The scroll of Ruth re-told through librettos and music: biblical interpretation in a new key

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CHAPTER TWO

A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THE SCROLL

In this chapter, using the concepts and terms discussed in chapter 1 as bricks and mortar (Introduction, p. 6), I will attempt to reconstruct and then interpret the frame of this ancient dwelling. With the text as a metaphorical house, once reconstructed it must be true to its own time but comfortably inhabitable by successive generations.

DIVISION INTO NARRATIVE UNITS

Dividing a text into units is complex (ch. 1, p. 7). How to divide the scenes in Ruth is a matter of interpretation. The biblical Scroll is divided into four chapters, roughly equivalent to four acts of a play. But there are other ways of dividing it.

Campbell divides this way:
I. “A Family of Sojourners” 1.1-5
II. “Returning Home” 1.6-22
III. “Amid Alien Corn?” 2.1-23
IV. “Encounter at the Threshing Floor” 3.1-18
V. “The Resolution at the City Gate” 4.1-12
VI. “A Son is Born to Naomi!” 4.13-17
VII. “A Genealogical Appendix” 4.18-22
Total: 7 scenes

Campbell’s division is based on theme rather than location. His choice of the number 7, which resonates for Bible readers, may not be an accident. He points out that the writer rounds off each episode in the book, giving each its own emphasis, using the devices of inclusio and repetition of key words to do this. For example, in 1.6-22 the words “return from the Moab plateau” bracket the scene: they open the scene with what is planned, and close it with the accomplishment of the plan (Campbell, 78). Campbell does not, however, consider the Ruth-Naomi scenes (1.18-23, 3.16-18) as separate, which Sasson and I do.

In Sasson’s commentary, the Scroll is divided as follows (in the Contents under “3. Philological Commentary”):
Chapter 1:
In Moab 1.1-6
The Parting 1.7-14
The Pledge 1.15-19a
Back to Bethlehem 1.19b-22
Chapter 2:
A Plan 2.1-7
Boaz and Ruth: First Encounter 2.8-13
Boaz Responds 2.14-18a
The Report 2.18b-23
Chapter 3:
Naomi’s Plan 3.1-5
Ruth and Boaz: Second Encounter 3.6-15
Nothing to do but Wait 3.16-18
Chapter 4:
Legal Discussions 4.1-12
Birth of Obed 4.13-17
The Ancestry of David 4.18-22

20
Total: 14 scenes

Sasson has a larger number of subdivisions, because he divides based on change of speaker and not only of location. For that reason his divisions of chapters 3 and 4 do not differ from mine: in those chapters the speakers change with the location, whereas in chapters 1 and 2 there are more changes of speakers in a single location.

I treat the Scroll as a play, dividing it into acts and scenes:

Prelude (providing summary of background) 1.1-6

Act I
Scene 1: On the road to Bethlehem 1.7-19a
Scene 2: Arrival in Bethlehem 1.19b-22

Act II
Scene 1: In the fields 2.1-16
Scene 2: Evening at home 2.17-23

Act III
Scene 1: Naomi’s instructions 3.1-5
Scene 2: On the threshing floor 3.6-15
Scene 3: Going home 3.16-18

Act IV
Scene 1: At the city gate 4.1-12
Scene 2: Ruth conceives and gives birth 4.3-17
Postlude: 4.18-22 (genealogy)

Total: 9 scenes, plus prelude and postlude

These act and scene divisions are based on change of location and time shifts. They differ from Campbell in several places because his division is based on theme rather than location. What I have called “Prelude” and “Postlude” are not really scenes in the sense of the rest of the book, because they contain no dialogue and belong to the pre- and post-action.

Scene division is also dependent on the difference between narration and narrated time (ch. 1. p.7). A dialogue creates the closest match between narration and narrated time, as in a play (Amit. 108). Dialogue scenes are stretched out, with some repetition and long, solemn speeches. This can be seen in the scenes between Ruth and Boaz in both chapters 2 and 3. Yet there is variation in this pattern: for example, the scene at the city gate is less prolonged than earlier scenes. Whenever the pace does slow down, it is a signal for the reader to look more carefully and watch for key words (Campbell, 17). 1.6 through 4.12, comprising seventy verses, cover a period of only a few weeks. In contrast, 4.13 describes the events of at least nine months in fifteen words, an example of a summary account (Sasson, 161). Another example of summary account is where months pass in a single verse (2.23) (ch. 1. p. 7). Ruth and Boaz’s marriage and the birth of their child is the climax of the entire story, yet is related in a summary account of only one verse (4.13)! An effect of shock or irony is produced here by reversing the expectation that more important events will be decelerated, while less important ones will be accelerated (Rimmon-Kenan 2002. 56).

Since the postlude, or genealogy, is absent from the libretto, I will not be discussing it in any depth

* Though the writer never specifically mentions the passage of time, based on the Gzer calendar we know how many weeks would have elapsed between the beginning and end of the barley harvest. The reader of the time would surely have known this.
The Scroll is composed largely of dialogue, with narration utilized to move quickly from one scene to the next. This is why it has the feeling of a play, and was so adaptable to librettos and musical representation.

CHARACTER DEPICTION AND DEVELOPMENT

Determining who is the main character in the Scroll based on the accepted criteria (interest, number of verses, story structure, theme) is not straightforward. In some regards Ruth is the main character, since the writer named the Scroll after her and she is the focus of interest: while in others it is Naomi, who appears slightly more often (Table Graph B, pp. 209-211). It is not clear until near the end of the story that all the characters are heading for the same goal—Ruth’s marriage to Boaz—even if they are not equally conscious of this convergence. Different actions by the different characters propel the action, and indicate individual personality traits, while also de-emphasizing the importance of one character over another.

Characters’ responses to others’ actions can often reveal points of view, but in Ruth this is ambiguous, because one character’s point of view is often reflected through another’s. For example, Boaz bases his perception of Ruth on the foreman’s report (2.7): Ruth perceives what Boaz knows about her (2.11), while Naomi perceives what Ruth perceives about Boaz (3.17). When the narrator is absent, evaluations are made as if by the characters themselves (Berlin 1993, 97-8), typical in any narrative.

Interpersonal relationships can sometimes be understood through use of language. Naomi addresses Ruth as לִבְנָה (my daughter) in several places: 2.2, 2.22, 3.1, 3.16, and 3.18. Boaz addresses her with this term three times: in 2.8, 3.10, and 3.11. In two of these three, the word לִבְנָה is immediately followed by a command: יִסְתַּחֵד אֱלֹהִים לְךָ בַּת (2.8); and יִסְתַּחֵד אֱלֹהִים לְךָ בַּת (3.11). In the third example (3.10), the word is followed by a formal expression of appreciation for Ruth’s kindness. In all these examples, Boaz seems to use the term to establish his superior social position.

By contrast, only one of Naomi’s uses of this term includes a command: לִבְנָה (2.2) and the לִבְנָה follows rather than precedes the command, softening it. In other instances, its usage, though expected in the in-law relationship, might also be interpreted as a term of affection. It is also the only place לִבְנָה is found in the mouth of a woman in the entire Bible.¹

Campbell and others have noted that Naomi and Boaz tend to use more archaic morphology and syntax, and based on this, they have assumed they are older. They also refer to everyone around them as young, which could be indicative of their assumed perspective (Campbell, 17, 110). Boaz comparing himself to the “young men” has been seen by many commentators as proof of his old age. Bal, for example, states that “Boaz admits his old age when he compares himself to the young man” (Bal 1987, 85). But in fact, the language used by Naomi and Boaz can also be indicative of their social standing and not only their age (Brenner 2002, 306).

¹ There are 15 occurrences of לִבְנָה in the Bible, 8 of these in Ruth. The two in Deuteronomy (Deut. 22,16-17) both involve a dispute about a daughter’s virginity. In Josh. 15,16 and Jud. 1,12, (the same verse), Caleb offers his daughter to the victor in a battle; in Jud. 19,24, the virgin daughter is offered to the strangers; in 1 Sam. 18,17, Saul offers his daughter Merab to David. These are all fathers referring to their daughters in the third person. The only time לִבְנָה is used in a direct address is in Jud. 11,35, when Jephthah bewails the appearance of his daughter after having pledged to sacrifice the first thing greeting him on his return from battle. It is a moment of heightened emotion and in that context, the term could seem laden with affection to the modern reader, although in fact it is simply a statement of Jephthah’s parental role.
Ruth's response to Boaz: "She prostrated herself with her face to the ground, and said to him, 'why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner?'" (2:10) shows a high degree of humility in her personality not previously evident. It could also be interpreted as deliberate manipulation, using this kind of language to make a certain impression. Her consistent response to Naomi's requests or demands is complete compliance in speech, but her actions tell a different story. So Ruth's speech may be an indication of how she uses language to manipulate others.

Ball has charted the number of speeches each character has in Ruth (Bal. 1987, 77; 1993, 54), because quantity of speech is indicative of character in addition to quality of speech. Bal's chart does not represent number of verses or words, so it is not a complete picture. The total number of words for each character is as follows: Ruth has 123, Naomi 225, Boaz 290; in addition, Orpah has 4, the head reaper 25, the redeemer 21, and the different choruses have 42, 31, and 30. These numbers are startling at first glance. The Scroll is commonly thought of in terms of its spotlight on women's relationships, yet Boaz is the most talkative character, followed by Naomi, while Ruth speaks fewer than half of Boaz's words. The choruses have more text than Orpah, the head reaper, or the redeemer, highlighting their relative importance (which is greatly increased in the musical works).

It is noteworthy that with only two exceptions, Boaz's exchange with his servant overseer, and at the gate with his kinsman,
2 all dialogue in Ruth involves either Ruth and Naomi together, or one of them with someone else. This highlights the centrality of the two women in the story, even though neither of them speaks as many words as Boaz.

Since all other characters stand in relation to her, most of the story's perceptual point is viewed through Naomi, even if Ruth is the focus of the interest viewpoint (Berlin 1994, 84). In terms of frequency of mention, Naomi dominates: in chapter 1 her name appears 8 times, mostly as the active subject of verbs. Her name is the first word in chapter 2, and she is the last to speak in this chapter. Naomi initiates and concludes the exchanges with Ruth at the opening and closing of chapter 3, making her voice the first and last to be heard there. Even though she does not appear in chapter 4, her name appears there 6 times. Naomi is mentioned a total of 20 times in the Scroll, compared to Ruth's 12 mentions and Boaz's 18. These numbers differ from the actual number of words spoken by the characters: Boaz is mentioned slightly less often than Naomi, though he speaks more. Ruth is mentioned less than either of them, as well as speaking less. Based on these figures alone, Ruth would be perceived as the least significant character, even though the story revolves around her.

Characters: Naomi, Ruth, Orpah, Boaz, "Chorus," God

Because the Scroll is so short, there is not as much character development as seen in longer biblical narratives such as the story of David (1 Sam. 16-1 Kings 12), or Joseph (Gen. 37-40-50). There seems to be more development and change in the character of Naomi than in either Ruth or Boaz.

Naomi’s presence throughout the story is both commanding and ambiguous (Trible 2000, 121). Naomi is the central character in terms of discourse, which can be seen as a form of

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domination (Rashkow, 28). Ultimately it is Naomi’s discourse in 3.1-4, where she gives Ruth instructions, that moves the plot to its conclusion.

Naomi is a unique figure: as a widow with no sons, she might be expected to disappear from a story, having no status. Instead, she becomes a “mother-in-law,” and in this identity she continues her textual life. She is initially named as Elimelech’s wife, in 1.2, but in the next verse, Elimelech is called “Naomi’s husband.” This technique of shifting the spotlight to a woman after initially introducing a man is also seen in 1 Samuel. There, Elkanah is introduced in 1.1, but the focus shifts gradually to Hannah in 1.5 and becomes her story by 1.9.

More of Naomi’s personality is shown through her words than that of any other character. For example, in her retort to her daughters-in-law (1.10-13), a sense of self-deprecation and even sarcasm comes through. In this speech, her use of the word השךיה (shekhiah in the piel form) “wait” or “hope” (BD B 960) is unusual. In all other places but one where this verb appears in the Bible, it has the sense of waiting and hoping for God. This occurrence in the Scroll, Campbell notes, is the only pre-exilic use of the verb with a “secular” meaning (Campbell, 69). The fact that Naomi uses such a particular term lends her character a kind of gravitas.

Naomi is portrayed as a woman who can only measure her self-worth in relation to men (Linafelt, 15). When Ruth brings food home, Naomi attributes the abundance to “the man who took notice,” looking to a male figure for security. It is not clear if Ruth has the same perspective (Caspill Havelock, 172). Though a contemporary reader views that kind of self-image as negative, we have no way of knowing whether the writer meant to portray this aspect of Naomi as a positive trait, or simply a neutral and realistic one.

In the first chapter, the reader can simultaneously feel “sympathy and antipathy” for Naomi (van Wolde 1997, 15). Van Wolde sees Naomi’s apparent self-centeredness as a negative trait, and claims it is visible through the preponderance of “I” and “me” in her speech throughout the first two chapters (van Wolde 1997, 15). But this perception is inaccurate, because the total of self-referencing words (including all pronouns and verbs) is only 20 for Naomi in chapter 1, equalling 18% of her 113 words. In chapter 2 Naomi uses no self-referencing words, and in chapter 3, only one. This can be compared to other characters: Ruth uses such terms 9 times in chapter 1, 24% of her total 38 words. In chapter 2, Ruth’s 12 self-referencing terms equal 21% of her total 57 words, while in chapter 3, her 5 terms equal 18% of her total 28 words. So if this analysis is an accurate measure, Ruth emerges as the far more self-centered character. But other factors must also be considered, such as the precise contents of each self-referencing example.

Boaz seems much more self-effacing in this analysis, using only 2 self-referencing terms out of 116 words in chapter 2, and 3 out of 73 words in chapter 3. In chapter 4, his total is 9 out of 101, because he issues many commands there in the first person, but does not actually refer to himself in the same way as Ruth and Naomi in the other chapters.

In spite of Naomi’s apparent dependence on men, her speech is exclusively with women. When she addresses the women of Bethlehem, in 1.20-22, her speech displays bitterness and anger. In this speech, Naomi struggles against God’s judgment, much like Job. In this way she attains a greater narratological role by virtue of her loftier position in relation to God (Pardes, 109). The comparison to Job is apt, since her use of the three words צד dou שדר ‘Shaddai has made my lot very bitter’ is found with this meaning in only one other place, in Job. 27.2. צד dou שדר (from דרש Nu. 1). Naomi’s use of צד dou in this way distinguishes her and possibly serves to elevate her character.

1 Other occurrences are: Isa. 38.18, Pss. 104.27, 119.16, 148.15, in all of which the object of the verb is God. Only in Esther 9.1 does it simply mean “hope for.”
Campbell asserts that the word יְהֹוָה for God is usually used in contexts of lament or complaint: this aspect of God had a special connection to judging, punishment, blessing and curse. His examples are Genesis 49.25, Jacob’s blessing of his children, and Numbers 24.4 and 16, Balaam’s blessing (Campbell, 77). Though Campbell also mentions other examples of the term, a closer look at those examples would seem to contradict his conclusion. Most of the occurrences in the Pentateuch assign the role of blessing to יְהֹוָה. The prophetic occurrences are mostly descriptive, and the instances in Psalms do not relate to judgment. Of the 31 occurrences of יְהֹוָה in Job, very few involve lament, punishment, or curse.

Naomi’s expression יְהֹוָה עָנָנִי (1.21) can be translated “testified against me” or “dealt harshly with me.” In no other examples of this usage, that is, in the קָר form constructed with the preposition ב- (2 Sam. 1.16; 1 Sam. 12.3; Isa. 3.9; Jer. 14.7; Mic. 6.3; Hos. 5.5 and 7.10) is YHWH regarded as the one who testifies. There are, however, examples of the word עָנָנִי without the ב- which have YHWH as the subject. In these cases, the more correct translation might be “afflict” (BDB, 776). Other possible definitions are “oppress, humble, torment, humiliate” (KBL, 779). The difference depends on the pointing of the verb, as עָנָנִי or עָנָנִי. The former is more generally accepted as meaning “testify against” while the latter is more commonly defined as “oppress, humble” (HAL, 851). If we accept Sasson’s reading (Sasson, 35), which accepts the MT’s pointed version of עָנָנִי, Naomi’s application of juridical terminology to YHWH would be unique in the Bible. She certainly is portrayed as a character who has an unusual bond with her God, because whichever translation of עָנָנִי we accept, she is still the only biblical character who uses the term with God as its subject.

Berlin arrives at an interesting conclusion based on a close literary analysis of Naomi’s phrase рамках אלוהיםRain רוחבול ראשל בלד וַיֹּאמֶר יְהֹוָה לָא מִצְרַיִם. “I went away full and YHWH has brought me back empty” (1.21). She notes that this is a case of subject-object parallelism, since the “I” of the first line becomes “me” in the second, implying that the emptiness was caused by YHWH even if the fullness, in Naomi’s view, was not. Berlin believes this opposition between “I” and “YHWH” is resolved at the end: יְהֹוָה רָאשֵׁי הַיָּעִישׁות לָא אֲשֶׁר אַלֹּהָה. “Blessed be YHWH who has not withheld a redeemer from you today!” (4.14) (Berlin 1985, 136). Yet these are not Naomi’s words, and her own feelings about YHWH remain ambivalent.

By virtue of her complaint against God, Naomi places herself in the biblical tradition of men who challenge God for undeserved suffering; for example, Moses in Exodus 5:22 and Numbers 11:11, Elijah in 1 Kings 17:20, or Job in 27:2. The difference is that in those passages Moses and Elijah address God directly and try to reverse the circumstances. Naomi has never been addressed by God, nor does she address God or expect any chance of reversal. As the writer portrays her, she must suffer hardship and insecurity without the benefit of an active God in her corner (Linfield, 20). Like Job, Naomi suffers at God’s hand but believes in the possibility of a reversal of fortune. In Aschkenasy’s words, “Behind the image of the woman punished by God is the image of the woman recognized by God” (Aschkenasy 1998, 148). This is almost a

The precise examples are: in Pentateuch, Gen. 17.1, 28.3, 35.11, 43.14, 48.3, 49.25, Exod. 6.3, Num. 24.4, 16, Prophets; Isa. 13.6, Jer. 1.24, 10.5, Joel 1.15 (the same word play occurs in both Isaiah and Joel). יְהֹוָה יָשׁוּב יָשָׁה. Psalms; 68.15, 91.1. Of the 31 instances in Job, many more praise יְהֹוָה than hurl accusations of injustice against him (Campbell, 77).

In 1 Samuel 12.3, Samuel says to Israel “Tell against me,” the same words used by Micah to his people in Mic. 6.3. In 2 Samuel 1.16, David says to the messenger “your mouth is stifled against you.” In Isaiah 5.9, the Israelites’ partiality in judgment affects them; Jeremiah says to God in Jer. 14.7, “our iniquities tell against us.”

The examples are Deut. 8.2, 3, 16; 1 Kings 11.39; Is. 64.11; Nahum 1.12; 1 am 3.33.
simplistic view of God as the parent who says “I’m punishing you because I love you so much.” In Aschkenasy’s view, Naomi sees herself as expelled from God’s mercy, and her goal is to regain that mercy. This is not evident in the text. In my opinion, the unusual nature of Naomi’s quest is precisely that she pursues her goal without appealing directly to God.

Matters of faith in the Bible are usually the male domain, according to Aschkenasy (Aschkenasy 1998, 150). Yet there are important exceptions: Sarah (Gen 18:15), Hannah (1 Sam.1:11-12), and Judith (Judith 9, 13.4-7) all address God directly. Aschkenasy claims that Naomi’s thinking is theological, her goal to “be embraced again by God’s bounty and kindness” (Aschkenasy 1998, 150). Yet the biblical text, taken literally, simply indicates that Naomi wants to find food and probably a better life. Nowhere is she depicted as longing for God’s blessing; this is Aschkenasy’s own projection. The idea of Naomi in a personal relationship with God is found in several librettos (e.g., Schumann, p. 153; Rumshinsky, p. 171).

Naomi is described through her words. Though her age is never stated, she describes herself as "too old to be married." This is a relative age designation, however, and only tells us that she is older than Ruth and Orpah. In chapter 1, Naomi is gentle but firm with her daughters-in-law. She does not respond to Ruth’s profession of loyalty: whether her silence comes from reticence or coldness is not revealed (this chapter, p. 48). She expresses bitterness and sadness to the community of women in Bethlehem. Yet she is not defeatist, as seen in her encouragement to Ruth in relation to Boaz in chapter 3. In her plotting of their encounter, she could be seen as clever, manipulative and controlling. These are my impressions, supported but never overtly stated by the text.

Orpah is first mentioned as one of the two “Moabite women” married to Elimelech’s sons (1:4). She is mentioned by name only once more, when she kisses her mother-in-law farewell (1.14). She is included in the expression נְכָרוֹת כְּלָה, “daughters-in-law.” in 1.6, in pronominal form in 1.9-10, and in the term בֵּרְכָי, “My daughters,” with which Naomi addresses Ruth and Orpah in 1.11-12. Orpah then vanishes from the story. Her primary function seems to be to form a binary opposition to Ruth, by obeying Naomi and returning to her own people while Ruth refuses to.

The name Orpah has been interpreted by many commentators as deriving from “nape of the neck” (עֵצוֹן), making her act of turning her back on Naomi the defining moment in her life (ch. 3, p. 68). Her name (assuming this is its origin) is iconic rather than symbolic, because it describes not only a feature of character, but also an emblematic action (Bal 1987, 73). As Bal notes, “the character is summarized by her name” (Bal 1993, 50). But other possibilities have been proposed, notably by Sasson and Campbell. Both suggest the name could be connected with the Akkadian and Ugaritic <arpetu>, “cloud,” or even the Arabic ‘arata, “scent” (Sasson, 20: Campbell, 55). However Orpah’s name is interpreted, though, it does not explain her action in the story.

Whether Orpah’s act of returning to her people, whom she had presumably abandoned when she married Chilion, should be seen as an act of courage or cowardice, is not dealt with in the text. The only thing the reader knows of Orpah is that, though she followed Naomi out of Moab and cried at the thought of leaving her, ultimately she did not choose to leave her own land and people permanently for Naomi’s sake as Ruth did. Her decision tells the reader nothing about who Orpah was. Librettists tried to fill the gaps by creating an Orpah who had great affection for Naomi, and who displays sadness at their parting (e.g., Damrosch, p. 114; Gaul, p. 119; Franck, p. 131).
Ruth remains an ambiguous character because her speech is both less frequent and more cryptic than either Naomi's or Boaz's. Although on the surface she seems to be a character with initiative, she usually acts in response to other characters in the story (Fewell and Gunn 1990, 94). The verb הָרַע, “love,” is applied only to her in the Scroll. In 4:15, the women refer to her as הָרַע אִשְׁתָּךְ, “your daughter-in-law who loves you,” implying that Ruth has made her emotional attachment to Naomi obvious to the other women, even if not to the reader of the story. Her emotional commitment to Naomi is special and unique, especially when looked at in the context of other women's relationships in the Bible. Ruth is a “symbol of unconditional love and loyalty,” and this love-motif lends the story depth and credibility as well as being the local point unifying the various strands of the plot (Brenner 1993, 84). Other possible motivations for Ruth's actions will be explored below under “Gap filling” (this chapter, p. 47).

Unlike other prominent biblical women—Sarah (Gen.12.14), Rebecca (Gen. 26.7), Rachel (Gen. 29.17), Abigail (1 Sam. 25.3), Bathsheba (2 Sam.11.2), Esther (Esther 2.7)—Ruth is not depicted as either beautiful, wise, or intelligent. The reader knows her only through her actions and, even more, her words. Ruth's speech and actions show her to be both independent and strong-willed, starting with her determination to follow Naomi. Ruth declares her allegiance to Naomi's God and people. Aschkenasy interprets this to mean Ruth wanted to “put herself on this people's historical track” (Aschkenasy 1998, 150). But if this means she wants to inject herself into Israelite history and destiny, it only tells us that the author wants the reader to understand Ruth in this way—or that this is Aschkenasy's own interpretation.

Ruth's determination to follow Naomi, for no apparent motive, is the most striking example in the Scroll of decision-making, which reveals a character's values. It establishes Ruth as a woman with a mind of her own right from the start of the story. Ruth's decision, which is a one-time action and thus does not reflect constant qualities, nonetheless suggests that the traits it reveals may be qualitatively more crucial than more routine habits might be (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 61). The verb הָרַע, often translated “was determined” (1.18), can also be translated as “confirm oneself in a purpose” (BDB, 55) or “exert oneself” (Sheffield v. 1.320). The root הָרַע means “be strong” (Sheffield, 320), “be bold, alert” (BDB), “be solid, hard” (KBL, v. 1.65). In the hiphil (reflexive) form, it is found uniquely here in the feminine form. It has the meaning of “to persist in something” (HAL, v. 1.65) or “to prove strong, persist in an intention” (KBL, 62). Elsewhere (I Kings 12.18, 2 Chron. 10.18, 13.7) it refers to men strengthening themselves. This verb applied to a woman implies an attempt to depict a female character of great determination.

Later in the story, Ruth seems willing to follow all of Naomi's orders—though more in words than in deeds. She tells Naomi she will do everything she was told (3.5), but instead of waiting for Boaz to speak, as Naomi had instructed, she tells Boaz what to do before he can speak (3.9). Trible sees Ruth as a “defier of custom, maker of decisions,” working in partnership with God as a “paradigm for radicality” (Trible 1978, 184). Yet the framework within which Ruth and Naomi both work remains a patriarchal one, with patriarchal goals. There is nothing radical except perhaps Ruth's directness, and certainly no indication in the text of any “partnership with God.”

Feuch's feels that the patriarchal ethos is the driving force behind the story. In her view, Ruth does not act independently, but rather in strict compliance with patriarchal goals, remaining faithful forever to her dead husband and his family. Ruth renounces her own culture and heritage to follow her mother-in-law Naomi, because she is the mother of Ruth's husband. Ruth sacrifices her freedom and even identity to perpetuate the identity of her late husband and father-in-law.
Ruth, in this view, is depicted as a heroine only because of her faithfulness to her deceased husband’s patrilineage (Fuchs 1985, 118, 130). Fuchs states that “Ruth’s loyalty to her husband’s family is unprecedented” (Fuchs 2000, 74). But she cannot presume to know Ruth’s motives any more than other readers. By reading into the text and finding all of Ruth’s motives to be based on patriarchal goals, Fuchs makes unwarranted assumptions to support her own agenda: that every biblical story is inspired by patriarchal ideology (Fuchs 2000, 7).

Sasson does not deny or discuss the quality of Ruth’s determination. He claims, rightfully, that we cannot assume her motivation was affection. She may have submitted herself totally to Naomi’s will in an almost slave-master relationship because she knew this was her best hope (Sasson, 124). Brenner supports this view, arguing that Ruth could be compared to foreign workers of any era, who are contracted, basically invisible, hard workers, with their only hope of integration into the host society being marriage (Brenner 2000, 159-60). For me, this does not explain her motivation any better than affection. If these theories are correct, we still do not know why only Ruth was motivated in this way, and Orpah was not. The motivation remains opaque. In libretto and music, affection between the women is easier and more appealing to depict as a motive; but this is midrash, not simply interpretation.

Before Ruth and Orpah make their decisions, they weep for, or with, Naomi (1.9). This expression "יָאַה הָרִאשָׁנָה, literally “they raised their voices and wept,” (my translation), or “they broke into loud weeping” (Sasson, 22), is found with a woman as the subject in only one other place in the Bible, referring to Hagar (Gen. 21.16). It is never found in the feminine plural. Other women who weep, the verb הָרִאשָׁנָה are Delilah (Jud.14.16-17), where it is a manipulative act; Jephthah’s daughter, who weeps for her virginity (Jud. 11.38); Hannah (1 Sam. 1. 7,10), and Esther (Esther 8.3), who cries in front of the king to manipulate him.

The expression יָאַה הָרִאשָׁנָה in other Ancient Near Eastern literature can indicate a formal rather than an emotional state. It is found as a formulaic expression for the speeches of gods or demigods in Ugaritic poetry. Cassuto believes the expression may have also existed in the Hebrew epic tradition, of which only traces are found in the Hebrew Bible (Cassuto, 75). The fact that this phrase was chosen rather than the simple verb הָרִאשָׁנָה could be a way of showing conventional behavior. But like women ululating at a funeral, adopting a convention does not mean there is no sentiment behind the conventional behavior.

There are several occurrences of the phrase יָאַה הָרִאשָׁנָה with males as the subject. Most of these examples are expressions of intense grieving, yet none occurs in response to a separation (except death). At the same time, the expression could indicate conventional behavior, especially in the instances of public grieving by Saul and David. The choice of this expression here may indicate the writer’s attempt to portray grief among women in a relationship who are forced to separate. Though the situation portrayed is unique, the verb has echoes of men crying out in various situations throughout the Bible, adding weight to the emotion of this scene but also highlighting the unconventional nature of the weeping as done by women.

64 Campbell finds significance in the reverse order of the verbs “wept” and “kissed” in 1.9 and 1.14. The effect is “to bracket artistically the episode of persuasion (Campbell, 72).” Also significant is the subject of the kiss: in 1.9, it is Naomi, but in 1.14 it is Orpah, who is offering a kiss of farewell.

65 In Gen. 27.35, Isaac weeps over the blessing not received; in 29.11, Jacob weeps over joy at finding Rachel; in Num. 14.1, Jud. 2.4 and 21.2, and 1 Sam. 11.4, all the people weep; in 1 Sam. 24.17, Saul weeps; in 30.4, David and his troops weep; in 2 Sam. 3.32, David weeps over Abner; the princes weep over Amnon in 13.36, and Job’s friends weep in Job 2.12.
Ruth’s speech is at the center of chapters 1-3. In chapter 1, she proclaims her determination to follow Naomi (1:16-17); in chapter 2, she speaks to Boaz in a very different, submissive voice (2:13). In chapter 3, her determination is visible again in her very direct speech to Boaz (3:9b). The portrait of Ruth that ultimately emerges, through her speech, is that of a strong-minded woman who knows how to appear compliant while silently working towards her own goals.

Boaz is introduced, in 2:1, as אִישׁ חַלָּק חַלָּק, a “man of substance.” In a civil context, this would mean a man of worth or wealth. The label could indicate his financial well-being, social status, moral character, or all of these. The description could be either the narrator’s evaluation or a reflection of how Boaz is perceived in his community (Gunn and Fewell, 62). Brenner finds evidence in the text that Boaz is wealthy, has authority, and is legally knowledgeable. Readers tend to use the hypothesis of age as a marker of social standing. But none of Boaz’s qualities necessarily imply old age, and Brenner suggests Boaz may be a “young strapping adult, as in the unforgettable Hollywood movie” (Brenner 2002, 305).

The first word in Boaz’s mouth is YHWH, in his greeting to his workers (2:4). When he addresses Ruth (2:11-12), he mentions YHWH two more times, as well as the term הַאֱלֹהִים God of Israel. When Boaz addresses Ruth in chapter 3, he includes YHWH in his speech two more times (3:10, 3:13). The significance of a character’s using God’s name is discussed in relation to libretti in chapter 7 (Table F, p. 221). In the Scroll, only Naomi mentions God (by any name) more often than Boaz (9 times to his 6). Ruth mentions God only twice, in her speech to Naomi when she accepts her God, יהוהך. Your God is my God (1:16) and in the next verse יִתֵּן יִתֵּן. Thus may YHWH do to me (1:17). The fact that Boaz mentions God so frequently when addressing Ruth or his workers, but not at all in his legal dealings at the gate in chapter 4, could signify a greater level of formality when dealing with his social inferiors. In addition, because God as an active character is virtually absent in the Scroll (this chapter, p. 32), Boaz and Naomi could be seen as “stand-ins” for God’s role.

When Boaz tells his workers not to bother Ruth (2:15), he says אל תְּאַלְּאֹם תְּאַלְּאֹמִים תְּאַלְּאֹמִים “without interference,” which Sasson defines “without rebuke.” In the hiphil form the verb לִפְשָׁח is defined as “be put to shame, humiliated, dishonored” (BDB, 483) or “abused” (Sheffield v. IV, 426), suggesting that Boaz’s request to the workers regarding Ruth was stronger than most translations indicate. It also implies that there is greater danger to Ruth than mere rebuke or interference. The verb appears 38 times in the Bible but nowhere else in the imperative mode, lending an unusual quality to Boaz’s speech. This could be due to age or class difference, as discussed earlier (p. 22).

In chapter 3, when Boaz realizes who the woman at his feet is, he becomes quite talkative. His speech is an outpouring of relevant information, as if he had been waiting for this occasion. In the morning, his speech to her is shorter and more abrupt. A significant word that might indicate a new level of intimacy between them has been mistranslated in some commentaries (both in JPS and Sasson), though Campbell translates correctly. After Ruth and Boaz wake up, the text says: בָּאָר הָנָּה לֹא יִרְאֶנָּה הָנָּה לֹא יִרְאֶנָּה. “He said ‘Let it not be known that the woman came...’” This is usually translated “He thought, ‘let it not be known...’” probably because there seems to be no object for the verb “said.” In the next verse, when he tells Ruth to hold out her shawl (3:15), there is also no object to the verb אמרה. “said.” The writer may be exploiting the general ambiguity of the biblical “said” between thought and speech here (Sternberg 1985, 97) to create a question in the reader’s mind. If Boaz mentioned the necessity
for secrecy, either out loud or directly to Ruth, it indicates a level of conspiracy that would require intimacy and understanding. This was dealt with by Josephus (ch. 3, p. 79).

Boaz’s speech patterns show the greatest variety between scenes. His speech changes depending on whom he is addressing. Thus in chapter 2 when he speaks to his workers and Ruth, he frequently inserts the name of God; he retains some of this formality when addressing Ruth in chapter 3, but seems less formal by the end of the scene. In chapter 4, Boaz is revealed as clever and manipulative, as his plan to obtain Ruth becomes clear to the reader. He no longer mentions YHWH, possibly because he is now acting on his own.

Another “character” in the Book of Ruth is the “chorus,” or “choruses,” which gain much more importance in some musical settings of the work. A chorus is absent only from chapter 3 in the Scroll, lending the scenes between Ruth and Naomi, and Ruth and Boaz, a sense of privacy absent from the rest of the narrative (Campbell, 130). The first appearance of a “chorus” is as a group of Bethlehemite women greeting Naomi (1.19): וַתֶּאֱמָנֵהוּ נְאֻמָּנְךָ הוּא. “they (fem.) said, ‘Is this Naomi?’” (my translation). In chapter 2, the chorus is a team of reapers and gleaners who respond to Boaz’s greeting (2.4): וַיִּשְׁמַע בָּאֵלֶּה וַתִּכְכֵּר הָאָרֶץ. “They said to him, ‘may YHWH bless you’” (my translation). The chorus has the largest role in chapter 4 of the Scroll, where they are first the people and elders, then the women, then the women neighbors.

The women of the city who recognize Naomi (1.19) are in Campbell’s words “a Greek chorus” (Campbell, 166). Wherever they appear, they suggest a public and open setting. The reader can both hear and visualize the group of women, in spite of the very few words they speak. They are therefore a true character in the story. In addition, because women townsmen are present both at the beginning and ending of the Bethlehem scenes, they represent female solidarity and highlight the theme of female bonding (Meyers 2000, 253). This feminist interpretation is not overtly found in the text but is strongly suggested, merely by the fact that both groups are identified as female in these places.

When the women first see Naomi, the word used for their reaction (1.19), סְחָרָה (niphal, waw conv. impf. of either the root סָחָה or סָחָה) (Sasson, 32), has been translated several ways. In its qal form, the root means “to confuse or discomfit” (BDB, 243; Sheffield v. l. 504), to “rush about madly” (KBL, 228), or to “be out of one’s senses” (HAL, v. 1, 243). In the niphal it means “to be in a stir” (BDB, 223; KBL, 228), “be in uproar, be distraught” (Sheffield, 504), or “be beside oneself; go wild” (HAL, v.1, 251). Sasson notes that the verb could mean “buzzing with excitement” or “expressing shock” (Sasson, 32). Zornberg defines the verb as “panic” and claims it is a very strong word (Zornberg, 66). In its noun form (סָחָה), the word means tumult and confusion (BDB, 223). Based on other appearances of this word, it seems to generally have a positive connotation, one of thrilled excitement (Zornberg, 66). Campbell, based on references to 1 Sam. 4.5 and 1 Kings 1.45, believes the verb connotes a reaction of delight, not pity (Campbell, 75). Based on other occurrences of the root, I think the only conclusion that can be
supported textually is that this verb connotes tremendous excitement, either joyful or frightened.13

The women’s excited response directs the reader’s attention to Naomi’s appearance. Though the writer left out any physical description of Naomi, the use of this strong verb paints a more vivid picture for the reader than any adjective could. It means the reaction of the women was intense, with an implication of either joy or chaos. It is left to the reader’s imagination to conjure an image of Naomi that might stir such excitement. This is expanded in the midrashic retellings (ch. 3, p. 62).

It is particularly interesting to compare the minimal appearance of the chorus of reapers in chapter 2 of the Scroll to the musical settings, in several of which they sing numerous and lengthy “peasant” choruses to musically establish a place and mood.

In chapter 4, the choruses at the city gate are made up first of the elders and people (4.11) and then the woman neighbors (4.15, 17). The “woman neighbors” may be a subset of the “women of Bethlehem” who welcomed Naomi on her return. The term for “woman neighbor,” תושבת, is found in only one other place in the Bible, in Exodus 3:22. The fact that such women’s networks existed is evident though barely visible (Meyers 2000, 254).

The women’s choruses seems to act as a mirror for Naomi’s condition. In chapter 1, they merely listen to her as she expresses her bitterness. Their lack of response to her, either positive or negative, is perceived as a gap that is filled creatively in several librettos (e.g., Franck, p. 135; Schumann, p. 158). At the end, in Naomi’s happiness, they name her grandson. This is assuming it is the same women, or a subset, as Meyers suggests (Meyers 2000, 120). In the three references to the women, three different terms are used. In 1.19, the women are not identified at all; only the female form of the verb נָּאְפָּרניקאָה indicates a female group. In 4.14, they are called נְאֶפְרָל, and in 4.17 נְאֶפְרְלִים.

A female chorus ends the story (though not the text) in the Scroll, and Sasson sees special significance in this fact. He finds a vestigial trace of other Ancient Near Eastern literature in the naming scene. Female deities (transformed here into the women neighbors) were traditionally given the task of establishing the fate and future of newborn males, who in this tradition would invariably be kings (Sasson, 235). If there is any foundation to this theory, it would mark off the female chorus at the end of the book from the earlier choruses, primarily because of its unique function in naming the baby. This is the only place where the feminine plural form נְאֶפְרְלִים

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13 I located 5 other occurrences of the root:

Deut. 7:23: נָּאְפָּרָה אַלָּחֳזָתָה מְסֻמָּה דֶּשֶּׁת נַחֲלָת

The use of both the qal perfect form of the verb along with the noun based on the same root makes it mean literally “threw into confusion and tumult.”

1 Sam. 4:5: נָּאְפְּרָה מַעֲשֵׂה וְעַמָּתָה נַחֲלָת

In these two examples, the verb is in the same hiphil form found in Rash, so the earth city was literally “in an uproar.”

Mica 2:12: נָּאְפָּר לְמַעֲשֵׂה, מַעֲשֵׂה וְעַמָּתָה נַחֲלָת

The verb here is in a hiphil form and is translated (JPS) as “noisy with.”

Psalm 55:6: נָּאְפָּר לְמַעֲשֵׂה, מַעֲשֵׂה וְעַמָּתָה נַחֲלָת

The same verb in a cohortive hiphil. It is usually translated as “I moan” (JPS, for example).
appears in the Bible. Mothers name their children far more often than fathers in the Bible (a full listing is given in Pardes, 163), but never is more than one woman involved in the naming.

Though they have few words in the biblical book, the choruses still serve to establish a certain mood. Bal calls the "collective speakers...remarkable," and describes their function as "thoroughly social." They represent and express public opinion, much like the chorus in classical tragedy (Bal 1993, 54). They also serve this function in many of the librettos.

The character God is undeveloped in Ruth, yet nonetheless, commentators differ in their perceptions of God's role. My interest is not primarily theological, yet because God is mentioned so frequently in many opera and oratorio adaptations of Ruth, I will present several views of God's role in the Scroll.

On a superficial reading of Ruth, a reader might conclude that God plays no direct part in the action. As Linafelt puts it:

The human characters are quite obviously the primary actors, with God's presence neither veiled nor hidden but, up until 4:13, simply missing (Linafelt. Introduction, xvii).

Readers with a theological agenda, however, believe the narrator meant to imply that God is present throughout. So Campbell, though admitting that God's activity in the Scroll is in the shadows, also claims that "God is the primary actor in the drama." Campbell bases this assertion on the numerous blessings and invocations found throughout the story (Campbell, 29). The fact that these expressions were probably formulaic and part of the writer's own world or of the cultural milieu being depicted, does not deter him (Alter, World, 22).

When God "lets Ruth conceive" (4.13), God is granting something to Ruth that she never asked for or showed any interest in (Linafelt, 77). But according to Campbell, God brings about a peaceful resolution and causes human beings to care for one another (Campbell, 29). This theological interpretation predominates in rabbinic midrash, and later in oratorio settings of Ruth. For readers with this viewpoint, the underlying message is that divine and human action are often intertwined, and God blesses those who live righteously (Gunn and Fewell, 157).

This viewpoint is also found in Matthews' commentary. When describing Naomi's plight, he states that "Ultimately, she will be heard and her present state of emptiness will be filled" (Matthews, 223). Matthews is implying that God will take care of Naomi without actually saying so or claiming that the text says this. Matthews later states:

Behind the scenes of this domestic drama stand the covenant promise to Israel and a God who fills the needs of those who trust in that divine power (Matthews, 242).

In Matthews' theological viewpoint, the genealogy of David demonstrates God's devotion to fulfill the covenant (Matthews, 243), and the writer's agenda was to show that God cared about the people.

Sasson, too, seems to believe that this was the message intended by the writer. In his words, "The tenor of the whole story makes it clear that the narrator sees God's hand

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1 There are three other instances where the verb לְאַלְכָּנֵי appears: Exod. 1:10, Lev. 19:19, and Num. 25:2. In the first two of these, the use of the feminine is not significant. Only in the third does it refer specifically to a group of women, in this case the Moabites, calling the Israelites to worship their God. The only parallel with the use of לְאַלְכָּנֵי here in the Scroll is that in both cases, the verb indicates women emulating proactive behavior.

2 Berlin admits that these groups add interest and realism to the book, yet considers them more part of the setting than a character in their own right (Berlin 1994, 86).

3 Linafelt also makes an important point, namely that the Bible does not always assert a strictly providential view of events; it is quite diverse in its theological orientation (Linafelt, 28).
throughout” (Sasson, 44). In this view, the writer underplays God’s role for effect, subtly suggesting that even seemingly accidental events are guided by God (Sasson, 44). Elsewhere Sasson states that the episodes most often cited as indicative of a “hidden” God could also conform to Propp’s scheme of plot sequence. Since, Sasson notes, no character role can be assigned to God in Ruth, it follows that God’s involvement in the narrative is relatively inconsequential (Sasson, 221). Sasson seems to be making a distinction between what he perceives as the writer’s agenda, and what is actually in the narrative.

In my opinion, there is no basis for reading God into either the narrative or the writer’s intention. This impulse is an example of reader response. It is not really even gap-filling, since there is no gap in the story that needs God to fill it! But God is there in the background, frequently mentioned or invoked in blessings by the characters, until coming forward dramatically in 4.13.

Whatever God’s role is, it is closely bound up with the human characters. A picture of God can be constructed from the different beliefs of the characters. Boaz and Ruth seem to have a conventional, unquestioning attitude towards God (Gunn and Fewell, 83-5). Because Boaz believes in a God that rewards and redeems, Ruth can challenge Boaz to be a redeemer himself. Ruth calls on Boaz in his religious language, and he responds to the call (Fewell and Gunn, 1990, 104). Yet Boaz does not fully respond to the foreign, indigent widow Ruth according to his own religious law until she pushes him. This leads Phillips to the conclusion that the Scroll is more about shame than about God. It can be read as an indictment of the writer’s contemporary society for failing to give effect to principles of Hebrew law (Phillips, 16). Phillips here not only accepts the absence of God from the narrative, he also elaborates on the effect of God’s absence: namely, lack of adherence to God’s laws. Yet if the Scroll is an indictment of this lack, why does the situation end happily? In many narratives in the Book of Judges, a kind of anarchy takes over when Israel stops following God’s commandments (Jud. 2.18-20, 4.1-2, 6.1-2, 10.5-6, and many others). It is true that Boaz does not immediately take in the two indigent widows; yet he does treat Ruth with generosity and kindness (2.8-9, 14-15). He is following the spirit, if not the letter, of Hebrew law.

Naomi blesses her daughters-in-law by saying כז לתרחשת התשובה “May YHWH deal kindly with you” (1.8) while a few verses later she complains that <YHWH has struck against me> “the hand of YHWH has struck against me” (1.13). Why is she calling on the same God who has made her life difficult, to bless Ruth and Orpah? Naomi apparently has a complex personal relationship with her God, accepting that the same God can mete out punishment and blessings.

In spite of this obvious ambivalence in the text, Tribe interprets the story theologically. She believes that human speech in Ruth interprets divine activity, and this speech itself is ambivalent. She admits that Ruth and Naomi move the plot forward, yet attributes a large role to chance, which to Tribe is a “code for the divine” (Tribe 1978, 170, 178). But any code is in the mind of the de-coder. Another place where Tribe detects a hidden code is in the vague phrase <YHWH let her conceive> “until you know how the matter turns out” (3.18) uttered by Naomi to Ruth. Tribe interprets this as the “divine plan in, through, and by human agents” (Tribe 1978, 187). But there is no reason not to take the phrase simply at face value: she and Ruth had done what they could; they now had to wait for a resolution, over which they no longer had control.

One of only two verses in the entire book that attribute activity directly to YHWH is יבשא על יְהוָה <YHWH let her conceive> and she bore a son (4.13).” This wording is unique in the Bible, as is God causing conception at the end of a story. The word <YHWH>, pregnancy, appears only one other time in the Bible, in Hosea 9.11. Attributing conception to

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God is standard in the Bible; with different wording in each instance, the idea is the same in Gen. 21.1. 29.31. 30.22. and 1 Sam. 1.19-20. Yet Tribe takes God's role one step further, stating that “The gift of life resides neither in male nor in female, but in God... intercourse between Ruth and Boaz is itself divine activity.” Based on these observations, Tribe calls her interpretation of this “human comedy,” a “theological interpretation of feminism” (Tribe 1978, 193). This is an egregious example of interpreting a text based entirely on a particular viewpoint, in this case, a theologically affirmative one, and then forcing all the elements in the text to conform to that viewpoint.

Feminist interpretation adds a new twist to theological interpretations, by granting women a greater role in effecting change, viewing them as guided in this role by the same God that guides men. Frymer-Kensky approaches biblical texts with the same assumption. In an otherwise balanced chapter dealing with gender and image of women in the Bible, she inserts the sentence “The cunning and sometimes deceptive women in the Bible serve to effect God's purpose and actualize God's designs” (Frymer-Kensky 1992, 137). She may be speaking of the author's intent rather than her own view; Sasson was also unclear on this distinction.

Underlying theological assumptions remain common. Even Fewell and Gunn, who admit to having “rewritten” much of the Scroll when they say “Part I [of their book] is a retelling of the biblical story,” claim that God pervades the story. They feel the reader “with ears to hear and eyes to see” can find God in much of the story (Fewell and Gunn 1990, 18, 104). But this is only because readers have been conditioned to find God at least lurking in the shadows of biblical narratives. There is no reason to insert God into a story when the writer did not do so him or herself. The evidence of a proactive and involved deity in the story of Ruth is scant, and to try to create a greater role for God in the story necessitates a firm belief that God simply had to be there or that at least the narrator wanted his readers to believe that.

There are similarities to the book of Esther, in which an active God is also absent. In the case of Esther, the later Greek translators altered the story, adding God’s name, prayers, and other new elements. This is true for both Greek versions, the Septuagint and the second version, known as the A-version. This “correcting” of a text occurred in the case of the Scroll in rabbinic midrash (ch. 3, p. 57) and later in librettos (Table F, p. 221).

PLOT DEVELOPMENT

The initial situation in Ruth is famine in Bethlehem, leading to Elimelech’s family migrating to Moab. The sequence leading to change comes ten years later, with the end of the famine and Naomi’s return to Bethlehem after the deaths of her husband and two married sons. The outlook for a widow with her daughter-in-law struggling to make a life for themselves is not good, until the revelation of Boaz’s presence as a potential redeemer, which leads to the eventual reversal of this dire situation. His presence leads to his nighttime encounter with Ruth, which leads to his manipulation of the legal situation allowing him to “redeem” Ruth by marrying her, leading to the final reversal, the birth of their son.

There is no true conflict in this story. There is no antagonist except chance (or God, as some would read it) which caused Naomi to find herself in such desperate straits in the first place. In the course of the story, Ruth and Naomi learn of Boaz’s existence, while Boaz learns of theirs in relation to himself. All of this increased awareness leads to a happy conclusion. The “witness who learns” (ch. 1, p. 101) is initially Boaz, who learns about Ruth; then Naomi, who learns of Boaz’s presence; and ultimately, it is the reader who learns, about the role and importance of the redeemer (in chapters 3 and 4 of the Scroll).
An alternative way of describing the plot of the Scroll is to see it as a social drama focussed on Ruth, which involves a process in four stages. Anthropologist Victor Turner describes this pattern:

1. Breach between social elements;
2. Crisis;
3. Adjustment;
4. Reintegration of the group, person or “element” into the social structure. (Turner, quoted in Matthews, 207-8).

The story of Ruth fits neatly into this paradigm. In stage one, Ruth’s separation from Moab is her “breach,” which leads directly to the “crisis,” her need to face her liminality in the new social setting of Bethlehem (obviously the famine itself is a crisis, but in this analysis the focus is on Ruth and not the external situation). For the “adjustment,” Ruth and Naomi must operate within the legal and social customs of the village culture. Ruth’s liminal character allows her to transgress certain physical and social barriers, and she and Naomi take advantage of this to move toward “reintegration” into the community. In this reintegration, Ruth finally moves from “outsider” to “insider” status (Matthews, 208).

A shift from the usual focus on men to a focus on women is seen near the start of the Scroll. The literary device that allows this shift is the death of all the men in the story. The women then set the story in motion, make plans, and carry them out to the desired resolution, albeit within a patriarchal framework. The Scroll opens with the phrase נר הלโล אילו האשת ושתהユニ, “A man went...with his wife and his two sons” (1.1; italics mine). In the opening two verses, the reader is told where Elimelech came from, why he emigrated, whom he married, and where he died. The lack of lineage, which is usually included when a male character is first introduced,1 is a clue that this will not be Elimelech’s story. The story starts with the death of males and ends with a female giving birth (Caspi Havrellock, 68), albeit to a boy.

Elimelech dies in 1.3, and his sons die in 1.5, where we read נר הללו אילו האשת ושתהユニ, “the woman was left without her two sons and without her husband” (italics mine). This progression can be clearly seen in the structure of chapter 2. In 2.2, Ruth speaks to Naomi; in 2.22, Naomi speaks to Ruth. The action that takes place in the field, described in 2.3-17, is bracketed by these verses. The women surround the episode with Boaz. Tribble offers a feminist interpretation in both design and content: the women shape their own story by planning (2.2), executing (2.3-17), and evaluating (2.18-22) (Trible 1978, 180). This analysis could be applied to the Scroll as a whole. Encounter scenes of women together are key points of transition in the plot (ch. 1, p.11)

Female marginality in the Bible is often based on the condition of infertility; improvement in status in this instance would involve having children (Nuditch 1993, 21). A variant of this theme is present in the Scroll. Ruth is not marginalized because she is childless, but because she is a widow and a foreigner. Hers is a unique story of a non-Israelite widow who re-maries and bears a son.

Trible highlights an interesting progression from the very start of the narrative. The opening verses relate what has happened and are all in the third person. Though this is fairly standard form. Trible feels “the form of the introduction mirrors content, and its content mirrors

1 Even Jephthah is described as the “son of a prostitute,” whose father was Gilead (Jud. 11.1); Hakanah is introduced as “son of Jeroham son of Helah son of Loth son of Zuphi” (1 Sam. 1.1) even though he will not be the main focus of the story.
form” (Trible 2000, 166). Naomi gradually becomes less bitter and passive, more positive and active, in the story. The steady progress of her mood in the course of the narrative is an “action sequence” (ch. 1, p. 10), moving from an expectation to fulfillment of the expectation.

Numerous examples of speech-propelled action (ch. 1, p. 11) could be cited from Ruth, indicating the centrality of dialogue in biblical plot development. In 1.8, Naomi commands Ruth and Orpah to return to their mothers’ homes. Orpah obeys, but Ruth does not, setting the stage for all the subsequent action. The Bethlehemite women ask (1.19) “Is this Naomi?” and Naomi’s lengthy answer gives voice to the themes of emptiness and fullness as well as expressing her own bitterness. In 2.2, Ruth asks Naomi for permission to glean, setting off the chain of events leading to her encounter with Boaz. In 2.10, Ruth asks Boaz why he has favored her, and his answer makes clear that her kindness to her mother-in-law is not a secret in her new community. In 3.3, Naomi tells Ruth to go to the threshing floor dressed in her finery.

**GENRE**

If the Scroll is not a pre-exilic text, it could be considered a polemic against Ezra, in favor of intermarriage. But no matter when the Scroll was actually written down, it could still be based on an older folk tale that existed in oral form. Dating the text is not a reliable means of determining genre or agenda. (ch. 1, p. 12)

It is quite possible that Ruth was read or recited before an audience at some point in its development. Sasson offers evidence for this theory. First, the narrative is full of oral word-play, typical of materials (such as prophetic and poetic), meant to be presented orally. Sasson gives several examples, the most convincing of which is the play on the root word נָזָר, “to recognize or know,” which appears in 2.10 in the same verse as נָזָר, a (female) foreigner. This word appears again in 2.19, when Ruth is recounting her meeting with Boaz to Naomi. Second, Ruth is divided naturally into four major episodes or acts (the chapters), at the end of three of which there are verses summarizing previous action and previewing what is coming. Third, the language in several places suggests interaction between speaker and audience. There are two examples of “breaking frame,” in 2.1. and 4.7, where the narrator pauses to address the audience (or reader) directly. Because this only happens twice, it is the least convincing of Sasson’s arguments. Lastly, Ruth contains the highest ratio of dialogue to narrative text of all biblical books, making it potentially rich for dramatic presentation (Sasson, 227). Taken together, these elements do not prove Ruth was ever an oral work, but they offer strong evidence of that possibility.

Sasson considers the form of the Scroll to be that of a folktale. He attempts to substantiate this by reference to Propp, charting the plot side by side with Propp’s outline of the sequences and functions common to folk tales. Sasson is careful not to label the Scroll an actual folktale, since this implies an “original” oral form, which cannot be determined with certainty. But he is convinced that the Scroll at least was created according to a folktale model (Sasson, 227). Brenner finds Sasson’s approach novel and attractive, but also finds weaknesses in it. I agree with her two main points. The first problem as she sees it—the exchange of roles between Naomi and Ruth throughout the plot—is not addressed by Sasson. Also, the “initial lack” as well

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1 Both Polak (Polak, 26) and Sasson (Sasson, 51) note the word play in Ruth’s first words to Boaz (2.10). Polak believes Ruth’s speech here emphasizes the contradiction between the words for “single out” and “foreigner,” while Sasson calls it a “metaphonic” play on the root of both words.
as the “reversal of fortune” pertain to both Naomi and Ruth (Brenner 1996, 76-7), where in the Proppian model it pertains only to the hero (Sasson, 201).

Life as depicted in the story is metahistorical, though it depends on the illusion of history (Landy, 293). Though Ruth is a story, not a history. Sasson believes the narrator nonetheless gives the tale “historicity.” For example, the story is introduced with the expression: יָּבִא צְבָאֹת. “In the days when...” equivalent in folk literature to “Once upon a time.” The narrator then places the story in the time of the Judges. Sasson claims that because many biblical books presumed to be “historical” open with the word יָּבִא, “and it was,” it can therefore be assumed that the author of Ruth regarded the events he recorded as belonging to his past (Sasson, 14, 36), and wanted the reader to draw that conclusion. The weakness in Sasson’s argument is that the word יָּבִא appears 750 times in the Bible. It is standard vocabulary, part of a narrative formula marking that element of structure called exposition (Coats, 11). The particular expression יָּבִא צְבָאֹת is found in only nine places, none of which opens a historical book. 1 The only place using the expression to similar effect as the Scroll is the opening of the book of Esther. So its use in the Scroll would seem to be a signal that this is more a “fairy tale” than a historical account. The effect of this expression on the reader will differ based on the presumption of genre (chap 1. p. 12).

Campbell labels Ruth a “historical short story.” Characteristics of this genre, which he believes to have been a new form, are, according to him: a distinctive literary style; focus on typical people; multiple messages; and a plausible plot (Campbell, 3, 5-10). Because of its realistic psychology and the way Ruth treats actual social institutions, Alter considers the book to be “verisimilar historicized fiction” (Alter, Art. 34). Beattie considers Ruth a short story, and lists his own three principles to support this: the narrative is coherent, intelligible, and credible (Beattie, 39-40). I think Beattie ignores the many gaps in the Scroll (this chapter, p. 45), which contradict these principles.

Humphreys also considers the Scroll to be a short story (along with Genesis 24, Jonah, and Daniel 1-6). His criteria are that these passages are brief and reveal the quality of a situation and character. The characters in these stories, Humphreys feels, are essentially the same at the end of the story as at the outset: they do not grow or develop. The reader just recognizes each character more clearly as the story progresses (Humphreys, 85). He differentiates this type of story from the novella, in which characters do develop, human beings grow and or disintegrate. Joseph is his example of a figure that is different at the end from the beginning. There is a difference between change in outward circumstances and inward change (Humphreys, 92). But Humphreys does not consider the length of time over which these stories supposedly took place. Change of circumstances normally is a factor in character development in any narrative, but the degree of development may depend on the period of narrated time (ch. 1. p. 7). For example, Naomi seems less bitter at the end of chapter 3 than she was in chapter 1, but only a few narrated months have elapsed. This is profoundly different from the Joseph saga (Gen. 37, 39-50), which takes place over a period of years.

Ultimately, any attempt to pigeonhole this narrative into one particular genre will sacrifice its uniqueness, the fact that it contains elements of more than one genre. For example, Sasson notes interpreters’ tendency to assign folkloristic terminology to Ruth and then to highlight its legal and theological aspects (Sasson, “Preface”). Ultimately it is limiting to try and categorize this (or any other) narrative (ch. 1. p. 12). Even though stories may appear similar.

17 Jud. 19.1, Isa. 7.1, Jer. 1.3 are three examples.
they are never identical. As Gunn and Fewell write, "Genres are constantly being stretched and broken, and every different text is potentially subversive of the genre." They suggest allowing the Bible its complexity rather than confining it to convention (Gunn and Fewell, 49).

Argument can be made for the validity of approaching *Ruth* with no pre-conceived notions of genre classification. The Scroll can be read through different lenses, each colored by a different presumed genre. But after reading with these varied perspectives, we can go back and remove all the lenses, to read the text with at least the illusion of no preconceptions or presumptions about its genre.

**INTERTEXTUALITY AND ALLUSIONS (ch. 1, p. 12)**

Every biblical story is metaphorically a link in a chain, and though each link can be studied as a detached unit, its context must always be kept in mind (Sasson, 128). Though the Scroll might initially appear unconnected to the rest of the Hebrew Bible, several themes link it to that chain. The precise way in which they are linked can depend partly on the dates of the texts being compared, but as I have stated earlier (ch. 1, p. 12; ch. 2, p. 36), we never know with certainty when a narrative was written. I am aware that this element plays a part in intertextual analysis, but its complexity and tendency to lead to circular arguments preclude its inclusion in this analysis.

In this section I will discuss the following:

A) Themes
   1) Land, people, ancestry
   2) Type-scenes, counter-type-scenes, gender roles

B) Character allusions

C) Semantic allusions

D) Ancient Near East allusions

A. Themes

1. Land, people, ancestry

   One theme connecting *Ruth* to the rest of the Bible is the land and the people. Land and people are part of the original covenant with Abraham in Genesis, and continue to be a predominant dual and interconnected theme throughout the narrative from Genesis to Kings.

   The land theme is found in *Ruth* in several ways. Most obviously, Naomi is returning to her own land. Then there is a physical connection between Ruth and her adopted land, when she gleans in its fields. More importantly, the legal transactions around the land offered for sale or redemption by Naomi highlight the theme of proper land inheritance, a very important concept in the Bible. This concept goes back to the original covenant between God and Abraham, where God promises Abraham all the land that he can see (Gen. 13.14-16). The principle of proper land inheritance is the source of many biblical laws and narratives, from the division of property between Lot and Abraham (Gen. 13.8-12), to the claims of the daughters of Tzelotechad (Num. 27.1-11, Deut. 36), and the laws of the sabbatical and jubilee years (Lev. 23, 25). Relevant to the Scroll, in Leviticus 25, is the law of the *qehin* or redeemer, who must redeem land that his kinsman was forced to sell through economic necessity. In this way, the references to land in the Scroll do more than create a pastoral setting: they link the story to the biblical land theme, both private land and the land of Israel (Berlin 1994, 256-7).

   Bethlehem has strong intertextual allusions through its associations with food (ch. 1, p. 8). Sasson points out that the region of Bethlehem was (and is) very fertile, producing abundant
wheat, barley, olive, almond, and grapes. This abundance may be the root of the town’s name.ан'77. It was known as “House of Bread Food” at least as early as the Amarna period (second half of the second millennium BCE) in folk etymology (Sasson, 15).

The harvest theme in the Scroll is linked to agricultural fertility, which is intertwined with eroticism and procreation throughout the story. Yet when Bethlehem becomes “infertile,” Elimelech seeks fertility in the fields of Moab, associated with the withholding of food. There he and his sons die childless, and the fields that had appeared fertile from afar become instead the graveyard of Elimelech’s lineage, the “burial ground of his own fertility” (Biale, 14). The Hebrew word for a barren, infertile woman or woman without offspring or descendants, נָעַר, literally means “uprooted” from the root יָרָשׁ (“to tear out, uproot”; HAL v. 2, 874; “to root up, weed”; KBL, 730). These allusions are used to create a paradoxical reversal of the expected. They also create a dialectic between emptiness and fullness that is a theme throughout the Scroll (Linafelt, 4). Leaving one’s land can cause infertility, and it is Ruth, the foreigner, who eventually restores fertility (Biale, 14).

Ruth, like Abraham, leaves her father and mother, the land of her birthplace, to come to a land she did not know before: Abraham does the same, except that he is carrying out God’s command and Ruth is not. The point of this allusion is to set Ruth up as a founding mother, symmetrically corresponding to the founding father (Alter, World, 51-2). In the course of their journey, Ruth and Naomi would have crossed the Jordan. Throughout the Bible, this is always documented as a momentous event (Caspi Havrelock, 150). It is not clear if it is regarded as equally momentous in this instance, where it is not specifically mentioned. If there is an intertextual allusion here it may have been unintentional.

Journeys catalyzed by famine are prevalent in biblical narrative. In most cases, these are viewed negatively: for example, in Gen. 12:10-20, Abram forces Sarai to pretend she is his sister, and she is taken into the Pharaoh’s harem. In Gen. 26:1-3, God explicitly commands Isaac to remain in the land. (This leads to Isaac calling Rebekah his sister instead of his wife, but the rape is discovered before Rebekah is endangered). Joseph might be considered an exception, but he did not leave the voluntarily. The Scroll deviates from this negative view of a famine-induced migration, yet the rabbis in their midrashic retelling interpreted Elimelech’s departure in a negative light (ch. 3, pp. 57-58).

Closely related to the land theme, and even more prominent, is that of family and people. The ties that bind Ruth and Naomi are the most notable example. The two women were not family in any kin sense, yet Ruth chose to remain with Naomi and become Israelite. Identity was defined by religion and ethnicity; a Moabite was always a Moabite (Berlin 1994, 257). Moab and the Moabites have negative connotations in the Bible.18 That the author of Ruth was well aware of this can be seen by the frequent, often unnecessarily redundant, depiction of Ruth as the Moabitess. For example, in 2.6 she is described as the “Moabitess who came from the country of Moab,” stressing that she was not only a resident alien, but one who came from a despised country (Donaldson, 135).

In the end, though, when Ruth bears an heir for Naomi, the themes of land and family merge. The genealogy at the end raises the story to the national plane: the theme of family continuity becomes the theme of national continuity. Leah and Rachel are evoked as the two co-builders of the house of Israel, highlighting the brief but important moment of cooperation between them (Gen. 30.14-16, the story of the mandrakes). The themes found in both these texts

1 The Book of Deuteronomy explicitly states that the Moabites are to be excluded from the congregation of Israel. One reason given is that “they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt” (Deut. 23:3).
are those of the harvest season and the building of the house of Israel (Pardes, 101, 105). The Scroll is therefore part of the linked biblical stories, because it dramatizes one of the Bible’s main themes—the continuity of the land and people (Berlin 1994, 110).

If land and family are the main themes connecting Ruth to other biblical books, then David’s ancestry would be the main point of the Scroll. The connection to David elevates the status of the story, in a sense, just as much as the story seems to elevate David. Without the final verses of Ruth, the story would have remained unconnected to the Bible as a whole. The narrator in these final verses puts Ruth’s story in the proper context, linking the Scroll to the main narrative sequence from Genesis-Kings (Berlin 1994, 110).

Sasson accepts the ancestry of King David as one possible purpose of the Scroll (and the reason for its inclusion in the canon), and he makes a convincing case for the genealogy verses belonging to the narrative itself. They give the tale roots in an “historical” past, setting Boaz three generations away from David. They also offer a contrast and inclusivity in a story that started in the drought of the period of the Judges and ended in the promise of the Davidic dynasty. In addition, hearing the familiar names of ancestors would have been pleasing to the audience of the time it was written, assuming it was at one point an orally presented work (Sasson, 181).

The theory that David’s ancestry was the purpose of the book is problematical, because it deflects the story of a common woman to that of a powerful king. Though this is a very common theory, it does nonetheless expose a certain prejudice (Flewell and Gunn 1990, 92; they also give several references in an unnumbered note, 131). However, a plausible theory cannot be rejected because it is not palatable to the modern reader. Whether we read the genealogy at the conclusion of the book as a later addition or as an integral part of the story, might determine what we consider the agenda of the book—and vice versa. Such circular arguments can never be conclusive. The placement of the genealogy at the end seems to point to the ancestry of David as the overriding, if not necessarily the only, purpose of the Scroll.

Intertextual allusions can be made both forwards and backwards. Thus similarities can be found between David and Ruth. David left his parental home as a boy to become a member of Saul’s household. Like Ruth, he married into his new family and formed a close relationship with a family member of the same gender. In fact, David and Jonathan represent the only other same-sex friendship depicted in the Bible besides Ruth and Naomi (Frymer-Kensky 2002, 279).

Other possible connections between David and Ruth are the fact that David was an “eighth son” and the women refer to Ruth as “better than seven sons” (4.15). David also has a connection with Moab, as he convinced the king of Moab to allow his parents to take refuge there (1 Sam. 22.3-4). Both Ruth and David overcome social obstacles to become instrumental in redeeming the land for following generations (Matthews, 242).

Another link between Ruth and David is the city of Bethlehem itself. David’s birthplace, Amit suggests that the story of the concubine of Gibeah (Judg. 19-21) “implies that a person reflects his or her birthplace” (Amit, 125). In that story, the favorable reception of the Levite and his concubine in Bethlehem is contrasted with their frightful reception in Gibeah. Since David came from Bethlehem and Saul from Gibeah, Amit suggests that the cities acquired a positive or negative image by association with the kings who were born there (Amit, 125). By extension, Ruth’s giving birth to Obed in Bethlehem also takes on these positive connotations.

*Sassen also insists it is an error to claim any single purpose for this book. In fact he considers it presumptuous and insensitive to claim a single purpose for any writing of the Ancient Near East (Sasson, 232). There has been much debate about whether the final verses of Ruth are even integral to the story or are only an appendix, possibly added later.
2. Type-scenes, Counter type-scenes

According to Alter, Ruth's story is aligned with the betrothal type-scene found in earlier biblical narratives. A type-scene is significant because it attaches a particular moment to a larger pattern of both historical and theological meaning. In the standard betrothal type-scene, the future bridegroom (or a surrogate) journeys to a foreign land. There he encounters a girl or girls at a well, an obvious symbol of fertility. Someone draws water from the well, and the girls rush home with news of the stranger's arrival. The conclusion is a betrothal between the stranger and the girl (Alter, Art. 52).

In the Scroll, this betrothal type-scene has been altered: the protagonist is a heroine, not a hero; and her homeland is Moab, so she meets her future mate on "foreign soil" which is actually Judea (Alter, Art. 59-60). The well and its water are substituted by the harvest, equally a symbol of fertility. The significance of the allusion to a type-scene is its intimation of Ruth's future as the progenitrix of the divinely chosen house of David (Alter, Art. 58).

Taking Alter's ideas several steps further, the entire Scroll could actually be read as a counter-type-scene. A female encounters the male candidate for marriage after she has already traveled to a foreign land. The encounter itself is initially planned by a second female. It takes place on the threshing floor, a substitute symbol (possibly) of fertility. The gift of grain (instead of water) offered by the man symbolizes the life that will follow. The gift is passed to Naomi by Ruth, as she will later pass another gift to Naomi, her son. The woman leaves the place of encounter and announces the success of the encounter to another woman (Bos. 64). These reversals of narrative expectations regarding gender highlight the allusion, signaling that Ruth is more proactive in the narrative than traditional gender roles suggest (Linafelt, 35).

Fuch's finds more radical contrasts with the original betrothal type-scene. The water-drawing motif that usually serves to dramatize the strength and ability of the prospective bridegroom here highlights Boaz's protectiveness and Ruth's helplessness (Fuchs 2000, 106). This is not surprising, since the gender reversal that makes Ruth the heroine should not be expected to also attribute a man's strength to her. The meal Ruth is invited to is not the conclusion of a betrothal agreement as in other betrothal type-scenes, rather just another indication of Boaz's generosity and Ruth's neediness (Fuchs 2000, 107). But the plot of the Scroll differs in many aspects from the other betrothal type-scenes, and in this plot Ruth is the needy widow while Boaz is the wealthy landowner. A reversal of those roles would be completely unrealistic for a story coming out of the Ancient Near East.

As Fuchs sees it, the role reversal interpreted by other commentators as giving Ruth the status of a hero, does not change the underlying power-structured relationships between the sexes as in other betrothal type-scenes. Whatever betrothal motifs there are in the Scroll, they confirm the bride's subordination to the groom, rather than extolling the woman's independence or self-determination (Fuchs 2000, 106-7). But biblical females are virtually always depicted as subordinate to males; that was the world-view of the writer and probably reflected his social reality. Within this framework, I believe Ruth can be considered a hero even if she is subordinate to Boaz.

Fuch's takes issue with the comparison to betrothal type-scenes because the narrative is missing their distinctive structure, in spite of the dominance of the betrothal theme in the Scroll. One of the key functions in the normative betrothal type-scene is YHWH's involvement in the fate of his chosen heroes, and this is absent in the Scroll. The whole story revolves around Ruth's successful betrothal, while the betrothals of male heroes are never the major focus of their narratives: they are only stages on their road to greater accomplishments. Ruth's raison d'etre is
her betrothal; she exists for the betrothal, not vice versa. Ruth, as a reproductive agent, is the means to an end, patrilineal continuity from Perez to David via Obed; this is why she is transformed from a heroine in chapters 1-3 to chattel, a passive object of Boaz’s transactions, in chapter 4 (Fuchs 2000, 108).

Fuchs has argued convincingly that the Scroll cannot be read strictly as a counter type-scene. But when she claims that Ruth’s only motivation is loyalty to her late husband and his mother, not her attraction to Boaz (Fuchs 2000, 109), she is less convincing. No reader, including Fuchs, is privy to Ruth’s private thoughts, sexual needs or taste in men; but Fuchs simply finds these elements irrelevant. In Fuchs’s reading, the overriding element is the writer’s patriarchal message. Because Ruth is a childless widow, she is portrayed as acting in the interests of her father-in-law and deceased husband—and vice versa. This circular argument ignores Ruth’s professions of loyalty to Naomi and the relationship between the two women, the most unique elements of the Scroll.

B. Character allusions

There are obvious allusions in Ruth to the story of Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38). The fact that at the end of the Ruth story, the people and elders invoke Rachel and Leah and the house of Perez “whom Tamar bore to Judah” as models for Ruth and Boaz (4.11-12), would seem to support the intentionality of the allusions. (Interestingly this verse is not found in any libretto.) Yet there is an important difference. In the Genesis story, the sexual improprieties are essential elements of the drama, whereas in Ruth, the writer remains silent about these elements which may be there. The language in chapter 3 of the Scroll is certainly suggestive, but it remains ambivalent and certainly nongraphic, which cannot be said for Judah’s language in Gen. 38.16, where he says to Tamar. יִלְּךֻּכָּה אֹתָךְ לִבְנָךְ. “Let me come into you.” Therefore it is possible that the story of Ruth in some way “redeems” the antecedent story about Ruth’s and Boaz’s ancestors (in Genesis 38) (Aschkenasy 1986, 88), as well as echoing it.

The reference to Perez, Tamar and Judah is a triple intertextual link: the son Obed, in van Wolde’s analysis, is compared to Perez, Ruth to Tamar, and Boaz to Judah. Once these relationships are seen, the reader becomes aware of the many similarities between the two narratives (van Wolde 1997, 433). Some of van Wolde’s connections are inaccurate because she is seeing similarities that are not really there, and then reading relationships into the text.

Van Wolde sees numerous similarities between Ruth and Tamar: their “seductions” involve older male relations and aspects of dressing up to be more attractive, while being partially disguised; they occur in a public place; their purpose is to bear a male heir for the survival of their dead husbands’ names: both women are praised by the men of Bethlehem (4.12) but are erased at the conclusion. Both become pregnant immediately; and Ruth’s son is called the son of Boaz (4.17, 21) as Tamar’s is called the son of Judah and Tamar (van Wolde 1997, 436).

There are a few problems with this analysis. Both Boaz and Judah may be “older,” but nowhere in the text are they described as “elderly,” as van Wolde calls them. Tamar clearly “seduces” Judah, but the same cannot be said for Ruth, as the text in chapter 3 remains ambiguous. Purpose and intent on the part of Tamar and Ruth are nowhere stated explicitly in the text; so these are not facts, but mere assumption on van Wolde’s part.

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1 Boaz’s redemption of Ruth actually creates a new family, with Boaz as the patriarch and Naomi the matriarch (Biale, n. 13, 235).
In both stories, women’s actions clearly result in transformation. The openings of both stories depict fathers leaving, while the endings depict births and name-givings of sorts. The husbands of the two foreign women have no narrative significance, because the main point in these two narratives is the ongoing life of Judahites and the role of certain foreign women who made it possible (van Wolde 1997, 434).

Significantly, the narrator in both stories represents female points of view and voices. Gender, plus the theme of inside-ness and outside-ness, are important features of both stories, and are better understood when the stories are read together (van Wolde 1997, 437, 451).

Intertextual allusion may be extended from the stories of Tamar and Ruth to that of Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19.30-58). These have been called the three “temptation scenes” (Fuchs 2000, 74; in my view an inaccurate term, as discussed above). All three open with a woman for two women in the case of Lot’s daughters) without a husband or child. The fate of the mother in all cases is incidental to the product, namely a male son. The mother-figures in all three cases are valorized for their promotion of the stability of a patrilineal genealogy. Ruth’s story, in this analysis, can be seen as a glorified example of the temptation type-scene (Fuchs 2000, 90). I do not consider Ruth a temptress, but I agree with Fuchs’s view of the writer’s agenda.

There are other similarities between the stories of Lot’s daughters and Ruth. The posterity of their houses, in both stories, is in peril, leading the women to act unconventionally to preserve it. In order to support the primal principle of paternal lineage, the women subvert the cultural norm of conventional sexual mores (Frymer-Kensky 2002, 263).

There is also an intertextual allusion to Rachel and Leah. Commentators have noted the difference between Rachel and Leah’s competitive relationship and the more cooperative one between Ruth and Naomi. The Scroll seems to revise the earlier story, transforming it from rivalry to harmonious sharing. There is a brief prefiguration of female cooperation in one scene, when Rachel sends Leah to lie with Jacob in exchange for mandrakes (Gen. 30.14-16). That momentary change in dynamics, occurring during the harvest season, becomes a continual moment in the Scroll, which occurs entirely in that season. The season of ingathering highlights another key issue linking the two texts: building the house of Israel. The past is invoked to empower and consecrate the marital union of Ruth and Boaz (Pardes. 105).

Brenner discusses the Ruth-Naomi relationship in terms of paradigmatic pairs of women involved in the birth of a hero (Brenner 1993, 209). Within this paradigm, the cooperation between Naomi and Ruth is exceptional. In their story, a hero is born through the abolition of what had previously been considered conventional female behavior, namely, strife. Brenner sees this change in depiction of women as a possible indication of female authorship (Brenner 1993, 221). It could also indicate a male writing from a female perspective.

C. Semantic allusions

A single word with particular intertextual resonance is another kind of allusion. The Scroll is a straightforward narrative about people, so it is not valid to ascribe figurative or

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71 Paired women throughout the Bible tend to be in opposition to one another (for example, Sarah and Hagar, Leah and Rachel, in Genesis). Two exceptions, where women speak directly to each other in a cooperative fashion, are also in Genesis. In one of these (Gen. 19.32), Lot’s (unnamed) daughters conspire to get their father drunk and then lie with him. One result of their incestuous acts was the birth of Moab, progenitor of the nation of Moab. Therefore their act (in the biblical story) ultimately made Lot the ancestor of Ruth. Similarly, the dialogue between Rachel and Leah (Gen. 30.14-15), in which Rachel gives Jacob to Leah for one night in exchange for the supposed fertility plant, the mandrake, may be implied to lead to Rachel’s pregnancy and the eventual birth of Joseph. It may or may not be coincidental that these lone examples of women in dialogue had such monumental historical import, leading directly or indirectly to the story of Ruth and Naomi, in which women in dialogue take center stage.
symbolic meaning to terms found there (Beattie, 3). On the other hand, Linafelt correctly points out that the reader can see the hint of a secondary meaning without denying the primary sense of a word; that is the whole point of allusion (Linafelt, 39). Whether an allusion is in the reader’s imagination or was the author’s intent will never be known.

The word "cling, cleave, keep close" (BDB, 179; KBL, 199), “adhere” (Sheffield v. II, 385), or “stick to” (HAL, v. 1, 209) may signify desire, love, affection, or loyalty. It is an example of how words for various manifestations and levels of “love” are loaned from other semantic fields. The word essentially has a concrete physical reference, “to be physically very close to” (Brenner 1993, 20). As applied to Ruth “clinging” to Naomi, the word has been connected by most commentators to its first biblical usage, Gen. 2.24, where a “man clings to his wife.” Berquist extends the allusion much further. He claims that this verb is most commonly used to describe clinging to God, but I disagree. In reality, out of a total of 56 biblical occurrences, only eight have God as the object (Deut. 10.20, 11.22, 13.5, 30.20; Josh. 22.5, 23.8; 2 Kings 18.6; Ps. 63.9), fewer than references between humans. Of these eight, the first six are commands by Moses or Joshua to the Israelites, addressed either in the male singular (twice) or the plural (four times). In 2 Kings 18.6, Hezekiah is the subject of the verb; in Ps. 63.9, the “soul” of the psalmist is the subject.

Berquist claims there are only eight references to clinging between humans, four of which are in Ruth, but there are actually eight in addition to Ruth, even if they do not all refer to only two people (Gen. 2.24, 34.3, Num. 36.7 and 9, Josh. 23.12, 2 Sam. 20.2, 1 Kings 11.2, Prov. 18.24). The most often cited references are Gen. 2.24, where a man “clings” to his wife, and Shechem’s soul “clinging” to Dina in Gen. 34.3. Those occurrences referring to more than two people are Num 36.7 and 9, where the Israelites “clinging” to the remnant of their tribe; Josh. 23.12, where the Israelites are instructed not to “clinging” to the remnants of the other nations and intermarry among them; in 2 Sam 20.2 the Judahites “clinging” to their king, from the Jordan to Jerusalem (the verb is mis-translated in JPS as “accompanied”); 1 Kings 11.2 refers back to the command given in Josh. 23.12 not to “clinging” to the remnants of other nations, precisely what Solomon did “clinging” to, as well as “love;” Prov. 18.24 refers to a friend who “clings” more than a brother.

Of the numerous other uses of קזנ, several refer to the tongue “clinging” to the palate (Ezek. 3.26, Ps. 137.6, Job 19.20, 29.10, Lam. 4.4). Other things that “cling” are sins, evil, famine, leprosy, bones to skin. This all points to a word standing for an intense joining together. It is not coincidental that this root is found in the modern Hebrew word for “glue.”

Berquist further claims that the verb refers to a male’s initiating love, marriage, or sexual relations, which I have just shown is only so in two instances, although in all cases it refers to men only. He is correct that it never describes a woman’s act except in Ruth. Berquist explains this exception by calling it “role dedifferentiation”; there are not enough men in this story to fill typical male roles, so women fill some of them (Berquist, 26–7; this chapter pp. 40, 43 for gender reversals). But text analysis shows that the verb קזנ is not necessarily an allusion to sexual love; it is rather a general indication of a powerful attachment which may or may not include sexual.

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22 Beattie refers specifically to the error of using an Ezekiel passage, clearly figurative, to define the meaning of “spread the skirt over” in the more literal Ruth passage.

23 Linafelt further remarks that the writer’s choice of words with potential double meaning is deliberate. These ambiguities are part of the narrative art (Linafelt, 55). But caution must be taken as always in trying to determine the writer’s intent. We can judge only the effect of the ambiguity, not whether it was intentional or not.
love. The fact that it is used only here to describe a woman's actions towards another woman may indicate an unusual attempt by a writer to depict a strong attachment between two women.

The oath formula Ruth uses in her pledge to Naomi resonates with other biblical passages referring to covenant and contract (Frymer-Kensky 2002, 241). King Jehoshaphat of Judah used the same form twice, in 1 Kings 22.4 and 2 Kings 3.7 (with an almost exact repetition in 2 Chron. 18.3). In both of these, he says: "I will do what you do; my troops shall be your troops; my horses shall be your horses." Jonathan's oath to David (1 Sam. 20.42) uses similar wording, but unlike Frymer-Kensky, I do not see the precise similarity in form of that oath to Ruth's. "May the Lord be [witness] between you and me, and between your offspring and mine, forever!" does not have the same sense or rhythm of the other oath quoted here.

Another word with possible allusions is נָשִּׁים, "open field, land, country" (BDB, 961). It can also mean "pasture, territory of a tribe or people" (HAL, v. 3, 1508). The word appears about two hundred times in the Hebrew Bible. In the Scroll, it appears 16 times, four of which are in the first six verses, and six of these times together with בָּשָׂם. In some biblical passages this noun conveys an esoteric message, such as the coming of a miraculous event (Caspi and Cohen, 79). Several examples would be Isaac meeting Rebecca (Gen. 24.63); Joseph wandering in the field (Gen. 37.15); Samson's mother encountering the angel in the field (Jud. 13.9); and Jonathan meeting David in the field (1 Sam. 19.3, 20.35). We do not know if נָשִּׁים (also found in Gen. 36.35) is the name of a specific place, such as the "domain of Moab" (KBL, 915) or of a generic field. Any allusion could be imaginary--sometimes a field is just a field. And sometimes it isn't. But nonetheless we should never jump to allusions.

Ruth and Boaz's encounter occurs at midnight: הנָשִּׁים (3.8). another intertextual allusion. Sasson points out numerous other examples of midnight as a "time of reckoning" in the Bible (Exod.11.4, 12.19; Job 34.20; Jud.16.3, 1 Kings 3.20; and others; Sasson, 74). Linajett, too, notes that the term is often used to indicate a time of ambivalent destiny, "the moment of both terror and exhilaration, of promise and threat" (Linafelt, 52). In addition to the Exodus moment, he also mentions Jacob wrestling with an angel in the middle of the night. Midnight as a liminal moment is also a theme in folklore of other cultures.24

The word נַפְשָׁה, threshing floor (chap. 3), according to some commentators is biblically associated with fertility and licentiousness (Landy, 259). The intertextual allusion here would be Hosea 9.1: נַפְשָׁה אֲנִית לְעָלַי נַפְשָׁה וּלְעָלַי נַפְשָׁה. "You love fornication on every threshing floor." Linafelt notes that if this Hosea verse is any indication, threshing floors were associated in the Israelite mind, even if not in actuality, with illicit sexual activity. This could be associated with the simple fact that working men took advantage during the harvest to have sex with women workers (or prostitutes).

Words can have multi-layered meanings. There are 35 occurrences of the term נַפְשָׁה in the Hebrew Bible, and only in two is it found in a scene of licentiousness; besides the Hosea reference, in Jer. 51.33. Babylon is said to be "like a threshing floor ready to be trodden." Hosea (9.2) and Micah (4.12) use the term נַפְשָׁה in metaphors. Elsewhere, it is simply a threshing floor in the plain sense of the word, until 2 Sam. 24.16, where an angel was seen at the נַפְשָׁה נַפְשָׁה, the threshing floor of Araunah. After this incident, this particular threshing floor takes on great importance: later David sacrifices there and Solomon builds a temple on that site. The term נַפְשָׁה

24 Two examples that spring immediately to mind are Hamlet's vision of the ghost of his father, and the story of Cinderella. Both depict midnight as a liminal moment between fantasy, or the spirit world, and this world.
seems to take on an aura of sanctity after the story in 2 Samuel, and it was clearly an important symbol of the harvest and hence of Israelite survival throughout biblical history. There are many examples where the threshing floor, coupled with the winepress, is an economic indicator of prosperity or the abundance of the land (Matthews, 231, footnote 34). But to claim it is a symbol of sexual licentiousness is not supported by textual evidence.

Though the Scroll plays on the image of fertility, with Boaz lying “beside the grainpile” (ברעא יָהָנָן), and though there is an abundance of verbs such as “know, come to, lie” together with “feet” and “expose,” all of which are usually found in a seduction context (Brenner 1993, 22), it still cannot be claimed that the writer was making a deliberate allusion to any of these broader themes through the use of the word יָהָנָן.

D. ANE References

Intertextual reading is not limited to the Bible itself, but can encompass other literature of the Ancient Near East. Sasson suggests that the activities described in 4.16-17 are vestigial motifs, decipherable according to Near Eastern symbolism (Sasson, 237). He refers to Near Eastern documents that allude to divine interference in human affairs with the goal of singling out a future king as a favorite of the gods. The acts include visitation for the purpose of establishing fate, placement on a woman’s lap for the purpose of breast feeding, and conferring a name on the child—all of which are found in those two verses of chapter 4 (4.16-17). In addition, the involvement of a group of women, and non-relatives, in naming the child is unique in biblical texts (Sasson, 173), and has not been satisfactorily explained otherwise.

In conclusion, understanding biblical references places Ruth in a particular context, and understanding that context becomes, in Amit’s words, “a two-way process of enrichment: it enhances the framework, which in turn enhances and deepens the story itself” (Amit, 146).

GAP FILLING

The numerous details absent from the Scroll result in ambiguities. We are not told what Ruth, Naomi, or Boaz look like, how old they are, how shy or open, effusive or reticent, they are (except based on our individual interpretation of their speech). This could be an argument for the Scroll as an oral narrative, where characters are more “universal” and the blanks are left up to the individual story-teller to embellish. Much readerly gap-filling falls into the category of what Exum calls “romantic gap-filling” (Exum, 163).

I will list and discuss the main gaps in the story by category, chapter by chapter. How these gaps are filled by the rabbis in midrash and later by librettists and composers, will be the subject of subsequent chapters.

Action Time

Chapter 1: After Naomi’s husband had died, her sons married Moabite women and lived in Moab for about ten years (1.4). We can only speculate about that time interval: At what point in that ten years did the marriages take place? Were they happy marriages? How were Israelite men married to Moabite women treated? Was the (presumed) inability to bear children an issue for the couples? The ten-year period without children is a central theme of other biblical stories; here it is just glossed over. Perhaps this is because it is never overtly stated that the couples were married at the start of that ten-year period.

Naomi hears there is food in Bethlehem (1.6). Did this news reach her by courier? Was it common to know where there was famine and where there was food? The story of Joseph and his brothers would seem to indicate there was some way of communicating this information in the
ancient world: Jacob tells his sons, "I hear...that there are rations to be had in Egypt" (Gen. 42:2). The trip to Bethlehem is not described in terms of duration or difficulty. Scholars who know the geography well have estimated the length of such a trip. W. Was it more than a week? Did they have all their belongings with them? How did they carry it all themselves? How far did they walk before Naomi sent them back?

When Naomi enters the city, the whole city is astir (1:19). It is vague whether people are surprised when they first spot her, or whether they had advance notice she was coming. Did a scout spot her and Ruth's approach? Could the whole city have appeared on such short notice? (for the midrashic response, ch. 3, p. 55).

Chapter 2: Only Ruth goes out to glean: why Naomi does not is left to the reader's imagination. Perhaps she was too bereft in her mourning to go out among people. Or maybe she was too old to work, or perhaps she thought the younger woman would be more likely to attract a potential patron to help them (Matthews, 225).

One of the more striking contrasts between summary account and described scene is where 2.1-22 describe the events of Ruth's first day, and 2.23 recounts that Ruth remained with her mother-in-law while she gleaned through the barley and wheat harvests. Whether the two women grew closer as they shared meals every night, and whether Ruth continued to see Boaz on a regular basis in the fields all this time, are left to the reader's imagination.

Boaz asks the overseer to whom Ruth belongs, when he comes to supervise the day's reaping (2.5): but a few verses later, he turns to speak to her (2.8). Where is Ruth when he asks the initial question? Are we to suppose she stealthily approached when she first saw Boaz? Then Boaz informs Ruth he already knows all about her history: if this is all the same day, did word travel that fast? Did everyone in Bethlehem already know the whole story—without ever going online?

Ruth has food left over after her meal with the reapers (2.14). Four verses later (2.18), this food reappears as a gift to Naomi. Where and how did Ruth keep it while she gleaned? Did they provide her with a doggy bag? And when Ruth returns to Naomi every day after gleaning, where exactly are they living? Has Naomi forgotten she owns a field?

Chapter 3: Boaz first mentions the next of kin in 3.12. If he knew about this person all along, why did he never tell Naomi? He must have realized that this male relative could be the key to solving all their problems. Did he only now recall his existence? How did Naomi know Boaz would be at the threshing floor (3.2)? Since she was aware that Boaz would be spending the night there after eating and drinking, this particular group of activities was obviously known to the society for whom the author wrote. It was probably a Bethlehamite practice linked to ceremonial or even cultic preparations (Sasson, 65)."

One of the most glaring omissions in the story is, what happened on the threshing room floor? How much is the reader supposed to read between the lines? On certain occasions, some interpreters believe, a gap is intentional. For example, both Campbell and Sasson believe the writer of Ruth meant to be "ambiguous and hence provocative" in the scene on the threshing floor (Sasson, 71; Campbell, 121). Caution should be exercised here as always in trying to determine the writer's intent, even though there are several clear allusions. Expressions like "the
down.” “to know,” and uncovering the legs, are all well-known biblical euphemisms for sexual relations.

Later readers really cannot know if the language used in that scene would have been understood less unambivalently in an earlier era. It is possible that the writer thought the action was so obvious that there was no gap at all. In any case, the fact that we will never know what the writer wanted us to think is an indication of the level of his or her art.

Chapter 4: Are we to believe it is more than mere coincidence that the redeemer Boaz wants to see, appears the moment Boaz sits at the gate? Or is it such a small community that this would not have been unusual? And why is this person, so important in the plot, never given a name?

(for midrashic response, ch. 3, pp. 55-6)

Another summary account that leaves much time unaccounted for is in 4.13: Boaz took Ruth, she conceived, she gave birth. After this verse, Ruth and Boaz drop from the story. What kind of a relationship did they have? Were they happy to have a child together? Was Ruth surprised, after her presumed previous ten years of infertility? The reader with imagination can even conjure an old Boaz and Ruth surrounded by children.

Chapter 1: Why did Ruth and Orpah marry foreigners? Were there no Moabite men available? Or were Israelite men a better catch? The text states that Naomi set out for Bethlehem with her daughters-in-law (1.6). Then two verses later, she tells them to go back (1.8). Had they accompanied her just to say goodbye? Or did she have second thoughts about bringing them with her? And why did they want to go with her? Were they perhaps outcasts for having married Israelites?

Nothing in the text explains a bond between the women more powerful than their ties to their own people and their own land. And if this kind of bond was the motivator, why did Orpah (after weeping) so abruptly change her mind? And why did Ruth not change hers? The tendency to base motives on emotional attachment is an example of “romantic gap-filling” (Exum, 163), and is predominant in all the librettos I will analyze (ch. 6).

Chapter 2: What is Boaz’s motive for his kindness towards Ruth? Is it, as he says, because he appreciates how loyal she has been to Naomi? Does he realize Naomi is a relation before chapter 4? And if he does, why does he ignore that fact until then?

Chapter 3: Why does Ruth answer Boaz’s question “Who are you?” with the request to spread his robe over her, against Naomi’s orders to let the man speak first? Is Ruth just impertinent, or does she realize she has to be proactive?

Chapter 1: Naomi’s silences are as enigmatic as her speech. Her silence after Ruth’s eloquent pledge to her (1.16-17) can be interpreted a multitude of ways, running the spectrum from indifference to overwhelming emotion. Many librettos assign words to Naomi in this scene (e.g., Franek, p. 135; Mellers, p. 180; Berkeley, p. 191). By not describing how Naomi felt, the writer leaves her personality a blank to be filled by the reader. But the fact that the writer has provided such minimal dialogue for Ruth and Naomi on their journey to Bethlehem, or in the time they live together, should not lead the reader to believe they never spoke (Beattie, 68). The writer simply did not include what seemed superfluous to the plot.

77 In an intriguing interpretation, van Wolde argues that Ruth was naked during the encounter. This is based on the word 입_YELLOW missing its accusative marker יק, leading to the conclusion that Ruth was uncovering herself at the place of Boaz’s feet. Yet van Wolde does not suggest there were sexual relations (van Wolde 1997, 443). If this is accurate, then Boaz’s degree of self-control was justifiably praised by the later rabbis (ch. 3, p. 71).
Why do the Bethlehemite women ask “Is this Naomi?” Is her appearance so profoundly altered after ten years? The rabbinic midrash is particularly creative in filling this gap (eh. 3. p. 62).

Chapter 2: Why, when Ruth mentions Boaz’s name, does Naomi only now tell Ruth he is a redeeming kinsman (2.20)? Did she forget such an important person, or did she withhold the information for some secret purpose? The fact that Boaz was a kinsman of Elimelech is mentioned in 2.1, but this is the narrator’s voice. It is not clear if Naomi remembered him at that point. She repeats the fact that he is a kinsman to Ruth in 3.1, at the end of the harvest, presumably because she thinks Ruth might have forgotten. The reader is never told the familial relationship of Boaz to Elimelech, or what the exact range of responsibilities of the (redeemer) are (Campbell, 109).

Chapter 2: Boaz praises Ruth for not going after young men (3.10), whether rich or poor (3.10). This implies either that Boaz is not himself as young as these other men working alongside Ruth, or he is of another class. Is Ruth ever tempted to go after the “younger” men? Or does she have her heart set on Boaz from the start? Without knowing her appearance, the reader can only guess at her level of attractiveness to the men around her.

How the reader visualizes the threshing floor scene will be influenced by how that reader imagines Ruth and Boaz: young and attractive, older and plain, or a mixture of these. Readers might prefer to think of a sexual or even emotional attraction between Ruth and Boaz, and strong emotional ties between Ruth and Naomi. But such emotional responses between the characters can only be found in the blank spaces between the words of the text. Music, even more than librettos, fills in these spaces wordlessly but effectively (e.g., Fino, p. 148; Schumann, p. 163; Rumshinsky, p. 174).

Even the most sanguine of biblical interpreters, claiming to be interpreting the text and not writing a midrash on it, interject their feelings. The first half of Fewell and Gunn’s Compromising Redemption is a modern midrash, and the second half is a commentary on that midrashic retelling. When they quote Boaz in 3.10, they claim “the sexual longing slips out from under a paternalistic and pious blessing extolling the virtues of loyalty. ‘May you be blessed by YHWH, my daughter,’ breathes Boaz” (Fewell and Gunn 1990, 85, italics my own). They continue in this vein when they claim “his desire for Ruth cannot be cloaked,” and “prove” this with the fact that his last, most telling move is to have intercourse with her (Fewell and Gunn, 87). They seem to ignore the dictates of the narrative itself, in their eagerness to portray a libidinous, heavy-breathing Boaz!

After Ruth’s night with Boaz on the threshing-room floor, Naomi says that she is sure he will settle the matter the same day (3.18). What makes her so sure? Does she know more about the night’s events, Boaz, and even the future, than anyone else in the story, or indeed, even the reader?!

Whatever went on under Boaz’s cloak, or in Naomi and Ruth’s house, is as masked by midnight darkness as when it was first written. And that is how rabbis, poets, playwrights, scholars, artists, and composers, could return time and again to the Scroll to find what might be hidden there between the lines of rich absences and ambiguity.

READER RESPONSE

Commentators, like any readers, perceive and fill gaps based on their own personal perspective and agenda. For example, Tribe reads from a theologically positive stance, and therefore any gap or coincidence in the action is interpreted as “blessed chance which aids these
women in their struggles for life" (Trible 1978, 183). Trible sees all the characters as simply human agents for the divine plan.

Fuchs has an entirely different perspective. She feels that patriarchal ideology permeates the Bible and that critics tend to ignore this. In her view, all biblical narrative "universalizes and legislates its hierarchical endorsement of power relationships between male and female characters. The Bible not only shows women as marginal, it also advocates their marginality" (Fuchs 2000, 7-10). For her, then, the characters and relationships in the Scroll are incidental and almost irrelevant to the writer's agenda. The points she makes are valid, but in my view she lets her anger cloud her reading and keep her from an appreciation of the Scroll as a literary work rather than a political manifesto.

In Brenner's analysis, which has a radically different perspective, Ruth could have resembled today's foreign workers in Israel. Therefore Ruth may have had less free choice than readers usually imagine. She basically would be contracted to Naomi. Similarities Brenner points to are Ruth's work as a menial laborer, her industriousness, her eventual partial integration into the host society via marriage. Yet Brenner argues that this final integration might be seen as less than complete, since Ruth disappears from the final verses of the book. Perhaps the issue of class interfered with her total integration, and she is "absorbed" rather than "integrated" (Brenner 1996, 159-60). She also could have disappeared because once she bore a son, her job was done.

In a provocative article, Laura Donaldson discusses an unusual perspective on Ruth, that of a Cherokee woman reader. To Cherokee women, Orpah is viewed as a positive role model, representing hope. She is the one who does not reject her tradition or her sacred ancestors, and in their society, that is a higher value. For Ruth, moving from Asherah to YHWH involved giving up her ethnic and cultural identity. Orpah, on the other hand, chose the indigenous mother's house over that of the "alien Israelite Father," an act of self-affirmation (Donaldson, 143).

Another unusual perspective is that of an African woman writer, Musa Dube, who creates a fantasy scenario in which she finds "The Unpublished Letters of Orpah to Ruth," the conceit being that Orpah is an African woman. In each of these "letters," Dube assumes the voice of Orpah, who identifies herself as Ruth's eldest sister, "the one who returned to her mother's house and to her Gods." She tells Ruth the story of their Moabite origins. She says she understood Ruth's decision to stay with Naomi, but she herself had to return to her old widowed mother who, like Naomi, had no son or husband to care for her. Orpah also felt it was right to return to her people and religion (Dube, 147-150). Dube, by injecting her own personal experience, humanizes Orpah, giving her an identity and motives that are absent from the Scroll.

This kind of modern midrash gives contemporary readers--especially Jewish readers--a jolt at the realization that from where we stand, Ruth's acceptance of Naomi's people and God has always been seen as a positive and brave act. Yet Jewish readers see it that way because we are reading it from the narrator's, and our own tradition's, perspective. Turning the lens around flips the view of which act is really heroic, Ruth's or Orpah's. Moving beyond my own traditional boundaries (as a Jewish woman), I see the value of what Gunn and Fewell call "a worthwhile enterprise," namely crossing and even subverting those boundaries (Gunn and Fewell, 31).

Every reader sees the text through a different lens in the prism, colored by that reader's culture, background, religious tradition, gender, and other factors. Each listener hears Ruth's and Naomi's words sung to a different tune, as did the composers who set those words. Precisely because Ruth is so filled with gaps, it can be seen with various colors and heard in many keys.
FEMALE AUTHORSHIP

Some scholars have posited a female author for *Ruth*. As early as 1957, Geniza scholar and folklorist S.D. Goitein proposed that the Scroll was composed by a “wise, old woman” (Goitein, 1957–1988). His reasons are that it is basically a women’s story: the plot opens and closes with Naomi, the older woman; Naomi’s advice moves the action forward; and the story ends with blessings to Naomi, not to Ruth (Brenner 1993, “Introduction,” 10). Brenner notes that although authorship can never be established, *Ruth* can undeniably be read as an expression of women’s culture and concerns (Brenner 1993, 143).

Naomi and Ruth provide a rare example of biblical women cooperating rather than competing—a non-androcentric portrait. Dialogues between Naomi and Ruth show distinctly female attitudes. Van Dijk-Hemmes finds it plausible that the story is a collective creation of women’s culture, shaped by the cooperation between wise women narrators and their engaged female audience. She supports this with three criteria for recognizing a female voice: the text’s intent is less than usually androcentric; reality is defined from a female perspective; there are obvious differences between the view of the male and female figures. She finds that the story of Ruth satisfies these criteria (van Dijk-Hemmes, 136-9). In addition, the phrase “through the seed which YHWH will give you by this young woman” (4.12) is indicative of a view that the foundation of this genealogy is through a woman, an example of a female worldview (or of matrilineal descent).

The story contains no religious creed or moral dictums, and the way the events are presented implies an audience familiar with agricultural life, and the importance of the woman’s role in this kind of life. All of this suggests a story told by women to an audience of women (Caspi and Cohen, 100). It is also probably one of the first stories in any literature to show what can be accomplished by an alliance between women (Bos, 64).

Brenner also points out, in her analysis of the “Birth of the Hero” paradigm, that the representation of female cooperation seen in the Scroll seems to originate in female circles that viewed their own species in a different light than the more common male-oriented and male-written representations. The women in this second type of paradigm are depicted as strong, while the role of the male remains skeletal. The other stories that belong to this category are Exodus 2 and Luke 1.1-2.7 (Brenner 1993, 221).

The Scroll is virtually the only biblical source for information about women’s social relationships and behavior patterns (the other is *Song of Songs*) (Meyers 2000, 111). It is often problematic to understand social relationships in the period when the biblical narratives were written, because the only viewpoint presented is that of the high status males who generally wrote them. Narratives can both reinforce and question the dominant culture. I read the centrality of women in the Scroll’s plot as an example of a writer—whether female or male—challenging the cultural norms of his or her day. This is my own response, supported by a text that deviates in fundamental ways from the standard depiction of women’s relationships in that period.

In the end, the author of the Scroll will remain anonymous and gender-less. No amount of elaborate guessing will contribute to either a better understanding or appreciation of this work. And in spite of the great appeal of a woman author for modern readers, it should not lead us to make any unwarranted assumptions.

NARRATOR AND LOCALIZATION

At the end of chapter 1, Naomi speaks of her great misfortune, while the narrator suggests hope, with the key words “Bethlehem” and “barley harvest.” The reader can contrast the
voices of character and narrator. When there is a discrepancy between what a character says and what the narrator reports, the narrator's report of action is usually a more reliable indicator of character than that character's speech (Gunn and Fewell, 71). At the end of each scene in the Scroll, narration seems to oppose dialogue, putting the narrator in tension with the characters. This opposition serves to heighten suspense, and this technique places the author and narrator in different spheres (ch.1, p.17).

McKinlay makes the interesting observation that "perhaps Naomi and the narrator had different views...but what can a mere character achieve against the powerful ideology of a narrator's text?" (McKinlay, 155). This view seems to attribute too much historical reality to the characters, who are still, after all, the author narrator's construct.

The reader knows that Boaz is a kinsman before, presumably, either Ruth or Naomi do. But the reader does not know exactly why Ruth goes to the threshing floor, though we assume the writer did know. As Ruth leaves Naomi to go to the threshing floor, the focus--like a camera--shifts completely to Ruth, leaving Naomi in the shadows. The narrator's silence about Naomi at that moment is the focalizer's interpretation (ch. 1. p.18).

When Ruth lies at Boaz's feet, he does not know who she is or her motive. The narrator reports only her action and his reaction. Ruth probably does not exactly understand why Naomi wanted her to perform these particular actions either. These are all examples of the focalizer's role (ch. 1. p.18).

The reader does not know why a group of women name Ruth's son and call him Naomi's, because the focus at that moment in the story is not on Ruth.

Examples of withholding of information, from the reader or from the characters within the story itself, abound in Ruth. Many of these have been discussed under the heading of "Gap-filling," and will be analyzed further in the next chapter, on midrashic re-interpretation.

CONCLUSION

As in archaeology, we can uncover the frame and even the foundations of an ancient house--but we can never inhabit it (or meet the owners). In each generation we try anew to re-create this house, using the bricks and mortar of our own day. We re-construct the house room by room and stone by stone. Gaps will be filled, rooms visualized on top of the sparse ancient frame. Yet a house in one era might be a hut in another. Our imaginations are limited by our culture. What I am doing remains a re-construction only.

The remainder of this thesis will focus on how subsequent generations of readers built an interpretive "dwelling" in which they felt they could comfortably live, and in whose structure they could understand Ruth in their own times. There were vast differences in both the materials and methods of "construction" between the rabbinic midrashists of the first centuries of the millennium, the librettists writing in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the composers setting those librettos to music. The agendas and methodologies of each of these groups formed the foundation upon which each built their interpretive "dwellings" utilizing the materials and methods of their time.

The narrator (or writer) chooses to withhold certain information for rhetorical, aesthetic, or other purposes (Sternberg, 183).