreats Orpah and Ruth to return to their “mother’s house” – another term stuffed with gender nuances – it echoes how the Moabite culture was a matrilineal one where the women belong to their mother’s house and not the father’s house as in the case of the Akan of Ghana. It could be that Naomi is directing them to another quarter where these women stay alone, or that both Ruth and Orpah had lost their fathers. Israelite society gives preference to the “father’s house” over the mother’s house” for that is where one’s identity and security are assured.

In the Song of Songs, there is no mention of the father’s house but rather the mother’s house (Song 8:1, 2). The female figure is identified by her relationship with her mother. The daughters of Jerusalem are invited to look at Solomon whose crown was put on his head by his mother, on the day of his wedding (Song 3:11). For Robin McCall, “such a language offers a tantalizing hint that perhaps the patriarchal world we encounter outside the story may not have been the only reality in ancient Israel”.²⁵

Naomi focuses on the crucial importance of their finding husbands, so that they may have security (Ruth 1:8–13). The Hebrew word *menuchah* (v9) – translated as “security” (NRSV; JSP), “rest” (ASV; ESV; NIV) – has the sense of being “at home.” Home sweet home, it is said. The Akan says, *se wo nsa ekyir beye wo dew a, onntse de wo nsa yamu* (lit. If the back of your hand can give anything good, it would not be like what the palm gives). For these single women in the ancient Near East, their best hope for long-term safety and prosperity is to find a new home as soon as possible, where security would be provided by a male.

25 Robin C. McCall, “‘Most beautiful among Women’: Feminist/Womanist Contributions to the reading of Song of Song”, *R & E* 105 (2008), 420–421.

Ruth's identity is tied to Naomi. She is continually described as a daughter-in-law even after the husband was dead, and so for a time is Orpah (Ruth 1:8, 11, 22, 2:2, 2:20, 22, 3:1, 18). The narrative makes Ruth continue to see Naomi as a mother-in-law (Ruth 2:19, 3:1, 16, 17). Naomi seeing Ruth as "my daughter" connotes a familiar relationship. Ruth is not independent. Daughters usually depend on their guardians and do not exercise authority.

Ruth as a Moabite is a young woman who has travelled from her country into a man's world – a widow, without a child, and a foreigner. She only belongs to Naomi by will and not by law. No wonder Gale Yee sees the relationship between Naomi and Ruth after they arrived at Bethlehem as exploitation: Naomi uses Ruth's sexuality to gain economically. Naomi does not work. She depends on Ruth, the foreigner, to labour non-stop to feed her. Eventually, Naomi takes Ruth's child as her own.²⁶ Yes, it seems Naomi gains something through the young woman. She uses her to renew her status and Ruth has no option but to follow the instructions of the older woman who sends her as a sexual being to satisfy the needs of Boaz.

Much as I do share such an opinion – a pattern we see in the lives of foreigners in the hands of indigenes all over the world – I must admit that Ruth's service is godly service, and that should inform Christian mission. God expects His people to willingly offer themselves to support others. Ruth is not a minor, but a responsible adult who takes her own decisions, based on her love for God. Although Naomi and Ruth are women, they do not stay within the confines of societal norms. In that community women do not propose to men, but Naomi hatches a plan to get a husband for Ruth. Similarly, Ruth takes bold steps, beyond what Naomi directed, and slips into the tent of Boaz and asks him to cover her with his wings.

Society expects Ruth, as a young woman living with the mother-in-law, to play certain roles. Social theorists claim that a division of labour between sexes fosters the development of gender roles. Males are expected to play a particular role and females are also expected to play different roles from males. Socialization processes have also contributed to such ideologies. Yet, some women do not have men in their lives, thus they play socially constructed roles designed for men.

26 Gale A. Yee, "'She stood in Tears amid the Alien Corn': Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Ministry", in *They were all together in one Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, eds., Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segoria (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 131.

In traditional Ghana, strangers and sojourners find their identity when linked to a man's world. They depend on the generosity of the men and not widows. Abraham is the one who decides to show hospitality to the strangers on the way to Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18). It would be easy to say that the plan of God to allow Elisha to go to Shunem and be hosted by a widow does not make sense, since a widow is someone compared to the poor (2 Kgs 4:8–37).

Johanna Stiebert highlights the relationship between Boaz and Ruth as similar to a father–daughter relationship. Boaz is an old man while Ruth is a young woman, and as such he qualifies to be a father figure. “Pater-*nalism* is made explicit in Boaz’s address to Ruth as ‘my daughter’ (2:8, 3:11).”²⁷ She goes on to say that Boaz, although not Ruth’s father, has acted as father figure, providing food and protecting Ruth. Even the conception is attributed not to him but YHWH (4:13); and after the birth of Obed, it is the women of Bethlehem who named the child, and not Boaz (4:16–17).²⁸

Ruth is described by both Boaz and his reapers as a young woman (2:5, 6, 8, 3:10, 11). The Hebrew term *na’arāh* (young woman, servant), in contrast to a slave who is not free, is a free person who enters by choice into a servile relationship. It is a term that is used for a young unmarried girl or newly married girl, or an attendant in the service of another woman.²⁹ Victor Hamilton thinks a *na’arāh* is more like a minor,³⁰ but a careful study by Milton Eng admits that “young woman” technically refers to someone who is not considered a minor and neither is she yet a legally, independent adult.³¹

We are never told anything about how Ruth looks or her beauty, although narrators usually give such hints about characters. It means that her beauty is not significant to the plot of the story. She may be an ordinary woman with no spectacular beauty or shape unlike Rachel (Gen 29:17), Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:2), Vashti and Esther (Esth 1:11 and 2:7), and Job’s daughters (Job 42:15); however, the way Ruth dresses that night to go and visit Boaz on the threshing floor points out that she was someone to behold (Ruth 3:3). She was to use her beauty to relate with Boaz. Christians, however, are to focus

27 Johanna Stiebert, *Fathers and Daughters in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 151.

28 Stiebert, *Fathers and Daughters*, 151–152. Italics original.

29 HALOT 1, 707–708.

30 Victor Hamilton, NIDOTTE 3, 125.

31 Milton Eng, *The Days of our Years: A Lexical Semantic Study of the Life Cycle in Biblical Israel* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 56.

and clothe themselves with inner beauty (1 Pet 3:4). Similarly, the Akan says, *ahɔɔfɛw nntua kaw* (lit. beauty does not cancel debts). That is to say one cannot ask someone to consider beauty as a replacement for a debt.

Initially, Boaz identifies her as a young woman (Ruth 2:5). When he starts speaking with her, the identity changes into “my daughter” (Ruth 2:8, 3:10, 11). Ruth also begins by referring to herself before Boaz during the harvesting as a “foreigner” (Ruth 2:10) and then as “your maidservant” (Ruth 2:13). When she creeps under the cover cloth of Boaz in the night at the threshing floor, she identifies herself as “your handmaid” / “your servant”, a term which has the nuance of a concubine.³² From these descriptions, one sees gender classifications at play. Boaz sees himself as someone responsible for providing security for a daughter and Ruth sees herself as someone who is willing to be under control.

Of the three women characters, Naomi receives the most development and speaks more than the daughters-in-law. She pulls all the strings and moves the plot of the story to a successful end. She is the one who gets all the praise as the story reaches its conclusion. While Ruth’s identity is defined in Naomi’s and is portrayed in a favourable light, Naomi’s portrayal is mixed and stands on its own. For Orpah, her identity fades, and she will no longer be called daughter-in-law.

Some commentators conclude that Naomi is an exemplary character.³³ However, Naomi’s actions in the first chapter of Ruth are morally suspect and therefore reflect her flawed faith, which serves as an effective foil against Ruth’s exemplary faith. Charles Simeon comments that Naomi’s character and advice to Ruth is not the best as it may seem. Her love was of too carnal a nature, focusing on temporal welfare than to the welfare of their souls.³⁴

Naomi begins speaking by grieving over her losses and blames God for taking her husband and children away from her (Ruth 1:13, 20–21). In chapter 2, the narrative hints that Naomi knew about Boaz, who was a man of

32 HALOT 1, 61.

33 Leon Morris and Arthur E. Cundall, *Judges Ruth*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 253; C. F. Kiel and F. Delitzsch. “Ruth”, in *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 473; David Atkinson, *The Wings of Refuge: The Message of Ruth*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983); Peter W. Coxon, “Was Naomi A Scold?” *JSOT* 45 (1989), 25–37.

34 Charles Simeon, *Horae Homileticae: Judges to 2 Kings*, Vol 3 (London: Samuel Holdsworth, 1836), 92.

good standing from the clan of Elimelech, yet she takes no initiative to seek support from him. She also does not introduce him to Ruth. By the grace of God, Ruth enters the field of Boaz and grace continually locates her. In chapter 3, Naomi takes an initiative, and this time it was for Ruth to sleep in the tent of Boaz secretly.

Naomi has lost faith and hope in her God and would not recommend the God of Israel to another. She would be happy if the daughters-in-law go back to their gods. Ruth, however, is prepared to follow the God of Israel who disappoints and has caused Naomi to be empty, no matter what. She is prepared to count the cost and return to Bethlehem as a worshiper of God. Naomi does not do a careful introspection of herself, but blames God. As Daniel Block assumes that it was a sin for Naomi to have travelled to Moab so she should have confessed her sin instead of blaming God. As such her faith is apparently not as mature or orthodox as some would think.³⁵

The stance taken by Ruth shows her exemplary faith as compared to Naomi's weak faith. Ruth's faith does not stem from what God has done, but from who God is. Ruth is not like one of the women who gives up too easily on her God. Her emotional state and responses to circumstances ebb and flow throughout the story as one committed to the worship of God.

Patriarchal families put women in awkward positions especially when the woman does not have children. Ruth and Orpah thus share the bitter experience of childlessness for the ten years they are married. Sarah is 90 years old before she has her own child. It takes God's intervention for Sarah to be treated honourably in the sight of Hagar (Gen 16:5, cf 21:8-13).

Ruth is very assertive, a gender role not very common among Ghanaian women because of the patriarchal nature of the society. When a woman violates the standards set for her by being assertive, she usually suffers various attacks and cautions. Ruth's assertiveness towards her mother-in-law is commendable. Her assertiveness at the threshing floor when she crept secretly into the tent of Boaz and uncovered his feet, however, is not easy to analyse.

In Africa, it is part of the vision and aspirations of AU Agenda 2063 that all women and young girls should be empowered. It is believed that 52% of

35 Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC Vol 6 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 638.

the African population are women, yet they do not have access to economic, political, social, and cultural opportunities as men do. With a youthful population in Africa, it is hoped that the engine for growth will be the young people. It is sad to note that more than 40% of Ghanaian youth are unemployed, most of whom are young girls. Hence the issue of women's empowerment should be an important thing on every mind.

Boaz describes Ruth as an excellent woman of noble character even though she does not have a child (Ruth 3:11, cf Prov 12:4, 31:10, 29). The Old Testament employs the term "capable wife" in the sense of a person of valour (Deut 3:18; Josh 6:2; Judg 11:1, 20:44; 1 Sam 10:26; 2 Kgs 5:1; Prov 12:4; Ruth 2:1), one who is able (Gen 47:6; Exod 18:25; Ps 18:33), and who has wealth (Gen 34:29; Num 31:9; Deut 8:17, 18, 33:11; 1 Kgs 10:2; Ps 62:11; Job 5:5; Prov 13:21). Describing Ruth a "woman of noble character" may seem strange, for Ruth is not wealthy and powerful like the woman of Proverbs 31. Instead, she is a poor widow who is not able to stay independent but has to glean the leftovers in people's fields in order to survive. If Boaz is a man of valour and admits that Ruth is a woman of valour, then the matter needs further settlement. So, one can be a woman of worth even if she does not have wealth or children. And if Boaz chooses to marry Ruth, he takes a woman of valour, not only in his own eyes but also in the eyes of all the people in the town of Bethlehem. Bledstein asserts that it takes a woman of valor can recognize a man of good character. Such a woman would dare to risk her own reputation in order to initiate a relationship which may result in securing continuity of life.³⁶

v) Ethnicity

God created all "people" (Heb = *goy{îm}*; Gk = *ethnos{ne}*); different families with different languages and culture (Gen 11:1-9). Not only is God the Creator of the peoples, but also their only Lord (Jer 32:19-20, 27), Saviour, King, and Judge of the peoples of the earth (Ps 2, 7:7-8). God requires that all peoples worship Him: "All the peoples (Heb: *goyîm*) You have made will ... worship ... You, O Lord; they will bring glory to Your Name ... Who should not fear You, O King of the nations? This is Your due" (Ps 86:9, cf Acts 17:26). Therefore, people identified by language, culture, and faith, but not colour or race is the essence of ethnicity. The Law allowed for assimilation from one people to another yet makes a legal distinction between ethnic citi-

36 Aldrien J. Bledstein, "Female Companionship: If the Book of Ruth were Written by a Woman...", in *Ruth, Feminist Companion to the Bible Vol 3*, ed., Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 132.

zens and ethnic aliens (cf Lev 17:8–15). All people are equally responsible before God to treat each other fairly. The people of Israel were not to mistreat or oppress foreigners (Exod 22:21, 23:9). God’s mission to the world brings all people together; every distinction is made void.

Since the beginning of biblical history, God plays an active role in all things and is revealed through a relationship with an individual. Later, God is revealed to a nation, Israel, from whom the Messiah would come, but does not stop there: “I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isa 49:6). Jesus redeemed the whole human race, bringing together all people and breaking down all dividing lines (1 Tim 2:5–6; Gal 3:28). The writer of Acts states that: “From one man [unity], He made every people of mankind [diversity], that they should inhabit the whole earth..., [and]...seek Him” (Acts 17:26–27). All these reinforce God’s mission to all people and not a particular group.

Ruth’s Moabite background does not put her at risk while living in the land of Bethlehem. She is accepted in Israel, although she is from a different ethnic group. She becomes surprised when Boaz offers her special treatment in the field, saying to him, “Why have I found favour in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?” (Ruth 2:10). Ruth’s ethnicity is repeatedly mentioned by the narrator of the story, referring to her as “Ruth the Moabite” (see Ruth 1:22, 2:2, 21, 4:5, 10), rather than simply “Ruth.”

In the Bible, some people can be found showing discrimination against or hostility towards “foreign women”. In the Law of Moses, there is a prohibition against intermarrying with pagan groups because “they will turn your sons away from me to worship other gods” (Deut 7:3–4; cf Exod 34:15–16). God is not happy with the Canaanites due to their practices of child sacrifice, incest, and bestiality (Lev 18:21–29). Nevertheless, the prophet Jeremiah also expresses God’s compassion for the Moabites (Jer 48:31–47). The prophet Isaiah depicts Yahweh commanding Judah to “let the outcasts of Moab settle among you” (Isa 16:4). Rebekah has problems with Isaac marrying a woman from a different ethnic group: “I’m disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living” (Gen 27:46). Even though the reason Rebekah loathes the Hittite people is not mentioned, her comment is heavily laden with ethnic prejudice.

Early in Moses' life, he runs away from Egypt to Midian. There he meets and marries Zipporah, a Midianite woman (Exod 2). In fact, Reuel, Zipporah's father, is a priest of Midian (Exod 2:15–22; Num 25). After leading the Israelites to cross the Red Sea and enter the wilderness, Moses is confronted by his sister Miriam and his cousin Aaron because he has married a Cushite woman (Num 12:1). Whether this woman in question is Zipporah or not is not known. However, Miriam's agitation is borne out of prejudice for the woman's ethnic background. Thus, Moses' marriage to a Cushite (probably a Black African woman) brings a problem between himself and his family members.³⁷

According to the *Africa Study Bible*, "it is also easy to look down on the people of other tribes or skin colours. But tribalism and racism have their root in barriers that sinful people have deliberately created."³⁸ The black skin colour is only mentioned once in Scripture in an Old Testament parable about the Ethiopian's skin (Jer 13:23). It is wildly speculated that the name "Ham" actually means "black" and thus refers to the people in Black Africa. To assume that the Hebrew name "Ham" is even connected at all to this Egyptian word is questionable. Likewise, to assume that the black person is cursed is not supported by Scripture. The curse was on the Canaanites and not on the supposed descendants of Ham or peoples in Black Africa (Gen 9:18–27). In the Song of Songs, the Shulamite woman's skin had changed to black because of the sun (Song 1:5–6). I do not agree with Alice Bellis who argues that commentators who translate Song 1:5a as "I am black but beautiful" are simply racializing a text that is not about race or ethnicity. She says that the tanned skin does not indicate an ethnic preference.³⁹ Nonetheless, racial or ethnic biases and distinctions to prove that one is different from the other are all not right. Admittedly, those who prefer to use "I am black but beautiful" interpret the text with ethnic undertones, of which Alice Bellis is not an exception.

In Judges 12, Jephthah rallies the men of Gilead to battle the Ephraimites, a people who ethnically were related to the Gileadites (See Gen 41:50–52, 50:22–23; 1 Chr 2:21–23). After the battle, Jephthah and his people develop a clever way to identify which survivors are friends and which are enemies by asking the men of Ephraim to say the word *shibboleth*. The trouble was, Ephraimites could not say the word correctly because they could

37 J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 70.

38 *Africa Study Bible* (Oasis International Ltd, 2016), 1445.

39 Alice Ogden Bellis, "I Am Burnt but Beautiful: Translating Song 1:5a", *JBL* 140.1 (2021), 91–111.

not pronounce the “sh” sound – they rather would say *sibboleth*. Hence, the Ephraimites are identified using ethnic differences and accents in speech. After coming back from exile, Ezra and Nehemiah reissue the prohibition against intermarriage (Ezra 9:1; Neh 13:23–27).

In the New Testament, “Jesus crossed boundaries, or barriers, that were not crossed in his culture. For example, the strict interpretation of how to stay pure prevented teachers of religious law from mingling with certain types of people, like the Gentile women.”⁴⁰ The relationship between the Jews and foreigners, especially the Samaritans was not the best. Jesus said to the Syrophenician woman that the children’s bread cannot be tossed to dogs, yet that was not to fuel ethnic prejudice (Mark 7:27). The Samaritans, for instance, had a long history of mixing with the Jews and in most cases this did not end well. They allied themselves with the Seleucids in the Maccabean wars to become a snare to the Jews. Also, in 108 BCE the Jews destroyed the Samaritan temple and ravaged the territory, led by the Judaeen king John Hyrcanus. The Samaritans then adopted Mount Gerazim instead of Jerusalem for worship. Sometime later, a band of Samaritans retaliated by profaning the Temple in Jerusalem, scattering the bones of dead people in the sanctuary. These feuds made the Jews and Samaritans dislike each other. The Parable of the Good Samaritan echoes the hostility between Jews and Samaritans (Luke 10:25–37). It was strange for a Samaritan to rise above the prejudices and show compassion for the injured Jew after the Jew’s own people and religious leaders passed him by without giving any helping hand. Again, the disciples of Jesus were amazed that Jesus was talking to a woman who was a Samaritan (John 4:27).

Prejudices and ethnic sentiments can make us ignore our own. The writer of Hebrews says: “keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it” (Heb 13:1–2).

Ruth’s ethnicity does not give her a disadvantage. To Mangrum, “the book’s ethnic ideology qualifies the foreigner’s inclusion through a pattern akin to the future envisioned in third Isaiah, for example, whereby the nations bring their wealth as an offering to Judah as a means for the exaltation of the elect of God (esp. chapters 60–61).”⁴¹

40 *Africa Study Bible*, 1445.

41 Benjamin Mangrum, “Bringing ‘Fullness’ to Naomi: Centripetal Nationalism in The Book of Ruth”, *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 33 (2011), 77.

Where one comes from or one's language should not be a basis for discrimination. Ruth's ethnicity as a Moabitess could have been used to forbid a son of Elimelech as well as Boaz from marrying her. In Deuteronomy, the Moabites are strictly forbidden from entering the assembly of Israel (see Deut 23:3). Ruth's marriage subtly subverts the ethnocentrism of Judah's nationalism and carves out space for the foreigner to identify with the community. God used such a union to build a family out of which David and the Messiah came from. Actually, Naomi herself becomes a sojourner and a "stranger in a strange land" (see Exod 2:22 KJV). At Moab, the people treat her with love and compassion. After all, Ruth is the foreign woman who accepted Naomi and made sure that she had a life among the Moabites. There is no hint that Naomi is treated as a foreigner in Moab. Similarly, Ruth does not become a Judean even by her admission. Ruth remains a Moabite and a foreigner throughout the story. The Judean ethnic identity of Naomi's family, however, plays no role in the drama.⁴²

Ruth's clinging pays off for both Naomi and herself and blurs her ethnic identity. Ruth finds a husband leading to a new identity; she is no longer a widow. Naomi finds blessing from the Lord because of Ruth who gives birth to a son (Ruth 4:14–15; cf 1:13, 20–21). When the son was born to Boaz and Ruth, it becomes a time for Naomi to "cling" to the baby – "she took the child in her arms and cared for him" (Ruth 4:16).

Kwaw Ansah's movie, *Love brewed in an African Pot*, featuring Ghanaian and international actors such as Kofi Bucknor, David Dontoh, Anima Misa, Ian Collier, and Peter Whitbread – shows how some Africans hate their own ethnic background. Kwaw Ansah, one of Ghana's foremost filmmakers, uses the film to depict how Kwesi Atta Bosomfi changes his name to Quincy Bosomfield after falling in love with the colonial/European lifestyle. After studying to become an excellent scholar, he grows to abhor everything African including his government and exalts the Whites who were bent on advocating their selfish, greedy, and colonial mentality. He, therefore, becomes a puppet of the Europeans, thus revealing how looking down on one's own ethnicity can be very harmful. The film is a masterpiece and was the winner of the Grand Prix Etalon de Yennega pan African Film Festival in 1989, the Outstanding Film at the London Film Festival in 1989, and the OAU Best Film Prize in 1989.

42 Mark S. Smith "'Your People Shall Be My People': Family and Covenant in Ruth 1:16–17", *CBQ* 69 (2007), 257.

vi) Mentorship

The book of Ruth reveals the heroic contributions of a Moabite woman called Ruth who was introduced into the Judean community by Naomi. Naomi is the older woman while Ruth is younger. The interpersonal negotiations between the characters of the book hinge on belongingness and teach all to reassess their understandings of the relationship between old people and young people, as well as insiders and outsiders. It teaches how to be open to difference, and to look for ways in which others might find belonging and blessing in new relationships. Thus, the book provides great examples of a mentor–mentee relationship in the Scriptures. Naomi takes Ruth and guides her into the fullness of God’s plan. The story also leads us to see a beautiful life of togetherness, and mutual support for one another. Although Ruth, the younger person, takes the initiative to support the mother-in-law, Naomi provides guidance as a mentor. There came a time when Naomi planned and supported Ruth, helping her to become established in life. Such is how mentoring works.

Mentoring, from its Greek root, means “enduring”. It is a sustained relationship that endures between two people, one of whom supports the other towards growth. Through continued development, the mentor offers guidance and assistance to the mentee going through a difficult time. Mentoring is a sustained relationship between a mature individual and an immature individual. It is about relationships and transfer of experiences in a way that facilitates empowerment. Mentoring is helping someone to move from learning by mistakes to learning by example.

Christian mission focuses on mentoring. Bernard Bass and Ronald Riggio opine that mentoring helps to make a significant impact on alleviating felt needs and stress, and is a way to provide development advice. It is about harnessing strengths and talents to build the mentee, learner follower, or protégé. It is also about an experienced person who is respected and admired for investing in an inexperienced one. The mentor creates a hospitable space, and connects and collaborates with the mentee.⁴³ Mentoring is a two-way process. The mentor stands to gain just as the mentee does. As such, both partners contribute freely and operate as equals. It does not matter the age, wisdom, and experience of the mentor or the mentee since the mentor can be younger in age but has something to offer. The mentee also can enlighten the mentor.

43 Bernard M. Bass and Ronald E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership*, 2nd edn (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 55.

For Gary Yulk, mentoring has some guiding principles:⁴⁴

- a) Help the person to identify relevant strengths and weaknesses.
- b) Help the person find ways to acquire necessary skills and knowledge.
- c) Encourage attendance at relevant training courses.
- d) Provide opportunities to learn from experience.
- e) Provide helpful career advice.
- f) Promote the person's reputation.
- g) Serve as a role model (demonstrate appropriate behaviour).

Christian mentoring and secular mentoring are quite different, especially in areas where the Holy Spirit plays a key role in Christian mentoring. Secular mentoring tends to focus mostly on career development, skills, or decision-making. Christian mentoring is more than self-improvement or personal development. It is also about helping people become more and more like Jesus, more akin to discipleship. Christian mentoring is a relationship that takes place within the context of God's Word aided by the grace of the Holy Spirit to build the mentee believer to spiritual and physical maturity. It gives a platform for one person to share experience and wisdom with another so as to build a strong relationship with God and succeed in life. In Christ, everyone can build the other since all are each other's keeper.

The Akan say *se enye kokotse sian, a enhweer woara* (lit: if you walk with a bush pig, you will not lose weight). That is to say, once you walk with someone having some characteristics, you get to learn from the person as you walk together. In Christian mentoring, not only will the mentee grow in their faith, but the mentor also grows from the relationship. The wise say, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (Prov 27:17). God uses every mentoring relationship to strengthen the faith of everyone involved, even those who look on and learn by that testimony.

It is easy to observe that Naomi does set a bad example for her daughters-in-law in terms of turning around to blame God in their presence. She does not serve as a missionary to them, introducing them to her God, the Creator. Rather she dismisses them to go back to their gods: "And she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law'" (Ruth 1:15). Hence, Naomi's reasoning paints a dismal picture for Orpah and Ruth. She is not one worth emulating because her life is bitter. She is among those suffering heavily under the hand of God.

44 Gary Yulk, *Leadership in Organisations*, 7th edn (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2010), 130.

She has no hope of a better future if she returns to Bethlehem, only that she is sure that there is food there. Maybe she does not want to continue to live in another country and as an immigrant or foreigner suffering at the hands of God. Given all that, one might wonder why it was that Ruth found it necessary to cling to Naomi.

Naomi knows that her husband Elimelech had kinsmen at Bethlehem, but she never introduces them to Ruth. Nowhere are we told that Naomi shares her faith in the God of Israel with Ruth. She does not take any initiative to secure the development of Ruth. She is still bitter, down, and seems to have almost given up. It is Ruth who gets up one day and asks permission from Naomi to go out and find food for the home: “And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, ‘Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favour’” (Ruth 2:2). Ruth does not know the right place to go and Naomi does not show her either. Ruth only depends on chance. She knows it is possible to gain favour in the eyes of someone who can allow her access to the field to pick leftovers. By the grace of God, Ruth goes to the right place and gains favour in the eyes of Boaz, who allows her to glean from his field. Ruth is other-centred, spending her life in service to her mother-in-law.

Christian mentorship grows in service, otherwise called *diakonia*. The experienced person serves the inexperienced while the inexperienced serves the experienced. Such service finds relevance in serving the needs of the needy and supporting the cause of the poor to bring about hope, dignity, and abundant life.⁴⁵ In Christian service, people put their skills at the service of those who need it most so as to fulfil the biblical concept of righteousness, where all relationships in family and society are established in fairness, generosity, and equity.⁴⁶

When Ruth comes home, she mentions Boaz to Naomi and it immediately strikes a chord. Naomi then says: “He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead” (Ruth 2:20b). Perhaps, Naomi’s long absence from Bethlehem made her forget that Boaz was a man who is known to show kindness. She had forgotten that Boaz was a loyal man with a good

45 Emmanuel Kwesi Anim, “Examples and Concepts of Diaconia in West African Christianity”, in *International Handbook on Ecumenical Diaconia*, Regnum HandBooks, eds., Godwin Ampong et al (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2021), 203.

46 Confidence W. Bansah and Edem Dzanu, “Diaconia in West African Christianity”, in *International Handbook on Ecumenical Diaconia*, Regnum HandBooks, eds., Godwin Ampong et al (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2021), 200.

heart. It is at this point that she tells Ruth that Boaz “is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers” (Ruth 2:20c). The Hebrew word *mig-go’ălênû* from the root *go’el* meaning “our redeemer”, is a legal term for one who is the nearest relative to come to the aid of a family member. It is an obligation for the kinsman to redeem relatives who are poor and had sold property, or cannot support themselves, or sold themselves into slavery to a foreigner (Lev 25:25–55).

Just as in mentoring, Naomi starts preparing Ruth informally and formally, naturally and with planning, with the aim of securing a future for Ruth. Natural mentoring occurs through friendship, collegiality, coaching, and counselling while planned mentoring is a formal matching process for the mentee to try. Naomi uses all her wisdom and experience to intensively guide Ruth to appear acceptable and appealing to Boaz. She knows it was time for threshing the harvest so Boaz will be on the threshing floor. She does not know which tent Boaz would use so she directs Ruth to watch the movements of everyone and to identify the tent Boaz would enter and sleep.

Naomi directs Ruth to “wash down, put on perfume, and get dressed in the best clothes” (Ruth 3:3) before she goes out to watch where Boaz would be sleeping. Ruth had been going to the farm to meet Boaz for a while. Why would Ruth have to put on perfume and be in her best clothes to meet Boaz? To Naomi, she must prepare Ruth to be different and attractive. Naomi wants the best for Ruth and will use all her experience to see to her wellbeing.

Moreover, Naomi directs Ruth to be circumspect and secretive. She should not expose herself to anyone while wearing her best clothes. She should hide and watch what Boaz does from the time of the evening meal till he retires to bed. Ruth needs to have a patient spirit and learn how to wait. She has to be watchful without attracting attention. The clothes are the best, but they are only meant for Boaz. The perfume may have to be very sweet-scented, but the sweetness of the scent should only be felt by Boaz.

Above all, Naomi directs Ruth to approach Boaz at a time she presumes he will be sleeping. *If* it would be too dark at the night-time Ruth enters Boaz’s tent, why the need for beautiful clothes? Was it not ideal for Ruth to simply offer her body to Boaz instead of the beautiful clothes? Naomi said to Ruth: “Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you

what to do" (3:4). So, when Ruth offers her body and lies at the feet of Boaz, and perhaps when the sweet-scented perfume starts to refresh the air in the tent, the obvious will follow. Ruth is to expect that something would happen and she must be ready for it. She must be ready to hear what Boaz would say. She must be ready to experience the consequences of her action. Mentors do not give all the directions in life; they allow the mentee to be responsible and manage how things go on. Mentees should not depend on the mentor's direction at every stage of life. There are times a mentee should manage affairs and be empowered to make further decisions. When Boaz wakes up from sleep in the middle of the night after something startles him, Ruth asks Boaz to spread his sleeping garment over her also. She wants to share the bed with Boaz and both of them must be under the cloth.

Ruth follows Naomi's directives and Boaz asks Ruth to spend the night with him. He also asks Ruth to sneak out secretly so that no one notices her, or that she had come to sleep with Boaz the whole night. Whatever happened from the middle of the night to dawn must have been so influential that Boaz does not wait for the day to break before summoning the elders at the city gate seeking the redemption of the land that will lead to the hand of Ruth in marriage.

The book of Ruth also invites us to ask what it means for us to belong to God, to a community, to each other. Ruth sets an example to show what it means to belong to a mother-in-law. Ruth also teaches us the significance of staying close to Boaz. Boaz sets an example to show what it means to be a kinsman or a relative. "Belongingness" in Christian tradition demands sacrificing, supporting, caretaking, and affection.

Initially Naomi thinks that her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, belong to Moab – they do not belong to Bethlehem. However, Ruth is willing to give up the land and people, and "belong" to Naomi, her family, and her people. Ruth knows how to "belong" by maintaining her relationship with Naomi. And Naomi also shows what it means to belong by directing Ruth and securing a future for her. Naomi risks her identity and future by travelling with Ruth although she did not see any future in Bethlehem. Belongingness presupposes mutual vulnerability. One cannot belong to another if the person is not ready to sacrifice. And truly Ruth sacrifices herself for Naomi and Boaz and in the long run sees herself belonging to the community at large, and belonging to the genealogy of David.

Ruth's status is also raised when she is described as "the wife who enters your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel." (Ruth 4:11a). She now belongs to the house of Boaz, supporting in building Israel. Moreover, the elders and all the people blessed Ruth "May you act [like] a virtuous woman in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem" (Ruth 4:11b). To be of good standing means belonging; it means acceptance. The genealogy at the end of the book reveals that Ruth the Moabite is the great-grandmother of David, king of Israel after God's own heart. In the Gospel of Matthew, the genealogy of Jesus is given and Ruth features prominently, along with two other Canaanite women, Tamar and Rahab, as ancestors of David and, thus, of Jesus.

In contrast to the idea that marriage with foreigners is not wanted elsewhere in Ezra–Nehemiah and parts of the Deuteronomistic History, Ruth is among the women who did enjoy the sense of belongingness. We find Zipporah turned away by Moses after they crossed the Red Sea into the wilderness – she does not belong to the community that was prepared to receive the commandments from the Lord. It takes the father-in-law of Moses, who related to him as a mentor, to bring back Zipporah and the two sons to Moses so that they continue to belong to the people of God (Exod 18:2–8).

vii) Grace and loyalty

God's mission to the world is an act of grace. In the book of Ruth, grace and loyalty plays a key role in the life of the characters, and that happens to be an essential requirement for mission. Ruth interprets Boaz's kindness to her when she went out to glean as an act of grace or favour (Heb: *ḥēn*). Grace, just like kindness, loyalty, and steadfast love are synonymous concepts that find relevance in relationships. The Hebrew "grace"/"favour" occurs three times in the book of Ruth (Ruth 2:2, 10, 13). Ruth wants to glean in the field of someone who would be gracious to her. Boaz finds her and offers her favours, and Ruth wonders why she is attracting all those gracious acts. She then prays that the favours would continue to flow to her path.

The Hebrew concept of grace has a close link with the Hebrew, *ḥesed* (sometimes written *hesed* or *chesed*), normally rendered as "steadfast love", "kindness", or "loyalty".⁴⁷ Both the KJV and ASV use "mercy" or "loving-kindness", while the NRSV uses "kindness" or "loyalty", and RSV uses "steadfast love", and the NIV uses "great love". Fundamentally, the concept

47 E. M. Good, "Love in the OT", in *IDB, K-Q*, ed., George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 165..

of *hesed* is not tied to legal notions, yet it goes as far as to “joint obligation”, “goodness”, “graciousness”, “godly action”, “achievements”, “proofs of mercy”, and the like. The concept of *hesed* points to conduct in accord with social norms. It can also be understood as “solidarity” and is central to the family and kinship ethos. Due to the difficulty of finding one meaning in the English language that best describes the Hebrew concept of *hesed*, it may be best to transliterate the Hebrew word into English so as to capture all the nuances of meaning when the word is used.

Brown-Driver-Briggs define *hesed* under two main categories: humanity’s *hesed* and God’s *hesed*. Under human *hesed*, they explain that it is “kindness towards men” by showing favour to others; kindness extended to the “lowly, needy, and miserable, mercy; affection; lovely appearance.”⁴⁸ Under God’s *hesed*, they explain it as “kindness” or “loving kindness” of God by “condescending to the needs of His creatures”. It is seen in the form of redeeming one from his “enemies and troubles”. Thus, *hesed* refers to the “mercies, deeds of kindness” shown towards Israel, or the kindness shown to and promised as a covenant to David.⁴⁹

Katharine Doob Sakenfeld establishes that there is no possibility of finding one “single expression to convey the content, in all its usages, of this extremely flexible term”. Sakenfeld rejects Glueck’s notion that reciprocity is involved in *hesed*, and the fact that one cannot separate *hesed* towards God and *hesed* towards others. It often occurs in a relationship between non-equals, in which the superior has a moral, though not legally binding, obligation to help and protect the subject according to the terms of the covenant.⁵⁰ To Sakenfeld, *hesed*

refers to care or concern for another with whom one is in relationship, but care that specifically takes shape in action to rescue the other from a situation of desperate need, and under circumstances in which the rescuer is uniquely qualified to do what is needed.⁵¹

Sakenfeld discusses God’s *hesed* by first demonstrating the failures of human loyalty. Actually, God expects humanity to pursue acts of love, kindness, and loyalty. God’s people can also visualize God’s loving-kindness since it is evi-

48 BDB, 338.

49 BDB, 339.

50 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of hesed in the Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 233–37.

51 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, Int (Louisville: Westminster, 1999), 39–40.

dent in all God has created. Sakenfeld explains *hesed* as a “combination of commitment in relationship, critical need of the recipient, and the freedom of the actor which characterize occasions for the exercise of loyalty”.⁵² The superior is not obligated to show *hesed* but recognizes a responsibility to act. For Sakenfeld, *hesed* is where an action is undertaken by a “circumstantially superior party” or a “situationally superior” party towards an inferior party.⁵³ That is not to say that *hesed* does not operate between two parties who are equal. However, she explains that two individuals may be equal on one occasion and then the situation changes, thus opening the opportunity for a need or the expression of *hesed*.⁵⁴ The need that is expected to be met is not the ordinary one that arises in various relationships but the extraordinary need that cannot be met by the person in need.⁵⁵

Norman Snaith establishes that the Hebrew word *hesed* is better understood as “firmness, steadfastness”. He insists that renderings such as “faithfulness, loyalty, loving-kindness etc are often far too weak to convey the strength, the firmness, and the persistence of God’s sure love.”⁵⁶ Norman Snaith prefers the translation “faithfulness” for *hesed* and argues that it is closer to covenant love, although that is not the same as election love.⁵⁷

Nelson Glueck also posits that among human relationships, *hesed* is received or shown only by those among whom a definite relationship exists.⁵⁸ That is to say, *hesed* operates under mutuality and obligation. Some relations where *hesed* is expected to exist include:

- Relatives by blood or marriage, related claims, and related tribes
- Host and guest
- Allies and their relatives
- Friends
- Ruler and subject
- Those who have gained merit by rendering aid and the parties thereby put under obligation.⁵⁹

52 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 42.

53 Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action*, 7, 12.

54 Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action*, 162.

55 Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action*, 42.

56 Norman Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 102.

57 Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, 8, 9.

58 Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, trans. Alfred Gottschalk (Portland: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011).

59 Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, 37.

In Glueck's view, it is in the context of "rights and duties" that such obligations are expected. He explains that members enjoy common rights and they have to fulfil mutual obligations because their whole existence is to be governed by reciprocity. One is obligated to the other, and such obligations expect one to act in certain ways and fulfil certain duties for mutual benefit.⁶⁰ It needs to be noted that *hesed* is much more than mutual obligation since it takes its source from the relationship between God and humanity, which is not a mutual relationship.

Gordon R. Clark's analysis, using the lexical field of the word *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible, observes six related Hebrew terms dealing with interpersonal relations, usually indicating attitudes or actions towards one another. He says *hesed* is "a deep and enduring commitment ... [and] this commitment is at the core of Yahweh's covenantal relationship with his people". The Hebrew *hesed* is closely related to grace but is much more than grace and mercy. It is close to compassion but more than mere compassion; it includes "faithfulness", "reliability", "confidence", but it is not merely faithfulness, reliability, confidence; it includes "love", but its connotations are much broader than those of love.⁶¹

Baer and Gordon assert that *hesed* is the disposition of one person towards another that surpasses ordinary kindness and friendship; it is the inclination of the heart to express amazing grace the one who is loved.⁶² Francis Anderson also explains *hesed* as the "spontaneous love which expects nothing in return". God's *hesed* is "prompted" by "love" and not out of a sense of "obligation" or covenant.⁶³

In his discussion on Deuteronomy 7:7–13, David Baker shows that:

Yahweh's relationship with Israel commences in his deep, yearning love, a love that longs for a close attachment and expresses itself in a lasting devotion – a love that is anticipated in v. 6 where Israel is Yahweh's precious possession. Such love Yahweh expresses by choosing Israel; and the speaker emphasizes that the choice is not influenced by anything the people themselves contribute; they are not a great or mighty nation, but Yahweh chooses them simply

60 Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, 38–55.

61 Gordon R. Clark, *Hesed in the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 157 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 267, 268.

62 Willem VanGemeren, *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Vol 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 211.

63 Francis I. Anderson, "Yahweh, The Kind and Sensitive God", in *God who is Rich in Mercy*, ed., Peter T. O'Brien and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 2–4.

because he loves them ... The relationship that Yahweh establishes and seeks to maintain with his people is founded securely on his love for them – a committed enduring love.⁶⁴

Baker goes further to establish that God's grace transcends His election of Israel. It also involves the whole area of discipline that follows wrongdoing.⁶⁵

There is an unfortunate impression that has persisted for a long time that God in the Old Testament is a harsh, wicked, dictatorial overlord, while Jesus Christ the Son appears in the New Testament as a gracious, loving, compassionate, forgiving, and kind mediator. Others go further to argue that the Old Testament is not relevant for Christians today. They sometimes dwell on the view that the Old Testament is "Law", which has been done away with by the gospel of the grace of Christ. They use the Pauline concept of Law in Rom 6:15 and Gal 2–3 to buttress their point.

A key contributor to this dilemma is Marcion, whose position was that the Creator God of the Old Testament is Jewish and not the same as the redeeming God of grace in Jesus Christ of the New Testament. Marcion was born in Sinope in AD 85 to a bishop in the northern province of Pontus (in what is now Turkey) on the coast of the Black Sea. He made his way to Rome sometime between AD 135 and 139 and was accepted as a Christian into the church there. He rejected the Old Testament and invented a new canon made up of a truncated version of Luke's Gospel and selectively edited versions of Paul's epistles. For him, Jesus Christ was not the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament; He was a totally new and unforeseen manifestation of the good God. Marcion was formally excommunicated in AD 144. Hence, this problem is not just recent, of course, since Tertullian gave a strong response, saying that Marcion's

whole aim ... centers in this, that he may establish a diversity between the Old and New Testaments, so that his own Christ may be separate from the Creator, as belonging to this rival god, and as alien from the law and the prophets ... Marcion has laid down the position that Christ ... is a different being from Him who was ordained by God the Creator for the restoration of the Jewish state, and who is yet to come. Between these he interposes the separation of a great and absolute difference – as great as lies between what is just and what is

64 David Baker "Aspect of Grace in the Pentateuch", *Ashland Theological Journal* 29 (1997), 8–9.

65 Baker, "Aspects of Grace in the Pentateuch", 12.

good; as great as lies between the law and the gospel, as great (in short) as is the difference between Judaism and Christianity.⁶⁶

Marcion's heretical position has been promoted by, for instance, some dispensationalists. The dispensationalists believe that God deals with people differently throughout history and that these different "administrations" or "dispensations" are identifiable as eras of biblical history. Hence, the dispensation of the Old Testament is not the same as that of the New; they are both qualitatively different as the old gives way to the new. That is to say, the God of the Old Testament is different from the God of the New Testament. The dispensational movement was founded by J. N. Darby (1800–1882). The Scofield Reference Bible, released in 1909 by Cyrus Scofield, promotes this kind of argument. Later on, the writings of Hal Lindsey⁶⁷ and Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins⁶⁸ have popularized that theology. Dispensationalism, a subset of premillennialism, has appeared in various shapes with different ideas. For instance, the classical dispensationalists posit a future time when a regathered nation of Israel will be the recipients of the glories promised. The Scofield Reference Bible, for instance, promotes a strict dichotomy between the Old Testament (Law) and the New Testament (grace). The fact is that, at every point in time, God self-identified as the God of grace.

Grace is the nature of God. When Moses asks God to explain who He is, God reveals His nature of goodness, mercy, and compassion to Moses (Exod 33:19) and His nature as gracious and compassionate (Exod 34:6–7). God's grace is shown in His *hesed* (Ps 86:15; Lam 3:22; Joel 2:13. *See also* Exod 33:19; Deut 13:17–18; Mal 3:17). Grace is evident in God's creative acts. After God creates the heavens and the earth, He "saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). The word "*good*" from the Hebrew, *tôb*, connotes other meanings like "gracious, mercy, pleasant, pleasure, prosperity, wealth, well-favoured". God's grace is shown in His abundant provisions (Lev 26:9; Jer 32:40–41; Num 10:29; Ps 30:4–5; Isa 49:8; Jer 9:23–24).

God's relationship and covenant with Israel are born out of *hesed*, a love that longs for a close attachment and expresses itself in a lasting devotion (Deut 7:7–13; 2 Kgs 13:22–23). It takes such love for God to choose Israel. Hence, what God expected from Israel is founded securely on reciprocal

66 Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, Bk IV, Chap VI.

67 Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

68 Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *The Left Behind* series, 1–16 (New York: Tyndale, 1995–2007).

love – a committed enduring love. God’s grace is shown in His readiness to forgive (Isa 55:7; Jer 33:6–9; Mic 7:18–20). All Christian virtues are graces God gives to humanity; gifts from God to live godly lives.

Paul gives examples of Christian living that should flow out of a loving relationship with Christ. He mentions that the Christian should be clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience (Col 3:12). He preaches that the grace of God in the Christian’s life should not make the Christian think more highly of oneself, but share with others as an act of good works (Rom 12:3–8; Eph 2:8–10).

The understanding of grace in the Old Testament clearly supports the New Testament claims. Jesus came to show us the love and grace of God. He was full of grace and truth (John 1:1–14). Jesus’ compassion in feeding the 5,000 and others is similar to that we find in God making provision through the prophet to feed the 100 people (2 Kgs 4:42–44). God feeds the Israelites for 40 years in the wilderness during their traveling period.

The prophets speak of God’s grace and human faith in a way completely in line with the New Testament. For instance, Isaiah begins his prophecy by criticizing the nations for their defection from following the Lord and threatening with even worse punishment. Yet he proclaims the survival of a remnant which is a mark of God’s grace (Isa 1:2–9; cf Isa 2–39). In Ezekiel and Hosea, for instance, the Israelites are called in the light of God’s mercy and grace. They portray God as being prepared to love His people unconditionally even though the people, given the debt of guilt, are totally undeserving of His affection (Ezek 16:1–63; Hos 11:8–11, 14:4–8). D. Block, for example, argues that God’s jealousy is an expression of His love, a love that “is fueled not by an exploitative need to dominate but by ardor for the well-being of the object”⁶⁹ To Hosea, the nation deserves punishment, but God wants to forgive and not punish because of His great *hesed*, love, and compassion for them (Hos 11:8–10; cf Isa 2:9). Furthermore, M. Boda points out, “Hope therefore lies not with Israel’s ability to repent but rather with Yahweh’s grace in spite of Israel’s apostasy.”⁷⁰ Jeremiah’s lamentation also portrays a central poem that accentuates Yahweh’s grace and justice (Lam 3:1–40).⁷¹ In the book of Jonah, one finds an inclusive theology where

69 Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 13.

70 Mark J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 302.

71 Katharine M. O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 13.

God in His grace extends mercy to a Gentile nation, even to its animals (Jon 4:11). Such an extent of God's favour and mercy makes Jonah so angry at Nineveh, thinking they do not deserve God's *hesed* and grace. Again, as an example of *hesed* and grace, God promises to pour out His spirit of grace on the people (Joel 2:28–32; Zech 12:10).

God the Father is always characterized by loving grace. Throughout history, grace becomes a sufficient means for a sustained relationship with God. According to Duguid:

The parallel between God's electing grace shown to Jacob as an individual and his electing grace shown to the nation is the foundational demonstration of God's love for his people (Mal 1:2–7). It is this grace that preserved them through judgment that distinguishes them from their closest neighbor state, Esau/Edom, and all other nations.⁷²

It takes the gracious nature of God to form the basis of the covenant in the Bible. That is to say, all the covenant relationships that God initiated are by the grace and kindness of God (see Deut 4:37, 7:6–8, 9:4–6, 10:15; Isa 43:4; Jer 31:3). It is on the basis of this covenant that people are “known” by God as “my people” (for example, Isa 19:18–25; Hos 1:9–11). And it is by grace that God's people are established and given “a glorious name”.

Kindness indicates faithfulness to a relationship. To show kindness is to act in a loyal, loving way to a person. Throughout the Bible, God shows His kindness to humanity in faithful relationships. God's kindness denotes persistent and unconditional tenderness, kindness, and mercy. It is everlasting (Isa 54:8). Kindness is closely tied to God's covenant with His chosen people; in fact, the covenant may be thought of as the relationship from which the kindness flows. In a sense, kindness refers to mutual and reciprocal rights and obligations between the parties of a relationship. However, kindness is not only a matter of obligation or generosity; it is not only a matter of loyalty, but also of mercy. God's kindness is not determined by whether human beings are faithful or unfaithful to the covenant. God's “mercies”, “kindness”, or “faithfulness” are His specific, concrete acts of redemption in fulfilment of His promise (Isa 55:3; Matt 6:31–34).

72 I. M. Duguid, “Israel”, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, ed., Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), 393.

Kindness is very much a virtue expected from human beings to one another. For example, David shows kindness to Mephibosheth, the surviving son of Jonathan, his friend who had always shown him kindness (2 Sam 9:1-13, cf 1 Sam 18:1-4). We find in the book of Ruth that Naomi blesses Orpah and Ruth by exhorting, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me" (Ruth 1:8). Naomi sees the sacrifices of her daughters-in-law after the death of their husbands as an act of kindness to her. Ruth also exemplifies kindness when she decides to leave her country and family in order to go to Bethlehem to care for her mother-in-law (Ruth 2:11, 18, 23).

Moreover, in the book of Ruth, one finds the relationship between Boaz and Ruth as an example of kindness. Ruth finds it necessary to support Naomi. Boaz goes a long way to provide security for Ruth when she is gleaning. He opens his arms to feed her out of kindness when the workers are on break, and gives her access to drink the water meant for his workers. When Ruth goes back home after gleaning from his fields, Naomi says, "May he be blessed by the Lord whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead" (Ruth 2:20).

Boaz goes beyond the legal requirements to show his generosity to Ruth (Ruth 2:8-9, 14-16) and Naomi's blessing anticipates the kindness to be shown by Boaz by giving more grain. Naomi reciprocates kindness by directing Ruth to visit Boaz at night. When they meet at the threshing floor, Boaz declares that Ruth's kindness is greater than the first since she does not go after young men, whether rich or poor (3:10). Ruth thus demonstrates kindness to Naomi and Boaz, and Naomi and Boaz return kindness to Ruth.

Ruth's determination to stay with Naomi, turning her back on Moab to travel with Naomi and take care of her; Boaz's special provisions for Ruth; and Naomi's plan to ensure Ruth's future are all within the concept of kindness.⁷³ Sakenfeld also notes that "concern for others⁷³ is expressed by many characters, not just by Ruth, not just by women. Naomi and the women of Bethlehem, as well as Boaz and the men of Bethlehem, join Ruth in expressions of concern."⁷⁴ So even the add-on or minor characters of the book exhibit some altruistic care and love.

73 Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 40.

74 Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 43.

Campbell argues that for Ruth and Orpah to continue to stay with Naomi after the deaths of their husbands amounts to some kind of kindness in the life of the mother-in-law. To buttress this point, he sees the praises of Boaz to Ruth in Ruth 3:10 as confirming the kindness these women gave to their mother-in-law.⁷⁵ Perhaps, the young women benefited from their relationship with the sons of Naomi and felt it was their responsibility to extend favour back to Naomi.

When Ruth secretly goes to lie in the tent of Boaz and uncovers his feet, Boaz understands that the actions of Ruth are that of kindness. She has not gone after young men whether rich or poor (Ruth 3:10). He interprets Ruth's action as making "this last kindness [*hesed*] greater than the first". In sum, what Ruth has done for him cannot be compared to what Boaz did for her.

Campbell unfolds the interplay between the prayers found in the book of Ruth and the actions that followed:

Hesed in the human scene is evidence of God's *hesed*, his faithful magnanimity. The correspondence is a particular characteristic of the story-teller's theology, one we have noted before and will encounter again. Boaz invokes God's blessing upon Ruth only to become himself the agency for the fulfillment of that blessing; the God he invokes is the one under whose wings she has come to seek refuge, but it will be the "wing" of Boaz, in 3:9, which brings her due recompense. Naomi praises the God who still acts with *hesed* because Boaz has so acted, and it will be the *hesed* of both Boaz and Ruth which will bring Naomi fulfillment. We can say that persons act as God to one another in our story.⁷⁶

The Akan maxim that *se obi ye wo papa a, nna sahaw wo* (lit. if someone does good to you, the person has caused a problem for you) means one good turn deserves another. A moral responsibility falls on the recipient of the favour to reciprocate. No wonder Naomi feels the need to help Ruth by giving her a plan.

75 Campbell, *Ruth*, 30.

76 Campbell, *Ruth*, 113.

PART TWO

4

Theme: The Visitation of God

READING: RUTH 1:1–10

ANCHOR TEXT: “God has visited His people and given them food.” (Ruth 1:6)

Introduction

There is a Ghanaian highlife song with a storyline about a man named Atia, a northerner who migrated to the southern part of Ghana. Initially, things go well for him but he starts having problems. He is advised to go to his hometown but refuses. He starts to abuse a locally brewed alcoholic drink called Akpeteshie instead of addressing the problem. He is always drunk, until he dies from the effects of the drink. The refrain of the song goes *Edeen na w’akum Atia?* (what killed Atia?), and the reply goes *Akpeteshie na w’akum Atia* (Akpeteshie has killed Atia). The moral of the story is when people encounter problems, the decisions they take can end their life.

Many things motivate people to leave home to settle in another place and decide not to return. Usually, the conditions at home, especially in Africa, are not the best. Hence, people want to seek greener pastures elsewhere. Least do they know that when we leave, God will visit the people back at home. This sermon focuses on the visitation of God to His people at home and what we can encounter beyond the visitation of God, as well as the lessons we can learn from it.

Exposition

The story of Naomi and Ruth takes place during the time of famine. We can learn a lot about Israelite geography and culture from the settings in the story. The story centres around one cultural group in Israel: Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and his two sons are called “Ephrathites” of Bethlehem, Judah (Ruth 1:2). We learn that the Benjamites depend on agriculture for their sustenance (Ruth 1:22, 2:8–9, 18, 3:1–15). The need for food drives the characters in the story. It was food that makes Elimelech and the family travel to Moab. It was food that makes Ruth take the steps she took while living in Bethlehem. We learn the type of agriculture: barley (Ruth 1:22), corn (Ruth 2:2), and wheat (Ruth 2:14, 23).

The story begins with a typical narrative introductory Hebrew word, *wayhi*, “and it was”/“and it happened” (Ruth 1:1).¹ It is at the time when *šep̄ oṭ haššop̄ etîm*, literally meaning “when the ones judging judged”. The infinitive construct *šep̄ oṭ* is acting as a genitive, thus connoting “the judging of the judges”.² The infinitive construct is used after a word in the construct state.³ A more functional translation would be, “And it happened in the days when the judges ruled.” It is very much like the equivalent to the fairy-tale expression, “Once upon a time”. Furthermore, the phrase “and it was in the days” is used often to indicate a specific time period that is well known to the readers (cf Gen 14:1, 26:1; Judg 15:1; 2 Sam 21:1; 2 Chr 26:5; Esth 1:1; Isa 7:1; Jer 1:3). The time is during the period of the judges. This puts the story of Ruth somewhere in the timeline after the conquest of Canaan and during the period of the judges, that is after the settlement in the promised land, the land of Canaan, and before the monarchy – around 1250–1050 BCE.

The book of Judges recounts a specific historical tradition of the Deuteronomistic History, along with other books before it (Deuteronomy, Joshua) and books after it (1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings as far as the Babylonian Exile). The book of Judges gives a history of both conditional and unconditional relationships between God and His people. The role of the judges is to lead the people to reconquer the land in the name of God. The period is often described as a time when “there was no king in Israel” (Judg 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25). As a result of this lack of legitimate royal leaders – a part of human administration – “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 17:6, 21:25).

Famine sets the stage for difficulties encountered even before the story begins. Famine is sometimes a divine punishment (Deut 11:14, 32:24, cf Lev 26:3–4), and sometimes becomes a driving force for God’s plan as in the case of Joseph (Gen 45:5–8; Ps 105:16–45). The land here refers to “Bethlehem in Judah”. The Hebrew *mibêt leḥem* literally means “from a house of bread”. Elimelech is said to leave the house of bread in Judah to sojourn or “dwell as a new-comer”⁴ in the cultivated fields of Moab. The

1 See also Gen 6:1, 11:1, 22:1, 38:1; Lev 9:1; Num 7:1, 11:1; Josh 1:1; Judg 1:1; 1Sam 1:1; and 2 Sam 1:1, for some obvious examples.

2 W. Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, ed., and enlarged by E. Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Crowley (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2006), 347. BDB 1996, 224, says the phrase can also be translated “it came to pass”.

3 RJ Williams, *Williams’ Hebrew Syntax*, 3rd edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 82.

4 BDB, 157.

story recounts an ironic unexpected reversal of fortunes: a shortage of bread in the “house of bread”. Bethlehem was in the region of Ephrathah in Judah, which later became the city of David (cf 1 Sam 17:12). Elimelech actually leaves “the house of bread” or “the house of praise” (Judah) and dwells in the fields of Moab, a place of no praise. He and his family move to “sojourn in the fields of Moab” (Ruth 1:1). The word “fields” (*bišāday*) primarily refers to a “cultivated field” which is “yielding food”.⁵ The infinitive construct *lāgūr* “to sojourn” alludes to such a notion.⁶

The reference to Ephrathah helps to distinguish the Bethlehem of Judah in Ephrathah (cf Gen 35:16, 19, 48:7; 1 Chr 2:18–24, 42–50; Mic 5:2) from the Bethlehem in Zebulun (cf Josh 19:15). The ancestor Ephrath was the wife of Caleb (1 Chr 2:19, 50, 4:4). An Ephrathite was therefore a descendant of Ephrath and Caleb (1 Sam 1:1, 17:12; 1 Kgs 11:26). Thus, the Ephrathites were a Judahite clan that settled in the region surrounding Bethlehem, with its borders reaching the north to Kiriath-jearim (Ps 132:6) and south to Tekoa. Since Bethlehem became a prominent town in the region of Ephrath, the prophetic and poetic passages of the Old Testament associate these two names with one location within Israel: “And Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem” (Gen 35:19); “and I buried her there in the way of Ephrath; the same is Bethlehem” (Gen 48:7). The wise men who knew the signs of the times tell Herod that Jesus, whom the Magi were looking for, was born in Bethlehem, in Ephrath, by quoting Micah 5:2 (see Matt 2:5–6).

Moab is portrayed in this story in a more positive way – a direct contradiction to Deuteronomy 23:4 where they had a problem with Israel: Moses bans the king and the Moabites are not to be allowed to worship in the tabernacle because they refused Israel passage through their land during the exodus. Yet in Deuteronomy 2:9, we read that the Lord does forbid the children of Israel to consider the Moabites as enemies or wage war against them. And, there are times in the history of Israel when Moab became of great help: According to Deuteronomy 2:27–29, the Moabites are quite willing to sell water and food to the Israelites. Or when David flees from King Saul, he requests help from the king of Moab to provide shelter to his parents, until the danger passes away (1 Sam 22:1–5).

5 BDB, 961.

6 Williams, *Williams' Hebrew syntax*, 83; Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew grammar*, 348.

There was an earlier incident concerning Moab – the story about Balak, king of Moab, who hires Balaam to curse Israel (Num 22–24). This story is indeed one of the reasons given by Deuteronomy as to why Moabites should be excluded from the community of the Lord. This episode precedes Numbers 25:1, where the Moabite women are seen to be those who lead the Israelite men into apostasy (compare the many wars against the Moabites attested in Judges 3:12–30, 1 Sam 14:47, 2 Sam 8:2, 2 Kgs 3 and 13:20).⁷ It should be remembered that Moses dies on Mount Nebo in Moab, just before the children of Israel entered the land (Deut 34:1).

Elimelech and his family go to Moab and “remained there” (Ruth 1:3). In contemporary language, Elimelech and his family are to be seen as immigrants and/or refugees in a land that is not their own. They do not intend to go there for a brief period. “Remaining there” means they plan to stay there forever. Before long, perhaps unexpectedly, Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi and her two sons to make it on their own. Eventually, Mahlon and Kilion marry local women, Orpah, and Ruth. Later, the two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, die and are buried in Moab. Hence, Elimelech and his sons “remained there” because they were buried there.

Mahlon and Kilion “took (Heb: *šē’û*) Moabite wives” (Ruth 1:4). The Hebrew word translated “took” from the root *nasa* literally meaning “to lift, carry, bear, take” has a connotation of bearing responsibility for something. The word also occurs in Ruth 1:9, 14, 2:18, all denoting “lifting up”. In fact, the word *nasa* occurs about 612 times in the Hebrew Bible. It is used especially for taking wives in Judges 21:23; 2 Chr 13:21, 24:3; Ezra 9:2, 12 and Nehemiah 13:25, and in all these cases there is an element of forceful taking, an implication that the men use force or their strength to take the women. Gafney explains, “The taking of the women in Ruth 1:4 is done with the same verb that describes the abduction and rape of the young girls in Shiloh in Judges 21:23.”⁸ Mention is not specifically made here about the actual son of Elimelech who married Orpah or Ruth but it is given in Ruth 4:10, where Ruth is described as the widow of Mahlon.

The marriages of Orpah and Ruth have sometimes been seen as matter of morality or fidelity, wondering why should these two Ephrathites marry

7 For further comment, see Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), xlvii, xlviiii.

8 Wilda C. Gafney, “Ruth”, in *The Peoples’ Bible Companion*, ed., Curtiss Paul DeYoung *et al* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 127.

Moabite women? Does marrying a Moabite constitute a misdemeanour or is it morally wrong? The Moabites are believed to be idol worshippers and as such going for their women can be a dangerous move. However, such a generalizing view of the Moabites will be to read our contemporary moral ethic into that of the Old Testament times.

In Ghana, marriage is between two families and not between two individuals. Hence, there should be the presence of family members, or heads of the families, for the marriage to be valid. These children of Elimelech do not have any of their relatives in Moab, so it is possible they take the women themselves, or that their mother stands in for them as their family member.

The family of Elimelech seems to have adjusted to their “new normal”. Then death sets in – Mahlon and Kilion die. Soon, Naomi becomes lonely. “The woman was left without her sons and her husband” (Ruth 1:5). The losses of Naomi are devastating. Nothing is mentioned about how Orpah or Ruth felt the loss of their husbands, because the emphasis of the narrator is on Naomi. At this point, these young women are insignificant in the plot. Nevertheless, the story focuses on all of the women rather than the men. Phyllis Tribble also makes an interesting observation: “The males die; they are nonpersons; their presence in the story ceases (though their absence continues). The females live; they are persons; their presence in the story continues. Indeed, their life is the life of the story.”⁹ Hence, we are to read the story as a story about women.

Like the story of Atia, if one refuses to go back home, death is imminent. Naomi’s loss makes her change her mind about remaining in Moab: “Then she started to return (Heb: *šûb*) with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab” (Ruth 1:6), meaning Naomi begins the journey back to Bethlehem with the young widows of her children. The word *šûb* (“return”) occurs twelve times in Ruth 1:16–22. The same word is used for “repentance”. Naomi seems to have repented from going to Moab. So, she is returning.

The motivation for Naomi is, “The Lord has considered his people and given them food” (Ruth 1:6). When the Lord considers His people, He visits them. The visitation of the Lord is written poetically with alliteration and assonance in the Hebrew (*lātēt lāhem lāhem*; lit. “given to them bread”). The Lord is true to His covenant, and faithful to His promise, bringing them blessing consistently. There may be times one would feel the absence of

9 Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 168–169.

the visitation of the Lord but it would not remain so forever. The visitation of the Lord brings to mind the prophecy of Zechariah in the New Testament: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a great saviour for us in the house of his servant David” (Luke 1:68–69). The visitation of the Lord is also seen as the Lord looking favourably on his people, and such visitation comes with salvation, a key terminology in Christian theology that is all encompassing.

Salvation in the indigenous African perspective emphasizes enjoyment of abundant life, prosperity, vitality, financial, and material security.¹⁰ Hence it encapsulates peace, health, healing, wellbeing, mediation, and liberation in this world, the unseen world, and the world to come. It is a package that comes with deliverance from evil and all misfortunes, barrenness, sickness, alcoholism, and other negations of life including the evil deeds of witches, leading to a decisive transition and empowerment into new life and a new lifestyle.¹¹

When God visits his people

There are a few observations we can make from the passage – seven lessons that can be seen when God visits His people:

1. God takes the initiative

For God to consider His people and visit them affirms that God is the one who takes the initiative to intervene in the life of His people. In biblical Christianity, the greatest affirmation of God’s visitation is through the incarnation of the Son to dwell with us (Luke 1:68, 78, cf John 1:1–12; Heb 1:1–2). Again, in the New Testament, Zechariah understands that the ultimate visitation of God is a time to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death (Luke 1:78–79).

2. Visitation produces breakthroughs

God’s visitation is a joy-producing truth that explodes onto a hopeless scene. When God visits Sarah, her inability to have children is reversed (Gen 21:1). Israel was in a hopeless situation in Egypt until God visits them (Exod 4:1). Naomi mentions her misfortune that her story changes during the period away from Bethlehem: “I went out full, but the Lord has brought

10 Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo, “Africa’s Poverty and its Neo-Pentecostal ‘Liberators’: An Ecotheological Assessment of Africa’s Prosperity Gospellers”, *Pneuma* 35 (2013), 375.

11 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 49, 176.

me back empty” (Ruth 1:21). She finds herself bereft of all that afforded her “fullness” and hope.¹² In her emptiness, she visits the land God has visited. And eventually, she encounters the favour of God. People of God who even live through emptiness can have a turnaround in life if they attach themselves to the land God has visited.

Naomi feels the need to go back to Bethlehem because the hopeless situation that made them decide to go to Moab has been reversed and now there is bread for her people. The faith of the people of Israel would hold that famine is an act of God. Similarly, a visitation of God broke the long season of famine in Bethlehem, Judah. The Akan says, *se idzi itur n’ekyir a, nka erenwe n’ano nam* (lit: if you consider the damage the gun brings, you would not like to eat of its game) – if you focus on what God does at a point in time, you will never like to follow Him. If you focus only on the bad things that happen in life, you will not enjoy the good things to come in life. If there is an experience in life that makes us think about God’s absence more than any other, it is in our difficult moments. The people of Nain affirm that God has visited his people when Jesus raises the widow’s son from the dead, which turns their weeping and wailing to a loud celebration (Lk 7:11–16). The two disciples who travel on the road to Emmaus hear rumours of Jesus’ resurrection. Instead of being filled with joy from the news, they were confused and soaked with disbelief. It was in the midst of their confusion that Jesus visited them on the way (Lk 24:13).

3. God’s visitation demands a response

When God visits his people, it demands our response. Returning to God is an act of response and also connotes worship (Exod 4:1). Israel realizes that God has not left them alone in their suffering or turned a blind eye to their situation when He tells Moses that He has heard the cry of His people. God has been intimately concerned for them even if they did not know it. God is thinking about them even in their suffering. God’s visitation thus is a way to deliver them out of bondage so that they would worship Him (Exod 3:18). God’s visitation is meant for us to acknowledge Him in all our ways and to worship Him. At a point, Israel sees God’s visitation at the foot of the mountain Sinai as something that prepares them for worship (Exod 19:18–19). God also visits them as a pillar of fire by day and a cloud at night but it did not move them to be in constant worship (Num 10:11–36). They yearn for God to visit them but the sight of the visitation often troubles them.

12 Benjamin Mangrum, “Bringing ‘Fullness’ to Naomi: Centripetal Nationalism in The Book of Ruth”, *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 33 (2011), 68–69.

4. Visitation is a matter of grace

What did Bethlehem do to deserve God's visitation? Can anyone play a role that would make God come to visit? In fact, God's visitation is always a testimony of God's goodness and grace. When God moves on his people's behalf, it is not because they deserve it. Human beings can do nothing to move God to act (cf Isa 64:6-7). We can position ourselves to enter into what God wants to do but the outcome will definitely depend on the sovereignty and grace of God. Out of sheer grace, God plays a key role behind the scenes in the life of the characters of the book of Ruth and in so many ways, perhaps much more than what we experience from God today. We will not see the powerful divine physical presence speaking to the characters as a booming voice from heaven as in the time of the patriarchs or the prophets. We do not see any visible movement of God's presence as in the days of Elijah on the mountain, Solomon in the temple, or Isaiah in the temple. Yet God is the one who comes to the aid of the people of Bethlehem. Our God still visits us in unimaginable ways.

A visitation of God breaks the seventy years of Judah's exile and gives them an opportunity to return to Jerusalem, but not based on what Judah did (Jer 29:10). God visiting his people means restoration of inheritance. I pray you will experience a powerful visitation of God upon your life, your family, work, region, and ministry. May God the Holy Spirit stand behind your heart and knock, ready to visit you (cf Rev 3:20).

5. Visitation gives encouragement

The visitation of God can be a confrontation while other visits may be for encouragement. There are some visitations we can testify about and others that we may not see. Sometimes we become practical deists and wonder, where is our God? We think God is far away and cannot do any miracle in our lives. We do not expect God to show up and visit us and are thus discouraged. Maybe you are thinking that God has forgotten you. You may have moved to a new location and enjoyed "fullness" but here you are confronted with challenges in your new location. And that old location is blooming with heavenly promises – why fault God if you have not heard them? Why turn to blame God when bad things happen? Are you sure that the bad confrontations in your life are no more than hurdles you have to jump in order for the visitation of God to change a chapter in your life? It is God who visits. No one else can bring about that testimony of visitation other than God.

Beyond visitation

God's visitation upon Bethlehem brings food. It changes Naomi and Ruth's story. It gives them that which would sustain them in life. Are you famished, and are you looking for something fresh? There is food in Moab but Naomi prepares herself for the food that had come freshly in Bethlehem. This is your opportunity to go to your Bethlehem.

Naomi did not sit on her oars. She decides to go back and experience the outcome of the visitation of God. She laments, yet she wants to go and enjoy the new favour her people are enjoying. Never sit when there is a visitation. Naomi hears that it is God who had visited her people (Ruth 1:6). For Naomi to decide to go back means she believed what she heard. Sometimes we need to take a step to see if what we are hearing is true. You might not believe it but the truth stands.

God's visitation is a means to an end. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit is a means to an end. Believers who have a relationship with God can always experience the ongoing visitation of God in our lives and move from visitation to habitation. We do not have to be like birds who feel threatened but still will hover and hover when they see food on the ground – they will do all they can to come down and pick food and then fly away. God wants those who are hovering and hovering to come down and stay so that something new can happen in their lives. Your testimony will still be hidden as long as you do not find a means to dwell or stay within the place where there is sure to be a visitation of God.

God's visitation to his people, in our time, is seen in the visitation of the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, when the time was ripe, God visits the disciples who had gathered at the place set for the visitation. The Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples and fills them, making the promises in the past, prophesied over 600 years earlier through Joel, see fulfilment (Acts 2:1–4, cf Joel 2:28–29). The fulfilment of the coming of the Holy Spirit comes with the promise that “anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be save; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, even among the survivors” (Joel 2:32). We need to eagerly wait for the visitation of the Holy Spirit to turn things around in our lives. Such visitation should be seen as a fulfilment of the promise of God. Never dwell on the past story. There will be a time when the appointed time for God will dawn. God intervenes at the right time, that is, the *kairos* moment, in due time, the fixed time, the season, and the opportune time.

After a divine visitation, the work God is doing among His people becomes visible to the world (cf Isa 60:1-2). A divine visitation will cause a chain reaction to take place so that like what happened in the time of Naomi, people who have never heard about God will turn to Him, and generations to come will be impacted by the move of God. The visitation of God to Bethlehem makes Ruth learn about God. We sometimes miss the testimony after the visitation of God when we fail to prepare to move and to search for new possibilities with all of our hearts (Jer 29:13).

The key to enjoying the blessings that come from a divine visitation lies in our relationship with God. One cannot stay in the old place and still think the blessings will flow and cross boundaries to where one has chosen to stay. It takes an act of obedience, preparation to go back, a move to a new settlement to experience the powerful breakthrough the people see after God's visitation.

The Holy Spirit chooses to make our moments become one of those moments when God shows up for people. God is always present, of course – everywhere. But we may not always see Him. In Bethlehem, however, God allows the people to see Him. Elsewhere, He makes them see His power. He lets them know His love in a direct and powerful way. He becomes for a widow all that she needs, and He demonstrates it by raising her son from the dead and giving her a future again (1 Kgs 17:17-24; Luke 7:11-17).

Like Cleopas and his friend, you may be confused and moving away from Jerusalem on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32). Expect God's visitation to clear your mind of all doubts and fear so that your eyes can be open to the wonderful nature of God. Even though your eyes are restrained and prevented from recognizing Him, do not be perturbed. He will break bread with you and your eyes will open. It is a mystery that Jesus was hidden in plain sight of the disciples; these two disciples knew him and walked with him for years but could not recognize him. Jesus' visitation to Cleopas and the friend had a purpose. So is the Holy Spirit in our midst. Some are spiritually blind that they cannot see. Even when they hear testimonies of what the Holy Spirit is doing, they sit back. Take heart, God is present in your mystery.

The word in our lives

God's mission in our world should be understood as divine visitation. Like Naomi, let us not remain where we are after hearing about the visitation of God. Let us decide to go to the place where we can experience the visitation of God and the blessings of the visitation. God chooses places where His name remains, that is the house of God, and you can find divine visitation when you go there (cf Deut 26:2). Never be deceived that if you continue to rest in your home and pray or meditate, the visitations you may have can be compared to that which God causes to happen in his sanctuary. Make up your mind to go to the house of the Lord to encounter His visitation. Do not stay at home. Take a step into the presence of God and see if what is being said about His visitation is true.

Have you taken any step, or been at a place where you thought you could enjoy yourself there but the enjoyment has been short-lived? Repent. Change your mind. Return to God. Repentance is a sure way to prepare the heart to encounter God.

Naomi makes up her mind to go alone to the place where God has visited. In Ruth 1:7-18, she decides to allow the daughters-in-law to go back to Moab while she continues the journey to Bethlehem. Do not go alone when you hear about the visitation of God. Go with your family, your wife, husband, children, and in-laws if they are available. Go with your friends. Invite them to come and taste the goodness of God. Do not go and enjoy the visitation of God alone. Such is the good work God requires of us. When the woman at the well encounters Jesus Christ and hears that life-changing testimony, she runs back to the town and to the people she was hiding from and tells them to come, tells them what she had heard from the Messiah (John 4:1-42).

God's visitation is about signs and wonders. A divine visitation will bring salvation to our land. Many of us are like the royal official at Cana who comes to Jesus only to seek healing for his son, and Jesus tells him, "unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe" (John 4:43-48). In John 6, the bread Jesus uses to feed the five thousand is a sign to them (John 6:26). Be prepared to encounter them and experience the signs and wonders of God. You may have heard about it happening near you. Just walk to the place and experience it. To experience the sign and wonder will first call for having faith in Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

God's visitation is meant for us to acknowledge Him in all our ways. To acknowledge God means accepting that Jesus Christ is Lord (John 17:3). Acknowledging God is accepting the coming of the Holy Spirit upon your life.

We need to eagerly anticipate the visitation of the Holy Spirit to turn things around in our lives.

Conclusion

Are you part of God's mission and is your desire to see the visitation of God on His people?

God wants to reveal more of Himself to you so that you will see His glory. Life may be constraining or compelling you to move out of your land. Even if you have moved out, God wants you back. It has been explained that when God visits us, it is God's own initiative that brings breakthrough and as such demands a response from us. Divine visitation is an experience of grace and serves to bring us encouragement.

You may be in a difficult time of transition in your life. You may be experiencing famine which has caused you to move out of the place God wants you to stay. All is not lost. You are about to hear of God's visitation. When you hear that God has visited your people, never sit aloof and cry over your emptiness. Rise up, move, and make a new settlement within the space of the visitation. You have been lamenting. It is time to sing the song of testimony. You need to be ready to tap the blessing out of visitation. You will soon hear a knock at your door. Just be ready to open it.

Remember, no condition is perfect. The once deplorable condition you experienced in your past is about to change because God is doing a new thing. There shall be a heavenly visitation that will change the story of your past. God is going to visit your home, your people, your country that was formerly in famine, disgrace, and trouble. There shall be food for you. Things are about to change. Are you ready for it?

5

Theme: Keeping the Family Ties alive

READING: RUTH 1:11–19

ANCHOR TEXT: “Turn back my daughters, why will you go with me?” (Ruth 1:11)

Introduction

God created us to be in families. The family is the site for God’s blessings. God told Abram: “through you all families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:2). The family institution, from an African perspective, is the foundation of society and goes beyond blood ties or father–mother–children to include extended relations, that is persons of blood relations such as aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, and other relatives, those in sexual unions or marriage bonds, adopted persons, close friends, and those who have joined the ancestors. A family, therefore, is constituted by three ties: biological, sociological, and spiritual. It is the natural unit, foundational basis, and pillar of society. Some friends or colleagues from a workplace can live together as a family.

As the foundation of society, anything that comes in to break the familial relationship is unacceptable. Obligations for family members include sharing joys and sorrows together. This sermon draws on how Naomi sought to break the family ties between her and her daughters-in-law, and it uses this to propose lessons and implications for African Christians. It aims at looking for ways to cement family ties so each one would acknowledge the usefulness of the other. It touches on why some consider other family members to be useful for a time and ignore them at other times, and on how family members can also depict their faith in relationships.

Exposition

The book of Ruth begins with a family made up of the father, mother, and children. After some time, Elimelech the father and, later, the children, Mahlon and Kilion, die. Only Naomi, the mother lives on. However, the children had married so they had started their own families. When the sons of Naomi die, she is left with their wives, Orpah and Ruth. The setting within which the family dynamics operates is food. There is no food in the land of

Bethlehem, the house of bread/food, and that affects the family of Elimelech. They travel to Moab because of food and the children built their families there.

The language and cadence of the famine causes the relocation of a family to a foreign land (Ruth 1:1–2). After sojourning in Moab for some time, their story changes. Death separates the family; a fact of life that cannot be overturned (Eccl 3:20, 5:15, 6:12). Quickly the focus shifts to Naomi who is left. Things become unfamiliar and disoriented for her. First Elimelech dies, leaving the sons under Naomi's care. The two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, after taking Moabite wives, also pass on to glory without having children. These details are reported with reference to Naomi. It is Naomi's husband who die, and Naomi's children who die. Interestingly, Elimelech is described as Naomi's husband, and not Naomi as Elimelech's wife (Ruth 1:3, 5b).

The household that once consisted of three married women and three men has now become three childless widows, none of them blood relatives: Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth. In a society in which fathers, husbands, and sons provide family security, this household's prospects look bleak. Women without children become the focus of the whole story. Besides, Naomi comes from a land that has lost its glory. As for Orpah and Ruth, they are in their own land with plenty of food yet the story suggests they are not able build their families in marriage. Gafney explains that in Ruth 1:4 the men took the women which connotes abduction and rape of the young girls, similar to that in Judg 21:23 where the Benjamites took the virgins from Shiloh as wives.¹ Such sexual and domestic violence shows how the men saw the women.² Despite these circumstances, these two women find enough healing to forge a genuine friendship, even after the loss of their husbands.

Naomi hears that the Lord has visited Bethlehem and as such, there is food in that land (Ruth 1:6). She faces a difficult choice. Should she continue living as a refugee in a foreign land of Moab, or must she return to her hometown? If she decides to stay, how will her future be? If she decides to go, what will be her future in Bethlehem without a man? How will she go if she decides to go with nothing? And what about the daughters-in-law? These questions might have worried Naomi for a while.

1 Wilda C. Gafney, "Ruth", in *The Peoples' Bible Companion*, ed. Curtiss Paul DeYoung et al (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 127.

2 Wilda C. Gafney, "Ruth", in *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora*, edited by Randall C. Bailey et al (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 250.

There is food back in Israel and there is food in Moab. So at least food is not the issue any more. Naomi can return to familiar surroundings. But what is the motivation to travel to Bethlehem without these two daughters-in-law who had been by her side and maintained familial bonds?

We do not know much about these characters, their past life, and their spirituality. All we can learn from them is their stay together. Perhaps motivated by the father, Elimelech, we can say they like food more than anything else. They would take actions that would get them food, no matter what, and not focus on their spiritual life. These people set the scene for the beginning of the story. As Tod Linafelt explains,

Characterization in biblical narrative, in other words, is rarely explicit, but rather must be teased out of the narrative based on what characters do and what they say ... As a rule, it is the actions and the dialogue of the characters that leads to the readers' judgments about them, rather than explicit commentary or moral evaluation on the part of the narrator.³

Hence, we can conjecture that there was no spiritual bond between Naomi and the daughters-in-law.

The name, Elimelech (*elîmelek*), literally means “my God is king”. Considering the period in which this story occurs, the name bears great significance. If God is his king, why would Elimelech take things into his own hands? The name Naomi (Heb: *Nā^{omi}*), means “my delight”. Naomi can also mean “my joy”. Likely, she is a delight to her husband, Elimelech, and she is introduced as “his wife”. Marrying someone who is your delight makes marriage wonderful. Falling into the hands of a woman who is a snare, and whose heart is like a trap ready to entangle, can be hell in marital life (cf Eccl 7:26). For a woman like Naomi to follow her husband, leave her family and home, and sojourn in the fields of Moab would definitely imply that she is in harmony in thought with Elimelech her husband.

Mahlon means “sickness”, “sick”, or “mild, sickly”, and Kilion means “spent”, “destruction”, “wasting away”, or “pining”. The two sons are said to be Ephrathites, a tribe that echoes the ancestry of great Messianic significance (cf Mic 5:2). Again, the name Ephrath plays on the tension between the tribes of Judah versus Benjamin, and David versus Saul (cf Gen 35:19).

3 Tod Linafelt, “Narrative and Poetic Art in the book of Ruth”, *Int* (April 2010), 118.

Without her family, Naomi is alone in a foreign land. When Naomi hears that God has visited Bethlehem and given them food, she decides to go back home (Ruth 1:6). At that time, she is living with Ruth and Orpah. Initially, she sets out on the journey with her daughters-in-law but along the way she requests that they return home to Moab. She says, “Go back, each of you (Heb: *lĕknaḥ šobnaḥ*) to your mother’s house” (Ruth 1:8). Naomi poetically uses two reversing imperatives – *lĕknaḥ šobnaḥ* literally means “walk, return”. These two words also occur in Exodus 4:19, 1 Kings 19:15, 20, and 2 Kings 1:6.

The reference to the mother’s house (Heb: *bēt ‘ēm*) may sound strange in Israel’s patriarchal system. Widows or divorcees normally return to their father’s house (for example, Gen 38:11; Lev 22:13, cf Num 30:16; Deut 22:21; Judg 19:2–3). In Genesis 24:28–53, Rebekah runs to her mother’s house to tell her about the proposal for her hand in marriage she had received. The dowry was paid to the mother, perhaps the father was dead. The reference to the mother’s house by Naomi may also connote their fathers were dead.

Carol Meyers makes a profound observation. If *bēt āb* (father’s house) points to a family household, incorporating the basic kinship orientation of a multigenerational family and includes functions like residency, economic production, social activity, cultic practices, and properties and animals, then the reference to *bēt ‘ēm* (mother’s house) should be seen in a similar light no matter how informal the reality is.⁴ She refers to Rebekah’s case, that her portrayal in Genesis 24 overshadows that of Isaac, and that:

Rebekah’s role as mother of nations looms larger than that of her husband as the father of nations. Hence Genesis 24 is a woman’s story in that it showcases the matriarch who dominates the central generation of the ancestry sequence of Genesis; it was Rebekah who supplies the “vitality of the line”.⁵

Similarly, the use of *heder* (mother’s chamber) in Song 3:4 and 8:2 is parallel to the father’s house: “For it is not simply a bedroom, it is the ‘chamber of her that conceived me’, an amplification highlighting the mother’s procreative role.”⁶ Chisholm also observes that:

4 Carol Meyers, “Returning Home: Ruth 1:8 and the Gendering of the Book of Ruth”, in *A Feminist Companion to the Book of Ruth*, ed., Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Pres, 1993), 102.

5 Meyers, “Returning Home”, 102.

6 Meyers, “Returning Home”, 104.

Commentators puzzle over Naomi's exhortation: "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home" (v. 8 literally, "Go back each to her mother's house"), pointing out that a widow usually returns to her father's house (cf Gen 38:11; Lev 22:13). Various explanations, some of which are overly complex, have been offered. It appears that Naomi was not speaking in technical, legal terms. Rather, she was suggesting the girls' first responsibility was to their own mothers, not their mother-in-law.⁷

In the Ghanaian patriarchal society, both the father's house and the mother's house have significant values in the life of a person. Some Akan belong to the matrilineal system of inheritance, and thus they trace their descendants through the mother's house. It is in the mother's house or family where one's identity and home are located. The Akan of Ghana will see a deeper meaning that makes a lot of sense to that particular cultural context. With that system, a married woman still belongs to her mother's house. That is where she holds her identity. Such a person is seen as a visitor when the father's family meets. The matrilineal system of inheritance stipulates that, children from such a marriage union belong to the mother's house. As such, it stands to reason that the widow will not have a place in the husband's house or clan because she still holds allegiance to her own clan.

Naomi had lived in the land of Moab for some time but shows she does not depend on the gods of Moab. The chief god of the Moabites was Chemosh and its wife Ashtar (cf Num 21:29; 2 Kgs 3:26-27).⁸ Naomi rather blesses the daughters-in-law in the name of the Lord: "May the Lord deal kindly with you" (Ruth 1:8). Naomi prays that the Lord shows *hesed* ("loyalty, kindness, faithfulness")⁹ in reciprocity to the love these young widows had shown to Naomi. Naomi feels the kindness of the Lord was enough for them; she has no hope of showing them kindness. In the words of Sakenfeld,

The words she uses may reflect not just a general wish, but a formulaic expression by which to bring a relationship to an end without recrimination or a sense of disloyalty on either side. By invoking divine *hesed* on behalf of Ruth and Orpah, Naomi signals to them that they are free of any continuing commitment to her.¹⁰

7 Robert B. Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 600.

8 Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Judges and Ruth*, ABCS (Texas: Ariel Ministries, 2007), 274-75.

9 Sometimes spelled *hesed*.

10 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, Int (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 64.

Orpah and Ruth reply to Naomi, “No, we will return with you to your people” (Ruth 1:10). The response from Orpah and Ruth gives the idea that they wanted to show concern and kindness. They do not want to break the family ties they used to have because of their marriage with Naomi’s sons. They are given an opportunity to go back and marry yet they refuse. They want to stay with their mother-in-law.

In our contemporary world, many couples do not want to have a close relationship with their mothers-in-law. They see them as a nuisance to the marriage relationship, an attitude that disintegrates families. Isabel Phiri observes that “in Africa the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is generally sour, especially in patrilineal societies. The young woman is overworked and treated like an outsider.”¹¹ The maltreatment of women who have come to marry the sons in a family sometimes influences the women to have nothing to do with in-laws. The example from Naomi and the two young widows indicates that some mothers-in-law can be nice to daughters-in-law.

Naomi explains to the women that she is too old to have another husband and give birth to male children, for them to grow and take the women as wives (Ruth 1:11–13). Naomi seems to be talking about levirate marriage but her view is quite different from what we read in the Torah. She is trying to reshape the law of *yibbum* or “levirate marriage” (from the Latin word *levir*, meaning “husband’s brother”), which stipulates that the deceased husband’s brother, according to Deuteronomy 25:5–10, or even the deceased’s father, according to Genesis 38, should marry the widow.

Naomi creates a situation that gives an idea that levirate marriage cannot be possible. She talks about the impossible situation of finding a new husband and giving birth to sons so that the daughters-in-law can have children through them for their dead husband. Levirate marriage comes with implications. The widow may continue to enjoy some of the privileges of the dead husband since it is not her right to take over the property. All the children to be born would be for the dead husband. According to Weisberg, the widows in the story are portrayed as eagerly pursuing levirate marriage while the men are hesitant or see only the harm it will do to their estates.¹²

11 Isabel A. Phiri, “Ruth”, in *Africa Bible Commentary* ed., Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 320.

12 Dvora E. Weisberg, “The Widow of Our Discontent: Levirate in the Bible and Ancient Israel”, *JSTOT* 28 (2004), 405.

To Naomi, her loss is more than the loss of the young women, Ruth and Orpah: “It has been far more bitter for me than for you” (Ruth 1:13). She has lost both her husband and children. The young women have lost only their husbands. Naomi’s self-centredness shows through comparing herself to the young women. She lost her husband at an old age after having children but Orpah and Ruth lost theirs while young and without children, which seems more painful. Naomi adds that “the hand of the Lord has turned against me” (Ruth 1:13). To the Israelites, good and evil come from the Lord. Naomi’s words do not mean she is simply blaming God; she is expressing her belief in the way things happen. Whereas Naomi sees her loss of her husband and children as a grievous trial and chastisement from God, Ruth and Orpah never feel that way.

Initially, the daughters-in-law do not want to go back to their individual mother’s homes. They still wanted to go with Naomi to where she wanted to go. Wilda Gafney suggests that “since the younger women are clearly not pregnant, they are of no use to Naomi, who tries to get rid of them.”¹³ So Naomi says: “turn back my daughters, why will you go with me?” (Ruth 1:11).

Naomi believes the young widows will fare better by departing and starting all over again.

Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the Lord show you kindness as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” (Ruth 1:8–9a; NIV)

Naomi sounds convincing in the ears of Orpah but not Ruth. Could it be that it is not in Orpah’s heart to go to Bethlehem? We are told, “Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law” (Ruth 1:14), and goes back to Moab. The choice Orpah makes to go back to her own people does not make her a bad woman. She uses a kiss to indicate her acceptance of going back to her people. The NIV inserts “goodbye” as an interpretive element to the kiss. In Ghana, kisses are generally not a key part in most cultures. A handshake is a cultural norm to express appreciation and to bid goodbye, except during a funeral celebration. Naomi kisses the two daughters-in-law as they all weep, showing signs of appreciation (Ruth 1:9). Orpah is not obligated

13 Wilda C. Gafney, “Ruth”, in *The Peoples’ Bible Companion*, ed., Curtiss Paul DeYoung et al (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 127.

to stay with Naomi forever; she does not abandon Naomi. She is free to go back to her people with the permission of Naomi and she makes the right decision. As long as Orpah is still with Naomi, she has to take Naomi as her mother-in-law, which may lessen her chances of getting married again.

The name “Ruth” may be a contraction of two words which means “appearance, beauty”, or it means, “friend”, or “friendship, companion”. Orpah means “nape of the neck” or “back of the neck”. No wonder, while Ruth focused on maintaining her friendship with Naomi, Orpah became a burden on the neck of Naomi that needed to be taken off.

How soon do we see no need for the people we once wanted by our side or who have sacrificed to be by our side? How soon do we find less need for those who are members of our family? In this sermon, I want draw from the attitude of Naomi to share seven reasons why people may want others out of their lives and how God through miraculous ways gives enough motivation to see the value in accepting others and to maintain family ties.

Why our usefulness is for a while

First, people see the worth of others when they are around them. As long as they are around and can offer some help, bring some fulfilment, they become useful. The moment they cannot fulfil those expectations, they are like filthy rags to be dispensed of. Remember the Akan says, *bedε n'ayeyi nye sumuna do* (lit: the carrier's glory is at the rubbish site). That is to say, when we need a carrier bag to collect or carry something, the bag becomes useless the moment the task is complete, the carrier ends up at the rubbish site. The human being can be compared to a carrier bag whose worth is only for a while. However, that is not how our worth should be seen. The Akan says, *obi nnyim obrempon ahyese* (lit: no one knows the beginning of a great person). That is to say, it is easy to misjudge the humble beginnings of a great person. It may be that Naomi had encouraged her sons to find wives for themselves among the ordinary women of Moab. There were women in Bethlehem, but these young men decided to choose women in Moab. And Naomi accepts these women – Ruth and Orpah.

Obviously, Naomi might have thought that once her sons get married, they will have children and she would be a grandmother. If these women cannot meet that expectation, why keep them? Charles Simeon comments: “I cannot think very highly of Naomi's character when I see the advice which she gave her daughters. She loved them, it is true: but her love was of too carnal

a nature: for she had more respect for their temporal welfare than to the welfare of their souls.”¹⁴ Why should our usefulness be tied only to raising children for the family and not the great variety of support we offer? As John Hayes explains, “the meaning of life was fulfilled in the person’s accomplishments, in his participation in the life of the community, and in his name and memory preserved by offspring.”¹⁵ But should offspring always be the case for deciding who is useful to us?

You may be living with a family who first wanted you. Now you are not useful. They seem to be telling you: “Turn back, why would you stay with us for the rest of the days?” The Akan say: *se ɔdo sa a nna ato adɔpaa* (lit: when love weans, it is left with insults). When people love you, they will bring you to their side. When they hate you, you will be driven away. Very often, un-thought-through and un-prayed about decisions lead to greater problems and difficulties. Naomi does not think through what she was saying. When she sits up and sees the worth of Ruth after settling in the land of Bethlehem, she devises a way to resettle Ruth in Boaz’s arms (Ruth 4). Christians who have the Holy Spirit are expected to pray and know the mind of God before they embark on any decision to get rid of someone who had earlier been useful to them.

Second, Naomi’s insistence that Ruth and Orpah turn back and go to their mother’s home symbolizes how some believers want to take advantage of profitable opportunities but cannot create space for those who contributed to bringing the opportunities to join them. They would do all to leave others in their lives behind. Naomi has heard about the food in Bethlehem. She has smelled something good in Bethlehem. Why should she go with Ruth and Orpah for them to enjoy part of that blessing? When there was food in Moab, she went there and expected others to open their doors for her and her family to enjoy. It is strange that she cannot allow others to join her in Bethlehem to enjoy the food in Bethlehem.

Naomi’s insistence that Ruth and Orpah turn back is a form of selfishness that usually clouds our vision for maintaining relationships, and makes us defend the wrong decisions. It separates us from others who stood by us and do not want to be identified with God’s people. Selfishness promotes isolation.

14 Charles Simeon, *Judges to 2 Kings*, *Horae Homileticae* Vol 3 (London: Samuel Holdsworth, 1836), 92.

15 John Hayes, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 88.

The reality is that some friends can be miserable comforters whose continual presence in our lives can be very challenging (cf Job 16:2). Job's friends come to visit and comfort him but end up blaming him for things they do not know about. Nevertheless, some friends can be very supportive.

One may assume that it was a lack of faith in God in times of difficulty that made Elimelech and Naomi move with their children to Moab. The same lack of faith in God shows clearly in Naomi's statement that God has made her life bitter. Yet there are earlier incidents of sojourning in the life of Abraham and Isaac due to famine, thus exonerating Elimelech and Naomi.¹⁶

Third, Naomi wants to break from her past. The Akan says, *kuntu huan a n'ekyir na kɔ* (lit: when the paddle attached to a canoe drops off, it returns to the shore). It means where one cannot go forward, the only option is to go back to where one started. The Akan also says, *wotena dufokyee so di brofrɛ a wo to fɔ, w'ano nso fɔ*, that is, if you sit on a rotten tree to eat pawpaw, your pants get wet while your mouth gets wet. It means where you stay to perform a duty matters. The rotten wood may be soft or comfortable to sit on, but it usually holds moisture. Sitting on it will make your dress wet. Naomi sat in Moab to eat pawpaw. Eventually, her mouth and dress got soiled. To break from the past, all the people that remind her of her experiences in Moab must be cut off from her life. For Naomi, the presence of Ruth and Orpah reminds her about not only the death of her husband but more importantly the interminable loss of their sons. These young women always bring to mind thoughts about her sons. They are only signposts or adverts that point her to her loss.

No parent expects to bury their children but in God's design adults die or children may die. The Akan says, *ahaban mono te na ahaban dada so te* (lit: a fresh leaf can fall, and old dry leaf can fall). When it happens, they grieve over the loss anytime they hear about them, thinking life is unfair. However, when we cannot move past the stage of grief, we get stuck. The friends and families of our dead son become a problem for us.

Are people cutting you off in their lives? Do they see you as a problem to them, with no future, no hope? As a child of God, do not accept how others see you now. There is a future awaiting you, a great one of course.

16 Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Ruth", in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed., Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 321.

Grief seems to have destroyed the already strong connections between Naomi and Ruth. It is now each person for themselves. The dialogue thus flows along the lines of where they must break up. For Naomi, the two young women need to find a way to meet their personal desires, and going back was Orpah's choice while deciding to stay was Ruth's choice. In fact, Naomi is thinking about herself so much that she cannot think about them, let alone understand Ruth.

The assurance that God is with us is the most precious gift we have in suffering (Ps 23:4; Isa 45:3). Of course, as Christians, we know that God is always with us, even in exile. God is with us when we sojourn in another country. There is nowhere we can flee from God's presence (Ps 139:7-8). Knowing that God is with you will give you a sense of comfort. The incomparable presence of God in times when we experience pain is enough to urge us on to trust in Him. Job says: "though He slays me yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15).

Eugene Roop is right in saying that though Naomi addressed the two daughters-in-law as "my daughter", echoing closeness and intimacy, "the tone of Naomi's speech betrays impatience, if not anger".¹⁷

Fourth, Naomi went back to Bethlehem not to mourn her dead husband and children but because of food. Hence no need of her daughters-in-law. She is going back to think of herself, motivated because the Lord had visited Bethlehem and given them food (Ruth 1:6). In Ghana, funerals and remembrance ceremonies bring most family members together including the dead's girlfriends, divorced spouses, and widows. For Naomi, all these people are not needed in Bethlehem. She is going there for the food.

It could also be that Naomi is not going back because of how the Lord has blessed her people but because she wants to be alone in her misery. Being alone and without food is worse. She would prefer both misery and the situation where she would have to live in Bethlehem begging for food because there is no man to care for her. That is why she stayed on till she heard that the Lord had visited Bethlehem with food. The Akan says, *wusiw nnyi ahocɔzen wɔ mframa kurow mu* (lit: the smoke has no power in the presence of the wind). It means some people are vulnerable when they meet others. So at least there is food in Bethlehem and being alone will give her some respite.

17 Eugene F. Roop, *Ruth, Jonah, Esther* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2002), 37.

Fifth, Naomi thinks the Lord has been so cruel to her and made her useless. The Akan say, *ɔkɔto rowea, ne ba so rowea; woana begye ne nyenko taataa* (lit: the crab is crawling and its child is crawling; who will help the other). If Naomi is a widow and sees life as empty, how can she help Ruth and Orpah who are also widows? The Lord has taken away her husband and children. Maybe she is afraid that the Lord will take these young women away from her and she cannot question God. Before the Lord does that, she would part ways with them. Masenya explains that within the African context, “one of the main challenges of attributing all evil to God / the ancestors / the devil is the possibility of leaving all sorts of injustices untouched. Evil structures and people may continue to flourish with ease in such circumstances.”¹⁸ That is to say, if all attention goes to the spiritual world when evil strikes, then evil people in the world will have a field day. They will continue to do evil knowing that the divinities will be blamed. Africans need to question wrongdoers and bad systems that continue to plague the continent.

Christians believe that God has a good purpose for our experiences of suffering. Naomi does not see her loss as a plan of God for a better future. In the economy of God, suffering is never meaningless. Many feel like fighting it when suffering is about to set in. They pray to crush it, break and bind it, destroy it, and wish it passes over them. Thankfully, God has a way of showing His glory through human suffering. The Akan says, *biribi annsee a, biribi rennye yie* (lit: if something does not go bad, something will not go well). Sometimes, suffering can be full of meaning and will not go bad at all if God has a plan for it. To the prophet Isaiah, suffering has a purpose. Isaiah says about the suffering servant:

Surely, he took our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed ... Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand (Isa 53:4–5, 10; NIV)

By faith, we can arrive at the conclusion that God has a reason and purpose for our pain – perhaps thousands of reasons. In Isa 54:10 God said ““For the

18 Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), “Struggling with Poverty/Emptiness: Rereading the Naomi-Ruth Story in African-South Africa”, *JTSA* 120 (November 2004), 53.

mountains may be removed and the hills may shake, but My loving-kindness will not be removed from you, and My covenant of peace will not be shaken,' says the Lord who has compassion on you". Take a firm stand against doubt by digging into your inner strength. You have nothing to lose.

Sixth, Naomi does not want herself to be exposed. She cannot marry again or give birth. If the daughters-in-law continue to live with her, she will be exposed to what she cannot do. She rather uses her inability to have children – and for that matter, a son who would grow up and marry Ruth and Orpah and have children with them – as an excuse to reveal her uselessness:

Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me – even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons – would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me. (Ruth 1:12-13; NIV)

Meyers asserts that the "survival of any group is dependent upon three major activities: procreation (reproduction), production (subsistence), and protection (defence)".¹⁹ Naomi does not see herself as capable of procreating, working, and providing for the young women, and above all protecting them when it matters most. The survival of the daughters-in-law is at stake. Naomi has no hope of survival let alone adding them to her burdens. What Naomi seems to be saying about being old and not able to have a husband or children are genuine facts at face value. But at the baseline were intentions of communicating disappointment, despondency, and depression. What she wants to declare is that she is fruitless. She cannot be relied upon. She will not do anything for the young women although she can do something. When we look down upon ourselves, we do not want to associate with others so that we become exposed.

When we look down upon ourselves, we tend to mirror our situation upon the lives of those who are close to us. We think that since we have not seen the best in our lives, others close to us will not see the best in their lives. Mothers have abandoned their babies, thrown them away in strange places, and turned their backs on their families because they do not see any hope in their lives. Do you know the plan God has for each one of us? You were created in God's image so learn to see the image of God in others (Gen 1:27).

19 Carol Meyers, "Procreation, Production, and Protection: Male-Female Balance in Early Israel", *JAAAR* 51.4 (1983), 573.

Naomi thought being a menopausal woman means life is useless. Her childbearing years are past and so she has no hope of being a woman or a mother to the girls. Strangely, Naomi does not only see herself as useless; she also sees Ruth and Orpah as very useless. No wonder Wilda Gafney suggests: "Since the younger women are clearly not pregnant, they are of no use to Naomi, who tries to get rid of them."²⁰

Naomi does not want to waste the time of the daughters-in-law. She cannot have sons, certainly not have sons and nurture them to grow to become husbands for Ruth and Orpah. Naomi's argument that her daughters-in-law would have to wait for such a child to grow up is evocative of Tamar having to wait for Shelah (Gen 38, cf Deut 25:5–10). Notice that there is no property to inherit at play. We are not told that Elimelech has land or that Mahlon and Kilion have a right to a property that they need someone to inherit.

Are you feeling rejected because you have a bad self-image?

Seventh, having experienced what it means to be an immigrant in Moab could influence Naomi to think that it would be very difficult for Ruth and Orpah to survive in Bethlehem. Each would be "too distant from her own kin to receive care and sustenance".²¹ Naomi's excuse that she cannot do anything good for the daughters-in-law was actually because God's hand has been against her. She does not want them to be at the mercy of God's hand yet she commits them to God's hand. Maybe if God strikes them while living in their own land and among their own people, it might not be as devastating as when living in a foreign land.

Naomi's character betrays her. She is saying one thing but she means the other. She knows that when her daughters-in-law accompany her, she has the responsibility to feed them. And she does not have anything to depend on at home. She did not cultivate any crops so there would be no food she can call her own. One needs to remember the desperate circumstances of widows in the ancient world and the injunctions to care for them (Deut 26:12–13, 27:19).

And there could be more reasons.

20 Gafney, "Ruth", 127.

21 Jack Sasson, "Ruth", in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 323.

When we have answers to the question why

There are several reasons why we need to keep family ties alive. Ruth has one thousand reasons to cling to Naomi, chief among them that she wants to look up to the God of Israel even if the Almighty has stretched forth the hand against Naomi (Ruth 1:13). She has in the back of her mind that God has made some provision for Bethlehem. She will follow the God of Israel and make Him her God.

Ruth does not reject the blessings Naomi poured over her life – that the “Lord shows her kindness” (Ruth 1:8). But there are more reasons she can see. The popular view is that Ruth’s decision to stay with Naomi sets her apart as an exemplary character in the story. Yes, there is something in Ruth that makes her decision to translate from the ordinary to the extraordinary. She has an inner strength that is not common. She is ready to embrace the unknown, chart a new course, travel to a new place, start life afresh, and align herself with a new religion. Ruth is the epitome of a woman strengthened with inner power, that which only the Holy Spirit gives. Such power makes people rooted and established in love, endowed with the ability to grasp the deeper things in God, and to be filled with the fullness of God (cf Eph 3:16–19).

Orpah seems to say, “If you do not want me, so be it. I will have preferred to continually stay by your side, but if you say so I will go”. She does not depend on her own thoughts and ambitions. She follows the advice given, even if that is not her choice. Chisholm writes:

Orpah, as a mere agent in the story, serves as a foil for Ruth. Orpah did what one expects. In the face of Naomi’s logic, she said goodbye and went home. But Ruth’s love for Naomi caused her to stay with her mother-in-law, even when such devotion seemed illogical and downright foolish. Orpah was not a bad person; on the contrary she was a good daughter-in-law who had treated Naomi well. She deserved and received Naomi’s blessing (v 8). But Ruth was beyond good; her love for Naomi transcended the norm. The contrast between the two girls should not be expressed as a polarity (bad versus good) but in terms of degree (good versus great). The narrator’s purpose in mentioning and describing Orpah is not to criticize her, but to highlight Ruth.²²

While Orpah returns to her gods, Ruth returns to the God of Israel. The chief god of the Moabites was Chemosh (cf Num 21:29), whose worship

22 Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 605.

included human sacrifice (2 Kgs 3:26-27). The Moabites also worshipped the wife of Chemosh, Ashtar.²³ Going back to her gods does not make Orpah an unfaithful person. She has done enough for Naomi. According to Phyllis Trible, “Orpah is a paradigm of the sane and reasonable; she acts according to the structures and customs of society. Her decision is sound, sensible, and secure. Nevertheless, Orpah dies to the story. However commendable her way, it is not the dynamic of the tale.”²⁴ Sometimes, it is good to move on after serving faithfully, but remember that your name might be lost. As long as our identity as Africans is tied to our families, never think you can desert your family and still make a lasting name.

Likewise, it does not mean Ruth has deserted her people and gods from Moab. She now belongs to a new family of which Naomi is the head. Some are married but they cannot identify with their new family or be a blessing to their new family. They keep spending all their time with their own parents or siblings, going back to their mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, and find real fulfilment there. However, it is better to work out a real-life of fulfilment in our new families when we get married. That is the essence of leaving and cleaving (Gen 2:24).

Ruth’s decision to go with Naomi eventually becomes a blessing for Naomi. Ruth was the one who went out to glean for food and made their house never lack. Her decision is what makes a difference for Naomi. In a sense, the decision is propelled by the favour that rests upon her. Wherever she sets her foot, favour will overtake her; goodness and mercy will run to her (cf Ps 23:6). It is the favour upon Ruth that makes her glean as much as possible from the field of Boaz. Eventually, it is the son of Ruth brings hope into the life of Naomi. When Ruth has a baby, it is on Naomi’s lap that the child is laid, and the women in the town shout: “Naomi has a child” (Ruth 1:17). Are you a blessing to your family or you have always been a pain in the neck?

I do not agree with Bruce Waltke who suggests that Naomi’s motivation was to test the daughters-in-law to see if they would be loyal to her: “Either consciously or unconsciously, she is testing their covenant fidelity, as *I AM* tests Israel to teach them to live by faith.”²⁵ Naomi is not testing the fidel-

23 Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Judges and Ruth*, ABCS (Texas: Ariel Ministries, 2007), 274-75.

24 Phyllis Trible, *God and the rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 172.

25 Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 854.

ity of Ruth and Orpah. She means what she is saying. These young women have shown her kindness, but she is not ready to reciprocate. The Hebrew *hesed* (covenant love; kindness; loyalty; steadfast love) is reciprocal but Naomi has nothing to offer except to ask God to show that kindness on her behalf. Ruth, on the other hand, sees the need to continually support Naomi and nothing would deter her.

In spite of Naomi's insistence, Ruth expresses her loyal love for Naomi. Ruth urges Naomi to stop exhorting her to return to her home because she is loyally committed to returning with Naomi. Ruth goes to the extent of vowing that she is going to Bethlehem with Naomi. Her loyalty even goes as far as making her join her people, and her God, until death parts them (Ruth 1:16–17). The Akan says, *akyerakyer wo n'afe* (lit: no matter how long a situation takes, it will come to an end). Ruth knows things will not be the same but she was determined. Where is your loyalty to your family?

Never think your loyalty is in vain. Never assume that your sacrifices, though not seen by people, are in vain. Joseph shows all the love he has and wants to be with his brothers. The brothers do not want him and so they sell him, thinking they are doing away with him. God eventually makes Joseph to be a turning point in their lives. In their times of hunger, it is Joseph who provides the food they need to survive. He also provides a place for them to stay (Gen 37:39–47).

The same Naomi who blesses Ruth in the name of the Lord turns round to blame the Lord for bringing catastrophe in her life. What does she expect Ruth to see in the Lord? Naomi does not see or accept her own responsibility for the decisions she took. It is well agreed that life and death come from the Lord. The tone of Naomi's voice does not provide any assurance of hope for those who want to follow the Lord. As Daniel Block argues, the same person who had earlier accused God of making her life bitter wanted God to be gracious to her daughters-in-law and to provide them with security.²⁶

Naomi tells the daughters-in-law that God has turned against her (Ruth 1:13), and later she tells the women of Bethlehem, "The Almighty has dealt bitterly with me ... brought me back empty ... dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me" (Ruth 1:20–21). She is aware that God has done something good for her people in Bethlehem but not in

26 Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC Vol 6 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 638.

her life. Could that be double standards? This is Naomi's perception, but Ruth has different reasons to cling to the God of Israel. For Ruth, the death of her husband Mahlon does not mean God's hand has been heavy upon her.

Naomi's words sound like a person who has lost all her faith in God. A similar word came from the mouth of Job's wife when Job lost his family and all his property – "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die" (Job 2:9). Naomi's grief can be viewed differently from what Job's wife went through – nevertheless, after some time, Job made complaints and accusations, and insisted that God is wrong. Yet Job is still seen as a righteous man. Fischer rightly observes that Job is an old man who is highly praised for suffering bad times, loses all his children and all his wealth, blames God yet trusts in God. Naomi, on the other hand, suffers the same kind of fate and blames God just as Job did yet is taken as an embittered old woman.²⁷ Such conclusions are not fair. What is seen as good for a man should be seen as good for a woman.

Africans are incurably religious, as Mbiti admits. Among the Akan, the usual response to greetings and inquiries about how one is faring is by saying: "It is by the grace of God." Yet, whether they really mean that it is the grace of God that has sustained them matters. Even when life is unbearable and is experiencing hardship, they still look up to God. To say it is by God's grace does not mean all is well.

Whatever Ruth's circumstances may be, her clinging to her mother-in-law is a gift of grace that Naomi cannot at first see. Naomi is not only convinced that her decision to turn the daughters-in-law back was the best. She sounds convincing. Yet Ruth is not convinced and will have none of it. She clings to Naomi, a term used in contexts of profound love, inalienable possession, unshakable commitment (see, for example, Gen 2:24; Num 36:7, 9; Deut 4:4, 10:20, 11:22). She has her own reasons for clinging and showing unconditional loyalty. She is well aware, like the Akan says, *ɔhɔhɔ te se abofra* (lit: the stranger is like a child). It means strangers are not well-grounded in customs as townfolk. The elders say: *ɔhɔhɔ n'eyiwa ebien naaso onnhu adze* (lit: the stranger has two eyes but cannot see). So, Ruth puts her trust in God since she does not know what lies ahead of her. For Ruth, chief among her reasons is "your God will be my God" (Ruth 1:16). Focusing on the God of Israel can give you more than ten thousand rea-

27 Irmtraud Fischer, "The Book of Ruth as Exegetical Literature", *European Journal: A Journal of New Europe* 4.0.2 (November 2007), 146.

sons. As a child of God, do not allow anyone to convince you to act contrary to your belief. Do not allow someone's good reasonings to allow you to turn back and so lose the identity of a loyal person. God forbid.

Ruth's speech reveals her faith. It is like singing:

I have decided to follow Jesus
 No turning back, no turning back.
 The cross before me the world behind me
 No turning back, no turning back.

The cross before me is telling me there is suffering, and the world behind me is telling me that there is no pain. Yet no turning back from the cross. Even if God hurts me, yet still will I cling to Him. Ruth is not simply a woman of words. She is also a woman of action. Her words are not different from the action she is taking. Indeed, she utters what might be a speech act; what she actually *does* is exactly what she is *saying*. Her speech is poetic, forming parallel lines:

A. Where you go
 I will go
 B. Where you lodge
 I will lodge
 C. Your people will be
 my people
 Your God
 my God
 D. Where you die
 I will die
 (Ruth 1:16-17)

Ruth's poem is made up of a fairly strict semantic and syntactic parallelism structure in the second and third couplets: the double repetition of semantically related verbs in Clause A ("go ... go" and "lodge ... lodge") gives way to a double repetition of noun-phrases in Clause C ("your people ... my people" and "your God ... my God"), with every line 2 exhibiting a grammatical shift from second to first person.

Perhaps, Ruth has faith that God is the one who changes destinies. God may not have done it for Naomi but He will do it for her. May your clinging to God cause you to encounter the God who changes destinies.

Ruth's poem is more convincing to Naomi. Her promise to go with Naomi matches the determination to make Naomi's God her own. The Moabites had other gods (see, for example, Judg 11:24). Truly, she has already forsaken her gods. As if this were not enough, Ruth then invokes a curse on herself—in YHWH's name: "May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you from me" (Ruth 1:17 NIV). Robert Alter writes about Ruth's speech-act: "Here Ruth is said to have 'returned' to Bethlehem, an alien place to her, when it is only her mother-in-law who has really returned. But we get a progressive sense that she is actually coming back to the unknown homeland of her new destiny."²⁸

It is interesting to find at the closing stages of the book that the Bethlehemite women say to Naomi what has been evident all along, that Ruth's love is worth more than seven sons (Ruth 4:15). The grace of God has been walking right beside Naomi through Ruth and she wanted to get rid of her. Grace was available to Naomi yet she does not see it.

Ruth holds a different perception of God that is solid. It is not dependent on what people say God is. She wants to have a personal testimony of who the God of Israel is. At least, she might have heard what others like Naomi had said in times past about the God of Israel. It is her turn to encounter the God of Israel, even if God brings hardship on people. Ruth does not argue with Naomi's perception of God, nor does she try to correct her. She simply expresses faith in God. It is not about what she will receive from God or lose in her walk with God.

Perhaps, Ruth knows that the God of Israel is the one who visits His people and helps the needy (cf 1 Sam 2:8; Ps 104:2, 109:31; Prov 29:13). The Akan belief is apt here: *abowa a onnyi dua no, Nana Nyame na ɔpra no ho* (lit: an animal without a tail, it is the Lord God who drives away the insects that settle on it). It means God has provided ways to help the vulnerable. Ruth will worship the Lord whom Naomi believes has abandoned her. Her own husband has died but she does not interpret it as Naomi did. Those who trust in the God of Israel will be like the mountain; they shall never be shaken (Ps 125:1-2).

To a large extent, Naomi realizes that her daughter-in-law has more faith than her. So, Naomi "said no more" to Ruth (Ruth 1:18). She keeps quiet. She feels ashamed of Ruth's determination. While Naomi is reluctantly and

28 Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 58-59.

unhappily returning to Bethlehem, Ruth is determined and happily going to Bethlehem. As a child of God, hold on unswervingly to the faith you profess for he who has promised is faithful (Heb 10:23). God will cause your detractors to keep quiet. They will say no more.

Ruth is a heroine for turning her back on her gods and identifying with Naomi's God. Why do you still hold on to your gods? Why do you still want to turn to your past? Walter Kaiser notes: "Like Abraham, Ruth leaves her country and family to follow *I AM* to an unseen land. Ruth's depth of character testifies to her ability to establish God's kingdom on earth."²⁹ Nancy Tischler also states, "More like a hero than a heroine, she abandons her own roots to adopt another family, another country, and another god. This is one of the most heroic acts in Scripture, rivaling even Abraham's travels to the Promised land."³⁰ Do you trust in the gods of your people that you cannot turn to the God of Israel?

Who is God to you? Naomi is an old woman who has seen it all in life and has a perception of God. She is someone who deserves to be held in high esteem. Her words need to be respected. So, if she proclaims that "the hand of the LORD has turned against me" (Ruth 1:13), how would that faith influence other people to the Lord? Ruth, however, knows something different. She is ready to testify of the God who is a game-changer. In your case, is God's hand against you or dependable for your deliverance? Is God the one who has looked on for your enemies to bring you down? Is God someone who forsakes his children? Does God not hear your prayer?

Beloved, do not let what others say to be a bad testimony. Beyond the punishment of God lies favour. So, let hope come to sustain all your conversations based on your new-found faith, grounded not in what you have experienced but what you know about God. God is the reason.

What then can I do?

God's mission is to empower all to be in families and to build strong families. Our blessings can mature if we cherish family life.

Never think you are so useless even to people who want you out of their lives. God created you in His own image to be of some help to others. As

29 Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, 844.

30 Nancy Tischler, "Ruth", in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed., Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 155.

long as you can offer help in any way, and bring fulfilment in the lives of others, see yourself as useful. Do not let what others say to you break you down and make you return to your mother's house. Cling on to your "mother-in-law" who looks down on you, and even tries to push you away. It will not be easy. It will take a lot of convincing. But what must be at the back of your mind is the blessings that lie ahead of you if you hold on. Those who give up never succeed. It is better to keep your family ties than to reject them.

As Christians, we need to know the mind of God before we embark on any journey. Paul prayed that the Colossian Christians will know the will of God and increase in heavenly wisdom to endure all things (Col 1:9-12). In all circumstances, we should not be too ashamed to introduce our God to others. And like Ruth, we need to profess faith in the Living God and stay committed no matter what. Professing our faith is a daily thing.

You may be a child of God, yet you are going through difficulties. Know that your period of suffering is for a moment. Soon joy will break forth. Let us hold on unswervingly to our faith in God. Do not listen to those who tend to push you away so that what God is about to use you to do will be thwarted. The insistence of your detractors should not make you lose your loyal love for others. Never assume that your sacrifices, though not seen by people, are in vain. Rather listen to yourself and move on with your vision. If there is anyone who can encourage you better, it is your own self.

It is your turn to meet the God of Israel, even if God brings hardship to people. Your story might not be the same as others. You will sing a brand-new song. You will have a new testimony.

Conclusion

We have reflected on why we need to keep our family's ties and never turn our backs on them. It could be your husband or wife, or your in-laws. It could be your mother, father, brothers, or sisters. It could be your cousins and close friends who have become more like family members. Never break the ties when you find something good. Never consider your family as if their usefulness is for a while and find many reasons to avoid them. Rather, depend on the many reasons to stay close to them. Be a blessing to your family by being loyal. Ruth's positive view of God made the difference so never hold a negative view of God and lose your faith. Convince your family about the new identity and the new ties you wish to cultivate so that

you can leave a lasting name. When family members are around us, grace abounds.

Remember, no one knows the beginning of a great person so do not be worried when people cut you off in their lives. Some cannot allow others to join them to enjoy the blessings they know about and that attitude should not be entertained.

Yours is to stay committed, knowing that God is always with us. God has a good purpose for our experiences of suffering. Never be too ashamed of your God who walks with you in times of suffering that you cannot introduce your God to others.

Today, people do not see your value. They do not acknowledge your worth. They have forgotten what you have done for them. Your presence has become a mark of sorrow. Tarry and be motivated by a thousand reasons to hold on. Cling on and show loyalty. God is going to turn things around. God will cause you to be a blessing in the lives of those who do not want you.

6

Theme:

Resolving to have a new Identity

READING: RUTH 1:15–22

ANCHOR TEXT: “Your people will be my people” (Ruth 1:15–16)

Introduction

In chapter 1 of the book of Ruth, we encounter Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons Mahlon and Kilion, who sojourn at Moab to find food due to the famine in the home country Bethlehem. While in Moab, the sons marry Orpah and Ruth, and later Elimelech and his two sons die, leaving Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth as widows. When Naomi hears that the Lord has visited Bethlehem and that her people now have food, she decides to go back. She then decides to dismiss the two young widows of her sons with a parting benediction, each to go back to their mother’s house to find security or a new husband. But the young widows feel they have to go with Naomi. When Naomi insists, Orpah turns back but Ruth persists.

This sermon reflects on how we build our Christian identity in Christ, drawing from the vow of Ruth. God desires that all become a new creation, that is to say have a new identity. A new identity is what Christian mission is about. This exposition looks at what it means to break from our past and old ways so that we can cultivate a new identity. Then it considers the vow Ruth makes and finally explores how Naomi relates to Ruth as an in-law.

Exposition

The pericope of Ruth 1:15–22 belongs to a larger unit of a narrative (Ruth 1:6–22) which tells about the third stage of exchanges as Naomi transits from Moab to Bethlehem. The pericope describes how far Ruth remains attached to Naomi and serves as a paradigm of a woman who forsakes her past and identity for someone who is dear to her.

The structure of the pericope can be seen in two parts of three movements each: Part one begins with Naomi’s rational appeal (Ruth 1:15), and a poem, or a speech from Ruth (vv16b–17), ending with a prose narration (v18. Part two begins with a prose narration (v19ab), continues with a speech from the women of Bethlehem (v9c), moves to a speech from Naomi (vv20b–21),

then ends with a prose narrative (v22). The structure of Ruth's response is made up of five couplets while Naomi's speech is made up of three couplets and a triplet.

Naomi wants Ruth and Orpah to leave her and return to their home, Moab. While Orpah finds it expedient to go back, Ruth does not and resolves to go with Naomi to Bethlehem. It is said, "But Ruth clung to her" (Ruth 1:14). Ruth's decision to cling to Naomi is her choice, though a costly one – "your people will be my people" (Ruth 1:15). Customarily in Ghana, turning your back on your family and own people is unacceptable. However, Ruth's commitment to stay connected to Naomi is clear. She married Naomi's son, thus accepting that Naomi's family would be her people. To stay connected, she reiterates her earlier marriage ties, although the ties are broken by death. The plot of the story makes Ruth's choice ideal for her to continue playing a part in the narrative. Hyman asserts, "Ruth's action stands in contrast to Orpah's. Orpah, Ruth's foil, is not bad or disrespectful... Rather, Ruth, in contrast, is shown to be exceptionally good."¹ Ruth made a very serious vow: "May the Lord do thus (Heb: *coh ya'ăšeh*) and so to me" (Ruth 1:17). Ruth's statement is self-imprecatory in nature. Her oath to stick by Naomi is very strong, imploring the Lord to take action if she does not do her part.

Yael Ziegler opines that in the Hebrew Bible, we find instances where an oath is pronounced and the expression *coh ya'ăšeh* is used with no first-person verb. Examples of the use of the expression *coh ya'ăšeh* can be found in 1 Samuel 3:17, 35, 14:44; 2 Samuel 19:14; and 1 Kings 6:31, 20:10. These instances suggest that the speaker intends to perform a positive action personally where the responsibility lies solely on the speaker. He concludes,

This leaves open the possibility that none of these oaths is taken with the intention that the speaker intends to be personally involved with the fulfillment of the pledge. Although the speakers do assume a measure of responsibility for the realization of the promise, in as much as they call down the curse upon themselves in the event that the promise is not carried out, this responsibility is not as direct as that of the oaths in which a person mentions him- or herself by name. In those oaths, the personal stake is so high, that the speaker intends to carry out the promise him- or herself, in a personal, direct fashion.²

1 Roland T. Hyman, "Questions and Changing Identity in the book of Ruth", *USQR* 39.3 (1984), 192.

2 Yael Ziegler, "So shall God do ...: Variations in Oath formula and its Literary Meaning", *JBL* 126.1 (2007), 75-76.

Ziegler further adds that in the case of Ruth, she was “speaking in an attempt to persuade Naomi that she intends to remain with Naomi and embrace whole-heartedly her norms and culture”.³ Naomi has no option but to go with Ruth and allow her to start a new life and take on a new identity. When Naomi and Ruth arrive at Bethlehem, “the whole town was stirred” (Ruth 1:19), indicating a joyous moment. The people of Bethlehem are happy that Naomi has come back. They did not lament that she came back empty or without her husband and children. At least, they have Naomi. A person is worth more than anything. Naomi rather sees everything differently. The way people see us might not be the same way we see ourselves. Sometimes we are tempted to think that others do not know us well or are ignorant about our situation. To welcome someone back home who was gone for good is no mean thing. The neighbours see it as a duty to troop in and share a happy welcome.

While the whole town is happy to see Naomi and Ruth, Naomi is sorrowful in her heart and tells them not to call her Naomi but “Mara” (Heb: *mārâ*), meaning “bitterness” (Ruth 1:20–21). Naomi’s speech in verse 20 to the people of Bethlehem displays antithetic parallelism with a semantically opposing word-pair:

Do not call me “Naomi”
... call me “Mara”

Literally, Naomi was saying: do not call me pleasant // call me bitter. Again, “Naomi”/ “pleasant” and “Mara”/ “bitter” match syntactically and grammatically (as double accusatives and as proper names, respectively), giving a pun on the names. The repetition of the verb “call” is significant. The first one is in the negative and the second one is in the positive, making the antithetic parallelism stand out.

Naomi is like a destitute returning home after a long stay in a foreign land. In Ghana, everyone expects to see those who have lived “overseas” (out of the African continent) return in flamboyance. Naomi does not have it that way. She comes empty-handed. In Ghana, people who travel to the West but come back empty-handed are nicknamed “burger loose”. The reality of life is that not all will be successful on a trip. Some will come home empty-handed. Naomi re-enters her homeland without a husband, children, material security in Moab, or hope in Bethlehem that she can rely on. She

3 Ziegler, “So shall God do”, 78–79.

is most likely barren in the sense that she may be post-menopausal (Ruth 1:11–13). Naomi’s status and age give her no hope of “catching” a man’s eye who would stay with her for the rest of her life.

The reason why Naomi wanted the people to call her Mara was as she said, “the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me” (Ruth 1:20). It explains how Naomi wanted her name to be changed because the Almighty (Heb: *šadday*) has done it. The Akan says, *Otumfo na ɔworɔw kawa fa abatsir* (lit: it is the Almighty who removes a ring upward through the shoulder). It means the one who is mighty can make one do the impossible.

The divine title “Shaddai” emphasizes God’s sovereignty. It probably means “The One on the Mountains”.⁴ “Shaddai” implies that God is the One who controls the world, who gives and takes away life. The patriarchs knew God primarily as El Shaddai meaning “God Almighty” (Exod 6:3). It shows how God is powerful over fertility and life. Shaddai promises numerous offspring, blesses, and makes people fruitful until they become a community of peoples (see Gen 17:1–8, 28:3, 35:11, 48:3–4). Shaddai protects the righteous from harm (Ps 91:1, 10). By contrast, Naomi sees the loss of her offspring as what she gets from Shaddai.⁵

The title “Shaddai” is also used in the book of Job about six times. Job laments that Shaddai has terrified him (Job 23:16), and has made his soul bitter (Job 27:2). Elihu makes it clear to Job that far be it from him to suggest that Shaddai should do wrong (Job 34:10), and pervert justice (Job 34:12). Shaddai does not hear an empty cry, nor regard it (35:13). Like Job, Naomi feels God had dealt with her bitterly and harshly in Moab. God is no longer her delight. Naomi has been humbled by God, and she does not yet understand God’s greater purposes for her struggles.

Notice also the antithetic parallelism in v21 (every three words here in the Hebrew text captured beautifully):

I	<u>went away</u>	full
but the Lord	<u>returned</u>	me
	<u>back</u>	<u>empty.”</u>

4 Edward Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, AB (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), 76.

5 Robert B. Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 610.

Again, there are semantically opposing terms – “full”/“empty” and “went away”/“returned”. Naomi’s use of the opposing subjects, “I” in the first line and “the Lord” in the second line echoes how she took the responsibility for going to Moab and the Lord is responsible for bringing her back to Bethlehem. Naomi took things into her own hands and went away over against the Lord bringing her back. Both interpretations are structurally and thematically revealing.

It is said that Naomi returned to Bethlehem “at the beginning of the barley harvest” (Ruth 1:22), giving an impression of hope for food to come. It was a time the people were harvesting their crops, and eating what must be consumed with some leftovers. Naomi went away when there was famine; she comes back when there was food. Barley was one of the major crops grown and widely cultivated as the main food among the Israelites (Deut 8:8). It was prepared and baked into round cakes (for example, Judg 7:13). The barley grain matures about a month before the wheat, that is, about the end of March or beginning of April, corresponding with the Jewish month Abid (Exod 9:32). The Israelites were instructed to “bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest” (Lev 23:1). The first fruit has to be offered on the day of the sabbath for the priest to set it before the altar of God (Deut 26:1–11), during the festival of the Unleavened Bread (Lev 23:9–14), and was associated with greater rejoicing (Deut 16:13–15). The Feast of Unleavened Bread (following Passover for seven days [Lev 23:4–8]) focused on Israel’s willingness to cut herself off from her old life in Egypt. The barley harvest was connected to the Feast of Passover (14 Nisan [March–April], cf Exod 12) marked the redemption and faithfulness of God in bringing Israel to the land he had promised to Abraham (Gen 12, 15).

The Jews thus read the book of Ruth during the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) when the close of the grain harvest was celebrated.

Breaking from the past

Although there was no complaint of hunger in Moab, or in the place Naomi stayed with the young widows. Naomi makes up her mind to return to her past. After all, God has visited her people and she should share part of that blessing. If Naomi is in Moab, then she seems to be cut off. She has broken from her past and formed a new identity as a sojourner or a migrant in Moab.

Likewise, by marriage contract, Orpah and Ruth had left their families and taken a new identity. Their marriages make them align with Israel and not

Moab, so they too have broken from their old identity. The death of their husbands can be seen as a way to break from that new identity and go back to their former identity, but they do not make a return to their people. Naomi feels that it is time for all of them to break from their present and return to their past. Orpah later understands her but Ruth goes further and breaks entirely from her past, even her gods. Naomi makes it clear that Orpah has “gone back to her people and to her gods” (Ruth 1:15).

In Gen 31, Laban accuses Jacob of stealing his gods when Jacob decides to run away with his two wives who were the daughters of Laban. The narrator of the story said, “Now Jacob did not know that Rachel has stolen the gods” (Gen 31:32c). One may say that Laban did not find it right for Jacob and his family to leave with his gods.

Naomi has kept her faith in the God of Israel while in a foreign land. In her farewell message, Naomi prays that the loving-kindness (*hesed*) of the Lord, the God of Israel comes upon Ruth and Orpah. However, Naomi’s faith is weak faith; faith that has been shaken and is wavering. Naturally, Orpah and Ruth might have experienced the Lord while staying with their husbands or with Naomi, for the God of the fathers should be the God of anyone who comes into the family. Some move to a new place and leave their gods behind, which for Christians is a good thing. We do not know whether Ruth and Orpah continued to worship their gods while staying with their Israelite husbands.

Abraham leaves his father’s house and does not take along his father’s god. On the way, he builds an altar and calls the name of the Lord (Gen 12:8). However, in the book of Kings, Jezebel, the wife of Ahab king of Israel, brings her gods to Israel and even has 400 prophets who minister before those gods. She continues to swear by her gods to take Elijah’s life (1 Kgs 19:2), an indication that she still looks up to her gods rather than the God of Israel. Orpah, by her marriage, does attach herself to a new identity and finds it worthwhile to return to her people and to her gods. On the other hand, Ruth sees the new identity as something to cling to. So, she makes a vow and declares her unconditional attachment to her new identity.

In Ruth’s vow, one can find that she is prepared to have nothing to do with her old self. So, Ruth does forsake her past – which is her people, her gods, and her burial place – as a sign of commitment. She is ready to enter a new community, take a new course, and lead a new life. She resigns her will to Naomi’s, not to question or to argue about anything but to follow her all her life.

A total break from the past is also expected of those who decide to take Christ Jesus as their Lord and personal Saviour. The moment a Christian declares allegiance to Christ, he or she becomes a new creation, everything old is passed away (2 Cor 5:17). Breaking with the past means one does not only associate with the easy part of life in the new community but the difficult situations, uneasy expectations, and hard demands. Unfortunately, some who come to Christ continue with their baggage of sins and old habits. They are not prepared to resolve for a new beginning. They seek their own comfort and to live according to their own dictates.

An oath too dear

Daniel Block in his exegetical commentary interprets Ruth's oath as a transfer of membership, arguing:

Like any Near Easterner of her time, she realized that if she would commit herself to Naomi and go home with her, she must also commit herself to Naomi's people (Israel) and to Naomi's God (Yahweh). Although some would interpret Ruth's declaration as a sign of conversion, it is better viewed as an affirmation of a transfer of membership from the people of Moab to Israel and of allegiance from Chemosh to Yahweh.⁶

Ruth makes a vow to support her claim to be with Naomi (Ruth 1:16–17). Making vows was one of the formal ways of expressing thought and conviction, but there is some tension in the Old Testament idea of making a self-curse. The type of vow Ruth pronounced is also regarded as “treaty-curse”, “evil wish”, or “death wish”. In the ancient Near East, cursing was employed for various purposes and is connected to numerous areas of daily life. It is employed to bring truth to light, force obedience, frighten off thieves and vandals, guarantee honesty, etc. Self-cursing, which is a form of oath to a deity, can also act as a preventive measure or avert punishment.⁷ It is used to emphasize one's commitment to what is at stake for the people who were convinced of its effectiveness.⁸ Self-curses are also used to guarantee honesty; their gravity lies in the call of God to witness/enforce it.⁹

6 Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC Vol 6 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 641.

7 John Day, *Crying for Justice: What the Psalms teach us in an Age of Terrorism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998), 36.

8 *TDOT* 1: 416.

9 Yael Ziegler, “So Shall God Do...” Variations of an Oath Formula and its Literary Meaning”, *JBL* 126.1 (2007), 64; Day, *Crying for Justice*, 36.

In treaty-curses, the deity is called to take action based upon how faithfully the treaty has been kept or how it has been violated, and its effects stretch to all members of the family and possessions. When Rebekah wanted her son Jacob to pretend to be Esau, Jacob told her mother that when Isaac finds out the truth, he might curse him. Rebekah then said, “Let your curse be upon me, my son” (Gen 27:11–13). A similar self-cursing can be found in 1 Sam 20: 13 where Jonathan pledges to David to be loyal to him. The priest Eli used a self-curse when he wanted the boy Samuel who was ministering before him to tell him what the Lord said in the night (1 Sam 3:17). Similarly, David pronounced a self-curse on himself that the Lord should punish him if he does not massacre the males in Nabal’s family when Nabal refused to show hospitality to the servants of David (1 Sam 25:22). Again, when Ben-hadad of Aram gathered all his army against King Ahab, he initially negotiates a surrender. But when Ben-hadad further requests that Ahab sends him all the silver, gold, as well as Ahab’s wives and children to him, Ahab refuses. That made Ben-hadad pronounce a self-curse on himself that the gods destroy him if he does not get all the people of Samaria to follow him (1 Kgs 20:10).

Ruth’s acts of commission and omission are now under the eagle eyes of the Lord due to the self-curse: “May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well if even death parts me from you” (Ruth 1:17; NRSV). For Ruth, if even death parts her from Naomi, the Lord should punish her among the dead. By implication, she would only be free from the wrath and punishment of the Lord if Naomi dies first. Such a pledge goes beyond a simple commitment. Although Ruth is very much a model, making such self-curses is too dear in the Christian life. Guarding our tongue is an important virtue in Christian life. Would Ruth still follow Naomi if Naomi renounces the God of Israel if she decides to live an immoral life? Would Ruth sheepishly follow Naomi if Naomi marries?

In Ruth 1:16, six declarations are made by Ruth, while in verse 17 four can be found. However, there seem to be four movements. In the first movement, one can find that the first three lines end with “do not urge me to leave you or to turn back from you” (v 16a). In the Hebrew text, a strong consonant “k” (final *kap*) is used to end each line. The introduction of *kî*-particle in the third line of the quatrain in verse 17 is an indication of a closure, and this is sustained by the vowel “i”.¹⁰

10 Linafelt, “Narrative and Poetic Art in the Book of Ruth”, 13.

After Orpah has left, Naomi continues to express a strong emotional demand on Ruth to follow her sister-in-law. However, in chapter 1 the two Moabite widows are usually identified, either as “daughters-in-law” or “my daughters”. They are three occasions each where “daughters-in-law” is used (vv6, 7, 8) and “my daughters” (vv11, 12, 13). Only once in verse 15 is Orpah referred to as “sister-in-law”. On the whole, Naomi is mentioned 19 times in the book of Ruth but eight times in chapter 1 (vv2, 3, 8, 11, 19, 21, 22). Ruth is mentioned ten times in the book but two times in Ruth 1:4, 16, and one of them is seen in this pericope. Orpah is mentioned two times in the book and both references are in Ruth 1:4, 14. One can find that the narrator tries to avoid mentioning the names of the subjects in various instances. For example, the narrator uses “then she arose/started” (Ruth 1:6), “then she set out from the place” (Ruth 1:7), “then they said to her” (Ruth 1:10), and “then they lifted their voices” (Ruth 1:14) to set off the exchanges between the women and their actions.¹¹ Perhaps, one can assume that since the context points to the addressee as the person’s “sister-in-law”, Naomi is addressing Ruth. Orpah seems to be the obedient daughter-in-law. Naomi tells Ruth that Orpah has gone, has gone back, and something that the story did not indicate but Naomi knows about: she has gone to “her people and to her god” (Ruth 1:15).

During the initial stages of the journey, Naomi entreats each daughter-in-law to return to their mother’s house (Ruth 1:8). Then the two young widows reply, “No, we will return with you to your people” (Ruth 1:10). Then Naomi asks them to “go your way” (Ruth 1:12). Naturally, if Orpah obeys her mother-in-law, she would go back to her mother’s house as directed. Tribble argues that Naomi wants them to go to their mother’s house because they are women without men.¹² We are not sure whether Naomi means the people of Orpah’s mother’s house or the mother herself. Preference is given to the larger context, the family, since Ruth desiring to belong to Naomi’s “people” could probably mean the family.¹³

Naomi urges Ruth to return with her sister-in-law, which means Ruth should also go back to her people and to her god. But Ruth will not be convinced so easily to break her loyalty and submission to her mother-in-law. Ruth says, “Do not press me to leave you” (Ruth 1:16a). The Hebrew

11 The subject of the verbs in vv6-7 is Naomi, judging from the context of the story. See Campbell, *Ruth*, 72.

12 Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 169.

13 See Ruth 4:14, where the child from the marriage between Boaz and Ruth is blessed to have a renowned name in Israel.

verb translated as “to leave, forsake” (and its related forms) also connotes forsaking one’s allegiance or possession.¹⁴ So in a sense, Ruth takes Naomi as someone she owes her primary allegiance to. Her words, “your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God” (Ruth 1:16c), is a direct response to Naomi’s command. Ruth has forsaken her god for Naomi’s God and her people for Naomi’s people. She has made up her mind, by no legal reason and outside the marriage ties, to belong to the family of Naomi, to follow her always or continually be with her, saying: “for where you go I will go and where you lodge, I will lodge” (Ruth 1:16b). This young woman has committed herself to an old woman until death parts them. In the words of Bledstein, “Ruth has found a human being whose values and concerns affirm what is most important to Ruth herself as a childless young woman who has suffered loss.”¹⁵ After all, Naomi is a role model to Ruth. She is not a bad mother-in-law. In spite of all her challenges and words that aim to divide them, Ruth still finds something good in her worth following.

Within the African cultural setting, the consequence of self-cursing is that not only would the one cursing be held liable, but the family and possessions as well. Where a deity is called to witness the self-curse, breaking the vow is a terrible thing. This means that not only Ruth will suffer if she breaks her vow – her descendants to come will also suffer from the words she pronounced. Kisilu Kombo from Kenya explains:

In African tradition, cursing involves the use of words or actions against an individual or group. Words indicating the misfortune one will suffer for engaging in a particular action or saying certain words may be uttered. Certain actions, for instance, a mother exposing her nakedness to her son for something the son did, constitute a curse which negatively affects the person cursed.¹⁶

Kofi Agyekum classifies curses from an Akan perspective into two: a minor curse and a major curse. A minor curse refers to a situation where

14 The word is used when Israel forsakes the Lord or the Lord’s laws (Judg 10:10; 2 Chr 12:1, 21:10; Ezek 8:12, 9:9), or one’s possession/family (Gen 2:24; 1 Sam 31:7; 2 Sam 5:21), and also to emphasize the Lord’s continuing mercies (Gen 24:27; Ruth 2:20). See BDB, 736, 737. Kathleen A Robertson Farmer, “Book of Ruth,” in *The New Interpreters Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 907.

15 Aldrien J. Bledstein, “Female Companionship: If the Book of Ruth were Written by a Woman...”, in *Ruth, Feminist Companion to the Bible Vol 3*, ed., Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 120.

16 Kisilu Kombo, “Witchcraft: A Living Vice in Africa”, *AJET* 22.1 (2003), 75-76.

the deity being used is a small deity with no established sacerdotal system or priest, such as a family deity or a deity in a small stream. The major curse involves naming a powerful deity who uses an intermediary like a priest, who is usually wicked and unforgiving, and may kill imprecates. Since the supreme being or God, in the Akan worldview, does not have a priest, curses that bear the name of the supreme being are considered to be minor. Usually, the Akan people are scared of curses and abhor them, especially the ones spoken with the formula “woe to you/me”, and the effect of a curse is expected to come after the utterance and not before it. It will take an appropriate intervention to stop the effect of a curse.¹⁷

Jeff Anderson argues that some biblical curses convey societal values and are used to regulate offensive behaviour. Society uses such curses not only to enforce but to actually convey and teach social values.¹⁸ Biblical curses in which the name of the Lord is used, however, as long as there are priests of God, can be said to be major curses. The sages see the power of the tongue as very powerful (Prov 18:21). James compares the tongue to fire which can corrupt the whole person (Jas 3:3–6). Nevertheless, a curse without a legitimate cause will not take effect (Prov 26:2). The sages say that the one who pronounces the guilty as innocent will be cursed (Prov 24:23–24).

Ruth then will have to make sure not to break her vow so as to incur the wrath of God. Ruth even further adds: “even when death parts me from you” (Ruth 1:17c). The presence of the asseverative *kî*-particle (usually translated “for/because”) indicates the determination of the speaker and that whatever the speaker wishes for must, all things being equal, come to pass.¹⁹ So, if death separates Ruth from Naomi, the Lord should punish her. If Naomi dies first, it is Naomi who has separated herself from Ruth, so the oath may not work. Ruth further opts to be buried in the same tomb as Naomi, which may include Jewish burial customs.²⁰

Ruth’s persistence has come to an apex. Naomi accepts defeat in the argument and keeps quiet; she saw that she could not stand up to Ruth’s superior stance. By the self-curse, Ruth makes her argument very strong – “when Naomi saw that she was determined” (Ruth 1:18). The Hebrew

17 Kofi Agyekum, “The Pragmatics of Duabo ‘grievance’ Imprecation taboo among the Akan”, *Pragmatics* 3 (1999):357–382.

18 Jeff S. Anderson, “The Social Function of Curses in the Hebrew Bible”, *ZAW* 110 (1998), 229, 230.

19 Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth and Esther*, WBC 9 (Waco: Word Books, 1996), 83.

20 Campbell, *Ruth*, 74–75.

verb *mit'ammešet* translated “determined” (in the *hithpael*) is from the root word *'āmaš* meaning “strong” is significant. It could mean that Ruth proves herself strong or persistent. It could also mean that Naomi sees that Ruth has strengthened herself. No matter what, Naomi recognizes how determined Ruth is and the weight of her pledge, so she gives in. As usual, the narrator does not supply the subject of the clause, but it could be inferred from the context that Naomi saw the persistence of Ruth. At that point, Naomi cannot ask Ruth to break her oath by returning to her people and her god. Hence, Naomi becomes silent, perhaps lost for words, and “she ceased to speak to her” (Ruth 1:18).

Being a trusted family member

How do we see our family members, especially our mothers-in-law? Are they persons to be emulated in spite of all their flaws? Are they role models? How do mothers-in-law depict themselves so that the daughters-in-law would like to be with them forever? It is often said that in Ghana daughters-in-law see their mothers-in-law as witches, talkative, family breakers, and bosses who must be obeyed at all costs and prove burdensome? So, in what way can people trust their family members if they are troublesome?

Ruth finds it necessary to cling to her mother-in-law no matter what. Is there anything we have seen about God that would make us cling to Him no matter what? Are you ready to make the God of Israel your God? This is the God whose hand had been heavy against Naomi. If that were to be you, would you accept Naomi's God? Or will you find a God who is always gracious, loving, and kind? Let us remember that God has never promised us a trouble-free life. We will experience ups and downs. Sometimes God will allow something to happen to us that would be very bitter for a purpose. This is the God we worship. God did not spare his only Son and made him experience rejection, hatred, and death. Good Friday, however, was not the end of the story; there was a day of Resurrection on Easter, where He rose triumphantly over all forces of sin, darkness, and evil. Are you ready to serve God who allows all things to happen to us?

In some cultures, especially in Africa, the extended family members of both the man and woman become part of a marriage contract. Marriage is not between two individuals but between four families: the man's father's family and mother's family, and the woman's father's family and mother's family. These extended family members are seen as integral members of marriages. A marriage's extended family is expected to celebrate life's

journeys with the young couple, and offer solace, advice, and support when there are problems in life. The statement about leaving the father and mother to cleave with the wife does not mean that one must have nothing to do with in-laws (cf Gen 2:24; Matt 19:5).

The extended family members, however, see the husband or the wife as a new entrant into the family, an addition to their family who is coming in to enjoy some privileges, or compete with them for the few fruits they have to enjoy with their son or daughter growing up. Such a notion places responsibilities on the new entrant. In some cultures, they expect the new entrant to work and serve every other member of the family, including the children of that home. In other places, the wife is expected to call every other member of the family “my husband”, whether old or young. It means her responsibility as a wife is not only to her husband but to the whole family, except in sexual matters. Some experiences from couples who live together with either of the parents in the same house are usually not palatable. The parent who lives with the couple can be so possessive that they will manipulate the life of the couple and direct them on what to do or how to conduct the marriage. Such problems also come to the fore when the parents or extended family members come to pay a visit for a short period. Literally, they tend to influence the lives of their “own”. These extended family members exert a very strong influence on marriages and such influence can have a bad effect on the couple, resulting in unhappiness, regret, or even divorce.

Some young women enter marriage with an unhealthy mindset that does not bring unity and love to the extended family. They have an idea that once a person is married, all should stay away. They desire to be individualistic, an attitude that runs counter to the African culture of communalism. With the notion that in-laws are troublesome, the new couple may draw a battle line with their in-laws when they think there is interference. Some are advised: “You better be careful with in-laws. If you do not put them where they belong, they can control your marriage.” Others hold a principle that they will not take any nonsense from anybody. They believe the Bible says the man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh (Gen 2:24). So, no father or mother-in-law would be allowed to put asunder what God has joined together.

Some husbands would defend their wives who disrespect and abuse their parents. Others would defend their father’s or mother’s actions when their

wives complain. They seem to be saying: “she is my wife, so what can I do”; “what am I supposed to do, she’s my dad or mum”; or “I think she is your in-law so you can speak to the person yourself”. A sad reality in a lot of marriages is that some in-law turns out to be “monsters-in-law”. They are always putting the couple on trial.

The Bible gives an example of the daughters-in-law of Isaac and Rebekah who were problematic. Esau, their child, marries Judith and Basemath: “They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah” (Gen 26:34–35). In fact, most African fathers and mothers-in-law would not accept any disrespectful or abusive son-/daughter-in-laws. When Jacob leaves home after stealing his brother’s blessings, he arrives in Paddan Aram where he stays with his mother’s brother, Laban. Jacob’s father had commanded him to take a wife from among the daughters of Laban in Paddan Aram (Gen 28:2). So, Jacob arranges with his uncle Laban to work for him for seven years and in return will be given the younger daughter Rachel as a wife (Gen 29:15–18). Laban does not keep his word and after seven years gives Leah, the eldest daughter, to Jacob instead (Gen 29:22–23). Jacob has to work for seven more years to marry Rachel (Gen 29:25–30). Laban thus is a selfish father-in-law who is willing to cheat his son-in-law, making him continue to serve with little wages. Laban’s desire is to keep Jacob perpetually in his own home so he could continue to manipulate and retain him. Jacob, however, schemes to gain more goats at the expense of Laban, and Laban’s attitude further changes towards Jacob. Jacob eventually has to flee with his family and livestock, but Laban pursues Jacob for seven days, Laban pledging to harm Jacob. When he catches up with him, God appears to Laban in a dream, saying that he should be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad (Gen 31:22–24).

Jethro, a Midian Priest, was the father-in-law of Moses and was a very good person. He willingly gives Zipporah to Moses as a wife (Exod 2:21). He takes care of his son-in-law. He allows Moses to go back to his own people when Moses requests it, wishing him well (Exod 4:18). Zipporah also becomes a blessing to Moses because when God attacks Moses to kill him, it is Zipporah who intervenes and saves Moses’ life. Yet after Moses leads the Israelites to cross the Red Sea, Moses sends back Zipporah and their sons back to Jethro in Midian. However, Jethro does not sit on his oars and do nothing about this. He takes Zipporah and the sons and visits Moses (Exod 18:1–6). He sees that Moses was wearing himself out by singlehandedly adjudicating all disputes among the people. Since he wants his son-in-

law's success, he advises him to appoint officials over groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, who would serve as frontline judges over disputes and bring the difficult cases to Moses. Jethro cares about the welfare and success of the ministry of his son-in-law (Exod 18:26).

The healing of Simon's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31; Luke 4:38–39) may have been influenced by the relationship between the woman and Simon. The woman may have had a great willingness to serve Simon. According to Mark 1:31, when Simon leads Jesus to pray for his mother-in-law: "the fever left her and she served them" (Greek: *diēkonei autois*). It clearly indicates that the mother-in-law is noted for service and that she provided them "table service". As Krause puts it: "Simon Peter's mother-in-law is thus heralded as the 'woman who ministers to Jesus', and as an example of an early disciple."²¹

In fact, some excellent fathers- and mothers-in-law treat couples like their own children (and who say that parents should always treat their own children with the greatest of love, care, and respect). Some couples are blessed with in-laws who treat them as respected family members. Some others are rejected and unappreciated no matter what they bring to the marriage.

Ruth and Orpah are depicted as young women who show extraordinary commitment to their mother-in-law, for they were not legally required or customarily expected to remain with Naomi after the death of their husbands.²² By continuing to stay with Naomi for some time after the death of their husbands, Ruth and Orpah make great sacrifices beyond the ordinary. Living with an in-law in itself comes with its own challenges and for the two young women to continue to live with Naomi even after their husbands die shows the kind of woman Naomi was.

Naomi acknowledges that the women have shown loving-kindness to her dead children and to her as well (Ruth 1:8). Yet Naomi is ready to part ways with her daughters-in-law. Iain M. Duguid makes a profound comment about the faithfulness of God towards us that we do not value, and the same can be seen in human relationships: "We undervalue the little tokens of God's goodness because we have neglected the big mark of God's goodness."²³

21 Deborah Krause, "Simon Peter's Mother-in-Law - Disciple or Domestic Servant? Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Mark 1.29–31", in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed., Amy-Jill Levine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 41.

22 Farmer, *Book of Ruth*, 908.

23 Iain M. Duguid, *Esther & Ruth*, REC (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2016), 315.

Ruth's unquestionable loyalty, by virtue of her submission and steadfast character, proves to be a valuable thing in God's salvation history. Ruth's "commitment to Naomi transcends even the bonds of racial origin and national origin: Naomi's people and Naomi's God will henceforth be hers".²⁴ What she does is out of loving-kindness. Perhaps, Ruth feels she owes Naomi some kindness and no one could forbid her to do what she intends. If the relationship between the mother-in-law and the daughters-in-law was not very cordial, that kind of love may not have existed. No matter what, something motivated Ruth to make that decision for Naomi, and in making such a decision, she has to forsake her people, her god, her future, and her identity. She gives up her rights in order to be attached to the will of Naomi.

Mothers-in-law are a great help in so many ways, especially when it comes to assisting with childcare. They sacrifice all to come to the couple to help with their son's or daughter's growing family for some time. When such support works out as a mutually beneficial plan, it's great. She comes in to spend time with the grandchildren while the couple is relieved to do other things. When the mother-in-law becomes more of a trouble for the couple, it becomes more unbearable and all her sacrifices are not worth it.

Something might have motivated or influenced such a thriving relationship between Naomi and Ruth as well as Orpah. Naomi might have cherished these women and lived happily with them. Ruth and Orpah might not know all the customs of the Israelites and the God of Naomi, but they might have seen something in Naomi that is worthy to cling to or emulate, so they stay on. Ruth's pledge to continue following Naomi indicates that she is happy with Naomi, and by extension Naomi's God, and Naomi's people. Even if Naomi had earlier depicted that her country was in famine, Ruth is prepared to associate with such an unfortunate past. Again, Ruth is not perturbed about the God of Israel who had turned against Naomi.

In the African context, rivalry among in-laws can be traced to the conditioning and nurturing received by females in a patriarchal community. Women are brought up not to trust one another, to see the worst about one another, and consider the next woman as a "competitor". The typical mother-in-law, therefore, does not see the daughter-in-law as a daughter, but rather as a usurper, one who is coming to redirect the son's attention and affection away from the mother.

24 Bush, *Ruth and Esther*, 87.

Sigmund Freud, postulating on male and female subjectivity, explains the attachment boy children have for their mothers as the reason for the closeness between them even after the son's marriage.²⁵ No wonder, some mothers find it difficult to sever the emotional attachment they have with their sons when they become adults. Others can relate better with their sons-in-law because there is no feeling of animosity and do not see the sons-in-law as a usurper taking away the daughter. Those who sometimes experience a feeling of isolation whenever their sons get married feel that the attention and affection from the sons will be no more. Their sons have become for them their "small husbands" so any competitor, especially girls who are younger and more beautiful, can be a big blow.²⁶ The same may be said of brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law.

Faloore Omiyinka Olutola mentions several behaviour patterns that lead to quarrels or fights between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law:

the wife making effort to control the son or dictate orders to him on some issues even in the presence of the mother. Laying claim to the man (her husband) as if she is the one that gave birth to him, daughters-in-law listening or contributing to on-going conversation between the son and the mother especially when she is not invited, not giving necessary and due respect to the man when the mother is there, preventing or discouraging the husband from taking care of his younger one and other family members, wasting a large chunk of the husband's salary on what they eat instead of building their personal house, the wife's incessant complaints about the actions and inactions of the mother-in-law, and not taking good care of the mother-in-law whenever she is around. Other questions on the factors causing quarrels and sore relationships between them are mothers-in-law difficult to please; they still treat the woman's husband (their child) like a kid despite the fact that he is married, not ready to give a helping hand to wives in doing the house chores, visiting too often thereby they deny the couple the freedom they desire.²⁷

All these attitudes are very unhealthy and do not help build community, especially the kingdom of God on earth.

25 Sigmund Freud, "Responses to Questions", *Espirit* 31.32 (1963), 628-633.

26 Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); Robert Winston, *The Human Mind and How to Make the Most of It* (New York: Transworld Publishers, 2004).

27 Faloore Omiyinka Olutola, "Wife-Mother-in-Law Relationship and Violence among Yoruba Women of Southwestern Nigeria", *American Journal of Sociological Research* 2.2 (2012), 14-15.

There is a saying in Ghana that women are their own enemies. Some women have traditionally been one of the greatest hindrances to empowering women. Some mothers tend to abuse their own daughters or influence them to do what is wrong. In some cases, the older women want the younger women to go through similar pain and suffering to what they experienced in some time past, as if the “tradition” must go on. Sometimes, it becomes a twisted form of vengeance. Again, there can be times when women seem to compete with other women over their husbands. Some women would never appreciate any positive change in the life of another woman.

In-laws can destabilize the marriages of their children especially when the man is the only biological child or the most trusted breadwinner of the biological family. The thinking could be that the only pride and joy of the mother-in-law after doing all in her power to nurture the young man to an appreciable level, is taken from her – someone else has come to enjoy their labour. All that might have gone to her is now re-channelled to another woman. Some mothers-in-law scrutinize the dresses the daughter-in-law wears, to make her look a certain way in her own eyes. To some, a married woman should not dress too attractively. Such levels of oppression and mistrust manifest further beyond the mother–daughter-in-law relationship, often leading to the wife’s battery due to what the mothers-in-law say. Continuing to treat one’s child who has grown to marry as still “a child” can be one of the mistakes parents do. Thus, the tendency to control the partner of one’s own child is there. The way out is to accept that the child is grown and independent, and the wife of one’s child is somebody’s wife just as the mother-in-law is somebody’s wife.

There must be a healthy, mutual relationship between in-laws. The Christian witness must enable everyone to live at peace with all people, especially those that belong to one’s family. Paul’s letter to Titus hints at such an admonition:

Teach older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God (Titus 2:2–5; *NIV*).

The expectation is that older women should set a good example for the younger women and help them grow to love their husbands. How we carry ourselves in relationships matters. Our lives are the living testimony of our faith (2 Cor 3:2; 1 Thess 4:11–12). Our lives can attract others to love us and be committed to us even if we have very little to offer.

The church should advocate for true familial relationships. It is important to affirm trust, loyalty, and commitment in our familial relationships as Christians. Such a healthy mutual relationship between Naomi and the daughters-in-law that made Ruth long for more is worthy of emulation. Can others look at us and pledge to be like us, follow our footsteps, come to faith in our God, and be ready to sacrifice for us? The Christian's personal pledge to Christ must be loyal and faithful. No wonder when it becomes necessary, Boaz testifies that Ruth was a woman of substance and noble character (Ruth 3:10–11). Christians should live their lives so that others would testify of their loyalty, goodness, love, and sacrifices.

Conclusion

We have been reflecting on how to cultivate a new identity and hold on to it in Christ. That is what Christian mission calls for. We have established that we first need to break from our past before a new identity can be created. We need not rely on Naomi whose faith in God was shaken after experiencing calamities in life. At least she travelled to Moab with her faith and we need to learn from that. Once we are settled in Christ, there must not be any turning back. Our loyalty and obedience are key to a new relationship. How we depict ourselves to others too is important. We need not be a bad influence in the life of others. Above all, where it matters most, be a good husband, wife, in-law, friend, or relation.

We have observed that there is no need to underrate ourselves. The way we see ourselves is not the way people look at us. Naomi thought she was nobody but the people embraced her when she arrived in Bethlehem. It is not healthy for mothers-in-law to prove to their daughters-in-law that they are either strong or weak. Mothers-in-law have the potential to significantly change the power dynamics within families at many levels. As adult women, they carry a big influence. Whatever experiences adults go through in their marital life can serve as teaching moments or lessons to impact younger generations so that they do not go through the same mistakes and problems. They can serve as role models, and that may lead to stronger marriages, healthier lifestyles, and cordial relationships with

extended family members. Learn to show extraordinary commitment to your in-laws as well as others in your extended family. We do not have to repay evil for evil. Your family ties may be broken, but the cords of love should not be broken.

We can make others our family and friends if we affirm our faith in God through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. With Christ, all things are possible (Luke 1:37). That is why we need to give our lives to Christ so that the Holy Spirit can empower us to do the impossible.

Like Ruth, our unquestionable loyalty, humility, and steadfast love can prove to be a valuable thing to God and God's people. Make up your mind to be of exemplary character. The unconditional Christian sacrificial love that should exist among in-laws should help each see the other as a brother or sister in the Lord. Not only should Christians show loyalty to those they are familiar with, but even to non-Christians and the newly converted.

7

Theme: Finding Favour in the Eyes of Others

READING: RUTH 2:1-10

ANCHOR TEXT: “Why have I found favour in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?” (Ruth 2:10)

Introduction

The word “grace” is commonly defined as unmerited favour. Grace is used synonymously with favour, kindness, courtesy, or a good turn. Others include good will, support, sympathy, presents, and gifts from another. The one who enjoys all these cannot lay claim to them. It may be a show of preferential treatment from another, perhaps someone who does not deserve preferential treatment. However, it seems there are certain actions one can take to attract favour and grace.

The book of Ruth hints at acts that made Ruth attract favour in the eyes of Boaz. This explores how Christians can position themselves to attract favour. It also argues that Christians should not do good only to those they know, but invest in the life of others. How then does Ruth, who represents the undeserved, attract and win favour, and what lessons can we learn from that?

Exposition

The main character in chapter 2 is Boaz. He is described as “a prominent rich man” (Heb: *’îš gibbôr ḥayil*; Ruth 2:1). The Hebrew *’îš gibbôr ḥayil* has a wide range of meanings and can be translated as “man of valour.” It also means a person of “wealth”, “strength”, or “fit for the army” (Judg 6:12). Some English Bibles use a “prominent person” (NRSV), a “man of standing” (NIV), “a worthy man” (ESV). Boaz, thus, is a person of good character, a very able and mighty man. The same expression *’îš gibbôr ḥayil* is used for Gideon (Judg 6:12) and Jephthah (Judg 11:1), both of whom are described as men of valour or noble warriors.

There is nothing in the text that explains why Boaz is a mighty man. Looking at him as a rich farmer is ideal. He is not like Gideon or Jephthah who were warriors. Aldrien J. Bledstein says,

The introduction of Boaz is remarkable. He is a go'el, redeeming kinsman to Elimelech, and called an *'is gibbôr hayil*, usually translated “a mighty man of valor”, that is, a hero in war. *gibbôr* arises from “be strong” which, in Arabic, signifies “one who magnifies himself, behaves proudly, a tyrant who is bold, audacious”. This is the meaning employed by the J narrator in Gen. 6.4, which satirizes the “heroes of old” whom, ironically, Yahweh wipes out in the flood. However, Boaz is nowhere presented as a warrior. Other Hebrew meanings of the combination *'is gibbôr hayil* are: a man of substance, magnanimity, consideration, ability, strength or efficiency. As we will see, Boaz is all of these.¹

Boaz is also identified in relation to Naomi. We read: “Now Naomi had a kinsman (Heb: *meyuddā'*) on her husband's side” (Ruth 2:1). The Hebrew *meyuddā'* (*pual* participle of *yada'*) translated kinsman also denotes a relative (Prov 7:4) or a “a close friend” (2 Kgs 10:11). The root word *yd'* indicates someone who is known. Campbell proposes that it is translated as “covenant-brother”.² Boaz and Elimelech were family members (see Ruth 4:3, cf 3:2).

The setting is within an agrarian culture. Boaz is a farmer and Ruth a self-employed harvester – not an employee of Boaz. Ruth does not have any fixed income. Ruth is someone who depends on farmers to survive. She has an opportunity to pick the leftovers on people's farms. She is like a squatter who has travelled from her hometown to the city to depend on the leftovers of workers in the fields in the country. Those who glean do not have it easy with the workers. They are either molested, abused, or sacked. It would be very offensive for a gleaner to pick what the reapers wanted to pick.

Ruth takes the initiative to go out and pick leftover grains in the fields, knowing about the law that permits foreigners to do so, a practice described as gleaning (Ruth 2:2). Farmers are instructed by the law of Moses to leave the fallen grains when harvesting so that the poor and disadvantaged could pick them and feed themselves (Lev 19:9–10, 23:22–23; Deut 24:19). The law was a form of charity to the poor, a welfare scheme to support the needy. The Mosaic Law allowed the poor to glean behind the reapers of the fields in Israel to affirm that the Lord is God, and that God will bless the one who opens doors for the poor. Hence, giving opportunities to the poor may position one to attract some favour from the Lord.

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- 1 Aldrien J. Bledstein, “Female Companionship: If the Book of Ruth were Written by a Woman...”, in *Ruth*, *Feminist Companion to the Bible Vol 3*, ed., Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 121.
 - 2 Edward Campbell Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, AB 7 (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), 89.

The way the fieldwork is set up and how the working culture is designed are important to see. There is the farm owner who hires labourers to work for him. The labourers have a headman or a foreman. And there are other casual labourers, usually women who are employed to work on the farm during harvesting. When the men harvest the crops, they gather them on the ground and the women who follow them collect the gathered harvest and send it to the appropriate place for processing (Ruth 2:8–9). As they do so, some are leftover. As such, the poor follow to pick the leftovers –gleaning. There are rules one must follow to work in the field or glean, and the benefits of working in the fields are all clear in the story.

In the story, the workers start working when the owner, Boaz, is not in the field. The headman acts as the leader when the owner is not there. It could be a normal trend that the owner may come when he pleases to inspect how work is going. He comes in later to check on his fields, greets his workers, and eats with them during break time. He even sleeps in the fields during the harvest (Ruth 3:7). Ruth enters the farm of Boaz unknowingly. The phrase “as it happened” (Ruth 2:3) does not indicate that it was a matter of chance or luck that sent Ruth there. It is utterly radical grace that leads Ruth to the field of Boaz. It was not planned, yet bound to happen, and it happened.

While Ruth gleans behind the harvesters, Boaz, who is the farm owner, visits his worker and greets them “The Lord be with you” (Ruth 2:4). The greetings of Boaz to farmers in his field not only depict his faith but also his concern for the wellbeing of his workers. In Ghana, there are specific and appropriate greetings for each activity. The Akan greets *edwuma o!* (lit: work o) when engaged in any labour and the response is *edwuma da w’ase*” (lit: work appreciates/thanks you). However, those who are trading are greeted *fre sika o!* (lit: call for money, o), and the response is *sika mbra* (lit: let money come).

No sooner has Boaz entered his own field than he notices someone unusual. He seems to know all the workers and those who are gleaning, but there is this young woman he does not know. He, therefore, becomes curious: “To whom does this young woman belong?” (Ruth 2:5). Boaz wants further details about the young woman Ruth in his field and not simply her name. The headman of the harvesters replies Boaz: “She is the Moabite” (Ruth 2:5). Ruth is identified by her tribe or ethnic background and not by name. She does not belong to Naomi; rather she has come back with Naomi. Such a description does not make her significant in the eyes of the headman.

God's favour, however, was at play, and more favour is available for Ruth because, in spite of her insignificance in the eyes of the headman, Boaz sees her differently. For coming to Bethlehem with Naomi positioned Ruth to have favour in the eyes of Boaz.

Again, she would not have enjoyed favour in the eyes of Boaz if she sat at home. Before she came, Boaz had not seen her and was not concerned about her. Going out into the field to glean so she could support her home set the favour in motion. Boaz then gives her an assurance: "I have ordered the men not to bother you [*Heb: nāg'ēk*]" (Ruth 2:9). The Hebrew *nāg'ēk*, "bother you" also means "touch you" or "abuse you".

Women who glean behind reapers or harvesters face the danger of harassment and bullying. As such, Ruth is in a place where favour is rarely shown. Those who find favour with the harvesters can pick what they get and will not be subject to abuse. Others are chased out, beaten, or abused for picking what they gather as if they are not supposed to pick those ones. Ruth may have fallen into the hands of abusers because of the everyday dangers faced by women in the barley fields. Deciding to work to help a family Boaz has connection with positioned Ruth to gain favour. The implication of Boaz's order is that any worker who harasses Ruth or harms her will face his wrath. Moreover, she is to enjoy the provisions made for the workers. According to Eugene F. Roop, "Access to water and protection from harassment provide Ruth additional assistance not available to most gleaners."³ To some people, once you extend favour to a family member, you position yourself to more favours from them.

Such uncommon favour was beyond what Ruth expected. She only wants to glean but she encounters more grace. So, Ruth asked, "why have I found favour in your sight, that you should take notice of me (*Heb: lehakkîrēnî*), when I am a foreigner" (Ruth 2:10). The Hebrew *lehakkîrēnî* "to take notice of me" (root: *nkr*) also means "to treat a foreigner". In fact, the word *nokriyyāh* "foreigner" and *lehakkîrēnî* "to take notice of me" form a wordplay. Here, the use of *nokriyyāh*, is qualitatively different from the use of *gēr* (foreigner) in Deut 10:18–19.⁴

There are some lessons we can learn from actions of Boaz and Ruth.

3 Eugene F. Roop, *Ruth, Jonah, Esther*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2002), 48.

4 Andre LaCocque, *Ruth: A Continental Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2004), 70–71.

Doing good at all times

Ruth's question as to why she has gained favour in the eyes of Boaz raises several issues that need to be addressed. First, Boaz does not know her. Boaz rather open doors for Ruth because of what he has heard about Ruth. Boaz has not met Ruth in person. He only had heard about her. Naomi's posture when she arrives at Bethlehem makes one to believe that much as she looks down upon herself, she does not draw the people's attention to Ruth. The story does not say how Naomi introduces Ruth when she arrived. It is all about herself. She had even wanted Ruth to remain in Moab and live among her own people but Ruth declines. Naomi might have failed even to tell her close relatives, of whom Boaz was part, about Ruth. The introductory statement in Ruth 2:1 is very significant, though: "Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz." The story does not say anything about Naomi's relatives, or whether Naomi knows this relative and related with him. Boaz teaches Christians that they should not do good only to those they know in person but also those they have heard something about.

From the narrative point of view, Ruth comes to know that Boaz was a relative of Elimelech after coming home from gleaning. It seems probable that Naomi did not show Ruth around for her to know who the family members were. It was sheer coincidence that brings Ruth to Boaz's field. Boaz has already heard about Ruth but has not seen her. He knows "how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before" (Ruth 2:11). Such a description echoes how Abraham left his own family for a land God would show him (Gen 12:1-2). What Ruth had done for Naomi, and by extension the family of Elimelech, is enough to position her to attract favour from Boaz.

Boaz is modelled after the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31. He is girdled with strength, as his name indicates (Prov 31:17). The name Boaz may be a contraction of two words meaning "in him is strength". He works with his hands and opens these hands to the poor and needy (Prov 31:19-20). Proverbs 31 uses *gibbôr ḥayil* to provide a detailed metaphor of feminine character in the context of a family and a community, where the term speaks of a rich woman being the worth of a good wife to her husband; it praises the manual labour that she does, her fulfilment of responsibilities to those who need her, her ability to provide for her family, and her wisdom in caring for herself so she can share her strength with others. Meeting a virtuous person can open one to the grace of God and favour in the eyes of the person.

Phyllis Trible describes the incident at the farm beautifully. Boaz is a

man of power and prestige, he surveys the scene, speaking divine amenities to his reapers, and spots the female stranger. He does not know her. “Whose maiden is this?” he asks (v. 5, RSV). Truly a patriarchal question. After all, a young woman must belong to someone; she is possession, not person. Thus Boaz does not ask *her* name but rather the identity of her owner. His question fits his culture, but it does not fit this woman, who is in tension with that culture. Accordingly, the servant cannot answer in the traditional way. He cannot identify Ruth by a (male) lord; she has none. So the servant describes her as the foreign woman “who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab” (v. 6, RSV). Her name he does not give. Her identity he derives from her own strangeness and from another woman.⁵

Boaz was a very successful farmer and barley was one of his important crops. No doubt he was successful because he sought to honour the Lord in his daily work. For example, we know that there were other people who gleaned from the leftover grain in his field (Ruth 2:2). Some successful men and women do not want any of their relatives or those close to them to visit them. They hate family members who are poor. They would pass by without saying “hello”. They show no sympathy or kindness. One painful thing is to be in the company of friends who know your rich relative, and that relative passes without complimenting you. However, when the prominent relative is a good person, it is very helpful.

Boaz did good to Ruth not because of what he would get in return. Jesus teaches us that if we do good only to those whom we know, that is hypocrisy: “If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same” (Luke 6:33). A misinterpretation of the greatest commandment “love your neighbour yourself” (Mark 12:30–31) has been that if your neighbour loves you, you love the person back. The Golden Rule is not merely reciprocal. Again, it is not like how the neighbour treats you should be the way you treat the neighbour. At least, the one who gets stranded on the way will be treated with love.

The basis for the command to love our neighbour is the attitude of God that we should emulate. It is not because people will love back. God loves all in spite of the responses each one shows God. For Jesus, we should imitate God the Father. Jesus says: “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend,

5 Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 176.

expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men” (Luke 6:36). Our response to God’s grace towards us should be what we do for others. In most cases, we cannot give directly to God. As much as we do good to others, we have done it for God (Matt 25:40). The sages teach us: “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due; When it is in your power to do it” (Prov 3:27). For the apostle Paul, “while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (Gal 6:10).

For Phyllis Tribble, there is a lot of power-play in the story. Gender biases also take the best part of that culture. Ruth is nobody in the eyes of the male because they could not identify her with a “male” guardian. She has no husband and does not live in a man’s house. Among the Akan, the question *ofi fie ben mu?* (lit: from which house do you come from?) points to one’s identity within the family being more important than the name one bears. Even where the name is given, the family name is the most important. A person’s identity is tied to the house he or she lives in or comes from. It is the house that trains the individual and shapes the individual. A person who comes from a house of honour is expected to do honourable things. A person who is from a poor home is expected to dress, walk, and talk in ways that characterize the home. When poor people talk a big talk, it is unacceptable. Incidentally, it is the poor who talk big in Africa. It is said that one cannot chew more than one can bite.

In the ancient world, a person’s identity is also tied to the family and to the head of the family. If that person is married, the identity will be tied to the husband. Identity is a mark of belongingness. One cannot have an independent identity. But Ruth does not have a man in her life. She does not have a secure identity. Child of God, never think that you must necessarily be attached to a man before you can attract favour. It is not always the case that you need to be supported by a man before doors can open for you. A woman, Naomi, gave Ruth an identity.

Investing in others attracts favour

Naomi made it clear that Boaz was a close relative – “The man is a relative (Heb: *miggo’ālēnû*) of ours, one of our nearest kin” (Ruth 2:20). The Hebrew *miggo’ālēnû*, from the root *go’el*, also means “one who redeems” or “acts as a redeemer”. In other words, Boaz has some responsibility towards Ruth and Naomi. The kinsman has a right to redeem a relative from oppres-

sion, slavery, poverty, etc. Perhaps to Naomi it was Boaz's responsibility to take care of them, so he has done nothing strange.⁶ Christians are to note that each one has a responsibility to their relatives and not only the nuclear family members. There are times when Christians have to sacrifice to redeem relatives who are not doing well.

Ruth is a very cultured young woman. When she enters the field, she seeks permission from the headman (Ruth 2:7). The Hebrew cohortative with the particle *'ālaqāh-nā'* – literally meaning “please, let me glean” – indicates a plea.⁷ Before Ruth sets off from home, she seeks permission from her mother-in-law: “Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favour” (Ruth 2:2). Ruth was counting on favour to guide her and to open doors for her. Besides, Ruth was a very hardworking woman. She would not sit at home with the excuse that “I am a foreigner” or “I am a young woman”. She would not spend her time sleeping in bed, with the excuse that there is a lion outside which can devour her if she goes out (Prov 26:13). The sages say: “A slack hand brings poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. A child who gathers in summer is prudent, but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame” (Prov 10:5). She knows that a little sleep can make a person poor (Prov 6:10, 20:13).

The headman testifies about the hardworking character of Ruth: “Until now she is sitting in the house a little” (Ruth 2:7). The Hebrew text is uncertain. Translators emend the Hebrew *šibttāh* (“her sitting”; qal infinitive construct) to *šābtāh* mean “her rest”. She may have been sitting when Boaz notices her, or she may have taken only a short break throughout the time she has been on the field. The JSP has it “she has rested but little in a hut”. The uncertainty of the text makes the NIV put it “except for a short rest in the shelter”, the ESV states, “except for a short rest”, while the NRSV says “Without resting for a moment”.

Nevertheless, Ruth is a very hardworking young woman who cares for the home. Such a virtue makes a person very respectable. She invests her strength to care for Naomi. Taking care of the elderly is a virtuous thing to do. Among the Akan of Ghana, “a young boy or girl is trained to work hard from childhood. This is because, for the Akan people, hard work is of great

6 F. B. Huey, *Ruth*, EBC Vol 3 (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 514.

7 HALOT 1, 656.

ethical value.”⁸ Such training imbues the young person with the heart to take care of adults. The Akan elders say, *edwuma sin nnyi akatua* (lit: work half-done does not attract any pay). Hence, one needs to work to the satisfaction of all.

Truly, God allows Ruth to find favour in the eyes of Boaz because Ruth sacrifices for Naomi. Boaz agrees with his headman that Ruth should continue to work and gives further instructions: “keep close to my young women” (Ruth 2:8). Staying close to the women pictures one “attaching oneself” or “sticking like glue”. Ruth attaches herself to her mother-in-law and will not return to her own people. Ruth is asked to attach herself to the girls working for Boaz. Since Ruth is vulnerable, she stays within her limits. She need not push her boundaries to dare the system, or pretend that she deserves to be ahead of the other women who are gleaning. She cannot pretend that she deserves some respect as a foreigner. The Akan says, *Akɔdaa a ɔnni hwesofoɔ na asemɔne kotokuo sen n’aboboano* (lit: a child who has no guardian has a bag of troubles hanging on his doorway). The adage teaches that when one is prone to problems, carefulness is all that is needed. Some people do not have anyone to speak on their behalf or pay the price of their actions yet still they are very daring. Ruth is not like that.

Ruth is not the only woman gleaning in Boaz’s field. Of all the women who are gleaning, Ruth is the only woman Boaz notices. He becomes so interested in her that he goes to his headman to ask more about her. Maybe the town is so small that everybody knows each other. So, when someone new surfaces, the person becomes distinct and conspicuous. Linafelt quizzes:

So also with Boaz, there is real ambiguity in his approach to Ruth in ch. 2, when he first spies her in his field. Clearly, he displays a keen interest in her, but what is the source and nature of that interest? Is it familial and altruistic, as he implies in his statement in 2:11–12? Or is it sexual or romantic, as the exchange with his foreman (with its emphasis on her Moabite identity) earlier in the chapter might imply? Or are we even to imagine that Boaz himself is not entirely aware of his motivations – after all, at what point does one “realize” that one is interested in another romantically? And of course such interest does not preclude other interests and motivations.⁹

8 Paul Appiah-Sekyere, “Traditional Akan Ethics and Humanist Ethics: A Comparative Study”, *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 3.6 (2016), 112.

9 Tod Linafelt, “Narrative and Poetic Art in the book of Ruth”, *Int* (April 2010), 121–122.

Providing godly care for young women

Ruth wonders why she should gain favour in the eyes of Boaz: “why have I found favour in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner” (Ruth 2:10; NRSV). Some people would only show favour when they see young women. Some men would ask for favour from women before they would reciprocate, and usually, they ask the women to give their bodies in return for the favour. Madipoane Masenya argues that a woman, as well as her sexuality, should not be “under the legitimate control of a particular man” and become an object to satisfy male lust.¹⁰ Boaz is trying to play it safe here as if he is not interested in Ruth sexually. He is not trying to take advantage of Ruth because she has strayed into her farm. Certainly, Ruth stood out among the women even if Boaz knows all the women who usually come to his field. First, he has noticed an unusual person, of which some may take advantage. Second, Ruth is vulnerable because she is a foreigner. Third, she is a woman. Fourth, she is a young girl, and that makes her case serious. As Gafney puts it: “Ruth is multiply-marginalized, socially and sexually vulnerable.”¹¹ Boaz knows Ruth is vulnerable but does not take advantage of her.

Only Naomi and Boaz are described as old persons in the story. Ruth and Boaz’s workers are described in chapter 2 as young. Boaz refers to Ruth as a young maiden (Ruth 2:5) or “my daughter” (Ruth 2:8). The foreman is a young man and the harvesters are either young women or young men. The foreman, nevertheless, calls Ruth a young woman. Naomi also knows that those who work on Boaz’s farm are girls (Ruth 2:22). If Boaz shows kindness to a young woman Ruth, then it is not strange. Boaz does not look out only for those who were of equal status to himself. It is unacceptable to live in a world that only stretches out a loving hand to those who are of equal status.

Jesus condemned the Pharisees for showing classism and looking down on women. When a woman weeps and oils Jesus’ feet, the Pharisee whose house Jesus is visiting is not happy with the woman (Luke 7:36–50). God does not show partiality. In the Acts of the Apostles, when Peter is sent to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, he says, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34). Paul reminds us that in the kingdom of

10 Madipoane Masenya, “Trapped between Two ‘Canons’: African Women in the HIV/Aids Era”, in *African Women, HIV/Aids and Faith Communities*, eds., Isabella Phiri and B. Haddad (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003), 122.

11 Wilda C. Gafney, “Ruth”, in *The African Bible: Reading Israel’s Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora*, eds., Randall C. Bailey et al (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 251.

God, “There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28; NRSV). James also says “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory” (Jas 2:1; ESV).

The foreman replies to Boaz that Ruth has been working non-stop ever since she stepped on the field to glean. It shows how Ruth is a hardworking person. The Akan says, *wosum akwadworɔ fidie a, woyi agya waadwo*, that is, if you sow in laziness, you reap I told you so. It means a hardworking person prepares assets for the future. A person reaps what he or she sows.

It is no wonder that Boaz gives her seed, seed, and more seed – barley to glean, parched grain to eat, stalks lying cut on the ground, an ephah of barley to take home, along with the promise of more every day throughout the harvest season. Ordinary seeds will fill the stomach. A life-giving seed will fill the womb and looks forward to countering barrenness. He also gives her food to eat, water to drink, and free access (Ruth 2:14–17).

Our strong faith opens doors for favour

Ruth has professed faith and allegiance to the God of Israel. Her whole life, thus, would be directed and determined by God. So, if she finds her way into the fields of Boaz, then it is not by chance. Only God could have sovereignly and marvellously orchestrated this movement. If the story says Ruth “happened to” come to the field of Boaz (Ruth 2:3), then this a reference to the divine hand of God. Through God’s gracious providence, the field of Boaz becomes the site and space for God’s intervention. When you position yourself strategically in a place God leads you even without you knowing it, God’s favour will definitely locate you.

Ruth decides to go to a farm where she would gain favour in the eyes of the owner and of course that is what happens. Her faith bears fruit. Her prayers are answered. Sometimes, the Christian needs to pray for specific favours. It is “normal” for the poor girls who glean on people’s farms to be abused. Ruth has put herself in harm’s way by going out to search for food, yet her step of faith yields more fruit. Sometimes, the legal actions we take to survive can end us up in more trouble. However, as long as God is on your side, you are more than a conqueror and an overcomer. Favour will flow on your path when you wake up or sit down. Favour will follow you all the days of your life (Ps 23:6).

Boaz is full of praise to God for the life of Ruth. He praises Ruth for her sacrificial life and her faith:

But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" (Ruth 2:11-12; ESV)

Boaz is out to show favour but he wants the Lord to repay Ruth for all that she has done and so prays for her. Campbell makes a profound statement about the import of Boaz's prayer:

It is imperative to realize that there is no mechanical doctrine of reward and punishment here; what is here is a confident affirmation that God's blessing follows upon righteous living. In terms of the now well-known covenant formulations of the OT, God first favors his people on his own initiative, then requires that they live in accord with their status as his people, and then responds with blessing or curse to their obedient and disobedient living. Human righteous acts do not incur God's favor, they live out God's favor. God's people do acts of *hesed* not in order to deserve God's grace, but in order to respond to his grace. God's blessing is then a response to the response, one which his people may be confident but of which they cannot be mechanically sure. To put it more directly with reference to Boaz' blessing of Ruth, his words really are a prayer, a petition and not a statement of doctrine.¹²

When Ruth goes back home after gleaning for the first time, Naomi, an experienced woman, knows that somehow something more than the ordinary had gone on. She has found favour with the harvesters or reapers or the owner of the farm. Truly, Ruth encounters radical grace because of her faith in the God of Israel. She goes home with more than enough because the owner of the field locates her. She is not hurt, not taken advantage of. She rather enjoys lunch-break drinks and food as if she was part of Boaz's workers. She eats her fill with some leftovers. Radical grace comes upon people so that they enter doors that are closed, climb difficult heights, and sit at places that are restricted.

12 Campbell, *Ruth*, 113.

During the dialogue between Ruth and Boaz at the harvest time, Ruth pleads with Boaz: “may I continue to find favour (Heb: *ḥēn*) in your sight” (Ruth 2:13). Those who find favour should not end it there. They should seek for more favour. When favour locates you, God will cause you to sit with princes and princesses (1 Sam 2:7–8). You will be treated like a king. You will enjoy food meant for special people. You will be counted among the nobles and blessed. Mary was from a humble family but when favour located her, she was called “blessed” (Luke 1:35). May the favour of God be your portion.

Boaz opens lots of opportunities to Ruth. She is permitted to stay with the women who work for Boaz. She is elevated from being someone who gleans to someone who moves along with the workers of Boaz. Ruth is also permitted to drink from the water jars the men have filled and not what the women have filled. That is radical grace at work, a double elevation. In a culture where women are not given all the privileges men have, it is strange for Ruth to drink the water the men have fetched. It is strange for Ruth to share what the men deserve. When the favour of God locates you, what is in store and reserved for kings and princes will come to you. May your faith, as a child of God, cause you to find uncommon favour with God.

Little sacrifices unlock vast blessings and favour, and great sacrifices unlock greater favour. It may have taken much from Ruth to take care of Naomi. It may have cost her all her family, her homeland, and identity. She may have sacrificed being a citizen to become an immigrant. All these prepare a special identity for her and open special doors for her.

Ruth’s favour overflows so much that it transforms Naomi’s emptiness and hopelessness into optimism. Naomi’s demeanour changes when enough food comes to her home. She is filled with a renewed sense of hope and thankfulness: “And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, ‘May he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!’” (Ruth 2:20). Campbell writes: “Her blessing is for Boaz, but it takes the form of praise to Yahweh as the one who, in spite of her complaint, still does act in *hesed*, among his people.”¹³ How often do we complain when we fall into calamities like Naomi and start to praise God when we enjoy new favours! Is your favour ending with you alone – have you forsaken the living or the dead? Do people see you as blessed yet those around you are not enjoying part of your blessings? How has your favour affected those who live with you, your parents or your guardian?

13 Campbell, *Ruth*, 113.

Even though Naomi acknowledges that Ruth had some favour, it does not take long for her to see God's hand at play. Naomi does not remember that earlier God's hand was heavy upon her. Ruth does go to the farm of Boaz, and not just a single time. It takes just one day for Ruth to have unlimited access to the farm, to get food consistently and regularly. For the next two months at least, throughout the harvest period, Ruth and Naomi will eat their fill. The wheat or barley harvest falls within a time associated with the Feast of Pentecost or Feast of Weeks (Deut 16:9–12). Pentecost is also identified with the Feast of First Fruits (Lev 23:9–14), where one was to wave the first fruits of the harvest before the Lord in faith that he would provide more of the same.

Boaz's faith also makes him act kindly. Divine favour makes Boaz take care to protect Ruth from male harassment (Ruth 2:8–9, 21–22). Webb says, "Boaz acts as Ruth's provider and protector."¹⁴ He orders that no man should touch Ruth. Naomi also advises Ruth to stick to the provision from Boaz.

God's providence enables Ruth and Naomi to enjoy the new grain.¹⁵ They do not farm but would regularly eat. Such a provision echoes how the Lord's covenant with Israel enables them to take over land that flows with milk and honey, and to enjoy the fruit of the land through grace (Exod 3:8). The mention of the feast of Pentecost echoes the grace of God to provide for his people. Pentecost is celebrated to thank God for His provision for another year, a celebration of life and new beginnings. The harvest festival is celebrated to express joy and thanks to the Lord who provides for the poor and the widows in due season.¹⁶

Are you struggling with what you can put on your table? Is your life filled with emptiness because of the loss of some dear ones or the breadwinner of the home? Recollect your steps and have faith in God who gives in abundance. God is about to usher you to your harvest period so that your emptiness is filled with continual provisions. The fruitfulness of the harvests will soon be your portion. God is about to provide you with security and with all that guarantees life. In the view of Chisholm,

14 Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 44.

15 Reg Grant, "Literary Structure in the book of Ruth", *BSac* 148.592 (1991), 429–430.

16 Benjamin Mangrum, "Bringing 'Fullness' to Naomi: Centripetal Nationalism in the Book of Ruth", *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 33 (2011), 78.

Boaz's response to Ruth's request assured the "empty-handed" one that her circumstances were about to change. The barley represented the fruit of the harvest and signaled that the time of famine, for both Bethlehem and Naomi, was over. It may even foreshadow Obed, who was the fruit of Boaz's union with Ruth and the one who would provide for Naomi's security (cf 4:14–16).¹⁷

God has not stopped showing his kindness; do not stop showing kindness to others. It is time to rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that you are directed to a place where you can come home with a plentiful harvest. Never think that all who come by your way are out of luck. Sometimes, our focus is on the person who supported us or opened doors for us and we hardly see the hand of God in all that come our way. We attribute some greater amount of agency to kind persons. We are full of praise for people and we leave God out. As a child of God, find time to praise the Lord who opens doors of favour for you and brings good people your way. Allow divine grace to drive your wheels into a new dimension.

Give thanks after you see food on your table. Give thanks to God after you see yourself in a place that can change your life. Give thanks to God for securing a job. Give thanks to God for the provision that would ensure that no one hurts you, or after escaping harm in an accident. All is possible because of God's grace and favour. Understand God's hand to be at work in our good fortune.

God has blessed each one of us and positioned us to be of help to someone else. You cannot say you have nothing to offer. God prepares Ruth to show favour to Naomi. Ruth will go to whatever length to find food for Naomi. Boaz becomes a blessing to others when God blesses him. He is not selfish. When God gives us a harvest, it gives us the opportunity to show favour to others. Iain Duguid says, "The grace of God that we have received is to be extended by us to others, so that all may hear the good news of redemption in Christ."¹⁸

17 Robert B. Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 662.

18 Iain M. Duguid, *Esther & Ruth*, REC (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2016), 319.

Conclusion

We have been reflecting on the favour that Boaz showed to Ruth on account of Ruth's favour or kindness shown to Naomi. We found that it is not good to show favour to only those we know. We should be kind to all as Christians. Whatever we do is an investment that will surely mature, and the benefits will come back to us. Sometimes, people capitalize on their identity or gender to attract favour. Ruth does not give herself out because she is a young woman. Rather, it is God who opens doors for Ruth. Her faith in God makes the difference. Our faith in God will not be in vain. Continue to show kindness and God will open doors of favour in your life.

8

Theme: Showing Compassion to the Underprivileged

READING: RUTH 2:8-18

ANCHOR TEXT: “Blessed be the Lord whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead.” (Ruth 2:20)

Introduction

The introductory part of Ruth 2 indicates that Boaz is a relative of Elimelech. There is a high probability that he knows Naomi. Certainly, Boaz hears about the return of Naomi and is quick to recall the story of Naomi when his overseer of the harvesters helps him to identify Ruth (2:6-7). The story, however, never mentions any intervention made earlier by Boaz to support Naomi who had returned empty-handed. He does not show any initiative to help Naomi. Later, he sees the need to support Ruth. His care and compassion for Ruth, thus, have lessons for us.

This sermon explores how Ruth attracts kindness and compassion from Boaz. The emphasis is on what compassion is, with the attempt to locate it within the context of duty. The aim is to encourage all Christians to cultivate a heart of compassion in our world that is compassionless. It argues that if children are nurtured with compassion, they grow to be the kind of people society looks out for. Participating in God’s mission requires a heart of compassion.

Exposition

Ruth lives with her mother-in-law in a town that is not her own. She is a foreigner in Bethlehem and has not been there for long. But she has to take care of her mother-in-law and provide for her upkeep. As it happens, the mother-in-law is from Bethlehem, yet she depends on this foreigner. One day, Ruth asks permission from her mother-in-law to go out and glean so that she can get some food on the table. Permission is granted and Ruth happens to enter the farm of Boaz, who is described as a kinsman of Elimelech, the dead husband of Naomi. She seeks permission from the workers and starts gleaning until Boaz, the farm owner, comes around and inquires about her identity.

When Boaz gets to know who Ruth is, he sees the need to help her. Boaz makes it clear that he has taken notice of Ruth because of her kindness to Naomi. He is doing all that for Ruth because she has left her father and her mother and her native land, and come to live among a people she does not know (Ruth 2:11–12). Eugene Roop, following Fewell and Gunn, comments that “there are hints that Boaz may have interests that go beyond family responsibility. His speech is sprinkled with words that have sexual as well as nonsexual connotations, including his persistent concern that Ruth not be molested.”¹ In all, Ruth’s kindness motivates Boaz to show kindness.

It is common knowledge that some men would never give free lunch. They cannot give gifts to women with no strings attached. The world is full of people who always follow a transactional principle – “give and take”, “I scratch your back, you scratch mine”. However, the answer from Boaz makes it categorically clear that he is showing favour to Ruth, not counting on sexual favours in return. Boaz wants to find a way to show favour (Heb: *hēn*) to Ruth for what she has done for Naomi. Hence, Boaz offers a prayer pronouncing blessings on Ruth: “May you be richly rewarded by the Lord God of Israel, under whose wing you have come to take refuge” (Ruth 2:12; NIV). For Boaz, what he is doing is because he is a man of faith.

Ruth addresses Boaz as “my Lord” (Heb: *’ădonî*), a term used in an emphatic plural sense or “plural of majesty” but with a singular possessive ending (Ruth 2:13). It is used for God as the Lord of Lords (Deut 10:17) to show God’s sovereignty over all. It also means “master” or “owner” (Gen 24:9, 10). It is used as a sign of respect for the angels that visit Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:2, 18). Sarai addresses her husband Abram as “my Lord” (Gen 18:2). The Hittites who gave a tomb to Abraham to bury Sarah call him “my lord” (Gen 23:6, 11, 15). Rebekah addresses the servant who is looking for a wife for Isaac as “my lord” (Gen 24:18). When David is running from Saul and hides in a cave, he calls out to Saul, “my lord” (1 Sam 14:8).

Boaz does not allow Ruth to eat among the young women who are working for him. We learn that because of the favours Boaz extends to her, “she sat beside the reapers” (Ruth 2:14). Earlier, she had to stand and reap among the young women (2:8), but now she sits and eats besides the men. It is like an elevation from a beggar or a hireling to a guest or an heir. Ruth sits among the privileged. She is not among those who glean. She eats what is

1 Eugene F. Roop, *Ruth, Jonah, Esther* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2002), 48.

served and has her fill. We learn that “she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some leftover” (Ruth 2:14). When the poor are eating and are satisfied, the mind is always on what may be available the next time. So for the poor, it is not what is available now but the time to come. To a large extent, Ruth did not simply enjoy the meal and take her eyes off her mission – she prepared herself to send some home.

The Hebrew verb *wattotar* – translated “and to have leftover” (Ruth 2:14) in the English versions – follows at least three different interpretations. The first translation interprets her to say that she leaves the place after eating (see ASV; KJV; LXX). The second translation is that she eats food and had some leftover (NRSV; RSV; ESV; NAB; NKJV; NLT). It may seem that she sends the leftover that was reserved for Naomi (Ruth 2:18b). The third translation says that she eats until she is filled, and leaves some food remaining. The verb is a *waw* consecutive plus a *hiphil* third person feminine singular, giving an impression that Ruth intentionally leaves some of the food. Since the men had passed the food to her, it could mean that what was given to her was more than enough. So, one can say that she eats part and leaves some. All along, she is thinking about Naomi.

Caring for the underprivileged as a Christian duty

The Book of the Covenant addresses the attitude towards widows and orphans at the beginning of a series of laws (Exod 22:21–23:9). The concerns of the poor and vulnerable are bracketed within the consideration for the alien. For example:

Do not mistreat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, when they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry; I will become angry and kill you with the sword, and your wives will become widows, and your children orphans. (Exod 22:22–24)

Nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit. (Exod 23:3; 23:6, NRSV cf Lev 19:15; Deut 1:17)

You shall not mistreat a foreigner. You know what it feels to be a foreigner, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. (Exod 23:9)

That is to say, any form of affliction, oppression, partiality, or dehumanization towards the widow, orphan, poor, or sojourner will attract intervention from the Lord. The reason is that God is the protector of the widow

and orphan, who without a husband or father might easily fall victim to maltreatment from others. One should not harden the heart or shut the hand against one's brother, sister, poor, and needy (Deut 15:7, 11).

As we go about our daily life, we should seek opportunities to share and be generous to those less fortunate. God expects all to be compassionate because God shows preferential consideration for the poor. "Whoever oppresses the poor insult their Maker, but the one who is kind to the needy honours him" (Prov 14:31). Again, "Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss" (Prov 22:16; NRSV). Isaiah explains that "When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them" (Isa 41:17; ESV). To the psalmist, when the poor person cries, Lord hears and will save him out of all his troubles (Ps 34:6, 72:12). It is the Lord who delivers the poor and needy from him who robs him (Ps 35:10). In the middle of a Deuteronomic sermon, Moses praises the Lord as the one who "executes justice for the orphan and widow, and loves the alien, providing him food and clothing" (Deut 10:18).

There are blessings for people who serve the poor. The generous will be blessed (Ps 41:1; Prov 14:21, 22:9). That is why it is necessary to affirm the words of Deuteronomy: "Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to" (Deut 15:10; NIV). Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord and God will deliver such a person in the day of trouble. God is the one who will repay the generous person for his deed (Prov 19:17). The prophet Isaiah says: "And if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday" (Isa 58:10; NIV). Certainly, God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor 9:5, 8), and that is what the Macedonians did, even though they did not have much (2 Cor 9:4).

The New Testament also emphasizes care for the poor. Jesus was a man of compassion. Everywhere He went He was doing good. He stopped in his tracks to heal the sick, and turned His attention to those who called for help by the roadside although there were crowds beside Him. Jesus attended to widows whose children were sick or dead, and fed multitudes who had come to him to listen to the word of God. Jesus said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3; Luke 6:20).

We may quickly say, Jesus is God. Yes. We must also be godly and show a Christ-like attitude to others.

The apostle Paul admonishes the Ephesian believers: “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labour, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (Eph 4:28). Sharing with the poor is an act of good works. The believer has “to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share” (1 Tim 6:18). To the writer of James, our Christian faith is measured by acts of good works. Treating the poor badly or failing to share with the poor means one does not have faith at all.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (Jas 2:14–17; ESV).

The blessings from giving to the poor make it imperative for believers to consider inviting the poor and needy to parties and celebrations rather than those who have plenty to eat: “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:13–14; NIV).

Compassion is a greater virtue than sympathy and empathy. That is to say, compassionate people do not only sympathize and empathize but also actively help alleviate the sufferings of others. In other words, compassion is not only about thoughts, feelings, and emotions, but also about actions and solutions.

Paul Appiah-Sekyere explains that among the Akan of Ghana, one “common moral/ethical value among the Akans is hospitality. In fact, Akan hospitality connotes generosity and it is very much interrelated with Akan communal spirit.” He adds that, “The Akan proverb ‘*Ɔhɔhɔ nna abɔnten so*’ which literally means ‘the stranger does not sleep on the street’ attests in a crystal way to the nature and magnitude of the moral value of Akan hospitality.”²

2 Paul Appiah-Sekyere, “Traditional Akan Ethics and Humanist Ethics: A Comparative Study”, *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 3.6 (2016), 113.

Who are the underprivileged among us?

Naomi comes to Bethlehem, her hometown, without any source of income or a farm to depend on. If Naomi, who is an old woman, has to find a way of surviving yet also has with her a young woman to feed, then her situation is dire. So, Ruth faces real physical danger. She is in need of food, and is without her own family or other formal support system in Judah. She is therefore dependent and needy. Her hope is only with the God of Israel who opens doors for the poor and underprivileged. Many people around us are in the same situation as Naomi and Ruth.

If Ruth catches Boaz's eye, then it is not only because she stays with Naomi but also because Boaz is generous. Boaz seems to be yearning to do good that day. Boaz makes sure that he allows Ruth to glean to gain something for her wellbeing (Ruth 2:8–9, 14–16). In the words of Campbell:

Boaz will prove to be one who can give more than is legally required; the only way Ruth can act correspondingly is to be a more-than-ordinary recipient. She is after all a foreigner and a woman, and, as her mother-in-law warned her in [Ruth] 1:11–13, with next to no prospects in Judah.³

What has become of the proverbial “Ghanaian hospitality” or “African hospitality”? A column article by Kofi Baah-Bentum from a newspaper in Ghana, *Graphic online*, on 28 September 2018 states:

Ghanaians are known to be one of the most hospitable and warm people on earth. The average Ghanaian is likely to share a meal with total strangers and engage them in all manner of conversations without bothering to know where they are from. And so much the better if the discussion is on politics, sports, religion or funerals. Indeed, our African warmth and hospitality are supposed to be the fulcrum around which our tourism revolves. ... The sad reality is the affable, bubbly, hospitable Ghanaian has been murdered by harsh economic conditions and a desire to get rich quick.⁴

Rockson Adofo also writes: “Every Tom, Dick and Harry wants to take advantage of the Ghanaian because of our unregulated culture of hospitality. In the name of, and upholding hospitality, the Ghanaian will lie low

³ Campbell, *Ruth*, 111.

⁴ Kofi Baah-Bentum, “A Hospitable Ghanaian: Who can Find”, *Graphic Online*, <https://www.graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/a-hospitable-ghanaian-who-can-find.html>

or flat to be walked over by a foreigner”⁵ The Akan says, *banyin a ne yer-nom pii no dze kɔm na ɔda* (lit: a man with many wives goes to bed with an empty stomach). That is to say, a man with many wives is unpredictable. Each of the wives would assume he has gone to the other to eat so there would be no preparation for him. Perhaps, too much of everything is bad. If all the wives were to be compassionate, the man would never go to bed hungry. Boaz is a man of compassion. He had a very big heart and is prepared to show love to the needy. Let us turn to explore what compassion is and how we can develop people who can be compassionate.

What is compassion?

The word compassion literally means “to suffer together” or “co-suffering”. Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas define compassion as “the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help”.⁶ Compassion is described as an inclination or an orientation towards suffering others. Compassion is not the same as empathy. While empathy is sharing the feelings and experiences of others, compassion goes beyond that to include concern or caring for others as well as acting on behalf of others. Empathy is inward-focused while compassion is outward-focused. Compassion is also not “sympathy” because the latter has an idea of feeling “pity” or “sadness” on another person’s behalf. Aristotle defines compassion – *eleos* – as follows:

Let compassion be a sort of distress at an apparent evil, destructive or distressing, which happens to someone who doesn’t deserve it, and which one might expect to happen to oneself or someone close to one, and this when it appears near.⁷

Compassion is also similar to what Immanuel Kant describes as Categorical Imperative: People are to “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law”. In other words, act in such a way that you “treat humanity, whether in your own person or in any other person, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means”.⁸

5 Rockson Adofo, “The Self-humiliating Ghanaian Hospitality”, *Ghana Web* 9 July 2017, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/The-self-humiliating-Ghanaian-hospitality-556803>

6 J. L. Goetz, D. Keltner, and E. Simon-Thomas, “Compassion: An Evolutionary analysis and Empirical Review”, *Psychological Bulletin* 136.3 (2010), 351.

7 Quoted by Roger Crisp, “Compassion and Beyond”, *Ethic Theory Moral Practice* 11 (2008), 234.

8 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

For Kant, unlike Categorical Imperatives, there are “hypothetical imperatives” which are commands that depend on the goals to be fulfilled in times of personal situations as well as particular human desires and dispositions. They apply only in particular circumstances, for particular people who happen to have these desires. A Categorical Imperative is universal and impartial because all people are expected to act in precisely the same way, as long as they are rational.

It is an understatement to say that Ghanaians love funerals. In such times of loss, many will visit the bereaved family to sympathize, empathize, or show compassion. There are those who would cry with those who have lost their loved ones. Other would be hired to cry so that the public would know that the family is grieving. Such hired people do not feel what the family is feeling; they are only doing their duty. Others come to sit their bereaved family because it is their social responsibility to be there. They also may not feel what the family is feeling and may even use their presence as a means to eat, drink, and become merry. If they are not shown appreciable hospitality, they become angry with the family that has lost a dear one. In most cases, the donations they make are not commensurate with the hospitality given.

It is impossible to feel compassionate for those around and not suffer for them. One cannot stand by and watch someone else suffer and not become motivated to take action to stop the pain or help out. Other synonyms for compassion may include:

- Concern
- Benevolence: a disposition to do good, acts of kindness
- Sympathy
- Empathy: sensitivity or awareness of another’s feelings, experiences, or thoughts
- Mercy
- Grace: disposition or instance of courtesy, clemency, or kindness
- Kindness: the act of being kind
- Benevolence

Compassion is modelled on the nature of God as a Compassionate God and on the unconditional love of God shown to humankind. The songwriter says about the compassion of Jesus:

Press, 1993), 421-429.

Everywhere He went, he was doing good
The Mighty Healer, He cleansed the Lepers
When the crippled saw Him, they started walking
Everywhere He went, my Lord was doing good.

Such unconditional love is usually described as *agape* in Greek. The Latin puts it as *caritas*, from which we learn “charity”. Compassion is thus essential to human relationships. Philosophers sometimes speak of compassion in the form of *altruism* and its opposite, *egoism*.

While it is necessary to have a heart of compassion and reach out to others, burn out can set in. “Burn out” or “compassion fatigue” is a condition that plagues people so that they become fed up of doing good. Compassion fatigue has been described as “a physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion that takes over a person and causes a decline in his/her ability to experience joy or care for others”.⁹ Such people show decreased empathy towards others, avoid the company of others, and show signs of loss of happiness and joy in relationships. Henri Nouwen explains compassion fatigue this way:

Massive exposure to human misery often leads to psychic numbness. Our minds cannot tolerate being constantly reminded of things which interfere with what we are doing at the moment. When we have to open our store in the morning, go about our business, prepare our classes, or talk to our fellow workers, we cannot be filled with the collective misery of the world.¹⁰

Let us discuss compassion under these four areas:

1. **Knowing and recognizing that there is suffering**

This is the capacity to recognize that others are in need or suffering, which comes from a heart that is full of warmth. A person with such a capacity is considerate and caring, and finds it easy to be kind-hearted. Some recognize a need but do not take any action. They may talk about it, theologize, and even recommend what can be done, but would not lift a finger to help. Others are cold towards those who are suffering. They have no sympathy or empathy towards those in need. They may think that the situation the

9 L. McMullen, “Oncology Nursing and Compassion Fatigue: Caring Until It Hurts. Who is Caring for the Caregiver?” *Oncology Nursing Forum* 34.2 (2007), 491-492.

10 Henri Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (Westminster, MD, USA: Doubleday Publishing, 2006), 51.

needy person is in serves that person right. The sufferer deserves what he or she is going through. Such a person cannot see what the sufferer is seeing. She or he is blind to what others feel. Nevertheless, there are those whose kindness springs from a heart that feels the pain of others.

Kind-hearted people always seek to build familial relationships with others. They see the other as a brother, sister, son, or daughter. Such familial bonds go a long way to inspire care and support. Boaz knows what Ruth is going through. He knows she is a widow and therefore needs some support. He is moved to help Ruth who does not have someone who can provide for all her needs. That is why he goes to great lengths to instruct his workers to give Ruth free access to all opportunities so that she can have enough grain. He knows she is in need and so he is quick to address Ruth as “my daughter”. Knowing who others are opens avenues for others to know who you are. Knowing ourselves honestly too is a good way to identify with others. If we do not know who we are, it is difficult to be affectionate, intentional, and caring.

Christians need to know themselves first in all they do. They should remember who they were in the past. Significantly, Israel was to remember that once they were slaves and needy (Deut 24:18–20). We also need to remember how we were nobody and God has made us somebody. To Peter, once we were no people but God has made us a people (2 Pet 2:9). Paul instructs Timothy to tell the rich not to be high-minded or proud, or set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who gives us richly and ceaselessly all things to enjoy (1 Tim 6:17). We need to stop looking down on others, especially the poor and needy, and stop feeling superior to them (Rom 12:3–5). Sometimes we act as if we have it all. We tend to make remarks like: “do you know who I am?” Remember what Jesus said to the rich fool: “Foolish man! Tonight, your life will be taken from you. So who will get those things you have prepared for yourself?” (Luke 12:20). If our lives can be taken from us, then all we have can be taken from us, no matter the insurance we take or investment we make. “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” (1 Cor 4:7; NIV). If we cultivate humility in our hearts, it will be easier for us to be compassionate towards others. Our hearts can see and feel what is inside the hearts of others.

2. Showing affection

To be affectionate implies being friendly, showing love or fond feelings towards another. In some cases, it is about being sentimental about the happiness of others. Such a person loves the neighbour as the self (Lev 19:17–18; Matt 22:37–39; Mark 12:39). Maybe it is right to say that placing the other above oneself, bringing oneself low so that others may go high, is not the right way to be affectionate. Nevertheless, being humble in Christ will call for placing others above ourselves. The way you would treat yourself should match with the way you want others to treat you. We need to do to others what we want others to do to us (Matt 7:12).

As believers, we need to be touched by what others are going through so that we can start caring for others and break free from the attitude of selfishness. The world is not all about ourselves. The ability to touch others matters. Proverbs says, some withhold from giving out and they end up with losses in what they kept while others open their hands to others and the more they give, the more they increase (Prov 11:24). There are times we have to put our focus and energy on the other person and limit personal goals because the human tendency to seek our own first to neglect others is high. We all have our own suffering. That does not mean we should do all we can to end our sufferings before we attend to that of others. Let us learn to move towards others who need help, cry with those who suffer loss, and sympathize with those who are sick or broken.

Compassion is about understanding others. We cannot understand someone if we cannot accept that person. In most cases, people do not fall into need by choice. Circumstances play a large part. We may provide what we think others need without addressing their real need. If Ruth was to be in her hometown, her story might be different. Hence, we need to learn how to accept people for who they are and create better conditions for them. The apostle Paul writes that we should think like Christ and treat others as more important than ourselves (Phil 2:3).

3. Intentionally taking action to intervene

Being intentional goes beyond wishing there is relief from suffering. Wishful thinking is not what is explained here. It is about intentionally acting with the hope that suffering can end. Being generous means giving out to others and showing love for its own sake, while kindness involves helping others to be happy. Both acts, generosity and kindness, are expected of Christians.

To be compassionate does not simply mean offering grand shows of generosity, nor does it mean thinking exclusively about someone who is in pain. It is about intentionally supporting whoever is around you. Many people sit in the pews of the chapels and temples going through pain, while all they hear is God loves them. Yet, there are no practical solutions offered to ease their pain. Sometimes, the eye contacts we make, the smiles we give, and the non-judgmental ear we offer when listening to such persons whom we do not know much about can be an act of compassion. Asking someone how the day is going is an act of compassion. Great things are usually found in small compartments. The very small actions we take can change someone's world, and connect us to other people. It helps others to see how important they are to you. It helps them know that you see and appreciate them.

The way Job sees his three friends is a lesson for us all. Job describes Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar as miserable comforters (Job 16:2) and ignorant (Job 17:2). They had been planning to comfort him in his troubles but instead they end up humiliating him. Job complains about the words the friends were using to torment him (Job 16:1–5, 19:3, 21:34). Such communication can be seen among couples in our world. We try to correct others but the way the communication goes demeans and destroys them.

A common saying goes: "If you love me love my dog". One cannot single out an individual who is in the company of others and show love to that individual alone. Your friend's spouse, children, siblings, parents, etc, should also be considered when trying to make that person happy. True happiness can be found when we become happy together with our loved ones. In Ghana, one marries from a family and thus becomes a member of the spouse's family. As such, showing compassion to your spouse needs to be done in such a way that the people close to your spouse or to the extended families can also be happy. You cannot love your spouse and hate his or her people. Boaz gave Ruth enough and provided access for her to get more not only because of what Ruth needed but also for the needs of Naomi.

4. Being ready to take action

Those who are ready to take action are the people who are highly motivated. Motivation gives people the reason to set goals, strive for achievement and power, desire intimacy, and build various emotions like fear, anger, and compassion. Motivation is a driving force that helps people to change their way of thinking, feeling, and behaving towards a goal. When someone is mean towards you as opposed to compassionate, it increases

unethical behaviour and apathy, and decreases cooperation, intrinsic motivation, and creativity. A good resource of motivation allows a person to adapt, hold on, function productively, and maintain health in the face of opportunities and threats.

Motivation can also be broken down into amotivation, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation. People who are amotivational are those who do not have any self-determination. Such people lack the desire to complete any task. It could be from oneself such as depression, immaturity, learning disabilities, or due to external factors.

Intrinsic motivation points to behaviour driven by internal rewards. People are motivated by intrinsic motifs such as self-satisfaction, self-dignity, and personal happiness. They become happy because the result of an action would benefit them towards fun, bodily satisfaction, competence, and autonomy. Intrinsic motivations are self-contained and self-determined because performing them is a reward in itself.

Extrinsic motivation points to behaviour that looks out for what they would get in return before taking an action. It is about engaging in an activity in order to get an external reward in return. What drives extrinsic motivation involves external gains such as money, praise, fame, power, or avoiding consequences. For some people, the benefits of external rewards are enough to motivate them to have compassion for others. The value they place on what they would get makes them do more for others. When they know that they would not get anything from their action, they are less motivated to move.

A genuine interest in helping others from a Christian perspective does not depend on oneself or others. It is dependent on who God is and what God has done for us. "We love because He loved us first" (1 John 4:19). No one has ever seen God so as to show love to God. It is what we do for one another that reveals our love for God (1 John 4:7-21). Genuine compassion is shown through warm and loving communication, not based on what we want or what we would get in return. One cannot say he or she is showing compassion but fails to speak peaceably or warmly to the other. We make a difference in the way we approach the needy, welcome them, and speak to them warmly. Jesus taught that if we are to invite only those who can give back or invite us also to dinner or parties, then our actions are not godly (Luke 6:33).

Boaz was intrinsically motivated to help Ruth. Boaz spoke warmly to Ruth, which made her wonder why the old man would communicate so warmly to a young woman (Ruth 2:10). It is no wonder, for there are those who have sweet tongues and pretend that they are helping with nice words but their intentions are bad. The sages say:

Smooth talk from an evil heart is like glaze on cracked pottery. Your enemy shakes hands and greets you like an old friend, all the while conniving against you. When he speaks warmly to you, don't believe him for a minute; he's just waiting for the chance to rip you off. No matter how cunningly he conceals his malice, eventually his evil will be exposed in public (Prov 26:23-26).

A godly motivation allows us to thrive as Christians, while its deficit causes us to sin. Intrinsic motivations not based on Christian faith would make us receive our rewards here on earth, which are only temporary. Looking for rewards that are in heaven should be the greatest motivation. Extrinsic motivation, as human beings, is best used in circumstances when the reward is not the reason for our action, but eventually comes to us. As such extrinsic motivation should occur sparingly, so that it does not always become the driving force behind our actions. If it turns out so, it loses its impact. One should not measure what can be achieved before knowing what energies can be invested. There are times that the value of the reward can decrease or the reward can be too much, and each case should not give a different motivation. Measuring the reward to inform action is sometimes referred to as the overjustification effect. Are Christians motivated to do godly acts always? Are Christians motivated to show compassion?

Addressing real needs

Boaz knows that Naomi was not available during the planting season. She has come back to Bethlehem at the beginning of the harvest season. As a relative, he may know the economic situation of Naomi. So, Boaz is prepared to meet the real need of Naomi and Ruth – food. But Naomi may be thinking of other needs, such as to find rest for Ruth, and Boaz did not see that.

One may share something valuable with someone who will not feel it's worth or try to solve the problem of a person in need by doing the wrong thing. Sometimes, the gifts we give can make the needy incur further costs. Therefore, it is not a matter of being generous for its own sake but also

being kind to those in need in such a way that they could smile. The writer of 1 John says, "Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:18). To be kind means to be extremely present in a conversation, by fully appreciating who the other is, understanding what the other is going through, and giving helpful interventions to address needs. Above all, love unconditionally. Whatever we acquire is given by God. "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven" (John 3:27).

Paul admonished Timothy to instruct the believers that if anyone does not care for the members of his or her household, that person is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim 5:8).

Showing compassion in our world today is becoming very difficult. Many people are so ungrateful that the motivation to show them compassion wanes. Some feel it is their right to take whatever they want from relatives without first asking. Hence giving opportunities to relatives and kinsmen is becoming very difficult. *It is believed that* our children are examples of ourselves. They depict what adults have taught them. Our adult life is shaped by the kind of nurture we had as children. That is to say, the children of today are growing up in homes that are less hospitable. The homes are now becoming spaces for only close relatives and no space for extended family members. People hardly create awareness in our children that it is a blessing to help those in need. Family members are becoming very wicked, even to their own siblings. People are hardly moved by those who are suffering and as such we do not have any intentional plans to provide relief to those that are suffering. What could be more important than fostering the quality of compassion in our children?

Compassion is a behaviour that is cultivated

It is said that one cannot teach an old dog a new tricks. People follow what they know best or has been imprinted on their hearts. They follow what their parents or society taught them. How to nurture our children to be compassionate is not as obvious as teaching them ABCs or mathematics. It is not as simple as how to cook or set the table. Parenting is largely teaching by example. Compassion does come more easily to children when parents and adults whom the children look up to are compassionate. It is said that the Church is very self-centred and does not open up to others who are not part of them. The Church and society have a role to play in correcting the problem of being less compassionate.

A Christian family, according to Bunge, is an ecclesial entity wherein adults and children are nurtured with virtues, behaviours, and attitudes that make them fit the kingdom of heaven.¹¹ The relationships that should exist in families need to reflect what Christians expect in the kingdom of God. As we pray for the kingdom to come on earth, Christians have to exemplify those kingdom lifestyles on the earth.

A proper approach to parenting begins with leaving adequate room for relational development. First, a child needs to develop a relationship with God. Before a child learns how to talk, the child should cultivate the habit of praying. Second, the child needs to develop a relationship with the family. Third, the child needs to develop a relationship with society. And lastly, the child needs to develop a relationship with nature. Christian parenting should be undergirded by wisdom derived from meditation on Scripture, aided by the in-filling of the Holy Spirit so that all relationship-building can be informed by God's word. The parent has to interpret the Scriptures and live out the Word so that they become an example to the child. However, the parent cannot do it alone. That is why the church and society can come in, as well as educational systems, where quality nurturing on parenting and relationship-building can be very helpful.

For the Christian Church, the household is one of the most powerful elements of society, empowered with the ability to establish the pattern for Christian living. However, it is becoming challenging for parents in our contemporary world to have time for their children. Some parents are too busy to have time to raise their children in acceptable ways of living. The craze for materialism, money, and urbanization among others has been part of the challenge. Some parents often leave their children in the care of old parents, nannies, or house helps /caregivers to take care of them due to some circumstances. Such people, due to the length of time they spend with the children, nurture them differently from what the parent may desire.

As humanity, we live in a world where each one is struggling to maintain a relationship with the family members. Urbanization is separating families so rapidly that most children do not know any of their extended family members. Children are spending more time in school than at home. Parents want to take care of their own children. At times, pressures of life and

11 J. Bunge Marcia (ed), *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 62.

perception about others make it difficult for one to trust even the parents or siblings. Christianity in Africa seems to be fuelling the perception that parents can be part of the downfall of their children, hence many do not want to go to their parents, let alone send the grandchildren to visit them. Since the children do not know the members of the extended family, they hardly show any concern for them. Their world is bounded by the four corners of their home. So, if you do not live with them, they do not care about you. The sages say: "Discipline your children, and they will give you peace of mind and will give delight to your heart." (Prov 29:17; ESV). They go on to say, "Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge" (Prov 14:7; ESV). If we do not set our own boundaries in our families, other influences – culture and social trends – will set our children's moral boundaries, and we may become surprised and dismayed by what they have learned.

The marks of a good and godly parent include providing, protecting, guiding, correcting, teaching, preparing, modelling, encouraging, and loving. A parents' greatest joy is to see the child walk in acceptable ways: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 John 1:4; NIV). Paul admonished parents: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord" (Eph 6:4). Likewise, "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged" (Col 3:21). Nevertheless, the child must be ready to learn and obey the parents: "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck" (Prov 1:8–9; ESV).

To delegate your child's upbringing to others is to leave them at the mercy of the values and principles of others. When God gave Hannah a son, she raised him until he was weaned. She then brought him to the temple to serve under the Priest Eli and his two vagabond sons, Hophni and Phinehas. The bad attitude of the sons of Eli could not influence Samuel who was living with them because her mother nurtured him so well, and had inculcated some good traits in him, prayed for her son, and surrendered him to God (1 Sam 1). As a parent, you have the responsibility to tend to your children's spiritual growth and education. Parents are supposed to be the child's first witnesses to the gospel. Sharing Jesus is our most important duty, as well as to "nurture them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4).

Developing a heart of compassion

The foundational biblical injunction for parenting towards a hospitable spirit is: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov 22:6). The Hebrew word *h^anok*, like the Greek *paideuein*, translated as “train” connotes dedicating a person to something, giving moral instruction, discipline, correction, training, education, etc. The world needs such training.

Fafunwa discusses seven cardinal goals of indigenous/traditional education. They include:

- i. Development of physical skills that enables the child to cope with the responsibility of adulthood.
- ii. Character development where the child is taught and encouraged to be sociable, honest, courageous, humble, persevering, and of good behaviour at all times.
- iii. Respect for elders and those in constituted authority.
- iv. Development of the intellect where traditional educational development is promoted through observation, imitation, and participation. Elders of households should transmit this knowledge.
- v. Vocational training where children in traditional African societies are taught to take care of homes, cook, farm, fish, and care for an animal.
- vi. Communal Spirit, where the child is taught to appreciate the role as a member of the immediate community and the society at large, imbibe the African communal system where everyone in the society is the brother’s or sister’s keeper. Every member of the community is expected to show some love to the other.
- vii. Promotion of cultural heritage so that the child grows up within the cultural heritage of the people.¹²
- viii. All these can play a large role in training young people. Everyone needs to be taught to show concern for the poor (Prov 22:22, 27).

12 A. B. Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria* (London: George Allen and Unwin. Print, 1974).

If people can be compassionate, they will be like Ruth who does not desert her mother-in-law even though the marriage is no more. They will be like Boaz who opens his doors for Ruth and Naomi. They will ignore tags like ex-mother-in-law or former mother-in-law to be compassionate to all.

Conclusion

This sermon has emphasised how Gd's mission requires that we become good children, nurtured in the faith. It has demonstrated how Ruth positions herself to attract favour from Boaz. Her kindness opens doors for her and Boaz recognizes all that. We have established that it is good to care for the underprivileged with no strings attached. We have also discussed the need to show compassion to the underprivileged. We have learned that it is a Christian duty to show compassion to all. Showing compassion is a deliberate act since there are many people around us that are in need. In fact, we are losing the time-tested tradition of "Ghanaian hospitality" because of the attitude of some people. The worst affected are the young people, so there is a need to train them to be hospitable. Since showing compassion is Christian duty, we need not allow the attitude of some to demoralize us. Above all, we should engage in that which meets the real needs of those in need.

9

Theme: Protecting Women from Violence

READING: RUTH 2:19–23

ANCHOR TEXT: “Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, ‘It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with the women who work for him, because in someone else’s field you might be harmed.’” (Ruth 2:22)

Introduction

Many stories in the Bible, directly and indirectly, reveal how women were subject to violence. In the ancient Near East women were hardly considered part of the communal experiences and had less protection on their own. Women are always rendered invisible in community life because of classism and sexism. The Old Testament world was no different. Males had the power to define what a community ought to be and assumed that they understood all the desires of women in the building of a community.

When Ruth enters the farm of Boaz to glean, she does not know that she is putting herself in harm’s way. She has no option but to be on the farm to search for food. Boaz orders his harvesters not to harm Ruth in any way, or offer any incivility or rudeness to her: “I have charged the young men not touch you” (Ruth 2:9). This is particularly necessary, as she is a stranger and unprotected. They are not free to trick or coerce her into unacceptable acts. Interestingly, Boaz gives the order in the hearing of Ruth. It suggests that Ruth would have the assurance of protection. She can count on what Boaz said, and the harvesters cannot claim they did not hear Boaz give that order.

This sermon explores how women and girls become victims of violence because of social constructs and their working in various workplaces. If God’s mission on earth is to be fruitful, it should resist gender biases, violence, and oppression. The issue is in what ways can we help to protect women and girls against violence? How can African women experience such kindness that protects them against violence? What are some of the actions one can take to be so selfless and protective, and go above and beyond the expectations of the law?

Exposition

Boaz is described in a way that shows the characteristics of a fine, outstanding, godly man. We need to remember that in those days there was spiritual deterioration and apostasy, the period of the Judges. Boaz's spirituality is evident in the way he comes to the farm and greets his servants by saying, "The Lord be with you!" (Ruth 2:4). We find a good working relationship with servants, and they replied, "And the Lord bless you!"

When Ruth is introduced to him, Boaz praises her and warns his workers against all forms of violence. He insists that Ruth does not go to any farm to glean except his farm. In fact, he does not have any sinister motive or a plan to draw Ruth closer to himself to take advantage of her. Boaz pronounces words of blessings upon Ruth for the sacrifices she has made for Naomi: "May you be richly rewarded by the Lord God of Israel, under whose wing you have come to take refuge" (Ruth 2:12). Boaz does all this because of what Ruth has done for Naomi. For Boaz, all the privileges and graces he has offered to Ruth cannot be compared to the rich reward from the God of Israel.

We can also say that the directive that the men should not lay hands on Ruth was from a pure heart. During a mealtime, Boaz invites Ruth to eat what he is eating: "come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar" (2:14). Later Boaz offers her some roasted grain, so that Ruth eats her fill and even has some leftover for her mother-in-law, Naomi, when she goes home (2:18).

Boaz the protector

What can we learn about Boaz's attitude towards Ruth in seeking her well-being?

Boaz is a caring man. He knows it is possible for people to molest Ruth. He does not wait for it to happen before intervening. He establishes structures that ensure the protection of Ruth. God has a special way of caring for all. It was a very excellent welfare system. When a farmer plants, insects and birds have their share. The poor have their share, and the soil also has its share. Depriving the insects, birds, the poor, and the soil of having their share is wickedness. Boaz is so magnanimous that he offers Ruth the opportunity to drink from the same pot as the harvesters: "And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the jars of water the men have filled" (Ruth 2:9). Harvesting time was usually a season of the year when

the weather was hot. One needs to constantly hydrate while working in the hot weather. It was the duty of the men to fetch from wells and fountains in or near the city, and fill the pitchers for the use of the reapers and gatherers (cf 2 Sam 23:13–17). Ruth is ordered to go to these vessels and drink when she pleases, without asking permission from anyone. Prior permission has been given so the one in charge of the harvesters should make sure that his young men do not hinder her.

Ruth recognizes that Boaz's actions towards her amount to "favour", which can also be translated "grace" (Ruth 2:9, cf Ps 84:11; Prov 3:34; Jer 31:2; Zech 12:10). Boaz actually praises Ruth for her acts of "grace" and kindness to her mother-in-law (Ruth 2:11). For, Boaz, all the kindness she has shown to Naomi is tightly bound up in the LORD, the covenantal God of Israel. Since Ruth showed kindness to Naomi, she must enjoy the kindness of the harvesters.

Naomi understands clearly that what Ruth has brought home from gleaning is beyond what anyone would normally have. Someone has taken notice of the plight of Ruth, so Naomi pronounces a blessing on him: "Blessed is the man who took notice of you" (Ruth 2:19). The root of the Hebrew *makkîrêk* (*hifil* participle) is *nâkar* (take notice of you; notice) is used 41 times in the Old Testament and it denotes "to recognize", "consider carefully". It also connotes a process of investigation and conveys the idea to "inspect" or "look over" something with the intention of recognizing it or looking at it intently. It also means to "treat someone as a foreigner". Ruth wonders why Boaz has taken notice of her, or perhaps treated her as a foreigner. And Naomi notices that the amount of barley Ruth has gleaned in one day is considerably more than one would have expected. The play on words here is spectacular. Naomi thus pronounces words or blessings like a beatitude on the Boaz who noticed Ruth.

There is a syntactic ambiguity in the way Naomi responds when Ruth narrates the kindness Boaz shows while she is gleaning in the field. Naomi said to Ruth: "Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness (*ḥasdô*) has not forsaken the living or the dead!" (Ruth 2:20). To whom does the masculine suffix *ḥasdô* ("his kindness") refer – God or Boaz? Grammatically, both are possible. This statement echoes what the servant of Abraham said to Rebekah: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. As for me the Lord has led me on the way to the house of my master's kin"

(Gen 24:27). The servant saw what Rebekah did as an act of kindness from the Lord. In that sense, we can say Naomi's prayer of praise is not specific to Boaz but to the Lord. She is blessing the Lord who has made kindness available to Ruth and herself. In the view of C. John Collins, the address is to the Lord "since Boaz *embodies* aspects of the character of God, most importantly his *hesed*".¹ Similarly, to Campbell, "It is true that Boaz has done acts of *hesed* in chapter 2 and will yet do more, but the much more likely antecedent is Yahweh."²

Violence women against in the ancient Near East

Violence against women has been going on for a long time. Two famous works from the early eighteenth century BCE help construct the precarious lives of women in these ancient times. More law codes from later periods of history also give us additional information, including the Middle Assyrian Laws, especially from the fifteenth to the eleventh century BCE. More than twenty thousand clay tablets with writings on them have been uncovered, mainly from the city-state of Mari, but only recently have historians been analysing them for women's history.

A Babylonian document from the seventeenth century BCE, *The Code of Hammurabi*, gives some prescriptive passages regarding women's legal standing. There are nearly three hundred laws to regulate society in Hammurabi's Code (circa 1750 BCE). There were earlier law codes, but Hammurabi, the Akkadian ruler of a large Mesopotamian region, put together this uniform law code for the entire empire. The code has definite class guidelines for nobles, commoners, and slaves; great emphasis was placed on the protection and maintenance of the family. Over one-fourth of the law codes have a direct or indirect influence on violence against women. Some of the areas of interest to women are adultery, divorce, rape, and business transactions. Interspersed in this chapter are incidents and conditions relating to the Hammurabi Code's treatment of women. These law codes, however, cannot ferret out specific events, but we can use them as indicators for circumstances involving women.

The Hammurabi Code provides that when a woman belittles her husband, she should be killed. That is to say, when the husband reports that his wife has belittled him, an investigation would be conducted.

1 C. John Collins, "Ambiguity and Theology in Ruth: Ruth 1:21 and 2:20", *Presb* 19 (1993), 100.

2 Campbell, Ruth, 106.

If she has been discreet and has no vice and her husband has gone out and has greatly belittled her, she shall take her marriage portion and go off to her father's house. But if she has been found indiscreet and has gone out, ruined her house, belittled her husband, she shall be drowned.

It means if a woman belittles her husband, she would suffer the punishment of death. If she does not disrespect the husband, she can be divorced and go to the father with nothing.

Another document is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which gives some descriptive details on violence against women. It narrates a story about a hero and his community. The hero, Gilgamesh, encounters a female on his journey and assumes that the female can be dangerous and negative because of her knowledge and potential to create or destroy. The hero then uses the woman as a sex object. Furthermore, Gilgamesh sleeps with all the women in the community. He would have sex with the women before the man who would come to marry them does.

Violence against women in the Bible

The story of the Jews cannot be complete unless it considers fully and seriously the experience of women. It means women played a key role in the nation-building and are indispensable in the history of Israel. However, as Sharon Ringe observes, women in biblical narratives are insignificant persons working on their own religious journeys. The biblical narrators hardly present women as co-builders of history but as “flat” characters, perfectly good or villainously evil, or as objects at someone's disposal.³

In the Bible generally, the woman's place is in the home. Her role at the home, in addition to childbearing and childrearing, includes (with example Scriptures): preparing meals (Gen 18:6, 27:14); carrying water (Gen 24:11; Exod 2:16); weaving and spinning, and thus making and caring for the family clothing (Exod 35:25–26); manual labour, which might include working in the field (Exod 2:3); nursing (Gen 24:59, 35:8; Exod 2:7–10; Num 11:12); or being a midwife (Gen 35:17, 38:28; Exod 1:15–22). These and many other duties, when performed well, bring joy and honour to her.

An adult woman is a minor in the eyes of the law and lives under the authority of her nearest male relative. Even her vows to God can be cancelled by

3 Sharon H. Ringe, “When Women Interpret the Bible”, in *Women's Bible Commentary*, expanded edn, ed., Carol Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 3.

her father or husband (Num 30:3–16). Her husband can divorce her (Deut 24:1–4) or take another wife (Exod 21:10; Deut 21:15–17), but she cannot divorce him. She is subject to trial by ordeal if her husband even suspects her of unfaithfulness (Num 5:11–31). She can inherit the family lands only if there are no male heirs, but she is then required to marry within her own clan because the land would pass to her husband (Num 27:1–11, 36).

Abraham's wife, Sarah, maltreats the woman Hagar for despising her and does not consider that she is carrying a child. When Sarah finds Hagar useful, she gives Hagar to Abraham to use her to make babies. When she feels Hagar is no more useful, she drives her away after making her have a baby (Gen 21:9–16).

There are times men had sex with women against their will. David has sex with Bathsheba who was Uriah's wife and makes her pregnant (2 Sam 11). David's son, Amnon, forcibly has sex with his sister, Tamar, and does not take notice of his sister's pleas or desires. It is his will against his sister's, and that brought disgrace to Tamar (2 Sam 13).

Gang rape is seen in the history of Israel. When all the men and boys in Gibeah in Benjamin have sex with the concubine of the Levite, which ended up with her death, Israel gets enraged and cuts the tribe of Benjamin off, vowing not to give any of their daughters to the men of Benjamin. Later, the Israelites begin to feel sorry of the remaining men from the tribe of Benjamin (Judges 21:13–18). Therefore, a plan is created to allow the Benjamite men to abduct one wife each from among the virgin daughters of Shiloh of their choosing at the Feast of the Lord in Shiloh (Judg 21:20–24). So, when the virgins come out and dance, each of the men of Benjamin is allowed to catch his wife from among the daughters of Shiloh and carry her off by force (Judg 21:21).

Women like Noadiah, a prophetess, are mentioned as joining those who wanted to intimidate Nehemiah and prevent him from completing the rebuilding of the walls. She instigates Sanballat and Tobiah to oppose Nehemiah (Neh 6:14). She also stirs up the people working with Nehemiah to be discontent with him.

God hates the inhumane treatment of women. Survivors of violence can know that God sees their suffering as He did Hagar's and cares deeply for their healing (Gen 16:13). God's kindness is always extended to women who find ways

to make God's purposes come to pass. It is important to note that although Abraham is guaranteed a son to carry God's promise to his descendants, it is not Isaac who next receives the blessing for possession of the enemy. It is Rebekah who receives the blessing similar to Abraham's as she leaves her family for the foreign land (Gen 24:60). The blessing for possession is given one other time, and that is to Jacob as he leaves for Paddan Aram (Gen 28:4). Abraham, Rebekah, and Jacob are the ancestors of this promise.

Violence against women in Ghana

On the blog page of the World Bank in 2016, it is reported that,

51% of African women report that being beaten by their husbands is justified if they either go out without permission, neglect the children, argue back, refuse to have sex, or burn the food.⁴

Luc Christiaensen also reports in 2020 that

Violence against women, or gender-based violence, includes many types of abuse, ranging from physical, sexual, and emotional violence to female genital mutilation and trafficking. The rate of such violence in sub-Saharan Africa is higher than the global average. Around 44% of African women, or more than two in five, have been subjected to gender-based violence, a 2020 study found. According to the UN, the global figure is around 30%.⁵

The Ghanaian patriarchal society continues to use idioms, culture, and religion to ensure that women remain secondary citizens. For example, the Akan says, *ɔbaa tɔ tuo a ɛtwere ɔbarima dan mu* (lit: when a woman buys a gun, she keeps it in a man's room). Again, *ɔbaa tɔn nyadowaa nnyɛ etuduo* (lit: a woman sells garden eggs not gun powder). These proverbs show how inferior women are in keeping a valuable property.

Gender-based violence (GBV) against women and girls continues to be a challenge. Problems include systems of ideas, beliefs, and actions that justify and rationalize injustice against women and girls, and this could be in the form of physical, emotional, cultural, and religious violence, threatening the fabric of African nations causing insecurity and panic among

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- 4 Luc Christiaensen, "Domestic Violence and Poverty in Africa: When the Husband's Beating Stick is Like Butter" [Blog] (18 Jan 2016). Available online: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/africacan/domestic-violence-and-poverty-in-africa-when-the-husbands-beating-stick-is-like-butter>
- 5 "African women tell of experiences of violence". Available online: <https://www.dw.com/en/african-women-tell-of-experiences-of-violence/a-59928442>

women and girls.⁶ Samuel Tsegah reports that between March and May 2020, because of the lockdown more than 51 girls below 18 years old became pregnant in Krachi in the Oti Region of Ghana.⁷ The lockdown was instituted in Greater Accra, greater Kumasi and Kasoa, but the effects were experienced throughout the country since all schools were closed. It is also recorded that police brutalities in Ghana increased during the lockdown in 2020. In fact, some security personnel were captured on tape beating a 60-year-old woman for breaching the lockdown directive. The woman, weeping like a child, stepped out to go to the market to buy food.⁸ A police report indicated that in South Africa, seven days into lockdown in 2020, more than 87,000 GBV related complaints were received.⁹

In Ghana, a publication by Dickson, Ameyaw, and Darteh states:

physical domestic violence manifests in several dimensions, including slapping or throwing things at someone, pushing, hitting, attacking with a weapon, choking, or strangling. The most common forms of physical violence in Ghana over a lifetime include slaps or being hit with thrown objects, followed by being hit by another person. However, varied implications emerge depending on the specific victim, his/her age, the intensity of the violence, and consistency of torment the person experiences. Living under persistent threat, fear, and humiliation constitute some of the emotional states developed in the memories of victims.¹⁰

Violence against women and girls, particularly from an intimate partner, is a major social drawback and a public health problem. It is as well a violation of women and girls' human rights. The cases of kidnapping and abduction in Ghana in recent times – including the Takoradi missing girls in 2018

6 Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Hearing and knowing: Theological reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1986), 122, 123. See also Sylvia Owusu Ansah, "The role of Circle women in curbing violence against women and girls in Africa", *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37.2 (2016), 1-6.

7 Samuel Tsegah, "Sexual Exploitation during lockdown in Ghana" (18 August 2020). Available online: <https://www.wvi.org/stories/ghana/sexual-exploitation-during-lockdown-ghana> (Accessed Dec 12, 2021).

8 Festival Godwin Boateng, "Ghana's COVID lockdown: Why it triggered a toxic mix of mass defiance and police violence", *The Conversation* (2 February 2022). Available online: <https://the-conversation.com/ghanas-covid-lockdown-why-it-triggered-a-toxic-mix-of-mass-defiance-and-police-violence-176062> (accessed March 12, 2022).

9 M.E. Baloyi, "The Escalation of Gender-based Violence during Lockdown as a Practical Theological Concern in the South African Context", *Journal of International Women Studies* 22.5 (2021), 107.

10 Kwamena Sekyi Dickson, Edward Kwabena Ameyaw, and Eugene K. M. Darteh, "Understanding the Endorsement of Wife-beating in Ghana: Evidence of the 2014 Ghana Demographic and Health Survey", *BMC Women's Health* 20 (2020), 5.

and two kidnapped Canadian women residing in Kumasi in 2019 that made headlines throughout the country – have brought the attention of society to such violence against women and girls. In the case of the Takoradi girls, it was observed that the perpetrators struck acquaintances with the victims for some time, promising to secure jobs, and money, or to procure a mobile phone for them. Violence by acquaintances and intimate partners leads to more forms of violence against women. Men are usually blamed for creating and perpetuating GBV but there are situations where GBV is sustained, nurtured, and recreated by women. Incidentally Dickson, Ameyaw, and Darteh conclude that females justify wife-beating more than males.¹¹ It means that women need to be reoriented to see what is done against other women in society. Some women struggle with questions concerning social evils, which demean their self-worth and contributions to church and society, and how they can be abated. The call is on all to examine how social systems work and, once provided with the facts, to help eradicate violence against women.

Addressing violence against women

First, Naomi believes that Boaz is a kinsman so all the actions he takes are based on such relationship. She says: “The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin” (Ruth 2:20). The Hebrew adjective *qārôb* from the verb *qārab* meaning “near, close by, inner” points to both time and space. The time for something to happen is near (Deut 32:35; Prov 10:14), or a place is near (Gen 19:20, 45:10). Being a near kinsman points to the closeness of relationship, that is, the closest relatives. Another Hebrew word which is synonymous to *qārab* is *go’el*, which is used 20 times in the book of Ruth and points to close relations. As Mangrum asserts,

the kindness of a kinsman (2:1, 20) equates to hospitality for the foreigner (2:8–16, 23). Boaz piously provides for the outsider by allowing Ruth to glean from his field; in effect, he fulfills the imperatives in Torah to take care of widows and foreigners (Deut 10:18; see esp. 24:19 where the Law specifically commands Boaz’s practice of leaving the leftovers in a field for widows and foreigners to glean).¹²

All this is to establish that everyone has a responsibility to take care of the women and girls in the family. As long as we all belong to families, we all should do what it takes to help one another.

11 Dickson, Ameyaw, and Darteh, “Understanding the endorsement of wife beating in Ghana”.

12 Benjamin Mangrum, “Bringing “Fullness” to Naomi: Centripetal Nationalism in the Book of Ruth”, *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 33 (2011), 71.

Second, Boaz does not provide protection for Ruth for a short while and then leave her to her fate. He makes provisions for her “until they have finished all my harvests” (Ruth 2:21). The end of the two harvests spans three months, that is from late March (approximate beginning of the barley harvest) until the middle of June (approximate end of the wheat harvest). So Ruth gleans in the fields of Boaz for about three months. Three months also echoes the period fixed by Jewish tradition before a female Gentile joining the Jewish faith may have permission to marry.

Third, Ruth’s submissiveness and obedience to instruction is seen here. She dutifully observes her mother-in-law’s and Boaz’s directions and continues to glean even until the end of the harvests. Her diligence and industry are rare qualities.

Fourth, people should learn to look favourably on women and girls. Boaz seeks to protect Ruth from GBV and from the men employed to harvest the grains and as such stay close to the women who are gleaning. One may wonder how safe the women who are gleaning were that staying close to the women could provide some respite for Ruth – considering she, as a foreigner, has such a grave situation. The Akan says, *anoma a hɔn ntakra sɛ no na wotu bɔ mu* (lit: birds of the same feathers flock together). Ruth is asked to remain in the fields of Boaz and glean with the young women always. She is not to go to another farm because that would not give her the liberties and expectations she desires. She might be oppressed and brutalized, or driven away, or have stepped on other’s toes if she gleans from other fields. Violence women face when they go out to the fields to glean is common in the days of Ruth. They are beaten and molested for picking what they are not supposed to pick. They can be accused of a crime they have not committed. They are looked down upon because gleaners are poor. All these did not happen to Ruth. Favour located her. We can attribute Boaz’s actions to his religiosity and faith. He knew what the Torah says about the poor. He was ready to extend a loving hand to Ruth and Naomi who did not have a farm.

Fifth, interventions to protect women from violence must focus on the concrete and domestic problems of victimization, rape, abuse, subordination, etc. Salvation for women is neither a dramatic political victory nor a mighty eschatological reconciliation, but experiencing life in its fullness in the here and now. It is about the evil realities that go around in society that need to be eradicated for salvation to be real. As such, Christian theology must define and respond to evil if we are to read the Bible with wom-

en's own voices.¹³ Evil is real and above all a deep-rooted cancer. The root causes of evil and violence may also be embedded in social, religious, and political structures. Gebara adds that,

Suffering is often mixed with solidarity, assistance, understanding. Even the most abandoned seem to feel, thanks probably to the support of others in distress or even in their own dreams, the desire to get out of their affliction. Some sharing common to the torment or the bad news has taken hold of us and represents the touch of salvation.¹⁴

It is important therefore to understand evil and salvation on the basis of what women say about their own lives. Such is the concrete and domestic quality of how things ought to stand out for Africans. Taking notice of violence against women would help us position ourselves to intervene.

Sixth, Boaz takes notice of Ruth and shows her what kindness, loyalty, and steadfast love looks like. True, he does not go to the aid of Naomi and Ruth when they arrive in Bethlehem. He only saw the need to help when Ruth happened to be on his farm. But while Boaz is reactive, we can equally see his proactiveness. When Boaz comes to the field and sees Ruth, he inquires who she is and takes a proactive role in understanding her needs (Ruth 2:5-7). He also goes beyond the call of duty and the law to show compassion for Ruth at a cost to himself. It is said, "Better later than never".

The apostle Paul in the letter to the Philippians explains how kindness is: "looking not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil 2:4). When we are consumed with our own interests, we tend to ignore and overlook that of others and God attends to the needs of others. When we pay attention to the interests of others, God attends to our needs. Looking out for the interests of others can be summarized in the commandment: "love your neighbours as yourselves" (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:37-39; Mark 12:31). Kindness is not simply clouded in the general sense of being nice to people, creating a warm, friendly environment, etc; it is in working through practical acts and deeds to help another.

Seventh, Ruth's protection is placed squarely in her own hands. She is not to go to other fields. Her mother-in-law also advises her and supports the idea that she stays on Boaz's farm. Listening to advice is an

13 Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 45.

14 Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 114.

important factor when it comes to violence. Some have gained some experience in life and so their words are full of wisdom. When we listen to such people, we can be safe. Kofi Agyekum intimates that:

In the Akan ethnopragmatics of advice, interlocutors normally respect the views of each other as social individuals and same cultural group insiders. The adviser does not seek his self-interest at the expense of his advisee, because both are social players in the interaction aiming to get something better for the advisee and the society.¹⁵

Conclusion

God is our protector par excellence. However, God wants all of us to participate in his mission to protect the vulnerable. For Boaz to intervene to protect Ruth, we believe that God was tenderly working behind the scenes, although we do not see that explicitly in the story. In life, many of us have no idea of how God may have directed our affairs and ordered our steps to the right places. The hand of God is always at work in the life of God's precious children. The prompting hand of God can push us intently into the right field, especially when we have trusted in God. The Holy Spirit will direct our choice of the right field. That is why heaven itself will rejoice when we take the right path, just as Ruth walks into the very field of blessing and majesty. The right field is where we would meet our redeemer: the Saviour of the world, Jesus Christ, who would protect us from the vagaries of life, and from all that want to harm us. I agree with L. Juliana Claassens that "where women suffer, and where acts of resistance and the unlearning of harmful stereotypes and negative gender-based behavior are found, one finds signs of grace entering the world."¹⁶ The story would have been different if Ruth had wandered down the farms and ended up in a farm of a landowner who was very ruthless. It would have been different if Ruth did not listen to the advice of Boaz or of the mother-in-law.

We have observed that we need to support our family members against violence, especially women and girls. Again, the support should not be only for a short while and must be concrete. If we have not taken notice of women and girls suffering abuse, then the time is now. Above all, women and girls should work to be as wise as the serpent and as innocent as doves.

15 Kofi Agyekum, "The Ethnopragmatics of Advice", *Pragmatics* 29.3 (2019), 314.

16 L. Juliana Claassens, "A True Disgrace? The Representation of Violence against Women in the Book of Lamentations and in J. M. Coetzee's Novel *Disgrace*", in *Fragile Dignity: Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family, and Violence*, ed., L. Juliana Claassens and Klaas Spronk (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 2013), 89.

10

Theme: Affirming our Identity

READING: RUTH 3:1–9

ANCHOR TEXT: “Who are you?” (Ruth 3:9)

Introduction

The Akan elders say, *se obi nnyim wo a ɔfrɛ wo akoa bi* (lit: if someone does not know you, you are referred to as a servant”). The question “who are you?” is meant to identify the type and nature of an individual. Hence, what can we learn about Ruth, who is questioned? And what about Boaz, the one asking the question? And Naomi, whose directives make Ruth come to Boaz for the question to be asked? How does the story help to reveal the characters? How can the lessons about Naomi’s, Ruth’s, and Boaz’s lives and experiences serve as lessons for our lives?

The general task here is to reflect on the experiences of each character. We are not to see them as good people, bad people, or perfect human beings in all ways, but we need to see them as the kind of people God wants them to be.

Exposition

While Naomi lived with Ruth and Orpah in Moab, she never saw the need to secure a future for the daughters-in-law. Even when the younger women decide to travel to Bethlehem with her, she refuses on the premise that there is no way she can secure a future for them. The young women should get husbands. Things change when Naomi and Ruth live in Bethlehem. Naomi might have seen something different about Ruth that makes her orientation change. So, Naomi decides: “I need to seek some security (Heb: *mānôah*) for you” (Ruth 3:1). The Hebrew word *mānôah* translated “security” also means “rest”, “resting place” for someone with no family.¹ Naomi implies a need to find a husband for Ruth who would provide a resting place for Ruth and serve as security for her.

The future Naomi wants for Ruth is to be initiated by Ruth. It is Ruth’s task to visit Boaz at night and the matter will take its course. This visit is to take place at the threshing floor where Boaz and his worker are “winnowing barley on the threshing floor” (Ruth 3:2). The threshing floor is a sig-

¹ HALOT 1, 600.

nificant symbolic location throughout the Old Testament, a setting that opens up sexual overtones and various regrettable incidents. Tamar has sex with Judah on the threshing floor (Gen 38). It is on a threshing floor that the people of Israel stop to mourn Jacob (Gen 50:10). It is also on the threshing floor that Uzzah reaches out his hand to support the Ark of the Covenant and God strikes him down dead (2 Sam 6:6). It is on the threshing floor of Araunah that King David offers sacrifices, and it becomes the very foundation of the Temple (2 Sam 24; 1 Chr 21). The threshing floor is also connected to the idea of prostitution (Hos 9:1). Hence, the threshing floor is usually associated with theological overtones of sexual activities, worship, judgment, and legal matters.²

In the plan of Naomi, Ruth is supposed to seduce Boaz on the threshing floor. For the actions of Ruth to succeed, she has to do a number of things. First, she needs to wash herself. That would give her refreshing energy. Second, she has to anoint herself (Ruth 3:3). It means she is to put on perfume oil, similar to that of using cosmetics. Third, she has to put on her best clothes (Ruth 3:3). Certainly, she should “dress to kill”. Her best clothes are hoped to make any man admire her. Fourth, she had to sneak unnoticed into the tent of Boaz. She is to make sure she does not miss the tent of Boaz and go into the tent of any of the workers. Fifth, she has to lie where Boaz is lying. Before she lies down, she must “uncover his feet” and lie down (Ruth 3:4). Reference to Boaz’s “feet” (Ruth 3:4, 7–8) may be a euphemism for his genitalia (cf Isa 6:2).³ If so, Naomi’s plan is bold indeed, and Ruth’s act even bolder. Much of the story makes sense in light of this euphemistic understanding of “feet” (for example, Ruth 3:9, 14), Naomi’s plan has been seen as unethical and condemned by some. Yet, it brought about the needed results. In situational ethics, the ends can justify the means. The consequences of one’s action should end in the desired results. Situational ethics should not be confused with utilitarianism which is about the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

Naomi gives the advice and Ruth has no option but to follow it. Within the Akan tradition, a piece of advice from a person who is respectable cannot be ignored. As Kofi Agyekum explains: “The adviser should persuade the advisee by handling face-saving and face-threatening mechanisms cau-

2 Leon Morris, *Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 285; Victor H. Matthews, “Entrance ways and threshing floors: legally significant sites in the ancient Near East”, *Fides Et Historia* 19.3 (1987), 25–40.

3 Charles Halton, “An Indecent Proposal: The Theological Core of the Book of Ruth”, *SJOT* 26.1 (2012), 31–32; Morris, *Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary*, 286.

tiously. This is done by using indirection and politeness, especially by prefacing the advice with proverbs to indicate their authoritative sources.” He adds that “some Akan pieces of advice may inconvenience the advisee but the Akan social respect, obedience and politeness systems abhor the advisee to instantly refuse the advice”⁴.

As an obedient woman, Ruth promises the mother-in-law that she will follow the plan: “I will do whatever (Heb: *kōl*) you say” (Ruth 3:5–6). This means she will do exactly what her mother-in-law told her to do. Here is a bold woman who is ready to sneak into a man’s tent and uncover his feet. The word *kōl* (all) implies Ruth was not only willing but also determined to do *all* that is asked of her. Ruth saw the words of her mother-in-law as a commandment, possibly signifying an idea of “doing before complaining”.

Naomi advises Ruth not be in a hurry. She should wait until Boaz has taken the evening meal and drunk some wine. Actually, he will by then be “in good spirits” (Heb: *wayyîṭab*; Ruth 3:7). Boaz will have taken in much wine and will be intoxicated. He will drink until his heart is glad/merry (*wayyîṭab*). Such an idea echoes Lot’s daughters who make their father drink – he is then in good spirits and they have sex with him (Gen 19:30–38).

Indeed, Ruth waits patiently at a distance and watches what was going on between Boaz and the workers in the evening. When everyone has gone into their tent, Ruth slips in secretly (Heb: *ballāṭ*), literally “in secret”. The Hebrew presents multiple translations. The NIV uses “quietly”; the ESV uses “softly”, which does not tell it all. The NRSV make it clearer by using “stealthily”, that is, in a cautious and surreptitious manner, so as not to be seen or heard. Either she goes in / enters secretly and uncovers his feet, and lies down”, or “she goes in / enters secretly and uncovers herself, and she lay down by his feet” – I prefer the first reading. Reference to the term “feet” (Ruth 3:4, 7–9, 14) may be a euphemism for his genitalia (cf Isa 6:2).

True to her word, Ruth follows the steps the mother-in-law teaches her and ends up in the tent of Boaz. After uncovering his feet and lying by his side, Boaz becomes startled and wakes up. He is not sure who it is and so inquires about the identity of the intruder: “Who are you? (Ruth 3:8). Ruth identifies herself: “I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin” (Ruth 3:9). Ruth’s statement signifies Boaz must sleep with her. It may be a form of a marriage ritual where men

4 Kofi Agyekum, “The Ethnopragmatics of Advice”, *Pragmatics* 29.3 (2019), 315.

spread their cloak over the woman to mean the woman belongs to them. To spread a cloak over another is, in ancient Near Eastern culture, a symbolical action denoting protection. It could also mean Boaz should take possession of her. In a similar figurative language, we read that God spread his skirt over Jerusalem as an act of marriage (Ezek 16:8).

Ruth's instruction to Boaz to "spread your cloak" (Ruth 3:9) – which has been translated by the ESV as "spread your wings" – evokes Boaz's initial blessing of Ruth in 2:12. The word for "wings" here is the same used for "cloak". The NIV puts it: "spread the corner of your garments". Spreading one's cover is descriptive of the covenant of marriage. Chisholm sees a link between Ruth's use of the term "wing" and Boaz's prayer seeking protection for Ruth under the "wings" of Israel's God in Ruth 2:12. He adds that "by referring here to Boaz's 'wing,' Ruth was suggesting that Boaz had the opportunity to be God's instrument in fulfilling his earlier prayer of blessing providing security for her".⁵ Similarly, according to Aldrien Bledstein:

When Boaz awakens, startled by a presence, he demands to know who is there. She responds, "Ruth, your handmaid". This time *'alma*, meaning a "marriageable woman", is the term she chooses. Furthermore, she pointedly recalls his blessing of her, "may Yahweh spread his wings over you" (2.12) by telling him to spread his "wing/robe" over her, indicating marriage (3.9).⁶

What then can we say about the character of Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth?

a.) Naomi

Chapter 3 begins with Naomi hatching a plan to find rest for Ruth. She states that it is for Ruth's own good (Ruth 3:1). Earlier in chapter 1, Naomi had desired that Ruth went back to her mother's house or got married to another person. Now Naomi is playing an active role in helping Ruth find a husband. Naomi's plan is to find a shortcut for Ruth, to avoid the plight of going out to glean – the season is almost over, and what would Ruth do then for them to survive? Hence, it leads us to situation ethics.

Naomi certainly might know who Boaz is and how he could be seduced. She might think that if Boaz falls in love with Ruth, he would supply her needs

5 Robert B. Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 655.

6 Aldrien J. Bledstein, "Female Companionship: If the Book of Ruth were Written by a Woman...", in *Ruth, Feminist Companion to the Bible Vol 3*, ed., Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 124.

daily even if the season ends, or that Boaz would help give Ruth security. She knows that he is a man who could not say no when seduced by a single young woman. She is sure that if Boaz takes a little alcohol, he will be in the mood and will not shout when his feet are uncovered even in his sleep. Some men are too predictable. The way they shake when they see beautiful women tells the kind of people they are. Though that does not mean women who are wise in their own eyes should capitalize on the weaknesses of men and seduce them to get what they want.

Naomi knows that Boaz is a relative (compare *qārôb* Ruth 2:20 with *go'ēl* Ruth 3:12). The Hebrew noun *moda'ettānû* (Ruth 3:2) translated as “relative” does not mean kinsman-redeemer (*go'ēl*). It could mean “friend” as in Ruth 2:1. It turns out that Naomi had not told Ruth that Boaz is a close relative. Naomi seems to assume that Boaz will fall for Ruth and redeem her, but her expectation was not met. The significance of this observation is that Naomi’s plan is probably a romantic one designed in a friendly atmosphere. Only a person who knows a man so well can hatch a plan such as that of Naomi’s.

Naomi knows that Boaz is out there for business. Harvesting and threshing in that culture make the workers sleep in tents on the farm. They work hard all day, and in the evening, they eat and drink very well before retiring to bed. No matter how tired a man is, a woman who he is attracted to can make him stay awake at night.

Naomi directs Ruth to watch the tent Boaz would use for the night so that she does not mistakenly find her way into another man’s bed. Once Boaz lays down for the night, she is to “uncover his feet and lie down” with him (Ruth 3:4). If the uncovering the feet is literal and not idiomatic as generally accepted, Boaz will feel the presence of another person tampering with his sleep. If uncovering the feet is idiomatic, then it might mean making Boaz naked – when Boaz wakes up to find that his genitals have been uncovered, he will then tell her what to do (Ruth 3:3–4). The obedient Ruth gladly welcomes the idea and promises to execute the plan precisely (Ruth 3:5). Naomi certainly knows how women can seduce men. She is an old woman who has not lost touch with reality.

Naomi might have known that although Boaz was a relative, he is not under obligation or compulsion to marry Ruth. Although Boaz knows Ruth and admires her sacrifices to Naomi, it appears Boaz did not have an intention

to have Ruth for himself. His instruction that Ruth glean on his farm alone does not carry any sexual connotations. It is Naomi who offers to Boaz a young woman on a silver platter.

Millgram makes an interesting observation, suggesting that Naomi is well aware of what happens in normal life but wants to avoid it:

Life in a village or town in those days meant one was constantly in the public eye. It was like living in a fishbowl. Everyone knew everyone else's business; we have already noted how well the "town telegraph" worked. Ruth had not been in Bethlehem for more than two or three days before Boaz, without ever setting eyes on her, knew everything about her. In the normal run of things there was no place that Boaz and Ruth could meet without everyone being aware of it.⁷

Naomi's plan gambles on Boaz's honour, exposing her daughter-in-law to the danger of humiliation, if not rape. Why doesn't Naomi simply go and talk to Boaz? For one thing, this plot is twisted, dangling on the edge of morality and custom, making a more interesting story. Perhaps she perceives that Boaz needs his initiative jump-started. It's a gamble, but Ruth neither protests nor even raises questions. "All that you tell me I will do", she replies (Ruth 3:5).

The greatest lesson is that Naomi was looking out for the wellbeing of Ruth. Her plan, however, does not meet the Christian standards of today. Thinking about the other's wellbeing is the greatest virtue that is commendable. The Akan says, *wo dua daakye a, efifiri ahotɔ* (lit: if you plant into the future, you reap peace). It means thinking only about the here and now is not sustainable. It is by taking steps to do what will be of great benefit in the future that would make one live in peace.

Naomi is a wise woman. She knows how to make right decisions, although her decision would not meet our contemporary standards. She knows the right time to act and her plan works to perfection. The world needs people who can take the right decisions in life and give the right counsel so that the young people can succeed in life.

7 Hillel I. Millgram, *Four Biblical Heroines and the Case for Female Authorship: An Analysis of the Women of Ruth, Esther, and Genesis 38* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 55-56.

b) Ruth

Ruth is a young woman who knows how to seduce a man very well. The Akan says, *akɔkono da betebetɛ, naaso ɔwe abɛ* (lit: the worm is very tender but it can chew the palm nut). In other words, do not judge what one can do by their outward appearance. Ruth's young age is rather her asset. She uses tact and plays the game according to what the man needs. She knows Boaz will be ready to accept her so she gives him an order to go ahead. Her tone has to be sonorous, her voice romantic, and her body inviting. Above all, her dress and the perfume will brighten the ambiance in the tent. It would not be out of place to say as the Akan, *ne fufu apatser akɔtɔ nkwan mu* (lit: fufu has slipped unintentionally into the soup). Fufu cannot be eaten without soup. So, when the fufu mistakenly drops into the soup, it is an advantage. Boaz might have been working hard without any time to play. For Ruth to visit him to play was an advantage. Carol Meyers rightly observes that Ruth's move to sexually seduce Boaz on face value is reprehensible, yet "it is submerged in an array of otherwise laudatory behaviours precisely because it is motivated by the goal of producing a male heir".⁸ Ruth's action led to the fulfilment of God's will. Sometimes, God uses unusual ways for His own glory.

There is, critically, the question of what exactly Ruth intends to be doing at the threshing floor. Hers is to uncover the feet of Boaz and lie down. If so, she is not told what to do next. Her next line of action is to be an instruction from Boaz. He is an old man, a rich and honourable man, and Ruth will respect his directives. When Boaz wakes up, he wonders who is doing such things and asks who it is. Ruth gives an explanation for what she is doing and pleads with Boaz, "spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin" (Ruth 3:9). Ruth is making an offer of betrothal, or better still she is proposing to Boaz to be a man. She makes an offer to Boaz, offering her body to him, a kind of sexual favour. Boaz has the right to do whatever he wants because he is a kinsman. The question is, did Ruth really desire him?

According to Mangrum:

Ruth's request in 3:9 reverses the customary gender roles of Jewish society ... Therefore, most likely Ruth is proposing marriage to Boaz in 3:9 and not rec-

8 Carol Meyers, "Returning Home: Ruth 1:8 and the Gendering of the Book of Ruth", in *A Feminist Companion to the book of Ruth*, ed., Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 88.

ognizing his status as a relative, although certainly the passage carries the double entendre of proposing sexual intercourse.⁹

Ghanaians may find a marriage proposal from a woman awkward, but there is nothing wrong with a woman expressing her feelings to a man. Where the man delays in proposing, the woman can take the initiative and propose to the man.

Ruth was to wait till he has eaten, drunk, and gone to sleep; slip under the blanket with him; and do whatever he says. Her proposal to Boaz, in her view, will come when the man has eaten and taken some alcoholic beverage. Certainly, a man with an empty stomach may not respond to a love proposal as a man who is well fed and drunk.

The Akan says, *abotar wie konyimdzi* (lit: patience ends in victory). That is to say, with patience one can achieve a lot. It is even possible with patience to dissect the intestines of an ant. The writer of Ecclesiastes says “the patient in spirit are better than the proud in spirit” (Eccl 7:8). Ruth does all this with patience – with one major exception: when Boaz wakes up in the night and finds a woman next to him, Ruth does not wait to be told what to do. Instead, she tells Boaz what he should do (Ruth 3:9). She quickly asks Boaz to put the cover cloth over her. Baylis sees Ruth’s action as legally acceptable. He argues that Ruth intentionally presented a legal case based on covenant obligation to Boaz by identifying him as a relative and that if he prayed that she would find blessing under the Lord’s wings, then she is under Boaz’s wings.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Boaz knew he was not the rightful person to “take over” the property of Elimelech or what belongs to Naomi. There is another person. As such, Ruth’s argument is defective; she is saying what Naomi told her but that’s not the real fact. Boaz, after all, is not the nearest kin.

Some men are so principled that they will never allow a young woman who is not their wife to come that close to their sleeping place, let alone touch their genitals. Some men will resist and shout out if they are seduced sexually, or raise their voices and disgrace anyone who attempts to come close to the bed. They have learned how to keep their bodies well. Others will see every little move as an advantage. They cannot say no when offered

9 Benjamin Mangrum, “Bringing ‘Fullness’ to Naomi: Centripetal Nationalism in The Book of Ruth”, *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 33 (2011):72.

10 Charles P. Baylis, “Naomi in the Book of Ruth in Light of the Mosaic Covenant”, *BSac* 161.644 (October 2004), 430.

a fine opportunity, especially when the one offering it is a young woman. However, we cannot impose our contemporary African Christian ethic on Israelites within that period.

The narrator of the story uses terms that suggest the possibility of immorality (“to lie down” [8 times], “to know” [Ruth 3:3, 4, 11], “to come to” [Ruth 3:3, 4, 7, cf 4:13]). These terms are meant for the reader to see how Ruth is a daring woman, a self-empowered woman who does not follow the cultural practice or traditions of allowing men to propose. It demonstrates Ruth’s willingness to be friendly. Her request is meant to challenge Boaz, a kinsman. She is fulfilling a duty, and so Boaz must fulfil his duty. As Berlin says, “Naomi sent her on a romantic mission but she turned it into a quest for a redeemer”.¹¹ The Akan says, *wɔkyere wo awia kwan na wammfa so a, wobisa tenee anadwo* (lit: if you are shown the way in daylight and you do not use it, you will have to get a lamp when you use it at night). It implies that one has to be familiar with the plan during the planning stage and when things are clear, so that when conditions change one do not miss the way. Ruth shows Boaz what to do so that he does not make a mistake, and she gives him the reason why he must act.

Scholars are divided concerning the meaning of Ruth’s action and request. Some find terms like “enter” (*bô*; Ruth 3:4, 7), and “lie down” (*šākab*; Ruth 3:4, 7) as having sexual connotations. Others think no sexual activity went on in the tent. For Chisholm:

By creating an “atmosphere” that is “sexually charged,” the narrator may be foreshadowing the consummation of Boaz’s and Ruth’s budding relationship described in the next chapter. Perhaps it also contributes to the theme of Boaz and Ruth being impeccable in their character. At the barley threshing floor, under the veil of night, the smell of fertility in the air, some might have capitulated to physical desire, but not Boaz and Ruth, who moved toward the consummation of their relationship in a proper, morally upright manner.¹²

What Ruth did to Boaz was the beginning, with greater things to happen. Maybe he did not do anything morally wrong within the acceptable cultural norms of the time. He only allowed Ruth to sleep close to him all night. Even if she suggested that Boaz have sex with her, we are not told that they

¹¹ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 90.

¹² Robert B. Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 653-53.

had sex. The story doesn't mention what follows. Though, undoubtedly, that the atmosphere was sexually charged. They spent the night together, the man and the woman. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld says the words and actions of Ruth are "fraught with the possibility of sexual intercourse."¹³ Bledstein also admits that "Boaz tells her to stay the night so that, I suggest, they may consummate their marriage. This is a lawful act committed secretly, a necessary measure."¹⁴ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, however, argue that what Ruth did was dignified when compared with other women. They explain:

The proper behavior of both Boaz and Ruth under compromising circumstances stands out more clearly because of the potential for transgression depicted in those related narratives. Boaz's restraint and readiness to undertake responsibility contrasts with Judah's shirking his duty and with his sexual encounter with Tamar. Ruth's dignified exchange with Boaz at night contrasts with Lot's daughters' seductions of drunken Lot. At the symbolic level, the encounter on the threshing floor also reverses and acts as a corrective to those other stories of ancestors and thereby "repairs" them.¹⁵

Boaz, a very religious man, blesses Ruth and acknowledges her dignity: "The Lord bless you, my daughter" (Ruth 3:10). If no sexual intercourse took place on the threshing floor, then it may account for the swiftness of Boaz in finding resolution at the city gate in the morning. In fact, Boaz makes it clear that Ruth "had not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor" (Ruth 3:10). Certainly, Ruth was a woman of worth. The Akan says, *dzin pa ye sen ahonyadze* (lit: a good name is better than riches). A good name speaks to the integrity of the person and defines one's reputation and character. Boaz was earlier introduced in the story as an 'iš *gibbôr hayil* (a prominent/powerful man of integrity; Ruth 2:1) during the daytime. When they meet in the night, Boaz admits that Ruth was an 'ēšet *hayil* (a woman of integrity, a worthy woman; Ruth 3:11). The same phrase is also used of the ideal woman/wife in Proverbs 31:10. No wonder the book of Ruth follows the books of Proverbs, and more especially Proverbs 31:10–31 to give an example of a virtuous woman.

13 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "At the Threshing Floor: Sex, Reader Response, and a hermeneutic of Survival", *OTE* 15.1 (2002), 164.

14 Aldrien J. Bledstein, "Female Companionship: If the Book of Ruth were Written by a Woman...", in *Ruth, Feminist Companion to the Bible* Vol 3, ed., Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 125.

15 Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), 55.

The Akan says, *ahwennepa nnkasa* (lit: good beads do not make noise). It means useless beads usually make noise. It is the empty barrels that make the most noise. Some women believe that they can only come out of their predicament by showing off their beauty in public and going after other men. Women who make so much noise about their presence are not the good beads. More so, the placement of the book of Ruth immediately after the book of Judges, may serve as a counter to show what loving relationships are meant to be. The book of Judges ends with the Benjamites gang-raping and abducting women and carrying them off to be their wives, and with the key theme that the Israelites in those days did what was right in their own eyes (Judg 21:23–25).

The narrator states that Ruth does all that her mother-in-law commands her to do (Ruth 3:6). However, there is an indication that Ruth goes beyond just following instructions. She asks Boaz to cover her with his cloak. This is probably not what Naomi had in mind. In the view of Berlin:

She did not realize that her mission was a romantic one, thinking rather that she was there on secret legal business. (The fact that she was a foreigner explains how she could be ignorant of the institution of *ge'ullah* and its workings). Although she thought she was carrying out Naomi's directions, in reality she was not. The scene read this way becomes both comic and touching.¹⁶

Ruth is a woman in her own right. She is dependent upon the advice of Naomi yet truly independent and takes a decision on her own to go beyond what she has been asked to say. She plans the first visit to the field to glean so that she and Naomi can survive. I have argued elsewhere that such women who sacrifice for others without being threatened are self-actualized leaders in their own right.¹⁷ Boaz gives her permission to continue visiting the field to glean for the next two to three months. The third visit is initiated by Naomi. Phyllis Tribble sees the time of harvesting as the first visit and the time Ruth spent the night with Boaz as the second visit and explains:

The first meeting was by chance; the second was by choice. The first was in the fields; the second at the threshing floor. The first was public; the second private. The first was work; the second play. The first was by day; the second

¹⁶ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 91.

¹⁷ Mark S. Aidoo, "Esther as a Self-actualized leader: A Psychosocial Analysis", *TJCT* 18.3 (2015), 43-67.

by night. Yet both of them hold the potential for life and death.¹⁸

Some of us are always waiting for instructions on how to live our lives. We lack the wisdom to take initiative. The Bible says the one that lacks wisdom should ask from the Lord (Jas 1:5).

The story makes sense when read in the light of what the narrator conceals or reveals. Biblical writers are not shy to write vividly when a man and a woman “know” each other. Hence, the story conceals that they had sex throughout the night but it reveals that Boaz praises Ruth and blesses her, and then promises to do all in his power to find security for her. If sex is the focus, then there is little to say. If the motivation is to influence Boaz to take an action to find security for Ruth, as Naomi clearly had in mind, then the plan succeeds. The gap created in the story leaves much to be wondered about and readers can fill it to the best of their knowledge about how life works. Yet the modesty about the drama in the night and their language reflects a negotiation; a plea from Ruth falls on good ears and Boaz becomes determined to help out because he is a kinsman.

Ruth visits Boaz at the threshing place when all have gone into their tents and there is no one in sight to know that she has been there. She wakes up before others come out of their tents so that no one knows she has spent the night there: “no one must know that a woman came to the threshing floor” (Ruth 3:14). Was it unacceptable for women to visit men at the threshing floor?

Ruth is ready to surprise Boaz at a time he will be sound asleep and will not notice her approaching. There was no prior appointment. Ruth is taking a chance. Will he be too startled to fulfil the part Naomi has planned for him? His question “Who are you?” echoes a surprise when he wakes up. Boaz does not shout so that neighbours could hear, rather he asks quietly. When Ruth identifies herself, she also speaks quietly, not loud enough for those nearby to hear. Some conversations should be kept quiet.

c) Boaz

Boaz is a man, but not “the man” after all. There is another man – another relative, a nearer one, the real next of kin. He is off the radar. Significantly, Boaz is not ready to take advantage of the situation and usurp the authority of the nearest kinsman. Does Naomi know about this next of kin? And

18 Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 183.

why does Naomi send Ruth to Boaz instead of the nearest man who is rightfully the one to redeem Ruth? Perhaps he had not shown any interest. Or he is too poor to be considered in the game. Or he does not have a farm where Ruth could also go and glean? Since the unnamed kin has not stepped forward to help or be introduced to Ruth, it would be interesting to know what he would do. His existence introduces another plot complication, another obstacle to the happy ending that we are expecting. If Boaz knows that the nearest kin is available, will he go ahead and have sex with Ruth on that wonderful night? Boaz promises to take steps to bring in this next of kin because he is an honourable man. He would not take what does not belong to him. He will conclude the matter as a person of worth with a noble character.

Boaz makes it clear that Ruth is a woman of noble character (Ruth 3:11). Such a compliment is enough to show how Ruth has maintained her integrity. Among the Akan of Ghana, as intimated by Kofi Agyekum, when women attract compliments is it mostly on appearance and performance. Hitherto, traditional Akan society reserves compliments mainly for men because of their participation in tedious work.¹⁹

Did it ever cross the mind of Boaz to find security for Ruth during the period Ruth was gleaning in his field? Or he did not take notice of the situation of Ruth? Maybe Boaz thought that providing opportunities for Ruth to glean was enough for the women and did not consider anything beyond that.

Boaz was a good conversationalist. He knew how to initiate a conversation. The first time he saw Ruth, he opens up with a good conversation full of promises. Robin Gallaher Branch wonders what did they talk about and adds:

Quite likely they grew to know each other. After all, the text up to this point records only their initial meeting and no further conversation between them during the harvests. Perhaps alone at night on the threshing floor they talked about their pasts, their hopes for the future, the people in their lives, their losses, silly things, deep things, in short anything that came to mind! Quite likely there was quiet laughter. What did they do? Most probably Boaz embraced her.²⁰

19 Kofi Agyekum, "The Ethnopragsmatics of Akan Compliments", *Legon Journal of Humanities* 21 (2010), 27.

20 Robin Gallaher Branch, "Handling a crisis via a combination of human initiative and godly direction: Insights from the Book of Ruth", *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 46.2 (2010). Available online: <https://indieskriflig.org.za/index.php/skriflig/article/view/110/759>

When Ruth was about to leave the threshing floor at dawn to go home, Boaz gave her some of the seeds to take home. The reference to seed also heightens the sexual innuendos of the story. Boaz giving Ruth his seed before she leaves can metaphorically imply having sexual relations before she left. Symbolically, the seed represents a life-giving seed, so plentiful that it would erode barrenness and death that the women had been experiencing. Boaz considers that they need food that sustains the body.

Christians are to follow the example of Boaz in honouring and protecting women. Protecting women's dignity, honour, and reputation is vital in our society. Men should not act only after enjoying sexual favours from women. Boaz's actions are to tell us how weak men are, and denounce men who cannot say no to seduction. Ultimately, Boaz seeks the security of Ruth and follows up on his word to do all he can to help Ruth.

There is something analogous between Boaz's prayer in Ruth 2:12 and Ruth's request in Ruth 3:9. Boaz understands that Ruth's coming to Bethlehem was based on sacrificial love, so she should find refuge under the Lord's wings (Ruth 2:12). Ruth visits Boaz in the night and requests that Boaz covers her under his wing (Ruth 3:9). By finding refuge under Boaz's wing, Ruth prepares herself to find refuge under the Lord's wings. Could it be that the Lord was using Boaz to answer the very same prayer that he had prayed for her, that he himself is the answer to that prayer?

Boaz considers her request as welcome, not crass or out of place. After all, she does not go after younger men. She has kept herself pure. She is going for an older man, a mature person. Like Naomi (See Ruth 2:2, 22, 3:1), Boaz calls Ruth "my daughter", implying that he is old enough to have her as a daughter. Boaz thought Ruth had a taste for only younger men, not knowing she is open to older men. Boaz salutes her for her character (Ruth 3:10-11) and proves his godly personality as he swiftly and responsibly makes sure he becomes the rightful redeemer for both the land and Ruth (Ruth 3:12-13, 4:1-12).

Conclusion

Christians are to be wise, proactive, and supportive and should be people of wisdom. Christians should learn not to blame, accuse, or point fingers at Boaz for entertaining Ruth at night, or other men when they succumb to the advances of women. Prayer for such persons is the right thing to do so that their integrity remains intact. It is said that when someone's beard is

on fire, you fetch water and put it by your side. Taking precaution is always the best. We should not dismiss what Boaz did as if it is a sign of a dysfunctional spirit. There are so many life experiences that should keep us humble no matter how honourable and rich we are.

We learn from Naomi that she is wise and knows how to hatch a plan to win a man. Such an attitude may not fit the way of life for Christians. However, she is not thinking about herself but about the wellbeing of others. Essentially, Christians are not to use the wrong methods for the right intentions. We also learn about Ruth that she is obedient, willing to serve, hardworking, and a woman of wisdom. Her patience and resilience are extraordinary. She is a bold woman who defies the traditional way of waiting for men to propose marriage. Such bold women who take initiative are exemplary to contemporary women. In all she maintains her dignity and honour. Boaz is a man of dignity and is very religious. He is not ready to usurp the authority of the one who has the rights. He knows that *nyia a adze wo no na odzi* (lit: he who deserves it, enjoys it). He is ready to sacrifice all to protect and honour women who are vulnerable. He seeks the wellbeing of others and that is worth emulating.

Knowing who we are and our mission on earth as Christians matters a lot. People should be able to read the lifestyles of Christians and tell who they are. At least, they should be seen as people who are walking with Christ, following the example of Christ, and doing what Christ would do.

11

Theme: Generosity – a Mark of Christianity

READING: RUTH 3:10–18

ANCHOR TEXT: “Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.” (3:17)

Introduction

Naomi and Ruth travel to Bethlehem when they hear that God has visited that town and given them food. Such a visitation translates into a bumper harvest. Naomi and Ruth come to Bethlehem after the visitation, when many have planted and are reaping from their toil. These two women have not planted anything and therefore depend on the generosity of others.

Ruth takes advantage of the provisions of gleaning and asks permission from Naomi to go to any field she finds and glean. Eventually, she lands in the field of Boaz, who happens to be a kinsman of Naomi’s husband, Elimelech. Ruth starts gleaning in the field, following after the women who are working. Later when Boaz comes to his field and sees her, things change. Ruth is given unhindered access to gather as much as she can. As far as Boaz is concerned, Ruth should not go home with little. To go home with little means being empty-handed.

In chapter 3, Ruth visits Boaz at night on the threshing floor and spends the night with him. When she leaves for her home at dawn, Boaz gives some of the seed – his harvest produce. It is six measures of barley, which is so much seed. That was enough to cater for Ruth and Naomi for a long time. The reason, according to Boaz, was that Ruth could not go home empty-handed. God’s mission is to visit His people and cause them to go home full, and not empty-handed. What does such a gesture mean in our contemporary world? How can we understand generosity as Christians in our contemporary time and how can Christians practice it?

Exposition

When Boaz first sees Ruth, he becomes curious about her and asks who she is. On hearing the words of his headman, he can identify the kind of person Ruth is. He has now heard about Ruth. When Ruth visits him at the thresh-

ing floor in the night and identifies herself, Boaz is taken aback. Now he is seeing her differently. He praises her and says “your loyalty is better than the first” (Ruth 3:10). Could it be that Boaz is comparing what Ruth had done for Naomi to what she had done to him? That is to say, is Ruth’s sexual exploit better than the sacrifices to Naomi? After all, Ruth has not shown any form of loyalty to Boaz in the previous chapters. Serving Naomi is a great sacrifice but coming to lie at his feet was more than her service.

When Boaz asks who it was intruding and disturbing his sleep, Ruth identifies herself by name and then describes herself as his “female servant” (Ruth 3:9). Earlier in Ruth 2:13, she uses “maidservant” or “female servant”, a term that represents humility. She means that she occupies a lowly position on the social scale. By describing herself as a servant, she makes the point that Boaz should see her as a woman who is marriageable. She is not a minor. As Chisholm puts it, “Ruth’s use of the term is appropriate for she was about to propose marriage to Boaz.”¹

The loyalty Boaz was talking about very much concerns Ruth’s continuing fidelity to Naomi and not that she has given herself to Boaz. The way Boaz treats Ruth is motivated by what he has heard about Ruth, about her sacrifices and fidelity to Naomi. It is not an easy decision to turn your back on your own people and come to live in a foreign land and take refuge under the wings of their God. Hence, Boaz was much appreciative. Even in the event of lying down with Boaz, he has the impression that Ruth is looking for the wellbeing and security of Naomi and not doing that for her own advantage. Such a self-sacrificing attitude makes her not go for a younger man but follow the law that could end up producing children for Naomi. She wanted someone who would act as kinsman-redeemer.

Beyond that, Boaz takes notice of who Ruth is. She is an honourable woman. That might as well account for the special treatment Boaz accords to Ruth rather than him doing it for the sake of kindness to Naomi. What motivates Boaz could be Ruth’s actions rather than being a relative of Elimelech. He knows he is not the nearest kinsman-redeemer, but he is determined to help: “I will do for you all that you ask” (Ruth 3:11). He notices that Ruth does not have food to live on so he provides her with what she needs.

1 Robert B. Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 654.

Boaz is ready to display kindness to Ruth, and to display concern over Ruth's reputation as a way to continue seeking her wellbeing and that of Naomi.² That is the high point of Boaz's generosity.

When Naomi wants a resting place for Ruth, it happens that Boaz gives Ruth a resting place for the night (Ruth 3:1, 13). So, he tells Ruth to "remain this night" (Ruth 3:13). While that request to stay for the night might at first appear to be questionable, it seems that he was choosing a time when it would be safer for Ruth to return home. She might encounter bad people when she travels home in the night. The early morning would be safer than in the middle of the night when another might be out and take advantage of her. While the "rest" Boaz provided for her in the night might have culminated in sexual relations, it is not certain.

Boaz promises Ruth that he will do whatever it takes to see that she gets a man in her life: "If he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do it. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, as the Lord lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you" (Ruth 3:13).

Ruth spends the night with Boaz and is up early before the morning light, ready to go back home. She leaves the tent "before one could recognize another" (Ruth 3:14). It means she leaves before dawn while it is still dark. Yet, Boaz makes sure that Ruth does not go empty-handed. He measures some six measures of barley for her to send back home (Ruth 3:15). In the words of Chisholm, the six measures of barley can have three implications. It can connote an ephah, seah, or omer:

- If it was six ephahs (around 35 litres each), then it will weigh between 180–300 pounds, which is too large an amount for Ruth to carry home.
- If six seahs (each around one-third of an ephah), then it would have weighed between 60–100 pounds.
- If it was six omers (each around one-tenth of an ephah), then it will weigh 18–30 pounds, which seems too small in light of the amount Ruth was able to glean in a day (cf 2:17).

2 Russell J. Hendel, "Ruth: The Legal Code for the Laws of Kindness", *JBQ* 36 (2008), 257; Robert D. Holmstedt, *Ruth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 170–171.

Chisholm thinks Boaz gives her six sheaves.³ All this is to say that Boaz is very generous. He would give and give without counting the cost. He has received a share of the kindness of Ruth and he has to reciprocate.

When Ruth arrives home in the morning, Naomi asks Ruth how the whole drama unfolded (Ruth 3:16). She needs news to feed her itching ears. She had sent her on the journey and must be told what happened. She needs details. The Hebrew text translated “How did things go with you, my daughter” (Ruth 3:16) can also be literally translated as “Who are you, my daughter”. In other words, are you the same Ruth who left last night or you are now a refreshed young woman?

When Ruth tells her mother-in-law all that went on in the night, Naomi knows what will happen after the encounter between Ruth and Boaz. She knows that what has happened will influence Boaz to act that very day. She says, “for the man will not rest” (Ruth 3:18), an echo of her intention to find rest for Ruth. Would a man forget so soon about a lovely visit at night and not keep his word? Boaz is a man of his word, but the fact that he will not rest signifies a burning desire to see to it that Ruth finds security, and in turn gets a husband. One may suggest possible reasons why Boaz is determined to help Ruth:

First, he wants to be generous. Boaz says the reason why he is generous is because Ruth has sacrificed a lot for Naomi. Second, to say that “as the Lord lives” (Ruth 3:13) is an indication that he is very determined. He is swearing to Ruth that he will do whatever it takes to close the matter. Third, Boaz will give the first option to the nearest kin – he takes the option, “good” for him (Ruth 3:13). If the tone in saying “good” is pleasant, then Boaz is prepared for whatever comes. If his tone in saying “good” is not from his heart, then he sees it as a wonderful opportunity. Fourth, he is interested in the wellbeing of Ruth even though he is not the first redeemer (Ruth 3:12–13). Much as he is not pushing his way or simply overtaking the nearest kin to get to her, he wants Ruth to be settled as quickly as possible.

What is generosity?

The word “generosity” in times past was used to refer to people’s status, especially those of noble birth. In contemporary times it describes a character to be practiced that belongs to greater goodness. It is more of an ideal virtue that one may aspire to and achieve. It is about opening one’s hand or

3 Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 660–61.

giving to others, especially from a free heart and in liberality, giving things that are good for others to enhance the wellbeing of the recipient.

In the Old Testament, generosity is usually seen in the context of wealth, though some poor people are generous. In fact, the poor are expected to be generous. Wealth is a form of honour and is something desirous. It is God's plan to make His people rich. We learn in Proverbs that wealth is a blessing: "The blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it" (Prov 10:22). In Genesis, God says to Abram, "I will bless you, and you will be a blessing" (Gen 12:2), a promise that goes beyond riches.

There is nothing wrong with working and producing a good harvest from your work so that you become rich. In fact, it is a virtue to be pursued. No doubt, blessing in the Bible often comes in the form of material wealth. At the same time, it's not an end in itself. Those who have should be faithful in giving to others (1 Cor 4:2; 1 Pet 4:10). God is not concerned with how much or how little we possess but how generous we can be.

Some examples of generous and faithful givers in the Bible are:

1. The Widow of Zarephath, though very poor, was generous (1 Kgs 17:7–16). She has very little food to cook for herself and her son. It is her last meal before she and her son starve to death. Elijah the prophet of God instead tells her to go home and cook something for him before preparing something for herself and her son. Out of generosity, the widow does not think about herself first. True to the prophecy of Elijah, her supply of flour and oil does not run out when she has given the first part to the prophet. May God cause all of your supplies to be refilled because you are generous.

2. The Shunammite Woman is another generous person (2 Kgs 4:8–10). She provides Elisha with a furnished room. This wealthy woman in Shunem invites Elisha to eat with her family all the time. It is an open invitation which means every time Elisha passes by, he should drop by to eat with that family. We learn that her giving generously opened doors of blessings and she conceives and gives birth to a child. May your generosity open the fruit of the womb to mature.

3. Joseph of Arimathea offers his own tomb for Jesus to be buried in (Matt 27:57–60). Joseph's tomb is not a cheap one. He gives it out and does not expect anything in return. Joseph's sacrifice is irreplaceable and he is always remembered when the death of Jesus is recounted.

4. The Churches of Macedonia give out of their extreme poverty, beyond their means, on their own accord (2 Cor 8:1-5). They are impoverished but that does not stop them from giving. When we offer our time and resources through the eyes of opportunity, it will marvel us how God can open doors for us.

Why should we be generous?

Generosity should define the life of every Christian. It is not simply about being “nice.” It is about giving freely of our time, money, and abilities, with the motif that we are demonstrating our reliance on God who blesses and gives freely. Christian generosity is always a response to faith. God’s Word does not say when we can give – we will never run out of resources. It does say that we should give because we can trust the Giver of every good and perfect gift to care for us (Jas 1:17).

Generous people often give more than they are asked to give. When it is time to build the tabernacle, the people of Israel give more than necessary (Exod 36:1-7). They give out of their substance, whether large or small. Jesus commends the widow for giving her all (Luke 21:1-4). They give even when it doesn’t make sense because they give in response to a great cause. Sometimes we have to be willing to imagine something much greater than ourselves in order to open our hands in giving.

God calls his people to be generous

Boaz feels obligated to give and does not count the cost. Maybe it is easy for him because he is rich. He has something to live on while Naomi and Ruth do not have. There are duties and responsibilities related to wealth, that is to say sharing the wealth. Immediately it occurs to me this connection: “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed” (Prov 19:17).

Generosity is about creating an equilibrium in society so that all can have something to rely on. It is a way to uplift the poor and needy so that they become somebody in society. For those who are in power or those who have, it is their responsibility to look out for the poor, needy, orphan, and widow to prove their loyalty. These are usually characterized as persons who do not have.

God is generous and so we should be generous. God gives, so we should give.

Everything we have is God's. During their training as disciples, Jesus sends his disciples out and orders them not to take anything but depend on the generosity of the people (Matt 10:9–15).

Moses instructs the Israelites: "You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day" (Deut 8:18). This means how we use our wealth has a link to the confirmation of God's word in our lives. God will confirm His covenant with us depending on how we manage our wealth. Part of the responsibility of remembering the Lord is the act of giving to the Lord.

The sages say: "One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered" (Prov 11:24–25; ESV). Again, "Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor" (Prov 22:9; ESV). Moreover, "Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered" (Prov 21:13; ESV). "Whoever gives to the poor will not want, but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse" (Prov 28:27; ESV).

The psalmist says:

Blessed is the one who considers the poor! In the day of trouble the Lord delivers him; the Lord protects him and keeps him alive; he is called blessed in the land; you do not give him up to the will of his enemies. The Lord sustains him on his sickbed; in his illness you restore him to full health. (Ps 41:1–3; ESV)

It is well with the man who deals generously and lends; who conducts his affairs with justice ... He has distributed freely; he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever; his horn is exalted in honour. (Ps 112:5, 9; ESV)

Paul also appeals to the church to give money to the churches in Jerusalem that are in need. Apostle Paul makes a crucial point:

The point is this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor 9:6–7; ESV)

Paul also says if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim 5:8).

Life application

A generous person does not only give to the poor but all. Some think that God is not poor so there is no need to give our substance to God. Also, to give with the motive that God will give back is not a sound teaching of the Bible. God has many ways to reward the giver, and God is not obligated to give back what the giver offers. Though yes, when we give, our reward will come, well pressed down, shaken, and overflowing (Luke 6:38).

Christian generosity is not a matter of showing to the public what one can give. God rewards those who give in secret (Matt 6:4). If human beings see what has been given and offer praise and thanks to the giver, that would be enough and God will not give the giver additional praise. If giving is done in secret or human beings fail to give thanks and praise to the giver, the thanks and praise will come from God instead. Boaz gives to Ruth not because he wants Ruth to praise him or thank him. Naomi sees that attitude in Boaz and gave thanks to God for the life of Boaz.

Generosity is a key virtue in Ghanaian society. It is unacceptable to have a visitor for a short while and not serve a drink. If the visitor has to stay for a period, food must be served. If the visitor stays on for days, the host must make sure the visitor does not go back empty-handed. One would find housebound men and women who yearn to give gifts to pastors when they pay a pastoral visit to them in their homes. Some housebound old people would take money from their children so that when young people visit them at home, they can give them something to take with them.

Christians cannot afford to be wicked. They cannot allow those who visit them for worship to go home with empty hands. To James, it is unacceptable for one to tell the poor to go in peace, keep warm, or be well fed when no gift is offered to them (Jas 2:15). May the Lord teach us to be generous in accordance with our faith (Rom 12:8). To the writer of John, "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" (1 John 3:17).

Conclusion

We have explored what it means to be generous and why it is necessary for Christians to be generous. Above all, we considered God's expectation from Christians in terms of generosity and the blessings that come with it.

Boaz shows us how to be generous. We learn that generosity should be motivated by honour and loyalty. Our past actions can open doors for people to be generous to us. Equally so, our dignity and what we stand for open bigger doors for God's generosity through others. We should learn to give, and give because there are more blessings in giving. Above all, we should be kind to everyone.

12

Theme: Children are a Gift from the Lord

READING: RUTH 4:1-12

ANCHOR TEXT: “May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem.” (Ruth 4:11)

Introduction

One of the commandments God gives to humankind at the beginning of creation is “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28). This commandment is also like a promise, an activity that God will cause humanity to be and to do. The belief is that it is the Lord who causes a person to be fruitful and multiply.

This exposition looks at how God uses human beings to fulfil His purpose and the place of children in our families. It highlights the nature of God in making people fruitful and finally looks at the plan of God in our lives.

Exposition

When Boaz spends the night with Ruth, he promises her he’ll find the next of kin who will redeem her. The determination of Boaz to settle the matter with the nearest kinsman of Elimelech makes him go to the city gate early in the morning (Ruth 4:1). The city gate is a meeting place for various business and legal transactions. The gates are the central place for any important assembly (1 Kgs 22:10; Jer 38:7), and in particular they are the location of the legal courts of the day (Deut 22:24, 25:7; Ps 127:5; 2 Sam 15:2-6; Amos 5:10, 12, 15).

Boaz calls together ten men from the city to adjudicate on the matter of the redemption of Ruth. The gathering of the elders at the gate of the town is consistent with the ancient form of legal assembly made up of male members of the town. For example, when Sarah died, Abraham has to go to the city gate where the men had gathered to speak to Ephron the Hittite, so as to buy a cave to bury his wife (Gen 23:10, 18). When Shechem defiles Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, the brothers enter into an agreement with Hamon, Shechem’s father. Hamon goes to the city gate and informs the men about the agreement and they all agree to be circumcised (Gen 34:24).

The men who sit at the city gate to give counsel are described as the “elders”, a term that can refer to their age as well as some form of position in the town.¹ It is possible that not all of them had equal status. Some might wield more authority than others but since they all sit in counsel, there is some form of democracy. The Akan says, *Ahemfo kyin, bi dzi bi ekyir* (lit: the umbrellas of chiefs, some are bigger while others follow in that order). It means in life, all people, authority, or things are not of equal rank. Some come before the other.

Bob Becking and Anne-Mareike Wetter argue that what happened when Boaz went to the gate of Bethlehem in Ruth 4 should be seen as the description of a ritual with both religious and legal dimensions.² At the city gate, Boaz sees the closest kinsman passing so he calls him, “Come over, friend” (Ruth 4:1). The NIV rightly translates the Hebrew, *pelonî ‘almonî* as “Mr So-and-so”. It means the closest kinsman-redeemer is not named, a way to show that this character is not so important to be identified by name. The Hebrew *pelonî ‘almonî* could mean a stranger who we need not concern ourselves with. As Campbell asserts, *pelonî ‘almonî* is an expression with an imprecisely known connotation. It could connote anonymity or it could be that which is bound by secrecy.³ Sasson explains that, “the potential redeemer is anonymous, for his future, unlike Boaz’s, will ultimately be anonymous: an interesting fate for someone who will shortly fret about his estate”.⁴

Boaz open his case before the elders and makes it known to the closest kinsman that “Naomi is selling (Heb: *mokrāh*) a parcel of land that belongs to our relative Elimelech” (Ruth 4:3). How Boaz got information about the sale of land is uncertain. It may be that Ruth told him during her visit at night. Could this be a ploy to take possession since he is a rich man? It must be noted that *mokrāh* is in its Hebrew perfect form, and thus ought to be translated in the past tense – it would mean that Boaz makes it known that Naomi has already sold the land belonging to Elimelech and now ought to be redeemed. This past tense usage does not make much sense given that Boaz is currently informing the kinsman-redeemer about his duty and possible acquisition of said field, as such “she will sell” seems appropriate.

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- 1 Friedrich W. Bush, *Word Commentary: Ruth, Esther*, WBC Vol 9 (Dallas: Word Books, 1996), 198.
 - 2 Bob Becking and Anne-Mareike Wetter, “Boaz in the Gate (Ruth 4,1-12): Legal Transaction or Religious Ritual?” *ZAR* 19 (2013), 253-265.
 - 3 Edward Campbell Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), 143.
 - 4 Jack Sasson, “Ruth”, in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 326.

Boaz says the parcel of land belonged to “our kinsman Elimelech” (Ruth 4:3). The Hebrew used usually means “our brother”. Like the Akan and elsewhere in Africa, brotherhood extends beyond blood relations. Chisholm asserts that “Hebrew ‘brother,’ does not refer here to a literal blood-brother, but rather to a relative. See 2:1, 20, 3:2.”⁵

Boaz explains to the closest kinsman that “the day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance” (Ruth 4:5). While in the first clause Boaz uses *qenôtkâ* “you acquire”, the Hebrew in the second clause uses the Hebrew *qānîî* a Qal, perfect, first, common, singular, meaning “I acquire” – but there is *qānîî* (“you acquire it”) provided in a bracket in the text to correct the error. The Hebrew *qānîî* meaning “you acquire” is more likely given the circumstance.

One may say that Boaz’s assertion seems to indicate the nature of the law on redemption in those days. There may be some customary basis upon which one acquires an inheritance on behalf of another, which includes the moral obligation of marrying the deceased’s widow. In fact, the elders or the people do not indicate that Boaz was misquoting the law or misapplying the custom.⁶

Buying the field from Naomi includes acquiring Ruth. Such a transaction is meant to maintain the dead husband’s name to prevent any form of alienation of a family estate, or to provide for the protection and security of the widow. This is similar to levirate marriage prescribed in Deut 25:5–10. But there is nothing there about marrying the widow or redeeming her out of kindness. Hence, it will be strange to think that Mr So-and-so did not show love. Chisholm agrees with Bush that the “levirate law” should be restricted to the legally required social custom prescribed in Deut 25:5–10 as evidenced in the narrative of Gen 38. However, in the book of Ruth, the emphasis is on redeeming the land.⁷

The closest kinsman declines the offer because he is of the opinion that redeeming the property and marrying Ruth would bring problems to his home. He cannot do that “without endangering my own inheritance” (Ruth 4:6). The closest kinsman is being selfish here. He wants to protect his own

5 Robert B. Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 666.

6 Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 211–33.

7 Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 684.

property and thus is not interested in acquiring the property of Elimelech. The reason for such a thought is unclear, that is, how the acquisition of the property of Elimelech would jeopardize his own property is unknown. Maybe he cannot manage any extra property, what he had was enough to manage, or he thought buying the property would conflict with the one meant for his family.

Chisholm believes the thought of having children with Ruth was Mr So-and-so's problem. More so, he would have to take care of Naomi, Ruth, and the child who might eventually come. He adds:

It seems likely that his concern pertained to his own land, not the redeemed land. Apparently, the child, in addition to carrying on the line of Elimelech and Mahlon, would become an heir of the relative's line. ... Adding an heir to his family line was unacceptable to the relative, perhaps because it would diminish the inheritance of his other children (assuming he had some).⁸

As a sign or evidence that the closest kinsman has declined the offer and is transferring his rights to Boaz, the closest kinsman "took off a sandal and gave it to the other [that is, Boaz]" (Ruth 4:7). The sandal is a symbol used to confirm the transaction, that is, the transfer of rights. The custom of removing one's sandal is also a signature of that individual. To take someone's sandal means you have proof that you possess something that once belonged to that individual. Since it is the sandal upon which one walks around, wearing someone's sandals could be a visual way of expressing the identity of the owner (cf Josh 1:3, 14:9; Deut 1:36, 11:24; Ps 60:8). Niehaus explains:

The sandal stood for the owner's right to tread upon his land. The transfer of the sandal from owner to purchaser symbolized the transfer of that right. In the case of Boaz and Ruth, the man who had first option to buy the land from Naomi and Ruth gave up that right in favor of Boaz. He symbolized his decision by giving Boaz his sandal, which would have trodden on the land had he acquired it.⁹

It seems the phrase "the house of him whose sandal was pulled off" (Deut 25:9) has some relationship to the removing of sandal custom in Ruth 4:7–8.

8 Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 676.

9 Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2008), 68.

Boaz promises Ruth that he will make sure that she finds rest in a new home. He could have given Ruth her security immediately yet there was someone who had that right to do so. Hence, Boaz invites the elders and people of the town to witness whether the closest kinsman would take possession of all that Naomi has, including Ruth. Taking over Naomi's property and marrying Ruth means that her first son will become Elimelech's heir or his son Mahlon's heir, and the land he paid for will no longer be his.

Unwilling to take that risk, the unnamed man declines the offer. The Akan would say *asem no bɔɔ no pusa* (lit: the matter took him by surprise). The negotiation does not go well with the closest kinsman and Boaz has to take over. The closest kinsman-redeemer did not want an "additional" wife, so he resigns his right to the entire inheritance (Ruth 4:6). The custom was that the case is closed the moment the man removes his sandal and gave it to the other redeemer. In this way, Boaz buys everything that belonged to Elimelech (Ruth 4:9). He also declares publicly by his words that he will marry Ruth (Ruth 4:10), and the marriage is accepted by all present.

One can rightly say that Boaz takes that initiative in securing rest for Ruth. Christians may believe that the action of Boaz is within the will of God, and that God made it possible for the closest kinsman to decline the offer so that Boaz came into the picture.

The elders and all the people at the gate witnessing the transaction immediately pray that Ruth will become a blessing in the house of Boaz:

May the Lord make the woman who is coming to 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 children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, who Tamar bore to Judah (Ruth 4:11-12; NRSV).

Through their prayer, they acknowledge that it is the Lord who grants the desires of His people by using people. Boaz and Ruth have to participate in the will of God to make children and the children they bear will bring them honour – a name and a dynasty.

The honour motif is also acknowledged by Robert Alter. To him, the statement by Boaz places Ruth among the heroines of Israel. Alter notes:

In the ensuing dialogue between Ruth and Boaz, the reversal of conventional literary gender is reinforced by a pointed allusion (verse 11) to Abraham, when Boaz says, “You have left your father and mother and the land of your birth and gone to a people you never knew” (*cf.* Genesis 12:1 – “Go you from your land and your birthplace and your father’s house ...”). Ruth is conceived by the author as a kind of matriarch by adoption.¹⁰

God makes people fruitful

Ruth is compared to Rachel and Leah in terms of fruitfulness. It is strange that these two women are taken as role models. Rachel and Leah are the wives of Jacob who together gave him sons and a daughter to make up the house of Israel. In Gen 28:5, Jacob leaves home when his father Isaac sends him to Paddan Aram, and that gives him the opportunity to run away from his brother Esau. Seeing Rachel, the younger daughter of Laban, to be very beautiful, he has to work for seven years to marry her. Laban then tricks him with the excuse that in their country the younger cannot marry before the elder does. It is only after the marriage is consummated that Jacob sees that he has slept with Leah instead of Rachel, the one he loved. Leah is described as a woman who has weak (Heb: *rak*) eyes, indicating that she has some defects. The Hebrew word *rak* translated “weak” also means “tender” or “delicate”. However, the NRSV says “Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful” (Gen 29:17). Jacob’s love for Rachel makes him labour for seven more years to marry her as well. It is noted that Jacob’s “love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah” (Gen 29:30).

Marrying the two sisters does not go on well for Jacob. Rachel and Leah are caught up in a web of jealousy and rivalry. Jealousy is an ugly emotion that leads to many destructive outcomes in relationships. In the case of Leah and Rachel, both of them have to deal with the ugly side of jealousy. Because of the rivalry and competition, God gives special attention to Leah, and enables her to have four sons before Rachel can have any. God enables Leah to have four sons because “the Lord saw that Leah was unloved” (Gen 29:31). After Leah has given Jacob three sons, she thinks it will make Jacob love her but that did not come to pass. In fact, she says, “Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.” (Gen 29:34).

Leah’s ability to bear children for Jacob, in turn, exasperates the jealousy inside Rachel. “When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. As such, she said to Jacob, ‘Give me

10 Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 59.

children, or I'll die!" (Gen 30:1). Rachel initially gave her maid, Bilhah, to Jacob so she could have children through her. Eventually, God opened Rachel's womb and she had a son called Joseph (Gen 30:22-24), and later another one called Benjamin.

Leah and Rachel are women who compete over who will bear the most sons to Jacob, and Leah wins the contest. She might be less loved than Rachel, but she nevertheless gives Jacob more children. God blessed Rachel and makes her conceive but she is not satisfied. She wants more. Her son, Joseph becomes prominent among the children of Jacob.

In all, Leah and Rachel help us to see how God works through families to bring about His will. God commands Jacob, like Abraham, to be fruitful, signifying how a nation and a community will grow through him (Gen 35:11). The sons of Jacob eventually make up the twelve tribes of Israel. Leah is rejected, unloved, and struggled with the emotions of jealousy while Rachel has to deal with barrenness, jealousy, and anger. Leah finds her security in her Lord and in the children she bore. Leah eventually has six sons and a daughter for Jacob. Her dignity and status rest on what God has done for her, not on her husband's love or lack of it. Rachel finds her security in love and in her son, Joseph.

Ruth is compared to these two great women – Rachel and Leah – who become matriarchs of Israel despite their failings and flaws. Therefore, Ruth is a matriarch. She is not compared to one woman. Maybe, we have to see the blessings of all these two women in Ruth. That is to say, Ruth would stand for one who is loved and one who is not loved, if that is what the comparison entails. She would stand for the one who is not beautiful and the one who is beautiful. She would stand for one who has six children and one who has four. She would stand for the one the Lord enables to have children and the one the Lord closes the womb.

Eventually, the marriage between Boaz and Ruth bears fruit – much fruit. Ruth 4:13 says: "So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son." The only son from the union, Obed, is enough to build a dynasty with a great name.

God sees the pain and struggles in the life of Ruth and, like with Leah and Rachel, blesses her. God sees not only her outward beauty, but the beauty

within her heart. Ruth is to be an example of a resilient woman whose quiet and loyal faithfulness to her family will give her a name. Ultimately, Jesus comes from the ancestral line of Judah, from the seed of Ruth's son. If God does this for Ruth, He can do it for us.

The descendant that is to come from Boaz and Ruth is also compared to Perez. In Genesis 38, Judah makes Tamar pregnant through an incestuous relationship between a father and his daughter-in-law, whom Judah thought was a prostitute. The story goes that Tamar conceives twins:

When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb. While she was giving birth, one put out his hand; and the midwife took his hand and tied a crimson thread on it, noting, "This one came out first". But as he withdrew his hand, his brother came out; and she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" So he was called Perez [which in Hebrew means "to burst forth"] (Gen 38:27–29).

The first of the twins is named Zerah. Perez is the second. His name means "to break". To "breach" or "break through" can also imply breaking out of an enclosure (like a womb) or breaking into pieces. Perez is not the firstborn, just like Isaac, Jacob, and Judah, yet God's promises are enabled through them. Perez has two sons, Hezron and Hamul. Solomon is one of the grandsons of Perez and the Bible testifies that Solomon is wiser than Ethan the Erahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the Children of Mahol who was a descendant of Zerah (1 Kgs 4:23). Hence the supremacy of the descendants of Perez is noted over his older brother. According to the book of Ruth, there are nine generations between Perez and King David. Perez becomes an ancestor of King David (Ruth 4:17–22). Perez is also the ancestor of Jesus, and Matthew's genealogy confirms this (Luke's genealogy, however, adds an extra person). Perez, thus, reminds us of God's mercy and grace in choosing to be first those who are not the first. He reminds us about how those who seem not to be worthy play a part in salvation history – even those who make mistakes.

God has a plan for all

Boaz decides to make a move to find "rest" for Ruth. Ruth has something to lose with that promise from Boaz, but he has nothing to lose. The introductory statement has been translated variously: "no sooner had Boaz gone up" (NRSV), "meanwhile Boaz went up" (NIV), "now Boaz had gone up" (ESV). This *waw* of coordination in the sentence indicates continuity. Boaz does

not waste any time getting to the city gate after the episode at the threshing floor. He does not allow anything to get in his way. He may not have planned the previous day to go to the city gate but things have turned in a new direction that needs prompt attention. It also means that there and then, Boaz proceeded to the city gate. But whatever Boaz is doing is part of the plan of God.

The underlying intent motivating the laws of redemption is God's plan. God intends that the one who redeems the property of another does not own the land in perpetuity (Lev 25:1-55). The jubilee also governs business transactions and makes provision for the property that has left hands to go back to its owner. Financial settlements were prorated on the basis of proximity to the Jubilee year. The one selling the land should not cheat either. The Law of Moses declares:

In this year of Jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. When you make a sale to your neighbour or buy from your neighbour, you shall not cheat one another. When you buy from your neighbour, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years. If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you. You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God. (Lev 25:13-17; NRSV)

If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next of kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold. If the person has no one to redeem it, but then prospers and finds sufficient means to do so, the years since its sale shall be computed and the difference shall be refunded to the person to whom it was sold, and the property shall be returned. But if there are not sufficient means to recover it, what was sold shall remain with the purchaser until the year of jubilee; in the jubilee it shall be released, and the property shall be returned. (Lev 25:25-28; NRSV)

The law of Jubilee is not applicable in our times today. However, the essence of the law is critical for Christian virtue. It teaches us that we should not exploit those who are in difficulty. We should not be idle while our relations lose their property because of poverty. How then can Christians help those who are in need? In our times where religious leaders are exploiting the church members and sleeping with them, the issue of helping those in need matters a lot.

Fanucci explains that the mandates surrounding the jubilee year where one has to return to their family's ancestral land are sacred provisions to re-establish a right relationship with God and not just civil obligations. "The right to private property is not guaranteed as an absolute right, but the ultimate ownership of the land by God is instead proclaimed as the foundation of all economic dealings."¹¹ The law of Jubilee should remind us that we should respect the arrangements God has put in place with respect to property and human dignity. Each family deserves to have a property.

The gift of the Lord gives security

When Boaz marries Ruth, it is not about giving her seed to eat. It is rather about giving her a seed of the womb. Earlier, Boaz made provision that Ruth glean on his field to have seed to eat. He also gives a gift to Ruth of about six measures of barley grain. Now Ruth is about to enjoy another seed – one of the womb. As Porten observes, "The seed to fill the stomach was promise of the seed to fill the womb."¹² The seed from the farm was to provide security against hunger, but the seed from the womb is to give eternal security, where the names of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz will be remembered forever.

Ruth's loyalty to Naomi leads her to provide a foundation of security for Naomi. According to the women of Jerusalem, it is not Ruth who has restored the life of Naomi but the son who has been born: "He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him" (Ruth 4:15).

We believe that "children are a gift of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward" (Psalm 127:3). Children are specifically referred to as God's precious gifts. They are the Lord's "heritage", or "inheritance", which comes directly from the Lord.

Of course, today, whenever people think about inheritance, what comes to mind is money, houses, land, valuable jewellery, etc. However, in the Bible, we are plainly taught that children are an inheritance God gives to us, and a security for our name.

11 Laura Kelly Fanucci, "Release from the Slavery of Debt: The Jubilee Year for Ancient Israel and the Modern Global Economy", *Obsculta* 1.1 (2014), 6, 7.

12 Bezalel Porten, "The Scroll of Ruth: A Rhetorical Study", *GCAJ* 7 (1978), 40.

Another basis for holding that children are a precious gift from God is founded on what the psalmist says: “Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are children of one’s youth” (Ps 127:4). Here, children are compared to arrows, a very valuable fighting tool. Arrows were common weapons in some time past. A good warrior should be conversant with using arrows. When the arrow is broken or bent, it is a great disincentive. God has positioned children to be like arrows. The parent throws it and the arrow fights on behalf of the parent. The child, like an arrow, provides protection and safety. One may say children cannot defend themselves. Yes, but they are there to defend the parent in the design of God.

Life application

Ruth may be an afterthought because the land being sold by Naomi is the main issue at stake. What the unnamed relative did not know was that when he agrees to buy the land, he would also take up the responsibility to marry Ruth (Ruth 4:5). Hence, the personality of Ruth has been tied to a commodity of exchange. She is an addition, a bonus one gets for buying the land. The buyer does not only have responsibility for the land but also over Ruth. She is not the main agenda, the major item, the focal element of negotiation – she is but an afterthought. Ruth is on sale. That may be the custom of the time and it does not mean we should emulate it since the whole concept, within contemporary thought, is dehumanizing for women. Nevertheless, Ruth allows herself to be part of God’s mission. Do not think that people are not concerned about you, meaning you isolate yourself and do not participate in what God is doing. Nevertheless, as Christians, we should value human beings more than property. Human beings are created in the image of God. In the sight of God, a child is more valuable than anything else.

If God can use Ruth, a foreigner, to have such an important child, then God can do something in your life. It does not matter whether our spouses love us or we are not the most prominent in our families. It does not matter whether we have one child or many children. Even those without biological children can be caused to be fruitful in raising a dynasty.

I do not believe that having children thwarts the plan of God in our lives. Children are not a burden or a curse in our lives. Some focus on their career and, to keep it, do not want to have children. There is nothing better in life than to hold on to the promise of God that children are a heritage from the Lord. Careers can never be compared to the kind of heritage children stand for, no matter how valuable a career can be.

Some think that children born outside marriages are not gifts from God, a view I disagree with. Maybe they see such children as not created in the plan of God. They are rather from an unplanned human action. Yet no one can have a say in pregnancy or cause a child to grow in the mother's womb, except providing semen or eggs. Children, no matter what, are a gift from God. Since it is God who causes such children to come into being, parents are to receive them as gifts and live with them as such. Appreciating the gift of God and nurturing children to become who they are supposed to be brings great benefits, especially when children are trained in the way they should go (Prov 22:6).

Moses tells the Israelites to pass God's commandments down to their children and to talk about God's laws constantly with their families (Deut 6:4-7). Jesus admonishes parents when he said to let the little children go to Him and not to hinder them, so children also belong to the kingdom of heaven (Matt 19:14). Likewise, Paul counsels parents to bring their children up with godly discipline and in the fear of the Lord (Eph 6:4). When parents fulfil their calling by passing on the faith to their children, they offer their children as a living sacrifice to God, giving them a sense of security in the Lord.

The psalmist says: "Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, Who walks in His ways ... Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine; In the very heart of your house, Your children like olive plants, All around your table" (Ps 128:1, 3). The idea is that parents who seek to obey the word of God will find that their children will shoot up around them the way olive shoots shoot up around an olive plant. Olive plants are so valuable because they symbolize blessings, beauty, and abundance. The Hebrew root *thr* from which we have "olive tree" literally means "tree of oil". And it means "to shine". It means "richness, anointing, fat, fruitful, oil, ointment, olive". Another related word for olive, *shemesh*, denotes "to be brilliant", and is the same Hebrew word for the "sun". The olive was a very important source of revenue to the early Israelites. It was tithed along with all the produce of the land (Deut 12:17). It is also symbolic of healing and restoration to life.

As a child of God, remember that it is part of God's plan to give us children so that they can help us mature as good stewards, become more other-centred, and become less selfish. In our world, those who have lots of children are judged or misunderstood for not controlling their sexual desires. Those who do not have children are weak in bed. There are those who have

a few children who feel God has not been fair to them. If you have one child, people have a way of looking at you. If you have two, the interpretation is also different.

As a Christian, you may be an afterthought or caught up in a negotiation. Those who look up to you are not ready to help you out. Someone is putting you out there for sale. You may be treated as a commodity, but God has different plans for your life. We join the witnesses to the transactions that mean, through you, God is going to raise godly offspring. God is going to use you to become like Leah and Rachel. God is going to you to become like Perez. Be fruitful and multiply. May you produce and be fertile, prosperous. May your life be successful in Jesus' name.

Conclusion

We have discussed how God intervenes in the life of people and gives them the gift of children. We learned that God uses human beings to fulfil his purposes. Our cooperation will make God's plan possible. God has a plan for all, to make us fruitful and multiply. There are those whose offspring will become great in the sight of human beings and can be likened to Rachel, Leah, or Perez. Even if people do not see your worth and may not be thinking about you, never mind because God has you right under his watchful eyes. Let us allow God to use us for His own glory.

13

Theme: God changes our Stories

READING: RUTH 4:13–22

ANCHOR TEXT: “and the Lord gave her conception” (Ruth 4:13)

Introduction

The Bible constantly bears witness to the unseen hand of God in all endeavours. However, many try to blame God when they see failures in their lives. They give reasons to the effect that God has abandoned them. For others, they see everything as luck and tend to leave God out of the equation.

But, no matter how people see you, God can change your story. It all starts with a plan from Naomi to find a way to settle Ruth so that she can find a husband to give her security. Naomi directs Ruth to visit Boaz at his threshing floor at night. When Boaz wakes up and sees Ruth by his side, a conversation ensues and Ruth asks Boaz to redeem her, assuming that he was the kinsman-redeemer. Boaz indicates that there is someone who is closer than him, but he will do all that it takes to get that person to redeem her. When the closest kinsman-redeemer declines to redeem the land Naomi is selling – and, in addition, take Ruth as a wife – he gives the authority to Boaz to redeem the land and marry Ruth. Boaz agrees and Ruth becomes his wife (Ruth 4:13). How does God change the story of Ruth and what lessons can we draw for our lives today?

Exposition

When Boaz marries Ruth, they come together and Ruth becomes pregnant. She bears a son named Obed. Then the women of Bethlehem bless Naomi that Ruth has given birth to a son to perpetuate the line of Mahlon, the son of Naomi. The women declare that the son born to Ruth “shall be to you a restorer of life” (Ruth 4:15). Literally these words mean the coming of the son represents a “return to life” in the life of Naomi, restoring the death of her son, and they also echo Naomi returning from Bethlehem (Ruth 1:21). She came back empty, because of the death of the husband and sons. After returning, the Lord has caused her to return to life. The coming of the child causes a change in the life of Naomi and Ruth. As Campbell notes, the mood that brings the story of Naomi and Ruth to a close is that of joy and happiness.¹

1 Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth*, ABC Vol 7 (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 168.

The story of Naomi begins with famine, a sign of misfortune but it ends with joy. She lost her husband and children and had no hope of having a grandson, yet God changes the story and causes Ruth, the daughter-in-law who stood by her, to have a son in the name of the dead husband. Naomi came back to Bethlehem empty, but the birth of the grandson makes her full. Ruth, who lost her husband early in their marriage and did not have any child in that union, is made to conceive and have a child, a doing of the Lord. Also, she lost her husband, but now has another one. Campbell's words are apt here, "the child is the one now responsible for the well-being of the two widows; he is the one to whom Elimelech–Mahlon inheritance will go".²

When God restores life

In the book of Ruth, there are only two places where the Lord appears as the subject of a verb. The first is in 1:6 where the Lord visits the people of Bethlehem to give them food. The second is in 4:13 where the Lord grants (*nātan*, literally, "gives") conception to Ruth. Notice that when the Lord visits Bethlehem, the people's identities change, their situation is transformed, and their shame becomes glory. The Lord's intervention causes restoration of food that helps to sustain life after a period of famine. This is also what happens in the life of Ruth. When the Lord intervenes in the life of Ruth, her identity changes and her shame is changed into glory. The Lord causes her to be a life-giving person. Certainly, the book of Ruth is a story about the Lord who changes identity and gives life.³

The phrase "he shall be to you a restorer of life" (Ruth 4:15) is usually applied to a male progeny (1 Sam 1:8), with the number seven being symbolic of a perfect family (1 Sam 2:5). But here it is applied to Ruth! She is better than seven sons to Naomi because, unlike her two sons, Ruth provides her with one who would continue the family name. These words from the women of Bethlehem indicate that they are also happy for Naomi and participate in her delight. There is nothing more joyous than to see an old woman nurse a baby once again.

There are some widows who have not been able to have any children. They are like Ruth, who did not have any child with her husband before he died. People misjudge such women, thinking they are barren, cursed, good for nothing. However, like Ruth, God is about to change their story. And what

² Campbell, *Ruth*, 168.

³ Robert B. Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 679.

the Lord gives is a pure gift. Every child that is born will become a child of promise through whom the Lord's delight and the beloved of God shall rise, just as we see in David. I do have a responsibility to tell you that God is faithful and God's Word is true, and that God's commandment to His people to "be fruitful and multiply" applies to you (Gen 1:28). Yes, it is within God's own time and by divine selection.

Naomi knows that the bad events of her life have been caused by the hand of God. She did not see the worth or sense in staying with Ruth any longer or traveling with her to Bethlehem, but it is Ruth who changes her story. When Ruth finds herself gleaning in Boaz's field, the narrator describes this specifically as chance or happenstance (2:3), while Naomi interprets it as God's providence (2:20).⁴ Here, Naomi's perspective changes, and so must our perspective change.

Ruth is a young widow. Her first husband dies when she does not have children. She is described by Boaz as *'ēšet-hammēt* ("wife of the dead"; Ruth 4:5) while negotiating selling the land of Naomi. When the closest kinsman gets to hear that he has to take on Ruth, he says that would jeopardize his inheritance. Ruth would be bad luck for him; her presence would not guarantee his property. The Akan say, *se obi nnyim wo a, ofre wo akoo bi* (lit: If someone does not know you, he calls you a servant). This unnamed man who is nearest kin did not know that Ruth could change his life.

Ruth is a Moabite living in a foreign land. Being an immigrant and not owning any property does not mean one cannot be somebody. Ruth's marriage with Boaz, a Jew, changes the story. Mixed marriages were seen to be problematic in the life of the Jews. In the Pentateuch, the Israelites are forbidden to marry from other nations (Deut 7:1-7- including the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites). Mixed marriages are also seen as problematic in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. After Ezra arrives in Jerusalem from exile in Persia, he is not happy about mixed marriages, so pronounces that, among the Judean people, all who have done so need to divorce. To him, such marriages are explicitly forbidden by the Torah. Ezra omits the Girgashites and Hivites but adds the Ammonites, Moabites, and Egyptians. However, the birth of King David is realized out of a "mixed marriage" between Boaz and Ruth. God has his own way of bringing things to bear.

4 Robert Williamson, *The Forgotten Books of the Bible: Recovering the Five Scrolls for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 58.

Ruth is a foreigner who professes faith in the God of Israel. She has vowed to Naomi that Naomi's God will be her God (Ruth 1:16–17). Professing faith in God makes the difference in the life of Ruth. She is now part of the believing community and hence not a “foreigner”. As Christians, we have this caveat that we should not be unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor 6:4). Thus, it does mean that marrying someone outside one's faith is not ideal. Remember, we can only become a somebody when we confess faith in God, and are joined into His body. Rahab is from Jericho but she becomes the mother of Boaz, just as Tamar is the mother of Perez and Zerah. All these women were foreigners to the Israelites.

Although Ruth is a widow and living precariously in a foreign land where she had to glean and eat, she is a woman of honour (Ruth 3:11, 4:11–12). The term for “honour” had already been used of Boaz (Ruth 2:1) and Ruth (Ruth 3:11). With the birth of the child, Boaz and Ruth become more honourable. It is as if they acquired more status, more wealth, more prestige.

There are similarities between the stories of Judah/Tamar and Boaz/Ruth. Both Ruth and Tamar make the initial move to have an encounter with Boaz and Judah respectively. Although Judah unknowingly has sex with this “strange” woman Tamar, not seeing her face, Ruth identifies herself when Boaz wakes up after Ruth has uncovered his feet. No wonder there is a link between Perez and Obed and eventually David. It is remarkable that David's great-grandmother is a Moabite, and that should teach Christians not to fuel xenophobia (fear of foreigners). We should be all embracing and welcoming just as God has accepted us and counted us as part of God's commonwealth. Xenophilia (the love of foreigners) is a virtue we should pursue.

Before the marriage, Ruth is always identified as “Ruth the Moabite” (Ruth 4:5, 10), pointing to her lowered status. After the marriage, she is no longer described by linking her to her hometown; she is Ruth (Ruth 4:13). What a young man, Mahlon, could not do for ten years, an old man Boaz has done in three months. Bledstein's observation is apt: “For possibly ten years Ruth was married to Mahlon in Moab and not blessed with a child. Three months in Judah, a few nights with Boaz, and she is pregnant! Can one doubt that the Nurturer ... has a hand in this, providing a grandson for Naomi?”⁵

5 Aldrien J. Bledstein, “Female Companionship: If the Book of Ruth were Written by a Woman...”, in *Ruth, Feminist Companion to the Bible Vol 3*, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 129.

The book of Ruth shares the holistic worldview that abounds in the Bible – that God moves through human actions. The persons God use are made to do what pleases God and to fulfil what God intends to do. For such persons, God is sovereignly with them. Hubbard makes a critical statement worth noting: “whenever people of faith practice God-like *hesed* towards each other, God himself acts in them”.⁶ Jesus comes into the world in bodily form according to the will of God, born of a woman, and becomes a man to identify with us and to provide an example for us in our way of life. Jesus becomes an example to us in the way God uses people. We learn that all that Jesus came to be and to do is the pure act of God to restore humanity to the life lost through sin at the Garden of Eden.

God is always directing our steps and guiding our life to go where He wants us to go and to do what He wants us to do so that we can pick up the shattered pieces and bounce back. God usually picks certain individuals for His own glory to restore their lives. No wonder Ruth and Boaz become instruments God uses to bring in David, a man after God’s own heart. If Ruth is chosen at a point in time, we can also be chosen for restoration.

As Mangrum asserts, “the restoration of Naomi occurs simply through the grace and compassion of hospitality inherent in the Law, which perhaps a Judean post-exilic community had begun to neglect in light of their affliction and identity crisis”.⁷ It is not specifically written that God is working out a plan using Ruth and Boaz. Such an understanding is an act of faith and that is what the Bible intends to teach us. These persons allow themselves to be used implicitly and explicitly. Are you ready to allow yourself to be used by God for His own glory?

No matter who we are, our story can change

The son Ruth bore was named “Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David” (Ruth 4:17). The genealogy listed in Ruth 4:18–21 puts an emphasis on Perez (see Gen 38:29). The name Perez means “breach” or “breakthrough”. Perez is a son of Judah and he is the father of Hezron and Hamul, and leads a family that is well respected as outstanding men. Interestingly, Perez becomes the chosen one for the passing on of the covenant blessing. Perez is not the firstborn but God chooses him to be a child of breakthrough.

6 Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing company, 1988), 72.

7 Benjamin Mangrum, “Bringing ‘Fullness’ to Naomi: Centripetal Nationalism in The Book of Ruth”, *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 33 (2011), 71.

The descendants of Perez are the ones chosen to live in Jerusalem after the Israelites return from captivity in Babylon (1 Chr 9:4; Neh 11:4).

The long list of generations, also listed in 1 Chr 2:5, 9–15, gives an indication that it is God’s plan for Boaz to come so that David would be born.

The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David. Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David. (Ruth 4:17–21)

As Oswald Loretz observes:

His [God’s] choice is not made in a moment; it has a long prehistory, and took place before the chosen one was formed in the womb of his mother (cf Jer 1:5). That this election was the act of God alone is thus made more evident; the mysterious workings of God in behalf of David began during the lives of his ancestors.⁸

People are always longing to be counted, recognized, and acknowledged. To some, wherever they are they should be noticed and introduced as somebody. They always aspire to be great or among the first. Being somebody is a way to gain respect. In fact, being disregarded or treated as a non-entity can sometimes be very disheartening. But that’s how the world is. God causes nobodies to be somebodies, the downtrodden to sit with princes, and the less privileged to see more blessings.

God made Hannah somebody and her song tells it all:

Those who were full hire themselves out for bread,
 But those who were hungry cease to be hungry.
 Even the infertile woman gives birth to seven,
 But she who has many children languishes.
 The Lord puts to death and makes alive;
 He brings down to Sheol and brings up.
 The Lord makes poor and rich;
 He humbles, He also exalts.

8 Oswald Loretz, “Theme of the Ruth Story”, *CBQ* 22.4 (1960), 398.

He raises the poor from the dust,
He lifts the needy from the garbage heap
To seat them with nobles,
And He gives them a seat of honour as an inheritance;
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,
And He set the world on them.
He watches over the feet of His godly ones,
But the wicked ones are silenced in darkness;
For not by might shall a person prevail.
(1 Sam 2:5-9; NRSV)

The Message Bible puts verse 8 nicely:

He puts poor people on their feet again;
he rekindles burned-out lives with fresh hope,
Restoring dignity and respect to their lives –
a place in the sun!

As Christians, we believe that only in Christ can we become somebody. Only Christ can transform us, because if anyone is in Christ, he or she becomes a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). It is God who causes us to be somebody – a person of worth or value.

A “nobody” is a person of no importance, influence, or power (Jas 3:2). Sometimes we deceive ourselves that we are somebody but in the eyes of God we are nobody: “For if anyone thinks that he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (Gal 6:3). The sages say: “Better to be a nobody and yet have a servant than pretend to be somebody and have no food” (Prov 12:9).

For those whom God uses, it does not matter whether they are citizens in a country or immigrants, whether they are men or women, or whether they are old or young. God does not look for persons who have a track record, have been trained in prestigious institutions, are in top positions with great potential, with degrees or certificates, or chalking up successes in their endeavours. God uses all kinds of people, even the ordinary person on the streets.

To inaugurate the Christian church, Jesus Christ uses uneducated fishermen whom he calls and trains. Paul explains that in the house of God, there

are many kinds of earthen vessels that can be used for certain purposes. Some are excellent in power, others are not (2 Cor 4:7). Yet God uses all and that should give us hope that we are not useless.

The Holy Spirit also chooses some people and works through them. For example, the Holy Spirit uses Philip, a deacon chosen to serve tables, to help an Ethiopian eunuch understand the Scriptures (Acts 8:26–40). The Holy Spirit chooses Barnabas and Saul to be set apart “for the work to which [he] called them” (Acts 13:2). How the Holy Spirit chooses is not predictable. We cannot control how the Spirit works in choosing people. As a child of God, be ready for the Holy Spirit to supernaturally choose you and guide you to fulfil the plan of God. Be ready to allow the Holy Spirit guide you through the normal ebb and flow of life.

Sometimes, people imagine that some people are too weak, uneducated, useless, and underperformers. People see others as immoral, sinners, and rogues who cannot be used by God. That is where human beings make a mistake. For the ways of God are not our ways, neither is his choice our choice (Isa 55:8–9). God can use our frail personality as a substitute for spiritual things. All we need is to truly understand who we are in the hands of God. May the prayer of Paul be your prayer: “I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called – his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance” (Eph 1:18).

Naomi does not see any possibility of offering Ruth any help to have a child (Ruth 1:11). When she changes her mind and gives Ruth the plan to meet Boaz at night, things started to change. While Naomi expresses doubt that it could ever happen, the Lord makes it possible.⁹ The Lord not only gives Ruth the ability to become pregnant but also to find rest after Boaz had sex with her (Gen 6:4; Deut 22:13; Ezek 23:44; Prov 6:29).

It takes time for Ruth to receive her portion. It may take time for some of us to receive our portion. In all, we can rejoice and be thankful that God is in control and is at work in our lives. In His own time, God will allow us see the wonderful things happening in our lives. When that happens, we will agree with Kathryn M. Schifferdecker:

9 Robert D. Holmstedt, *Ruth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2010), 205.

The tide is turning. Emptiness is being filled. Hope is born. And it is an old widow (one who has seen more than her share of sorrow) who recognizes the hand of God in these seemingly happenstance circumstances. Perhaps it is often thus: Those who have had long experience of seeing God at work can recognize and name those times in our own lives when miracles begin to happen.¹⁰

The women, however, take things differently from how Boaz sees things. Ruth is to build a dynasty. She will become a matriarch, the mother of generations to come. For Boaz, he is maintaining a dead man's inheritance: "The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also buying Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance" (Ruth 4:5).

Naomi's misfortune is turned through the sacrifices of Ruth. Ruth's emptiness is restored through the generosity of Boaz. In the words of Mark Smith, "Ruth helps to provide the family that Naomi lost and in particular the grandson that Naomi never had, and within this web of new relations, Ruth and Naomi found a family and home together."¹¹ All these were made possible by the hand of the Lord working through unseen moves.

Naomi's story changes. She no longer sees herself as "Mara" or "bitter". The child that Ruth bears is not simply a grandchild for Naomi; he is a *child* of Naomi. To the women, the child that is born is for Naomi. They say to Naomi:

Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him. (Ruth 4:14–15; NRSV)

This child is more than seven sons. Have you ever wondered how one person can make a difference that seven cannot?

For modern readers there is much to puzzle over here. The complexities in the story and the gaps have all been resolved by what the Lord is doing,

10 Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "Commentary on Ruth 1:1 – 4:22", *Working Preacher* date accessed September 30, 2021. Available online at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/preaching-series-on-ruth/commentary-on-ruth-11-22-21-23-31-18-41-22>

11 Mark S. Smith "'Your People Shall Be My People': Family and Covenant in Ruth 1:16–17", *CBQ* 69 (2007), 258.

making it easy to see what precisely is going on. There is a change in status for Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. Ruth, the Moabite, is the great-grandmother of the one God loves – David, someone whose name is renowned in Israel. She joins the spiritual matriarchs of Israel – Rachel, Leah, and Tamar. That is how God wants to change your story.

We cannot change our status by our own strength or scheming.

Are you struggling to catch the eye of someone? Are you struggling to be noticed in your own family? And do you know how to make things turn around according to God's standards? Remember, The Lord does not look at things the way human beings look at them. Human beings judge by outward appearance but God judges from the heart (1 Sam 16:7).

The apostle Peter shows us how God changes a nobody to a somebody. He says once we were no people and were rejected like a stone not needed for any building. God, however, has caused us to be chosen, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. Once we did not receive mercy but now we have the mercy from God (1 Pet 2:9–10). Such a gift enjoins us to submit ourselves to God so that we live as free people and not as the foolish (1 Pet 2:13–21).

Do you believe in what God can do in your life? Allow Christ and look out for the grace he offers (John 3:16–17; Eph 2:8–9).

Conclusion

Stories that begin with misfortune and end in joy or blessings are usually captivating. Of course, not all stories that begin with profound misery end in great joy. Even when they do, the joy that comes at the end of the story does not always make us easily forget all of the misfortune that began it.

But miracles continue to happen in the life of God's people even to the extent of making them produce children. No matter who you are, God can choose you and restore your life to be a blessing. The God who chooses Ruth and Perez can cause breakthrough in your life. God who restores life and causes people to give birth also sustains life. May our lives be sustained so that we can see how the broken pieces are restored in Jesus' name.

PART THREE

14

The Book of Ruth in the Light of Christ

The task of reading Christ from the Old Testament is generally accepted. Jesus Christ stated categorically that all that Scripture has said from Moses to the prophets speaks about him (Luke 24:25-27; John 5:39). The “I am” sayings of Jesus also emphasize his active presence in the Old Testament days (John 8:56-58). The same view is reinforced by the apostle Paul who saw Christ as the “fulfillment” of the promises found in the Old Testament (Rom 10:4). Similarly, the writers of the Gospel of John and the epistle to the Hebrews say that Jesus was present from the beginning of creation and through Him all things were made (John 1:1-14; Heb 1:1-14). He is the One who motivated Moses (Heb 11:26). Jesus Christ is the Redeemer who led the people out of Egypt (1 Cor 10:4; Jude 5). However, the challenge has been the interpretation of what “all Scripture” means.

It must be noted that there are two main approaches to reading Christ from the Old Testament: The Christocentric approach, and the Christotelic approach. The Christocentric reading of Scripture sees the Christ or Messiah in every part of the Old Testament and every word points directly to Jesus, while a Christotelic view makes the distinction that, even though Jesus is God and the Bible is about God, many of the Old Testament passages do not directly point to Jesus.

Using both the Christocentric and Christotelic to explore the book of Ruth is on the premise that they help in understanding what God has for us. A critical use of both approaches are mutually beneficial. Both pay attention to the divine author’s concealed identification of Christ in the process of inspiration (a *sensus occultus*) and the deeper significance as God’s plan unfolds (a *sensus praegnans*), yet do not ignore the historical nature of the text. Significantly, both approaches were used by the New Testament writers in their writings by heavily focusing on the Old Testament.

Abner Chou summarizes that Christocentric hermeneutics as follows:

- (1) desires to present every text in its relation with the person and work of Christ;
- (2) stresses the unity of Scripture, and is sometimes called a redemptive-historical hermeneutic;
- (3) emphasizes the theology of Scripture;
- (4) stresses the need for grammatical-historical interpretation as a foundation for its method;
- (5) acknowledges the need to move beyond grammatical-historical hermeneutics to a theological method; and
- (6) emphasizes its Christian nature.¹ Such an approach can be helpful in reading the book of Ruth.

Although not all that is found in the book of Ruth points directly to Christ, we find a redemptive history that supports the message of Scripture with words that ultimately reveal Christ. For instance, Walter Kaizer Jr. in his book *The Messiah in the Old Testament*² reveal how The OT presents typologies of Jesus Christ. The word “type” comes from the Greek word *tupos* which can mean literally an impress or imprint. Hence, the Old Testament types prefigure the work of Christ or an aspect of the message of the kingdom, and become a sign that point believers to the reality of Christ.

Peter Gentry explains that typology is tied to the Christian view of God and the plan of God in history. “God in his providence sovereignly controls history, and he is consistent in his character so that there are repetitive patterns to his works in history.”³ The interpreter has to find the link between a type of a person, event, or institution in the Old Testament and the Jesus Christ. What happened in the past becomes an interpretive tool to understand Jesus in His fullness. Schrock explains that, typology is built on the foundation of “the intratextual relationship between one historical figure in one biblical epoch and another later, (usually) greater historical figure.”⁴ There is some correspondence between what happened in history and the covenantal context of Christ. Moreover, Köstenberger and Pat-

1 Abner Chou, “A Hermeneutical Evaluation of the Christocentric Hermeneutic,” *The Masters Seminary Journal* 27.2 (2016), 115-116.

2 Walter C. Kaizer, Jr., *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

3 Peter Gentry, *How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 90.

4 David Schrock, “What Designates a Valid Type? A Christotelic, Covenantal Proposal,” *STR* 5, no. 1 (2014), 6-7.

terson aver that a Christocentric reading of the Bible provides cohesiveness to the canon of Scripture and makes the overall purpose of the Scripture in showing the fulfillment of the OT hope and message of Christ.⁵

The Christotelic interpretation, on the other hand, also follows a historical-redemptive story that finds its climax in the coming, death, resurrection, and second coming of Christ. The assumption is that the original audience of Scripture was led to understand the varied theologies, some of which might not speak about Christ directly, as finding their ultimate purpose of God in Christ. Hence, the ultimate end of the Old Testament is Christ.

To assert that Christ is the heart of the Bible's message (Christocentric) and that Christ is the goal of the Bible's redemptive history (Christotelic) is a position taken in this exposition. A Christocentric or Christotelic hermeneutic or approach to reading the book of Ruth respects the principles of intertextuality and typology between the book of Ruth and other books within the Bible. It notes that there are parallels, echoes, types, and pointers of Christ in the book of Ruth. The message of Christ can be heard when reading and preaching the book of Ruth.

Ruth revealing Christ

The meaning of the name "Ruth" is "friend". Ruth, thus, becomes a friend whose sacrifices culminate in the coming of the Messiah. Ruth is one of the five women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus alongside Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba, and Mary (Matt 1:1-16). The link between Ruth and Christ is very significant. Ruth gave birth to Obed who was the father of Jesse who was the father of King David. It is from the family line of David that Jesus comes into the world, hence the title the "Son of David". The presence of both Ruth (as well as Rahab) who was a Gentile woman in the Gospel of Matthew among the Jewish descendants of Christ affirms the all-inclusive mission of Jesus. Non-Jews including women are part of God's redemptive plan of salvation. Jesus picks on the concept of friendship in his relationship with the disciples when he said: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15; ESV).

5 Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2011), 210.

Ruth teaches what it means to be part of the kingdom of God that Jesus came to inaugurate. Ruth, a young Moabite widow came to accept the covenant love of the God of Israel and the joy of belonging to his people through her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi. Her future was transformed forever by accepting the God of Israel as her God. Despite such a devastating terrible experience, Ruth made it a point to accept to covenant with the God of Israel. She vowed:

Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me (Ruth 1:16-17; NIV).

Her loss of the husband and childlessness were all restored when she chose that way, and it helped her to gain the past life she had lost. The profession of faith happened when she was on the way to Bethlehem: "With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the way that would take them back to the land of Judah" (Ruth 1:7). The term "way" on which the women take to the land God has visited typifies Jesus who is the Way to the Father. The Bible says that the only way to God the Father is through Jesus Christ: "I am the way the truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Ruth and Naomi went through difficult times when they lost their husbands. Naomi explained, however, that her loss was more than that of Ruth when she said, "it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me (Ruth 1:13).⁶ Her words affirmed that both of them have gone through bad times, but hers was more because the cause of the problem was the Lord. Indeed, Naomi lost her husband and two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, and Ruth lost only her husband, Kilion. The idea is that it is the Almighty who has turned against her is striking. The Hebrew *kî-yāš'āh bî yad-YHWH* (Ruth 1:13) can be literally translated "for the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." When the Lord stretched His hand against his people, there were disastrous consequences (Job 19:21; Zeph 1:4-5; Ps 38:2). Figuratively,

6 The Hebrew ארמ is probably derived from the root ררמ (cf. Is. 5:20). See J. M. Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth* (Leiden: Brill, 1955), 10; L. Morris, "Ruth," in A. Cundall and L. Morris, *Ruth, TOTC* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1968), 262.

it could mean the hand of the Lord has departed, been removed from her, or fighting against her. Bailey characterizes what happened to both Naomi and Ruth as a 'bad' death because it is premature, and there is no surviving heir.⁷ Losing loved ones does not only end biological historical life but it is also understood *mythologically* as a power, agent or principle and *symbolically* 'as the loss of rich, joyous existence as willed by God.'⁸ Jesus echoed the same idea on the cross when he said "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Matt 27:46; cf Ps 22:1). Ruth, however, did not count her loss as the hand of the Lord removed from her.

Ruth's vow that the God of Israel will be her God makes her accept the salvation that comes only from God. It took strong faith for Ruth to make up her mind to accept the God of Israel because the words of Naomi that God was against her could have demoralised her. Since all have sinned, the hand of the Lord will come against us. However, there is grace in God's judgment. Paul admits that we are saved through faith which is a gift of God: "For by grace are you saved through faith – and that's not yourself, it is a gift of God – not by works so that no one could boast" (Eph 2:8-9). No profession of faith in God is concrete except is it founded in Christ's loving grace.

Christians believe that to be saved, one must acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, and welcome Jesus Christ to be Lord over one's life. Accepting Jesus means admitting all mistakes and sins, repenting and pleading for forgiveness, believing that Jesus died on the cross to save all, trusting in the Lord with the assurance that God answers prayer and has come to dwell in one's heart. The one who has believed has to come to Christ and Christ has to come into the life of the believer. In those times, however, Ruth only had to accept that God will be her God and then go to Bethlehem, and by so doing she enjoys the favour of God. Her unshakable faith was enough to earn her a place among the people of God and in the Kingdom of God. Such a provision echoes the case of the dying thief on the cross who pleaded with Jesus to remember him when he goes to His kingdom and Jesus promised him a place in paradise at that moment (Luke 23:42-43).

Ruth made a covenant with the Lord, not like the Sinai covenant but more like a new covenant – "your God will be my God". A covenant is a pledge to be in a relationship, and a walk together toward a common goal. Jesus ushers to all a new Covenant that has been put into effect through his death,

7 L. R. Bailey, *Biblical Perspectives on Death*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 48–51.

8 Walter Brueggemann 'Death, theology of', *IDB Sup* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 219–220.

burial, and resurrection, replacing the old covenant God made with the people of Israel (Heb 8:6-13, 9:15, cf Jer 31;31-33). In the new covenant, Jesus invites all who are broken, burdened, and going through difficult times to come to him and he will give them rest (Matt 11:28-30). Rest, from the Greek *anapausō* has the idea of actuating the individual and refreshing the soul. Such a concept of rest is different from the Sabbath rest given in the Old Testament decalogue or the old covenant, which is tied to refraining from work and engaging in worshipping. Under the old covenant, the Sabbath was the day of rest and they ceased from all of their works. The Sabbath rest (Greek: *sabbatismos*) as emphasised in the book of Hebrews (see Heb 3:11, 3:16-19; 4:4-5,9-10) and is different from *anapausō*. The “rest” that Israel experienced, when they entered the Promised Land after they departed from Egypt and journeyed through the wilderness, also gave access to a guaranteed satiation – a land flowing with milk and honey (Ex 3:8,17; 13:5; Lev 20:24; Deut 6:3; 11:19; 31:20; Josh 5:6; Jer 11:5). Essentially, their rest was the respite from oppression toward a new beginning, but rest in Jesus is all-encompassing, even toward eternal life.

The rest (*anapausō*) Jesus promises is not about ceasing from our works but a blessed life that would make the believer trust in Lord always to take care and provide all needs. The new covenant person under any heavy load will not need to exert his or her own strength, but rely on the grace of God to sail through life. It is about a relationship of continual favour with Christ. Hence, Ruth’s declaration points to what Christ offers.

Ruth’s entrance into a covenant of God and her coming to live in Bethlehem also gave her access to enjoy a land flowing with milk and honey. She came to Bethlehem at a time when there was barley harvest, and when the Lord had visited the people and given them food (Ruth 1:6). She came as a foreigner who had nothing to depend on; she had no portion in the food except to glean for the leftovers and depend on that. However, she got enough to eat after she gained favour in the eyes of a farmer (Ruth 2:2). Becoming a Christian or accepting Jesus as one’s personal Saviour does guarantee prosperity, riches and abundance. It assures rest, and that is what we see in the life of Ruth, making her become one of the ancestors of Jesus (Matt 1:5). It also assures the believers that it is possible to gain favour and enjoy life. Hence, Ruth serves as an example of what Jesus teaches – come to me and I will give your rest.

The entrance of Ruth into Bethlehem with her promise to worship God (Ruth 1:16-22) echoes God's call of Abraham and the promised blessing through Abraham to all families of the earth (Gen 12:2-3; 22:18 cf Gal 3:29-4:7). Similarly, the call of Israel was to the effect that through them all families of the earth will be blessed (Isa 27:13; Mic 4:1-2). The inclusion of the foreigners or Gentiles ensures that all Israel will be saved (Rom 11:11-32). Christ's call for the disciples to go to all the corners of the earth to draw the attention of God to all people finds relevance here.

If Naomi is to regain hope after losing her husband and two male children, then Ruth played a key role in the way she displayed friendship. Ruth's sacrifices gave restoration to the life of Naomi. Her deep love for Naomi was rewarded when Boaz considered that sacrifice and married her, giving her a son, love and security. In fact, when Ruth gave birth to Obed, the women of Bethlehem said: "a son has been born to Naomi" (Ruth 4:17). Naomi who had lost her sons now has a son. She who had nobody now has somebody. The women of Bethlehem had earlier prayed that Ruth's son would become the next-of-kin to Naomi and also "a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age" (Ruth 4:14-15). The words "restorer" and "nourisher" echo the nature of Christ. To restore means to place again in the first state or condition (see Isa 1:26; Acts 1:6), and also to make restitution, or satisfaction for injuries inflicted. The Messiah is called the Repairer (Isa 58:12).

Jesus said "the son of man came to seek and to save that which is lost" (Luke 19:10). The Hebrew *kalkkēl* from the root word *kāl* translated "nourisher" also means "sustainer", "endurer", or "maintainer". When Elisha prophesied that there will be no rain, the Lord asked him to go and dwell by the brook so that ravens will feed (Hebrew: *kalkkēl*) him (1 Kgs 17:4). Likewise, the widow of Zarephath was to feed (Hebrew: *kalkkēl*) him (1 Kgs 17:9). The word of God came to the prophet Ezekiel saying:

Thus says the Lord GOD:

You shall drink your sister's cup
that is deep and large;
you shall be laughed at and held in derision,
for it sustains (*kalkkēl*) much

(Ezek 23:32)

The psalmist admonishes us to see that the Lord is our sustainer:

Cast your cares on the Lord
and he will sustain (*kalkkēl*) you;
he will never let
the righteous be shaken.

(Ps 55:22).

Hence, no matter what Naomi has been going through, there is a new child who will support her to endure and sustain her, and that is what Jesus offers. Jesus does not only nourish us; He sustains us in all our difficulties and helps us to endure. If Naomi endured pain and eventually became nourished, then it was partly due to Christ's grace and nourishment. Jesus is our sustainer, and as the writer of Hebrews says He upholds all things by the word of His power (Heb 1:1-3). In his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul says Christ is our sufficiency and great Sustainer who holds all things together (Col 1:17).

Naomi felt her situation was hopeless and the assurance from the prophet Isaiah shows how God through His love and mercy will restore her:

In all their affliction He was afflicted,
And the angel of His presence saved them;
In His love and in His mercy He redeemed them,
And He lifted them and carried them all the days of old.

(Isa 63:9; ESV)

Likewise, the suffering servant whom Isaiah talks about – Jesus – was afflicted in every way and thus understands what Naomi was going through. His love and mercy were available to Naomi to redeem her and restore her. Again, the Suffering servant is a shepherd who tends and cares for the lost sheep. Naomi was lost because she moved to Moab instead of living in Bethlehem yet God shepherded her back to the fold. When she lost all her family in Moab but returned to Bethlehem, she gained a perpetual family. She needed one who would carry her in her bosom, and Ruth exemplifies such an image.

Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs
And carry them in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes.

(Isa 40:11)

Ruth is a type of Christ who shepherds Naomi, tends her, and feeds her. Ruth displays the kind of loyalty Christ expects from His followers. Although she could have left her matrimonial home after losing her husband, she opted to stay on with her mother-in-law, displaying unwavering commitment. When Naomi decided to go back to her hometown Bethlehem, Ruth could have stayed among her own people in Moab. Yet she accompanied Naomi to Bethlehem even when Naomi insisted that she returns to her own people. She gave up all she had including her mother's house and followed Naomi. Such an example typifies what Jesus does in the life of all people. There is every legitimate reason for Jesus to abandon us, yet He sticks to us even when we try to convince Him to leave or reject him. However, Jesus requires that all who want to follow Him give up everything first before they follow Him (Mark 10:21).

In times of distress, there is a need for a sympathetic awareness that life's problems compel action. We need not sit on our oars when the storms of life are beating us but do something about it. Naomi did something by moving back to Bethlehem. Ruth knew that life in Moab was over, so she tried a new place. In the New Testament, Jesus' ministry is a kind of ministry that takes us into a new location as a new creation. In this new place, we are welcome with compassion. It is a place where Jesus is sympathetic to the sick, the needy, and the hungry and would not let them go until their needs are met. Jesus had compassion for multitudes. When Jesus saw the multitudes of people coming to him, he was moved with compassion for them because he saw them "as sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 9:36; Mark 6:34). Naomi and Ruth were like sheep without a shepherd, and Jesus felt the distress that they were going through, how weary and hopeless they have become without a Shepherd.

Boaz: A Type of Christ

Boaz, like Jesus, showed compassion to Ruth a foreigner. He allowed her to glean with the other women who were working on his farm. He allowed her to eat the food prepared for his worker and drink from the pot that the workers had filled for themselves (Ruth 2:1-9). Ruth felt she did not deserve such compassion. She tried to know why she had found favour in his sight (Ruth 2:10). Boaz showed compassion to Ruth because Ruth has shown compassion to Naomi. Compassion not only includes feeling sympathy for people, but also a desire to take action to alleviate their distress. Jesus models compassion for us. In his interaction with crowds of distressed people and with individuals in need, He found miraculous ways to

meet their physical needs for bread to eat. Often, the people Jesus helped were outside of the “faith community” of Jesus’ day. Even when the disciples explained that they did not have enough food to feed the crowd, Jesus insisted that they find them something to eat. Eventually, Jesus had to fall on the five loaves of bread and two fishes of a little boy who joined the crowd to feed a multitude of 5000 people (Matt 14:13-21).

Jesus had compassion for people who are outsiders or not counted by the Jews as part of the Kingdom of God. He was ready to accept them, open up opportunities to them, and feed them. People who do not have any hope were invited to come to the Lord Jesus Christ and taste His compassion. When we come to Jesus just as we are, we are sure that He will welcome us, feed us, touch us, and heal the sick, comfort the grieving, and teach us many things. As Jesus’ followers, we need to show compassion as Jesus did, and work to alleviate the distress of all.

Boaz, an Israelite, did not exemplify the patriarchal attitude of his people. He opened his arms to embrace Ruth and affirmed her as praiseworthy (Ruth 3:10). Israel was a patriarchal society in which women occupied a subordinate position. In many ways, women were treated as inferior to men, thus the life of women in Israelite society was precarious. For Ruth to leave Moab and come to live in Bethlehem can be seen as a difficult decision. She would surely not enjoy much recognition. Nevertheless, we find in Boaz the open heart to accept Ruth, a foreigner and a woman.

When God decided to redeem humanity, Mary, a young woman, was chosen to be the mother of the Saviour (Luke 1:26-38). Women in their youthful years were often treated with suspicion, but Mary found favour with God and with humanity. Ruth came to Bethlehem when she was a young woman. When Ruth encountered Boaz, it became clear that Boaz has taken notice of Ruth’s character and was ready to show her favour. He closely monitored her, and came to know that she did not go after younger men, whether rich or poor (Ruth 3:10). Boaz’s words to Ruth that “you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people you did not know before” (Ruth 2:11) mirrors the words of Jesus to his disciples, “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother... will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life” (Matt 19:29).

Jesus was sensitive to the needs of all people, whether male or female. He exhibited an all-inclusive compassion that broke through the traditional gender restrictions and taboos, spoke with a Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42), and did not reprimand the woman with the issue of blood for many years who touched him (Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48). When the woman who had been caught in adultery was being condemned by teachers of the religious law and Pharisees, Jesus did not condemn her but asked her to go and sin no more (John 8:1-11). When another woman, perceived to be a prostitute, approached Jesus while he was eating in a Pharisee's house, poured precious ointment on Jesus's feet and used her hair to wipe the feet, Jesus accepted that sacrifice and praised the woman for that gesture (Luke 7:36-50). Similarly, Boaz, an Israelite, accepted Ruth and recognized her worth.

Widows stimulated the compassionate help of Jesus. Actually, the Old Testament provides specific commands about how widows were to be treated with kindness and respect (Deut 14:28-29; 24:19-21; 26:12-13; Isa 1:17). Jesus showed compassion toward the widow who had lost her only child and was with the funeral procession outside the city of Nain. When Jesus heard the widow sobbing, he was moved with compassion and "His heart went out to her" and eventually raised the young man from the dead (Luke 7:13-17). By showing compassion to Ruth and Naomi because they were widows, Boaz becomes a type of Christ.

Both Naomi and Ruth were widows who came to live in Bethlehem, and at the mercy of the people because they were not in Bethlehem to cultivate food crops at the beginning of the season. It is possible that some families neglect to provide for their widowed relatives, but Boaz opened his heart and hands to Ruth so that Naomi would be sustained and cared for. People who neglect their family members, especially widows, are worse than unbelievers (1 Tim 5:8 cf Acts 6:1-5).

Ruth could not understand why she gained favour in the eyes of Boaz: "Why have I found favour in your eyes, that you should regard me, seeing I am a foreigner?" (Ruth 2:10; see also 2:2, 13). Perhaps Boaz did all that to mirror the heart of Jesus. The prophet Hosea prophetically describes Israel as a nation that does not deserve favour yet God showed them mercy, forgiveness, and restoration. Hosea was to name his daughter born out of a relationship with Gomer Lo-ruhamah:

Then the Lord said to him, 'Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them. But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the Lord their God; I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen.' When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. Then the Lord said, 'Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God.' Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people', it shall be said to them, 'Children of the living God.'
(Hos 1:6-10; NRSV).

The Hebrew word for "favour" or 'grace' – *ḥānān* – shares the same cognates as the word '*Ruḥamah*' which also means compassion or love (see Ruth 2:10). Like Jesus, believers need to be compassionate to others and care for their emotional needs. They have to stop to notice others, welcome them, hear them, break bread with them, and be present with them. Caring for someone's emotional needs can go as far as caring for the physical needs.

Jesus promises anyone who comes to him that He will not turn the person away (John 6:37). Such a person will be welcomed at the Lord's table to eat and drink with Him. Ruth went to the field of Boaz and was welcomed and invited to an "eucharistic" meal. At mealtime, Boaz said to her, "Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar" (Ruth 2:14). The eating of the bread and drinking of the wine as they sat together in Boaz's field echo how Jesus sat with his disciples in the last Passover meal (Matt 26.17–25; Mark 14.17–21; John 13.21–30).

The Gospels writers reveal that those who came to the table with Jesus had continued supply of food that, "they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces left over" (Matt 14.20; Mark 6.42–43; Luke 9.17; John 6:12–13). It is not surprising that Ruth ate and left some over (Ruth 2:14). Food is such a basic human need, and the Saviour of the world is the bread of the world. All who come to Him will never hunger (John 6:35).

When Ruth visited Boaz at night during the threshing period, Ruth identified herself and added that Boaz was the kinsman-redeemer (Hebrew: *go'el*) of the family (Ruth 3:9). Naomi had described Boaz to Ruth as a kinsman-redeemer so when Ruth visited Boaz at the threshing floor, she told

Boaz that he was just that (Ruth 2:20). The redeemer in this context is one who by law has to pay off a family member's debt, defend the family member who is sold or in bondage, and stand in as a willing partner to pay the price to set free a family member who owes something. The use of the word "redeemer" echoes Christ who is the Redeemer of the world.⁹

Boaz knew that there was someone who was closer to the family of Elimelek than himself. With permission from that nearest kinsman, Boaz accepted Ruth's offer to become her redeemer who would look out for her good and that of Naomi. The story that Naomi was selling a piece of land belonging to their kinsman Elimelek made the nearest kinsman decline to redeem the land which meant that she would possess Ruth as part of the deal. Boaz rather accepted to buy the piece of land that belonged to Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelek, and thus married Ruth as her redeemer (Ruth 4:9-12). When people act as kinsman-redeemers for their family, they were imagining the work and mission of Jesus who comes to pay our debt (Col 2:13-14; Heb 9:12; 1 John 2:2). By acting as a redeemer to secure the land of Elimelek and provide for Ruth, Boaz is a type of Christ.

When Jesus was eight days old, he was sent to the temple, and the prophetess Anna spoke prophetically about him as the hope for "all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Lk. 2:38). Jesus is our Redeemer, for "in whom we have our redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:7). The Message Bible explains the redeeming grace succinctly:

Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we're a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free, either. *Abundantly* free! He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth (Eph 1:7-10).

9 Kenneth Boa, *Jesus in the Bible: Seeing Jesus in every book of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 36; David C. Deuel, "Job 19:25 and Job 23:10 Revisited: An Exegetical Note," *MSJ* 5.1 (1994):97-99; Brian P. Gault, "Job's Hope: Redeemer or Retribution?" *BSac* 173.690 (2016), 147-156.

God's redeeming love and sovereign grace are evident for all who come to Him in Jesus Christ. Believers are adopted into the family of God through such redemption, offered all the benefits of belongingness even if formerly they were "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12-13; ESV). These benefits include protection and provision, and find relevance in how Boaz called Ruth, "my daughter" (Ruth 2:8 cf Rom 8:15).

The Jews had some contempt for Moabites but Jesus stressed the need to accept all to be included in His fold and taught his disciples to treat all persons with dignity (Matt 18:17). Jesus ate with a tax collector and even invited one to be part of the three who were so close to him (Mk 2:13-17; Lk 19:1-10). Jesus had divine compassion all who feel ostracized, outcast, and dejected into membership in God's Kingdom. Certainly. As many as believed in Him are welcome into the kingdom of God.

Boaz opened up his inheritance for Ruth and Naomi just as Christ opened up His inheritance for all who believe in His name. Likewise, Christians who have received the rich inheritance of God through Jesus Christ need to share the graces with their fellows. Such a provision is a free gift of grace from Jesus who adopts us. In Christ, believers are redeemed from slavery and sin and saved from facing God's wrath to become sons and daughters who enjoy God's grace and peace. Christians also have an opportunity to be redeemed from spiritual poverty into Christ's abundant life, from hopelessness to hope, and from nobody to somebody out of that sheer grace. Such was the opportunity Boaz offered Ruth.

Jesus is concerned about hunger, disease, and injustice in our world. When invited to read from Scripture in the synagogue at Nazareth, he read a portion from Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

(Luke 4:18-19; NRSV).

By quoting this passage from Isaiah, Jesus announced his mission as focused on the needs of the people. Boaz typifies Jesus when he stood in and redeemed Ruth and Naomi who were poor. So that period became the “year of the Lord’s favour” for Ruth and Naomi.

Conclusion

Preaching from the book of Ruth, as an African Christian, has led us to see intertextual and typological allusions that eventually point to the life mission and work of Jesus Christ. It has opened up parallels, echoes, types, and pointers of Christ in the book of Ruth so that the message of Christ is heard when reading and preaching the book of Ruth.

Ruth is a type of Christ who shepherds, tends, and feeds Naomi. Just as the meaning of her name is, Ruth echoes how Jesus calls his disciples “my friends”. She becomes involved in God’s redemptive plan of salvation in the genealogy of Jesus and David. Ruth accepts the covenant love of God and affirms her allegiance to the God of Israel, and thus become part of the people of God all through grace. Such grace is made possible only through Christ.

Similarly, Boaz, typifies Jesus Christ in the way he showed compassion to Ruth a foreigner. He is not consumed by the patriarchal attitude of his people but accepted her. He sees her as a woman of valour. Boaz is compassionate to the needs of the widows and the helpless. He welcomes and invites Ruth to a communion meal. He becomes a redeemer for Naomi and Ruth, buying the land Naomi was selling, and standing in as a willing partner to buy off the price to secure a future for Ruth by sacrificing his inheritance. All these are what Christ came to offer and Christians are called to do the same.

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