EXEGETICAL WORK ON RUTH:

WHO IS SHE?

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INTRODUCTION TO RUTH: Bronze Age and Tribal leadership

“A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.” -Proverbs 31:10

1. Introduction

A compelling narrative of the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Ruth describes a girl's journey from helplessness to the state of a respected, married woman and one of the greatest ancestresses of Israel's history. This book demonstrates both the complexity of gender roles as well as solidifying the genealogy of David by one of the boldest statements of ancient erotica in Ruth 3.

Who is Ruth, then? The law sees her as a Moabite, a sojourner as well as a childless widow, and thus no longer a virgin. Yet Ruth boldly chooses to keep herself pure before the Lord. While the Torah and the post-exilic writings are patriarchal and male-dominated, the Book of Ruth in particular reveals a distinctively different perspective on gender and sexuality.

2. The Dating and Culture of the Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth is historical reflective material that is both helpful and potentially confusing in how it handles culture and gender studies. Therefore, before one can appropriately read the material, one must first examine the structures of history, culture, and the social-political geographic landscape of the Israelite people during the time that the story takes place.

**Dating**

Dating the piece itself has been highly controversial in modern scholarship. The speculation ranges from the days of Samuel to after the exile. Arguments that are based on the late Hebrew expressions and Aramaic words found in the book support the theory of the final composition occurring after the exile. Meanwhile, others believe that since the setting of the story takes place in Judges that it should be paired with Judges. On this train of thought, others have suggested that the book of Ruth in its final form was written pre-Judges, due to the
similarity in early grammatical writing with the Hebrew stems. Other scholars suggest that the Book of Ruth was actually written in three separate stages. The first stage of its development was probably an old, poetic tale transmitted from the time of Judges orally. This would be followed by a second version which materialized in written prose between the 9th and 8th centuries BCE. Finally, the third edition would have been written post-exile, suggesting that the text responds to Ezra and Nehemiah. Still others say that it was written during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah alone due to the similarities in the perspectives on Israelite marriage laws which were patriarchal and oppressive to foreign women. This stems out of the fact that most of Ruth ties directly into familial cultural patterns and marriage systems, both of which were concentrated “hot topics” during that era of Israelite history. These topics were significant, because many of the Israelites were returning home after the Babylonian exile to reclaim their family property. For this reason, Ezra and Nehemiah needed to reiterate the law rituals to ensure proper family lineage. It is true that more than any other book in the Hebrew Bible, the book of Ruth deals directly and intentionally with the issue of what constitutes a family. The book redefines family, centering not on clan or blood relationships but rather on acts of loyalty and female sexuality. However, this does not necessarily mean that it was written during that time.

In addition to these conflicting theories, the setting in Bethlehem is itself problematic. Ruth 1:2 states that אֵלֵיָהֶו (Elimelech) came from Bethlehem, אֶמְיָהוֹ. Then in Ruth 1:6-7, Naomi intended on traveling back to the Land of Judah, her kindred, אֲדַמַּהוֹ רְאוֹדָהוֹ “to [the] land [of] Judah”, in order to find sanctuary, as Ruth claims in 1:10 as Naomi's people. And

finally in 1:19, it states, “And they went, the two of them, until in they entered the house in
Bethlehem...there was murmuring all throughout the city...” Clearly, the book is explicit not only
in the time period this story is set, but also the location.

This is problematic because there is virtually no evidence of Bethlehem's existence at this
time. This is partly due to the current political situation in the country and partly to the layout of
the modern town itself. Unfortunately, archaeologists have been unable to complete much work
in identifying the city as the same one that is mentioned so frequently in Ruth's story. Aside
from the excavation of the Palaeolithic remains in the northwestern area of the modern town and
the scattered finds of the Neolithic flints both in Bethlehem and Bait Sahur, the early
archaeological sites focus on the lower east slopes of Bethlehem ridge and the western lands of
Bait Shaur\(^3\). The digs on the eastern slopes have uncovered burial sites with few artifacts of note
and little else to support whether this Bethlehem is the same as the one in the book of Ruth.

If there is little archaeological evidence tying modern Bethlehem, other options must be
considered which could help to date the overall text. First, and the weakest of the claims, is that
the location might simply have been incorrectly named within the book. If that is the case, then a
few of the surrounding locations could be the “Bethlehem”. A little further down to the east, the
modern town of Bait Sahur was in continuous or intermittent use from the Early Bronze Age I to
early Bronze Age III (ca 3000-2700 BCE) as evidenced by a dig that discovered 160 pottery
vessels found in a cave indicate multiple burials. Although no bones survived, such multiple
burials tend to be associated with denser urban populations but no settlement of this date has yet
been recorded. The presence of a "Khirbet Kerak" bowl among the burial goods indicates contact

ave new york, NY(2013): 105
with the people farther north in Palestine. This could mean that there was a temporary urban-based location that could have been a tribal location, although more evidence would need to be collected.

Another option in locating Ruth's Bethlehem is to treat the book as historical fiction, a novella. This would mean that the Bethlehem in the book of Ruth is loosely based on the Bethlehem of later dates. In all likelihood, the author deliberately used this location in order to tie the events of Ruth to the ancestral line of King David. Novella is a form-critical category which is a combination of brevity with a plurality of episodes. Those identifying Ruth as a novella believe that the content is at least primarily fictional, if not purely so. According to Bentzen, Ruth is often lumped with Esther, and Judith, due to their common themes of a heroine that has legendary beauty, piety, and accomplishments with fairy-tale motifs. Herman Gunkel also calls attention to the number of indefinite periods such as “when the Judges were Judging” so characteristic of a popular narrative opening, as is said above in the structure statement פֶּלֶם. This assertion is the most plausible.

The Hebrew text of Ruth, when describing the location, frequently uses terms such as kindred, territories, house of Bethlehem, and familial phrases. Most likely, the is that the Bethlehem of the book of Ruth, was a tribal territory location used for a family based plantation. It is, therefore, important to see the work as dated in the time that it proposes in 1:1, as in the times of the Judges, rather than indifferently placing it in a nonexistent urban location. If one wants to understand Ruth, then it more important to date the story in the textually intended setting of Judges, rather than to try to estimate its actual date and place.

4Master, The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible, 1:105
6Myers, Jacob, The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth. (Netherlands: Tutasubaegide Pallas EJB): 33
The Geographic Survey of Bronze Age Israel

In order to understand Bronze Age Israel, one must look back to the Neolithic age of the ancient Near East. This period is associated with the establishment of stable communities, villages and eventually cities. The origins of progression stem not from farming the great river valleys as widely assumed, but rather, in the cultivating of rolling steppes of the hilly countries which had sufficient rainfall, easily workable soil and natural vegetation.

These safe haven-like locations were good pasturing and added economic value. The earliest farming communities lay in the natural rainfall zones, at favored sites enjoining a variety of natural resources along the margins of the great flood plains: the Nile and the Tigris Euphrates systems. The annual rainfall in the land of Moab which would receive 0-100mm of annual rainfall, thus explaining the possible frequency of famine like as described in Ruth 1:1. Jerusalem, not far from Bethlehem and presumably Boaz's fertile land, would receive upwards of 600-1000mm of rainfall. Even before 5000 BCE, artificial watering began to appear on the alluvial fans of smaller watercourses in order to supplement raised farming. This development precedes the major colonization of the Southern Mesopotamia and the great urban expansion of the fourth millennium. Cities couldn't have existed without a highly productive, local agriculture, and agriculture required political stability.

Critical to the development of territories, such as the farmland in the story, was the use of cisterns, usually by gate of the cities (cf. 2 Samuel 23:14-16), is generally thought to have begun

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8Ereye, "The agricultural cycle, Farming," in Civilizations of the Ancient, 1: 180
9Ereye, "The agricultural cycle, Farming," in Civilizations of the Ancient, 1: 175
in the late Bronze Age; but their origins in this area are frequently undated.\textsuperscript{10} Vineyards and fig plantations thrived under similar conditions. Also, throughout the Bronze Age and into the early Iron Age, substantial terracing work was done to create stable farming land on hills and slopes of Palestine. By this period, the settlement patterns did not depend completely on the suitability of a site for grain cultivation, but the agriculture shows more adoption in supporting cities whose rationale seems commercial.\textsuperscript{11}

In Ruth, much of the story took place in a geographic location that during the Early and Middle Bronze Age was almost entirely restricted to the fields and valleys around the modern Bait Shaur. Typically in this region, small villages produced wheat, barely, and fruit. During the fourth millennium BCE, such products likely supported the small agricultural and pastoral communities\textsuperscript{12}. Some of the cultivated plants in this area appear to have been domesticated as secondary crops, occurring first as weeds of other corps, and later being domesticated in the second and the first millennium. Among these are oats, rye, and false flax. It is very likely that vegetables such as radishes, lettuces, beets, and leeks came into cultivation in this way as well. In an inscribed clay tablet, commonly called “The Farmer's Almanac and 3,500 years old, a letter from a farmer to his son was found at Nippur (Nuffar). This instructional letter documented how to grow the best crop of barely on an irrigated field. It details the process of irrigation prior to sowing during the growth of the crop. The preparation noted for this crop included using oxen and the special seed trill plow. The farmer explained that while growing the plants had to be protected from the possible ravages of field mice, vermin, and birds. Then, he urged his son to harvest the crop before the ears bent over with the weight of the ripened grain. The harvest was

\textsuperscript{10}\textsuperscript{Master, The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible, 1: 104}
\textsuperscript{11}\textsuperscript{Ereye, "The agricultural cycle, Farming," in Civilizations of the Ancient, 1: 178}
\textsuperscript{12}\textsuperscript{Master, The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible, 1: 104}
to be followed immediately by threshing with a threshing sledge and winnowing with winnowing forks to clean the grain of chaff and dust. This was the same process that occurred in Ruth's book. It would have been a painstaking business that required a plantation-like community and would explain the reasons behind a celebration. In Boaz's case, indicated in Ruth 2, the main grain was barley. This was certainly not uncommon for the supposed size of Bethlehem if one were to approach this as a familial tribal plantation. More important was the economic strength of barley at that time. This indicates that Boaz was quite wealthy and why that grain in particular appeared in Ruth.

*A multicultural Bronze-aged agricultural village.*

To understand the sexual encounter between Ruth and Boaz one first has to understand how the sexual culture was, and that is something that differs from the biblical text on rituals and customs though these texts probability interacted with the following historical truths. Bethlehem being a fabled agricultural town of the Middle Bronze-age, would follow to be like any typical village of its type. Ergo one must understand that the village itself, being as stated before a town for Barely would have been at its height a highly developed economic station.

Hazor, an actual agricultural village would suggest that, at the end of the third millennium BCE, Hazor was not just another “little farming village” but played a special role in the economic and social networks in the north of the country and, in particular, in the Hula Valley. It prescribes a perfect example for how trade influenced the culture of Bethlehem in the story of Ruth.

In an archaeological dig, Hazor, More than three hundred vessels and sherds belonging to

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a single family were found during the renewed excavations at Hazor—the richest and largest
assemblage of this type of pottery at any one site in the southern Levant. It is generally
accepted by scholars that this ceramic family reached northern Palestine from Syria. According
to Shlomit Bechat's reassessment of the Syrian parallels, he believes that he has identified
fundamental differences between the vessels produced in Syria and those from the southern
Levant. This is due to the majority of Syrian vessels are made off light-colored clay, in contrast
to the local ware, which turned black in the firing process; even in cases where the Syrian pottery
is made of gray clay, the vessels’ shapes are somewhat different from local Palestinian pottery.
He also believes that two regional groups also differ in the manner of decoration. The Syrian
vessels are decorated in the “white on black” technique is also known in the southern Levant, but
in this case the effect is the opposite: the vessels are made of dark-colored clay, and white
painted lines are incised to expose the black background. He concludes by observing that the
ceramic family was produced locally in the Hula Valley and its environs, displaying Syrian
influence in shape and decoration. This means that, although, the architectural remains may hint
that Hazor was a small agricultural village typical of the period, evaluation of the ceramic and
metal finds suggests Hazor was actually of importance in the role of production and distribution
of this ware.

For Ruth's Bethlehem then, as supposedly a high trafficked area on route would be seen
as a place in similarity. It is a logical jump then that sexuality in its basic custom would be
shared. Much like pottery and pottery techniques, the customs and culture of sexuality would be
married throughout the Near East, Egypt, and Mediterranean. If not for the Israelites in

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14 Shlomit Bekhar, "Tel Hazor: a key site of the Intermediate Bronze Age," *Near Eastern Archeology* 76, no. 2 (January 2013): 75
15 Bekhar, "Tel Hazor: a key site, 75
Bethlehem, at the very least the Moabites in the Moab cultures. It is then likely that to understand the range of sexual habits of these mixed cultures of Syria, Israel, Egypt, Moab, and other closely traded location, one can get a feel for the over all sexual habits and customs of that world. In this way, one can get a clear picture for the dynamic scene of the threshing floor.

3. Tribal structures of the Bronze-age Near East

One theory is that Israel emerged in the Late Bronze Age as a tribal coalition near or on the border between the great powers of Hattie and Egypt. The meaning of “tribe” used is “a unit of sociopolitical organization” of groups defined by kinship, who tend to share a common ancestor, or whose leadership authority is defined by one or a small clan of non-permanent chiefs, such as biblical judges\(^\text{16}\). Tribalism is a social extension of household kinship conceptions: in the case of Ruth, based on kinship with Elimelech, and later in Bethlehem, with Boaz. These tribal structures and identities are fluid, often changing hands, as seen in the Book of Judges. The identity meant to define the social boundaries of the tribes is then based on the household level of the leaders whose structure it replicates, and the community on the whole ends up informed by dyadic relationships.

The strength and effect of this coalition are made clear by the spread of highland villages in Palestine in the Bronze Age to Early Iron Age. These settlements were an extraordinary geographical development, as new, mostly Israelite, agricultural villages were coming under what must have been a tribal dominion\(^\text{17}\). This correlates to the first summary of Judges 1:1-2:5, where several tribes that failed to defeat the Canaanites who lived in the land were forced to co-exist with them in an unstable competing tribal system. This sets up the whole framework for


\(^{17}\) Coote, "Tribalism -Social Organization in the Biblical," in Ancient Israel: The Old Testament, 35
Judges in that Israelite clans form alliances and coalesce into larger tribes to survive and thrive, then compete with hostile neighboring entities. The narratives in Judges relate both victories that make a tribe stronger, and failures said to be YHWH's providence to help another tribal region grow. It is this system of overlapping peace and competition that constitutes the book of Judges.

In pre-monarchic Israel, when as in Ruth 1:1 states, “the judges ruled [NRSV].” the highest leadership did not rest in one or even a few leaders, but was rather localized at the tribal level. In the Book of Judges, this leader is simply called a “judge” or in Hebrew shophet. They were not officiants over courts of law. Rather, they were like military authority figures or strong, alpha-male, national heroes that led the tribes in battle. In time, these strongmen, probably all claiming tribal affiliation, assumed monarchic prerogatives over their dominions. In the central highland, the result was a run of unstable tribal monarchies. The tradition of tribal Israel lived on in the courts of these highland monarchies, not only to back appeals for support from their inferior subjects, and to assert autonomy in the face of meddling monarchies, but also to define the extent of their heroic male sovereignty, which was unusually wide insofar as dominion of tribal Israel.

In Ruth, Elimelech and Boaz are considered shophet although it was not textually given to them. Elimelech, would be such a leader as he had made all the traveling decisions to move from one location to the other. This would establish him as a leader of his immediate family and any servants of his household, although none specified as common in the Hebrew Bible. Boaz would be one of the main leaders in Bethlehem, since he was one of the strong economic leaders in his village, and had several younger males working for him (taking from the literature on

tribalism, such as the Middle Bronze Age Mari texts, that when the tribes are embedded in a
monarchic or state of setting tribal identities from mainly between tribal leaders). While the
majority of texts may not give a straight forward description of social organization of Israelite
tribes in villages in any period, they do give great insight into the political and tribal organization
through court ideology.20

Because of this unstable leadership, there was a cultural need for the leaders to establish
control by only allowing older men access to women in order to create a power vacuum within
the society. This excluded some men, while creating a monopoly for others. One manifestation of
the strict cultural control of women was the policing of the virginity of women. Frequently, the
acquisition of women was accompanied by the exchange of monetary resources, either in the
form of a dowry, bride price, or bride wealth21. In biblical law, family issues were considered
under the category of property (i.e., Exodus 20:17). The law carefully controlled issues of
sexuality, including viewing women's sexuality as the property of their fathers or husbands, to
ensure protection of both family line and property22. Family was of the highest importance to
grow a stronger tribe. It would be each male's responsibility to produce as many sons as possible
to grow either soldiers for the alpha male's armies, or maintain legal domestic practices.
Daughters would be a source of economic gain, but little else other than maintaining the
domestic environment. Marriage, although prized throughout Torah law, became the expression
of male-dominated sexuality, aimed at cooperation in production; and in rearing of progeny, and
at reconnection of the tribal union by legal practices insuring legitimacy of offspring. According
to Elser, ethnographic studies of women in Sudan, Egypt, parts of North Africa, and the Arabian

21 Leeb S. Carolyn, "Polygyny: Insights from Rural Haiti" in Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social
22 Jacobson, "Redefining Family in the Book of Ruth," 2
Gulf have uncovered that women in those cultures will even go so far as pursuing demonic possession for an opportunity to pursue their interests outside of the Mother's House to meet the demands of a hostile environment of male supremacy and female oppression.\textsuperscript{23}

For the judge or chieftain, marriage was of the highest importance to his village. It was literally a case of life or death for him to gain the largest amount of kinship relations. The general assumption was that everyone ought to be married. Though marriage is most frequently monogamous, polygamy seemed to be allowed, if required by circumstances. One reason they favored polygamy is that due to the extremely low rates of surviving children, more wives increased the potential of having surviving children. Large losses of men in war tended to balance the number of women dying in childbirth. Another reason was that migration led to an imbalance in the sex ratio in society.\textsuperscript{24} When opportunity for economic survival was limited, individuals would migrate to other locations in search of the means to live. Sudden droughts and famines would lead to the migration of whole family units in search of food and would also lead to the dispersal of individuals, primarily males.

Control of access to women by older men, usually the leader, became the norm of tribal society. According to Esler, a virtual excess of women became created by those with power. The controlling groups gain two benefits: First, an excess of women were available to them for conjugal pair formation; and second, a body of males is available whose energies can be harnessed toward the projects of the controlling group\textsuperscript{25}. In the case of Israelite-based villages, especially during competition, women or girls would often be the spoils from other tribes, or even other racial lines such as Moabites or Cannanites. Even in cultures that do not legitimatize

\textsuperscript{23}Coote, "Tribalism -Social Organization in the Biblical," in Ancient Israel: The Old Testament, 131-132
\textsuperscript{24}Leeb, "Polygyny: Insights from Rural Haiti" in Ancient Israel: The Old Testament, 51-52
\textsuperscript{25}Leeb, "Polygyny: Insights from Rural Haiti" in Ancient Israel: The Old Testament, 52
polygamy, this control of access may be operative, resulting in a large difference of age between a man and his mate(s). Patriarchal control of the lives of women has been studied more than patriarchy’s effects on younger men, an effect felt especially keenly in the area of legitimated outlets for sexuality. Young men may be required to complete a quest or serve or be a part of an army in service to the hierarchy in order to gain a conjugal pairing.

Such barriers would create a time gap between men of marriageable age and the young girls expected to produce children or exclude some men entirely. In Israel's case, this would refer to a Bride-price. One manifestation of the strict cultural control of women is an emphasis on the virginity of women at the time of their first union. Frequently, the acquisition of women was accompanied by the exchange of monetary dowry, bride price, or bride wealth - all of which served as a “buy-in” to assure that only successful men can participate. Daughters of less successful men may end up either in unions of secondary status or in non-legitimatized sexual arrangements such as prostitution, which will stigmatize the resulting off-spring.  

**Naomi’s Plan: The standard female in comparison**

Naomi in many ways represented the standard woman in contrast to Ruth. It was common for Israelite women to be compared with children and slaves. Women were regarded as exclusively domestic, and their identity would have been one of unchallenged dignity honored only as a mother. In Exodus 20:17, the tenth commandment lists the neighbor's wife among his household items, his slaves, and his animals as property that should not be coveted. The Decalogue believed that the law of YHWH was given to be worshiped by men and not women, as they were merely legal property. Also in Exodus, there were other laws to protect the man

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26 Leeb, "Polygyny: Insights from Rural Haiti" in Ancient Israel: The Old Testament, 52-53
27 Mary J. Evans, Woman in the Bible: An Overview of All the Crucial Passages on Women's Roles (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 1983), 33-34
from his female property, both his daughters and his wives, by having laws in the case of recall on his daughters, or non-reproductive property of his subordinate females, which would diminish their economic value to the male-dominated leader, while also causing the tribal households shame, such as Exodus 21-22. The ability to reproduce was seen as a biological necessity. It was a society where the patriarchal fertility mandate was emphatic.

Song of Songs 3:4, 8:2 states the patriarchal ideal of virgin daughters, closely supervised in their fathers’ households. At times, a mother would welcome a young woman bringing her lover “into my mother's house” as that was an effective way to bring on pregnancy and arrange marriages.28 The pressure to have a child is so great in this social-political situation that women were oppressed, and only given two activities which were gleaning and childbearing. Naomi, by evidence of her actions in Ruth 2 and 3, tried to take advantage of her status of a widow and use Ruth to gain the status that was lost to her. This would have been the reason that she sent Ruth out in the beginning of Chapter 3.

In Ruth 3:3, Naomi ordered her to, “Go and bathe yourself and anoint yourself and put your clothes upon you and go down to the threshing floor;” אַבָּתֵן noun feminine which meant wrapper, mantle; wrapper, mantle, usually square piece of cloth worn as outer garment, and in Joshua 7:6; as costly gifts Genesis 45:22, Exodus 3:22; Exodus 12:35. This was extreme behavior to bathe and oil oneself and deliberately made her appear alluring. If she did not couple with Boaz, it was still likely that Ruth would become pregnant and provide a change in status. Although this was not directly stated in the text, it was not an unusual situation. Indeed, the ideal of virginity at marriage may have developed later, perhaps even with Hellenistic influence and

28 Leeb, "Polygyny: Insights from Rural Haiti" in Ancient Israel: The Old Testament,61
virginity at this time may have been less valued than at other periods of ancient Israel. 

4. The Threshing Floor

At night, Naomi sent Ruth to lie down with a drunken man, uncover him, and then to do as he says, which would obviously be sex. The threshing floor is key with the context provided in Hosea 9:1. The place would be associated in Israelite minds with illicit sexual activity. This could be due to religious fertility rites. It could also simply be that the working men away from home for the harvest took the opportunity to have sex with secular prostitutes. While the story itself provides no imagery of fertility, the multiple sexual illustrations and the image of laying down where the heaps of harvested grain are stored is reminiscent of Hosea 9:1.

Many scholars believe that the story in the book of Ruth took place during the first day of the Barley Harvest. This explains the ceremonial foregathering of the people of Beit Lechem before they worked the fields on the eve of Passover. This is significant, because like the Farmer's Almanac, it notes that the first sustainable crop has grown to maturity. This crop is brought to the priests as an offering to God. After this ceremonial offering, the actual harvest may begin. The people were then permitted to enjoy the fruit of their labor, eating and drinking freely. On the threshing floor, outside the city-gates and away from wives, men could freely engage in festivities late into the night, as Boaz does in 3:7a: “Boaz ate and drank until he was pleased in his heart and he went to lie down in/at the end of a heap of threshed grain.” Boaz got drunk on the threshing floor as was common during the harvest season festivals.

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32 Rapoport, Biblical Seductions: Six Stories, 438-39
33 Cotter, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew, 51
research of the Iron Age, has revealed a shocking perspective of what went on during these threshing floor festivities. A closer look at Israelite artifacts depicting dancing women reveals the cultural norm of promiscuity associated with music and dance.

**The threshing floor scene: Israelite sexuality**

The harvesting festival in the book of Ruth and the celebration around it, is clearly a product of the time period. In fact, the harvesting festival in the book of Ruth is similar to the festival described at the end of the book of Judges 21:19-21, and described in the Bible as "the annual feast of the Lord" during which "the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances ... in the vineyards". It is clear that through these sources, dancing was used as a means of courtship in ancient Israel, if not invariably a direct sexual indiscretion. While not explicitly stated in Ruth, the common, ancient Israelite would have been familiar with the festival and the explicit activities that preceded it, deepening their understanding of Naomi dressing up Ruth like one of these promiscuous musicians in chapter 3.

This would mean that it was women who entertained the men at these gatherings. Through archeology, Eastern metal cups were found dating between the ninth and sixth centuries BCE which portrayed dances performed mainly by women, while another representation of young female dancers has been carved on the so-called, “Eshmun platform” in the Phoenician sanctuary of Bostan.34 These figurines of female dancers offers literary and iconographic sources in the Old Testament such as Ex. 32:6 and 19; 2 Sam. 6:14–6; 1 Kings 18:26; and later, in Greek and Roman authors, such as Lucian in De Dea Syria, and Apuleius in Met. 8.27–8, who reported sensual dances performed by women, with percussion instruments inciting ecstatic dancing.35

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35Lopez-Bertran and Garcia-Ventura, "Music, Gender, and Rituals," 401
Furthermore, in the Song of Songs, the female beloved, the Shulamite, is described as participating in the "dances of the two camps" in 7:1. In the Mishnah, Taanit 4:8, on the 15th of the month of Av, a date most reminiscent of midsummer, the daughters of Jerusalem would go out to the vineyards and dance.

One can see through the eyes of the men eating and lounging by the fires while listening to soothing music being played by beautiful, enticing women. The tradition of dancing and the depictions of promiscuous, female musicians manifest in both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmud and commentaries on the Mishnah. Girls, were sent out over the floor and made to parade their assets, while boys come out there to inspect and decide which of the merchandise they would buy, according to the Yerushalmi Taanit 4:6, 69; Bavli Taanit 31a. This event is certainly reminiscent of wine and fertility celebrations, which are familiar from the surrounding Mediterranean cultures. Though, alternatively, in some cases some festivals such as the three pilgrimage festivals, sociologically dispensed woman from all participation do to their reproductive and domestic roles in society such as in Exodus 23:17, 34:23, and Deuteronomy 16:16.

RUTH: THE WOMAN BEHIND THE TALE

1. Who is Ruth: Defending the Heroine as נערת

Subtle Nuances of נערת

The word itself, נערת (na'arah) appears 76 times in the Hebrew Bible. They are: Genesis 24:14, 16, 28, 55, 57, 61; 34:3, 12; Ex 2:5; Deuteronomy 22:15–16, 19–21, 23–29; Judges 19:3–6, 8–9; 21:12; 1 Samuel 9:11; 25:42; 1 Kings 1:2–4; 2 Kings 5:2, 4; Amos 2:7; Job 40:29;

37T. Ilan, "Dance and Gender in Ancient," 135-136
Proverbs 9:3; 27:27; 31:15; of these the greatest cluster is in the book of Ruth. Intriguingly, it appears once in the prophetic books: Amos 2:7, where it seems to describe a cult prostitute. Apart from Esther and Ruth, na'arah does not occur in Late Biblical Hebrew. The BDB labels נָעַרָה as a feminine noun for girl. It claims that it means little girl only in 2 Kings 5:2, while in 2 Kings 5:4, it would mean daughters. Elsewhere, in 1 Samuel 9:11, it is used generically for young women of marriageable age. Finally, it recognizes that if the word is a plural noun then it would mean maids.38 In the Holladay, it states that the word means firstborn marriageable girl, who is still a virgin, or a newly married woman. It also means daughter, but in most cases, it is connected with another label such as בֵּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלִ֑ם or “Daughters of Jerusalem” or more accurately: “Young women of Jerusalem” such as in Song of Songs 1:5, and 1:7. This can also be seen in “daughter of Zion” in 2 Kings 19:21, כִּיּוֹר. In Song of Songs 6:1, this word used as בָּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלְיָם indicates the Bride, and therefore also has a slight subtext of someone young who is about to be married.

In English, there are many different words for age, all of them in first declension neuter and based solely on physical development ranging from infant, child, tween, pre-adolescent, adolescent, young adult, and adulthood. Yet, in Hebrew, this is not the case. Instead, for the female gender, the relevant words are based in marital status, not physical development. It is the nuance of the word that is used for young and marriageable and would have a significant role in

38 נָעַרָה feminine girl, damsel; 1 girl, damsel; נָעַרְתָּי little girl only 2 Kings 5:2; compare 2 Kings 5:4, perhaps young daughters Job 40:29; elsewhere young woman 1 Samuel 9:11; especially as marriageable, Genesis 24:14, 16, 28, 55, 57; Genesis 34:3, 12, Deuteronomy 22:15; Deuteronomy 22:16, 19, 20, 21, 24, 26 (twice in verse); Deuteronomy 22:29; 1 Kings 1:3, d; Esther 2:4, 7, 8, 9, 12; Esther 2:13; specifically virgin נָעַרְתָּי Judges 21:12; Deuteronomy 22:23, 28; 1 Kings 1:2; Esther 2:2, 3; נָעַרְתִּי betrothed girl Deuteronomy 22:25, 27; young widow Ruth 2:6; Ruth 4:12; of a concubine Judges 19:3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9; a prostitute Amos 2:7. 2 of female attendants, maids (always plural), Genesis 24:61 (J), Exodus 2:5 (E), 1 Samuel 25:42; Proverbs 9:3; Proverbs 27:27; Proverbs 31:15; Esther 2:9 (twice in verse); Esther 4:4, 16; gleaners Ruth 2:5, 8, 22, 23; Ruth 3:2.
status, as well as signal of sexual development.

The term נערת often has a sexual connotation to it and is used to translate a marriageable, sexually nubile quality to the young girl. In Esther 2:2, it states, “and then his king's servants who sought to serve their king, said, “Let the נ訊ה (little girl/marriageable/young girl), virgin, That are pleasing-(sexually beautiful), in sight. This would mean that they are not only virgins, but beautiful and sexually pleasing. נערת almost always has a meaning of a young unmarried woman and could have a subtle nuance of virginity as well. In Genesis 24:16, it describes Rebekah before Isaac marries her. Here she is seen as ננה נתמה, `The girl was beautiful in sight, that was a virgin, having been known by no men.” She was still tied to her mother's household in Genesis 24:28. Later, in 25:20-21, Rebekah is called, ננה after she becomes Isaac's wife. Both Esther and Rebekah, are youthful, marriageable, but not small children. It is a means of status in a sexual connotation. Later in Esther 2:7, “This is Esther, daughter of beloved because she has no father or mother and is a young girl beautiful in sight....” making Esther of the status of the rest of the girls. She is rushed off to be in the harem and be taught the nature of sex and raped. This is why in 2:17, she becomes married and gains status, yet the other girls who were defined as נUnload נuggage are now defined as ננה. “The King loved Esther above all the other Women and he took favor and kindness to his face from all the other virgins and put the royal crown on her head instead of Vashti.”

Ruth is similar to these previous texts. In 1:8, Naomi demands the two girls return to their “Mother's House.” Hebrew Bible gives references to “house of the mother” as a place
where all children are recognized and where female children are to be raised and taught
domestication, and, in the case of Song of Songs 3:4, a place where women were not oppressed.
Quite possibly, this is telling them to go back to the childhood sanctuary where they can still be
safe and perhaps even be remarried. The mother's house, in later Judaism such as Song of Songs,
was only used to describe a place for birthing and raising children. Since Ruth had no children to
birth, why would Naomi send them there unless she was still considered a child? Then, in Ruth
2:5, Boaz sees Ruth working in the field, and he asks his servant, “to whose girl is this?” He does
not ask him what or who נְבָרָה, but just as with Rebekah, Ruth is, נְבָרָה. Clearly, the author’s
phrasing of Ruth is to push that she is especially of marriageable status. This is also done in Ruth
2:6, “And he answered, the servant who was stationed over the harvesters, and he said, “The
girl/"marriageable”...” Finally, in Ruth 4, after the marriage is consented to, her status changes
her from נְבָרָה “marriageable girl” to אשת “wife” following the birth of Obed, father of Jesse,
father of David.

אשת is the status change of women in the Hebrew Bible from a young, marriageable girl
to a proper married woman. The status of a young girl or נְבָרָה would be one of ambiguity, a
daughter to foster for marriage or a sexual object for men to leer. Women were reduced to objects
for men to own rather than individuals, and it is in that sort of society where age is stripped down
to the value of married or unmarried status. Women would be raised to be married into a
hierarchy, and in the case of Ruth, Elimelech would be the highest hierarchy. He would want his
sons to marry and have children quickly so that the eldest would have the possibility of being the
next patron of the tribe. So Ruth would be raised in this environment to be a means of production
of offspring, even though she was not yet at a mature enough age to bear children. In Ruth 1:1-2,
it reads, “...a man [Elimelech] to sojourn in land Moab that his wife and his two his sons. And
name the man Elimelech and name of his wife Naomi and name two his sons Machlon and
Kilyon...” The meaning of Naomi here is very clearly wife as it describes the Elimelech the male
and dominate and his familial property. It could mean woman such as the Decalogue as a list of
his property, like in Exodus 20:17, the tenth commandment lists the neighbor's wife among his
household items, his slaves, and his animals as property that should not be coveted. The
Decalogue holds that they were merely marriage, or legal property, “your neighbors wife”. Either
way of meaning his woman, or his wife, Naomi is referenced as a means to display familial
property and help reinforce Elimelech's status. In 1:4, They took on wives, clearly does not
mean woman or female, rather means “wife”.

In chapter 3, Boaz is considered a kindred of Naomi, which could link them through age
and contrast with the young girl age that is Ruth. From Ruth 3:3-9, it describes a sexual
encounter of Naomi's seems whereby Naomi instructs Ruth about the ways of sex, indicating that
Ruth does not know how to have sex. In 3:4, Naomi tells her that Boaz will order her what to do.
It would be he that would instruct her on the act of sex, not for her to do the act herself. It is
unclear why this is mentioned in this way. A multitude of possibilities could be the actions
behind this, but the author leaves it as an ambiguous. It could be that she did not fully
comprehend what was going to happen, or that Naomi did not want a woman to force herself
onto a man of Boaz's position, or that it needed to be Boaz to do it so that Naomi would trap him
into purchasing the bride-price of Ruth, or that Ruth was too young and was still a virgin, as the
word can sometimes be nuanced, such as in the cases of Esther; Judges 21:12; Deuteronomy
22:23, 28, and 1 Kings 1:2.
Kapelrud, suggests that the word 'Virgin' (bethulah) was kept, 'to indicate that their youth and beauty remained throughout the years'. He suggests that, in reality refers to her eternal youth. Translators of the Septuagint use the Greek parthenos to translate every occurrence of the term. Parthenos occurs 8 other times, 5 times to translate Parthenos also generally means "virgin," though, like bethulah, is sometimes better as "young maiden." It is especially noteworthy, that every occurrence of bethulah in the Hebrew Bible ascribes to 'her' a place of distinction among the people. Simply being like in Ruth's case, "בֶּתֻלַּה 'a girl of marriageable age' or, "בָּתָן, are one and the same. Landsberger suggests that the word הבטָן, would be more apt for the English word 'adolescence', than the word virgin, because there is no word for virgin in the Sumerian or Akkadian language that has a concept of virginity, rather a phrase 'who is not deflowered.' If Landsberger is to be believed then there could in fact be a direct collation between the two words. Gordon J Wenham states,

"Morphologically betûlîm is a regular form for abstract nouns in biblical Hebrew designating age groups 'youth', נֵעַר 'old age' 3 It could therefore as well be understood to mean 'adolescence' as Virginity'. However in this passage it has evidently a more specific and concrete reference. The girl's parents produce the בָּתָן, and spread it before the elders. If this denotes an adolescent girl of marriageable age, הבטָן may be better translated 'tokens of adolescence' instead of 'tokens of virginity'. What these 'tokens' were is uncertain, but they could be a piece of clothing stained with menstrual blood."

When it comes to the scene with the threshing floor things start to get a bit complicated. On one hand, Ruth's age stays constant, in 3:2, Naomi states, “...now is not Boaz one of our kindred? With which whose girls you were? Lo! Behold! He scatters the Barley/common grains

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39Gordon J. Wenham, "Betûlîh, a Girl of Marriageable Age.," Vetus Testamentum 22, no. 3 (January 1, 1972): 6-8
41 Wadsworth, "Is There a Hebrew," 167
42 Wenham, "Betûlîh, a Girl of Marriageable," 6
43 Wenham, "Betûlîh, a Girl of Marriageable," 3
at the threshing floor tonight!” It is clear she is trying to identify to Ruth that Boaz has taken interest in her. She is a young and sexually attractive in her youth. She is marriageable, and available to have -a commodity that Naomi schemes to use. But, the complication comes in when Boaz awakes from his drunken slumber and notices Ruth stripping him and trying to engage in sexual relations with him. This is strange because he still acknowledges her as a daughter. It could be more ambiguity in her age, or more likely, that it is the author trying to separate who she is with who the author needs her to be. The author tries to depart her from those negative connotations in order to protect Boaz. It shows Boaz, not as having sex with the forbidden Moabite women, nor having sex with an adolescence, but rather a piest woman chosen by God.

Finally, In Ruth 4, after the marriage is consented, she is then switched from “marriageable girl” to “wife.” In the Epilogue, 4:16, much time has passed and she has given birth to Obed, father of Jesse, father of David. If she is able to give birth after this much time has passed, she would then be considered to be a woman, not a teenager.

**Ruth as a Moabite: What is a Moabite?**

Deuteronomy 23:2-3 states, “Those born of an illicit union shall not be admitted to the Assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the Assembly of the Lord....No Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.”⁴⁴ It is unclear where the name Moab originated or even when it first cropped up. Most scholars theorize that it could have even been as early as the Bronze Age. Prior to this and throughout Deuteronomy, people from Moab were called “descendants of Esau”. Moab was a desolate land above Edom and below Reuben. The Israelites made the connection between the legend of Esau

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and this wilderness as Esau was considered a wild man, more beast than human.

In Genesis 19, the daughters of Lot lay with their father and give birth to what the Israelites believe to be the ancestral line of the Moabites, described as evil by means of incest. Moabites are described in the story of Balaam in Numbers 22-24. These events follow Israel's escape from Egypt and the conquering of land during which they have harsh entanglements with the Moabites. Furthermore, in Numbers 25, Israelites, like Elimelech, are accused of having illicit sexual relationships with Moabite women, just like Ruth. They were not only sexually seduced, but also swayed to worshiping Moabite gods and outcast from Israelite society. The Moabite females were blamed for corrupting these honorable men and were seen as the cause of their destruction.

In Ruth 3, once Ruth and Boaz start intimate sexual relations, the identity of Ruth changes, and she is no longer called Moabite. It is not that she loses that status and becomes an Israelite, as that would undermine Boaz's generosity and the need for it. Still, her association to Moab stops the moment she is seen having sexual relations with him. The author implies that this is an act of God, intervening not on Ruth's behalf, but on Boaz's so that those reading would see him as a hero not corrupted as the men in Numbers were.

In Numbers, when the Israelites were claiming land through divine influences, they stated, “For fire came out of Heshbon, flame from the city of Sihon. It devoured Ar, of Moab, and swallowed up the heights of the Arnon. Woe to you, O Moab! You are undone, O people of Khemosh! He has made his sons fugitives, and his daughters captives, to an Amorite King Shihon.”45 Later, in Judges, God even is celebrated for the destruction of the Moabites: “But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, [he] raised up a deliverer for the Israelites, who

45 Coogan et al., The New Oxford Annotated, Numbers 21:27-30, 154
delivered them. The spirit of the Lord came to them...at that time they killed about ten thousand of the Moabites, all strong, no one escaped. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel.” Daughters were captured, possibly done in a tribal manner to secure wives. Sons were put to death or kicked out, also another tribal key point. Ruth very well could have been in a similar situation, at least in practice. It may have been that the author of Ruth wanted her to be depicted as one of these daughters or an antecedent of, depending on the date. To be a Moabite in the Hebrew Scriptures was in many ways to be labeled as the 'bad guy.' Often Moabites were considered at the very least a violent enemy, if not the racially different and thus evil animals. Their kings were often depicted as gluttonous and sinful. Their religion and rituals labeled as demonic.

Historically, however, the truth of the Moabites lies not in Hebrew scripture, but does, in fact, lie in the Egyptians. Statues of Ramesses II at the entrance to Amun at Luxor reveal an astonishing text. The statue on the right bears a topographical list which includes the name "Moab." 1279-1212 BCE provide the earliest references to Moab (mu^bu) in particular. This Egyptian source supplies the earliest epigraphic appearance of Moab. Who were the Moabites according to these sources? In all likelihood, the Moabites were a more localized tribal society. The people of êu-tu are relatively unknown, archaeologically speaking, but they part of what earlier Egyptian sources termed "êu-tu Land" which is may be Moab. If Late Bronze Age Moab was populated by Shasu clans and tribes of various origins in the process of settlement some of êu-tu stock, then there would be tribal competition, which reflects in the tension between the various Shasu tribal elements among the ancestors of the Israelites and Moabites.

46 Coogan et al., The New Oxford Annotated, Judges 3:9-30
48 Worschech, "Egypt and Moab," 230
49 Worschech, "Egypt and Moab," 236
Ruth: *What it means to be a “foreigner”*

The Bible prohibits intermarriage between an Israelite and a Moabite in Deuteronomy, Proverbs, and in Ezekiel 44:4-9. It could have been as stated in Ruth 1:3-4, that Elimelech has died and his sons married afterward, to mean that the sons being raised in alien community might not have been brought up in accordance to the law and married to continue the status of their father, without realizing the boundaries that they were opposing with the law. It is important to recognize that Ezekiel represents a position adopted by a particular faction, a minority group, which is attempting to impose its own anti-assimilationist and potentially xenophobic ideology on the Jewish community. So the law might be less constraining in social practice. But what is the very idea, to be a “foreigner” and what could it possibly mean other than racial tension in this tribal dichotomy?

Probably the most significant progress in the study of Biblical stereotypes and ethnicity has been in the observation of the rational aspect of both concepts of “race” as a biological phenomenon and the society culture around them. For Ruth to be a Moabite, that would set her apart as different, but there is more here, beyond being the hated race of a Moabite, she is also a foreigner. Biblical anthropological insights gathered by Philip F. Elser, has studied of stereotypes, such as foreigner, that he makes is that ethnicity has been the observation of that relationship aspect of both concepts in the past to describe the relationships of the biblical era.

Israelites stay as Israelites units, Egyptians as Egyptian, Moabites as Moabites and so on. They are often blocked as separate units. However, Esler sees that anthropology has been able to move past this seeing beyond ethnicity as a biological phenomenon, to see the use of the rather

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problematic their “race” can thus be avoided and replaced with the term “culture.” Esler uses the research Norwegian anthropologists Thomas Eriksen and offers the following definition of the term ethnicity stating, “Ethnicity is an aspect of social relationship between agents who consider themselves as culturally distinctive from members of other groups which whom they have a minimum of regular interaction.” This definition shows that the boundaries of ethnicity, or a group of individuals of a community, that describes as the different from the competing “other”.

Ethnicity, therefore in Esler's mind, creates an “imagined community,” since each member of an ethic group will never meet most of his or her fellow members but will imagine, he or she can “know them” all by attributing to them on the same notion of ethnicity and thus expressing community with them. An ethic group then defines itself by the preconceived or imagined dissimulates such as history, religion and cultural, appearance and language. In this case then, “other” would form as the foreigner. It would be only natural, especially in a tribal world to place the “other” as an automatically opposed from the imagined community. The differing of race, language, and religion would be enough to vastly separate the community from the other, and even if the cultures would be similar then, the community would have to shun the “other” in order to keep the appearances of the imagined community. In Ruth's case, this is most evident as she tries from the end of chapter one all through chapter two to win the hearts of the community to no avail.

52 Hagedorn,“Nahum -Ethnicity and Stereotypes: Anthropological Insights into Nahum's Literary History” in Ancient Israel: The Old Testament 230
53 Hagedorn,“Nahum -Ethnicity and Stereotypes: Anthropological Insights into Nahum's Literary History” in Ancient Israel: The Old Testament 230
Anthropological research as has shown that the notion of ethnicity is not necessarily needed to be connected to a specific physical entity, rather as a proposal put forward by Barth, ethnicity should be seen as a process of self-ascription group belonging where the manifested members set a signs of cultural difference to function the mark and defend social bounties and channel their structures of cultured interaction and exchange across those boundaries. Ethnicity also then is conceptualized as relationships not of difference, or perceived difference, but distinguished by balances of resemblances. This can function of “imagined community” then to create a structure, of how and why Ruth was not only seen as an outsider for being a Moabite, but also as blatant outsider or “other”. This also gives an understanding that the personality of the Bronze Age tribal society in seeing the danger of a foreigner. A foreigner could potentially corrupt the divinely given customs of the form that builds the Israelite communities and disrupt the daily lives of the over all society.

This is just the basis for any foreigner, however, when the foreigner is a woman the community of the Israelites put a specialized distinction. Foreign women often comes up in Proverbs, and in these texts “foreign woman” is clearly has a negative, especially sexual connotations. Another context is the discussion about marriage between an Israelites and the foreign women in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. these books show very clearly that foreign women are a danger to the post-exilic Judahite society and therefore should be avoided and rejected. The Torah laws that would protect Naomi, would not protect her as she is both a Moabite as well as a foreigner. Ruth is never described as a מָאֲלָמָה, which according to the BDB

describes the definition of a widow as, “....2 Samuel 20:3 of those imprisoned as concubines.

Isaiah 47:8 especially widows as helpless, exposed to oppression and harsh treatment. Isaiah 1:23, 10:2, and Malachi 3:5; harshness forbidden & care for them enjoined. Under despotically care of God in Deuteronomy 10:18, Jeremiah 49:11.56 Ruth would not receive this care.

Normally, it would not have been an issue for Ruth if only one of Naomi sons died, because then the Levirate Marriage would save her as described in Deuteronomy 5, “When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband’s brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.” There would be strict consequences if he had refused, however, this is not the case as Noami lost both her sons, there would be no one to look after Ruth, and Ruth's widowed status would not come into play. Instead, harshly and a bit unfairly, her widowed status is shadowed by her status as an unmarried, motherless, Moabite, foreigner.

In these texts, “foreign woman” clearly has a negative and sexual connotation. Ruth, on the other hand, directly opposes these books by showing that women could not only be protagonists and heroines, but be valued in Judian society as mother of the line of David.57

2. How Ruth Defies the social-political norms

From the very beginning Ruth by definition defies the social-political norms of Israeliite society. When the sons and Elimelech die, Naomi knows that according to Torah law she should

57 Jacobson, "Redefining Family in the Book," 443-452
be under the protection of her kindred back in Bethlehem, because there is a higher chance that
the laws would be followed more strictly close to Jerusalem in the center parts of Judah verses an
Israelite foreign community in Moab. Those laws would protect her, however she probably
knows that the laws would not protect Ruth and Orpah since the laws would have strictly forbade
their union in the family in the first place, and because of the racist overtones in Israelite society
in the first place. This is why in Ruth 1:12-15 Naomi states:

1:12“Return my daughters! Go for I have become too old to give you husbands. For even if I say 'I being hope!' and
I happen to also that night to have a husband and also I bear sons? 1:13Would you therefore wait until which they
grow up? Therefore would you shut yourselves off in order to not have a man be your husbands? No my daughters
that would be bitter to me, force/abundant for you to do that. YHWH has gone from my hand. 1:14And their voices
carried, and they wept yet again and Ruth's sister-in-law kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth she cleaved in her.
1:15And she said, “Lo! Behold! Your sister-in-law returned to her people and to her gods. Return after your sister-
in-law.”

The laws would not have protected Ruth, but Ruth still agrees to go with Naomi. The
present danger for her would be that in the Israelite's mind in Bethlehem that YHWH would only
grant sanctuary for Naomi, since it is presumed to them that the gods of her people would
prevent YHWH from giving her the same abidance as it says in the Deuteronomy passage that
they would not be she as a Moabite would not be able to be in the Assembly of God's presence
and thus His protection. It would fall on Ruth's own people to take her back, like they would by
Torah law take Naomi back. The danger of Ruth would be that she would be unprotected and
able to have any and all done to her since she would be a legal scapegoat. Even for Naomi it
would be tough. As a childless widow forces her from the high place in society that she was in
with Elimelech to a poor status. In Israelite society this is why so many laws are pivotal around
marriage status and protection laws around the family to protect these margins of society.

According to Agnethe Siquans, while it might seem like Naomi is being realistic about
the oppressive nature in the Torah laws, and trying desperately to send Ruth back to her people
for her own protection, she is actually preparing a defense for a new ground of ideology and a for a new possibility of interpretation of the Deuteronomistic law, as the Torah itself provides means for poor women to survive. Although she admits that in the end a woman will still have no chance to be accepted into society without a man, as the limits of patriarchy were not exceeded in the book of Ruth. 58

In chapter 2 Ruth clearly starts breaking the social norms, but so does Boaz. In some cases it even seems like Boaz is helping Ruth break social customs. It is Ruth that asks first Naomi to do work in the field. Keep in mind that Naomi is the one that is under the protection of the clan and not Ruth. She has no business involving herself in the fields and it is never mentioned what Naomi is doing to maintain her part in the community. But here it is Ruth, not Naomi who desires to work in the fields like socially the other women of the clan of Bethlehem are doing. 2:2 She asks, “Please let me go into the field and to glean in fields after which I find grace in his eyes.” and Naomi said to her, “Go in my daughter.”. The His is ambiguous of whether she mean Boaz, or YHWH, which is also interesting. Does she mean that she wishes to do the work that Noami should be doing in order to make it so that she is more welcome in the community, or is this a through back to Ruth 1:16-17, “But Ruth answered, “no! I will not encounter upon on me to you leave to return from your following. For where you go, I will go, and where you pass the night, I will pass the night. Your people are now my people, and your god is my god. Where you die, I die and there I will be buried.” Where in fact she is trying to appease God and put herself not as a Moabite, but gain assembly to God's court and become an Israelite. If this is the case, then Ruth is not only defying the laws of the society, but the very fabric nature of the laws that came from YHWH.

58 Jacobson, "Redefining Family in the Book," 446
Furthermore, as the chapter continues, she then goes and asks Boaz if she can in fact work in the field. To even approach the man in the society would be to oppose herself on an Israelite of power and open him and his whole household to corruption and/or uncleanliness. Even so, she asks him, in Ruth 2:7, And she said, “Please let me gather and I will gather the removed rows of fallen grain after me the harvesters.” And she came and she took a stand firm from the time of the morning until now. This she remained in the house for a little while. There is more at play here than what initially is let on. Ruth recognizes and acknowledges her status as a foreigner and a Moabite. By falling down on her face and bowing before the older man, and a tribal leader she sees herself as the social status of a person with an inferior position.

While being an orphan or widowed person like Naomi is a form of social convention of communication in the ancient Near East, it is not the same sort of situation for a Moabite young, and attractive as Ruth 2 points out, woman to do. Again in Numbers, it was the young marriageable Moabite women who seduced Israelite men into false worship and false culture. Obviously, even if she herself is unaware of it, Boaz certainly as the leader of his society would be aware of it. What is odd is that here Boaz helps her rather than dismisses, or even punishes her. His determiner to her is friendly and even protective. Boaz himself defies the same laws and customs the Ruth does. To Boaz, it seems that his understanding of law is in a different place than family or sexual considerations. He sees to overlook her status as a Moabite and he looks to laws such as in Leviticus 23:22. Understanding the law and these books sheds light as to why Boaz is represented an atypical Israelite male clan leader by asking for information about Ruth. It is striking to see the servant's reaction, who does follow the Law. The direct allusion to the proverbial promiscuity of Moabite women constitutes no irony coming from the servant leader,
since it only reinforces his message of Ruth's sexual availability. However, to Boaz, he sees Ruth more as a sojourner in need of help than a foreign widow who is fair game: When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the LORD your God.

CONCLUSION

Theological application & Christian Perspectives

Ruth is perhaps the key for Christians to fully understand the culture of the Hebrew Bible and the true lives of the people behind the texts. While the Torah and the post-exilic writings are patriarchal and male-dominated, informing the reader that women are less than human and only worth their sexuality and ability to reproduce, the Book of Ruth reveals a distinctively different perspective on gender and sexuality. It allows readers to see that in fact women were able to defy their roles as sexual objects and glean the fields or plot to gain security and riches from wealthy men. It reveals how there was, in fact, legendary heroines that the Hebrew people looked up to, read about, and fell in love with. Ruth is a true under-dog story that has immense power to the modern Christian. It is truly a powerful tool to teach about the complexities of gender in the Bible.

60Jacobson, "Redefining Family in the Book of Ruth," 1-8
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