



Reading *Ruth* for the sake of poor rural women: A *bosadi* womanhood
approach

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DECLARATION - PLAGIARISM

I, Felicia Ramaribana, declare that,

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11 March 2013

Felicia Ramaribana

Date

As a supervisor, I agree to the submission of this dissertation.

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11 March 2013

Dr Helen Efthimiadis- Keith

Date

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my mother *Kemelo Ramaribana* and to all the poor rural women who are impoverished and disenfranchised as a result of oppressive patriarchal structures.

ABSTRACT

This study posits that a deconstructive socio-historical reading of *Ruth* will elicit aspects of ancient Israelite women's agency which can then be used to inspire greater socio-economic agency amongst poor rural women today. While it is difficult to establish the date of *Ruth* with any precision, the study argues that the book was first written to legitimise David's kingship and then used as a polemic against Ezra-Nehemiah's intermarriage policies some 550 years later. Accordingly, it discusses the socio-economic conditions pertaining to both periods, namely the early monarchic and the early post-exilic periods.

The study shows that Israel began as a loosely organized tribal confederation, which lacked a structured political system, in the pre-monarchic period, and that far-reaching changes ensued upon the institution of the monarchy. During the monarchic period, the political structure of the land was increasingly centralised around the king. Despite the political changes, and variances within the mode of production, the family remained the basic economic production unit throughout Israel's history. Similarly, Israelite society remained patriarchal in nature, and women derived their identity and economic wellbeing from the men in their lives. Women did not have any economic rights *per se*; their rights, if any, were secured and safeguarded by the men to whom they belonged. Furthermore, land was the most important economic commodity but Israelite law deprived the majority of women of the opportunity to own land. These factors disenfranchised and impoverished women, particularly childless widows.

Within this context, Naomi and Ruth devised strategies which subverted the oppressive patriarchal structures of their time and overcame their socio-economic distress. The principles underlying their actions may be used to encourage poor rural women to develop greater socio-economic agency today.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCING THE STUDY

People matter. People are social and communal creatures. In important ways community structures, especially economic production, distort, and destroy people. As creatures of God, it is both possible and obligatory to build better forms of economic community in which more people benefit more equitably in deciding economic priorities and in the production and consumption of goods, service, and ideas (Gottwald 1993a:347).

1.1 INTRODUCTION

As a rural Motswana woman, I have observed that certain Setswana traditional norms work against women and impinge on their socio-economic life thus blocking their economic self-sufficiency. These traditional norms relegate women to a second-class societal position society. In many cases, little or nothing can be done to change, let alone challenge, these traditional norms; life has to go on and women have to survive under these oppressive structures. I have observed with concern that, in the face of hunger and the struggles of life, society expects women to provide for their families regardless of the harsh conditions they encounter. This is reflected in the Setswana sayings *õmmangwana o tshwara thipa ka ha bogalengö* (literally: a woman holds the sharp edge of the knife) and *mosadi thari ya sechaba* (an idiom that portrays woman as the backbone of the nation).

Rural women are the poorest of the poor and the most economically marginalized. As a result, they are severely affected by national/international economic crises such as the current global economic downfall. Moreover, disempowering cultural norms often impinge upon their ability to overcome the negative socio-economic circumstances in which they live. Since Batswana¹ women, for example, are traditionally confined to the domestic sphere, they do not have the same opportunities as their male counterparts to improve their economic status and so their living conditions. As Nkomazana (2008:83) observes *õthe traditional Tswana status quo, which [is] governed by certain laws and norms, [is] biased against women, they are socially constructed as inferior and subjects to menö. As such, Batswana women are disempowered and disenfranchised.*

As a theology student and Minister of Religion, I have often observed that the Bible is a powerful resource to which many poor people appeal in their distress.

¹ The word *Batswana* refers to the people of Botswana. The singular of *Batswana* is *Motswana*.

[The Bible] plays an important role in the lives of many, particularly the poor and the marginalized. The Bible is a symbol of the presence of God with them and a resource in their struggle for survival, liberation and life (West 1999:9).

Similarly, Nadar (2000:67) argues that regardless of the Bible's androcentric bias and its patriarchal nature, it has positive motifs and role models that people look up to in their reading. As such, they use it as a crutch on which to lean in difficult times. Given the Bible's significance for the poor - and particularly the women amongst them, I find it necessary to use the Bible in my attempts to inspire poor rural women to greater socio-economic agency.

The Bible is full of stories depicting the rise of previously disadvantaged persons. One such story is reflected in the book of Ruth (henceforth *Ruth*). This book details the ways in which Ruth and Naomi - two rural, disenfranchised widows - overcame the patriarchal constraints of their society in order to secure their socio-economic well-being. I therefore find it appropriate to probe this book for strategies which may ultimately empower poor, rural, Botswana women to greater socio-economic agency. To my mind, a social-deconstructive analysis of *Ruth* would be best suited for such a task (see section 6. below).

This study therefore posits that a socio-historical reading of *Ruth* will elicit aspects of ancient Israelite women's agency which can then be used to inspire greater socio-economic agency amongst poor rural women today.

Having laid the foundation for the study, I will now turn to the research background.

1.2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

Poverty stands out as the fundamental "social affliction of our time" (Ramaribana 2010:39) and thus the most significant challenge facing rural women. It is without question a "threat to life and it continues to deny people the fullness of life" (Hewitt 2009: 34).

While poverty affects human beings of both genders, women are the most vulnerable social group to poverty worldwide. "Women's poverty, which is growing in visibility, is arguably rooted in demographic trends, cultural patterns and political economy" (Moghadam 2005:1). This means that socio-economic structures lead to women's impoverishment, systematically denying them the resources to empower themselves economically. My own country, Botswana, for example, is reported to have the highest percentage of female-headed households worldwide

(BCPRM² 2008:8). Statistically, it has been discovered that 34% of Botswana female-headed households are living in poverty as opposed to 27% of their male counterparts (BCPRM 2008:8), with 50-60% of the rural population being estimated as poor and female-headed (Ditshwanelo 2007). Women constitute 70% of the 1.3 million poor (HDR³ 1995:4). Given these statistics, it would seem that poverty has indeed developed a "woman's face"

As intimated above, patriarchal systems, such as cultural norms and values, ensnare women, relegating them to subordinate positions as dependants and minors. Patriarchy therefore tends to deprive women of their agency - or at least minimise it - and renders them helpless in the face of economic crises. Patriarchy has thus contributed to women's economic disenfranchisement. Women must therefore be encouraged to employ greater socio-economic agency in order to survive.

For instance, I have observed that very few poor Botswana rural women are able to obtain land, even though most of them are dependent on subsistence farming.⁴ The reasons for this are varied, but include illiteracy and the women's lack of someone to negotiate on their behalf. As women's literacy is patriarchally controlled and the negotiators in land matters are typically men, the patriarchal and systemic nature of these women's disenfranchisement is clearly evident.

Furthermore, Botswana women are generally dependent on marriage and their relationships with men in order to gain access to economic resources. This is a social construct and women have been made to believe that it is correct. Marriage is thus seen as crucial to women's economic survival.

Similar conditions are found throughout most modern and ancient patriarchal societies, including ancient Israel. The economic plight of disenfranchised women in ancient Israel - especially that of the widows - is addressed by religious law, for example Deuteronomy 10:18, 24: 17-21, 26: 12-14 and Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22. It is also demonstrated beautifully in *Ruth*. This story relates the strategies employed by two disenfranchised widows, Naomi and Ruth, in overcoming the strictures of patriarchy and ensuring their economic survival. Eliciting these strategies will enable me to facilitate increased socio-economic agency

² BCPRM = Botswana Census Poverty Report Map.

³ HDR = Human Development Report.

⁴ Subsistence farming is generally not an effective means of earning and sustaining livelihood. This is due to unreliable rainfall and the seasonal nature of crop production. Furthermore, women who own arable land are often unable to fence it, with the result that cattle raid their fields, leaving them empty handed. For most, therefore, subsistence farming does not lead to economic self-sufficiency. Even so, land remains an important economic commodity that women cannot afford to do without.

amongst poor rural Batswana women. In order to do so, I will employ a deconstructive socio-historical analysis of *Ruth*, which will entail the following:

- a) A thorough socio-historical analysis of *Ruth's* context in terms of the book's general date of composition (the period of Israel's history in which *Ruth* is likely to have been composed);
- b) Identification of the socio-economic factors which contributed to rural women's impoverishment at that time; and
- c) Building upon Efthimiadis's deconstructive reading of *Ruth* in order to identify the strategies which Ruth and Naomi used in securing their economic future within the then patriarchal culture.

1.3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

1.3.1 Research Questions

1.3.1 Main Research Question

The main research question for this study is:

How might a deconstructive socio-historical reading of *Ruth* elicit aspects of ancient Israelite women's agency in securing their socio-economic future?

1.3.2 Sub-questions

In an attempt to adequately answer the above question, the study has addressed the following:

- What were the main factors that contributed to women's impoverishment in ancient Israel?
- To which resources could ancient Israelite women appeal to alleviate their plight?
- Which strategies did Naomi and Ruth employ in overcoming their socio-economic distress?
- How may this study be used to inspire poor, rural women to greater socio-economic agency?

1.3.2 Objectives

1.3.2.1 Major Objective

This study aims at conducting a deconstructive socio-historical reading of *Ruth* that will elicit aspects of ancient Israelite women's agency that might be used to inspire poor, rural women to greater socio-economic agency.

1.3.2.2 Secondary objectives

- To examine the socio-economic conditions affecting women at the time in which *Ruth* was written;
- To investigate the main factors (including societal roles) that contributed to the impoverishment of women in ancient Israel;
- To identify resources that ancient Israelite women could appeal to in order to alleviate their plight of women's agency;
- To identify the strategies which Naomi and Ruth employed in overcoming their socio-economic distress.

1.4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is framed by Masenya's *bosadi*⁵ (womanhood) approach to Biblical texts. Masenya pioneered her approach while reading for her 1996 doctoral thesis, "Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South-African context: a *bosadi* (womanhood) perspective". The *bosadi* approach draws its name "from a Northern Sotho [Setswana⁶] word *mosadi* which means woman" (Masenya 2001:148). While it is rooted in the "African American womanist approach which is concerned with multiple forms of oppression such as racism, classism and sexism" (Masenya 2001:147), this approach takes into account the unique features of the African-South African context and African culture (Masenya 2001:147-148). "The *bosadi* approach to the reading of the Bible grew out of ... commitment to take seriously the unique experience of African women in South Africa as they interact with the bible" (Masenya 2009:157). As such, it includes the following elements (Masenya 2001:148-149):

⁵ The Setswana word *bosadi* may refer to private parts of a woman. However, in the context of this study, the word is not used in that way.

⁶ Setswana is a language spoken in Botswana. While the term may also be used to refer to the culture of the Batswana it is here used in the context of language. I have chosen to use the word Tswana to refer to the culture so as to make a distinction between the culture and language.

- Critiquing the oppressive elements of African culture manifested in women's lives, while reviving aspects which uplift the status of women.
- Critiquing oppressive elements of the Bible, while highlighting its liberative ones.
- The interplay of post-apartheid racism, sexism, classism, and the African culture in shaping the context of African-South African women and their reading of the Bible.
- The concept of *botho/ubuntu* which seriously implies that the liberation of all African women in [South Africa] calls for the involvement of all Africans (both men and women) and the involvement of all South Africans.
- The significance of the family for African peoples, and its importance in providing a balanced woman's liberation perspective.

While Masenya limits her approach to the South African context, I find it equally applicable to the Botswana context as Northern Sotho traditional norms and values are closely linked with those of the Batswana. For example, as I have indicated above, certain aspects of traditional Tswana culture are oppressive for women, curtailing their socio-economic agency. Using *bosadi* as a theoretical framework will enable me to critique various patriarchally motivated socio-economic aspects of Tswana culture and ancient Israel which portray women as sub-human. However, it should be noted that the *bosadi* approach focuses neither on present-day economic systems nor on the economic dimensions of the texts studied. An in-depth critique of the socio-economic aspects of the Tswana society and ancient Israel will thus not be possible on account of this limitation. Such an in-depth critique will become part of my proposed doctoral work. Even so, the *bosadi* approach will allow me to navigate between the contexts of the production of biblical texts and the present day South African [read: Botswana] woman bible reader (Masenya 2007:57). I find the *bosadi* approach appealing in that it does not only reread the texts through the lens of the marginalized African... woman's experiences but also challenges ideologies of poverty/classism, sexism, ethnicity... as they appear in these texts (Masenya 2009:158). It thus actively examines African and biblical culture, highlighting their positive contributions and critically engaging with their negative ones.

1.5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study is purely qualitative in nature. It will be conducted by means of collecting and analysing data from existing literature that pertains to the socio-economic conditions of women's lives as depicted in *Ruth*.

Methodologically, the study will employ socio-historical analysis and Efthimiadis (1991 and 1995) application of deconstruction to *Ruth* in order to achieve its aims.

1.5.1. Socio-historical Analysis

Socio-historical analysis is primarily interested in the historical and sociological world that lies behind the text (West 1993:27). In other words, it takes seriously the socio-historical context/s from which a text originated. In this study, *socio-historical analysis* will be used to:

- a) Determine the context in which Ruth lived, according to the general time of the book's composition;
- b) Identify the main factors that contributed to the impoverishment of women in ancient Israel at that time, and
- c) Identify the resources to which women could appeal for their socio-economic survival.

Locating *Ruth* in its socio-historical context will be critical for my understanding of Ruth and Naomi's agency as depicted in the book; it will help me to appreciate the broader socio-economic factors which could have influenced their disenfranchisement as women and widows, as well as the strategies which they employed to overturn their socio-economic plight. This, in turn, will facilitate my deconstructive reading of the book as it will assist me to comprehend to what extent the women's actions conformed with and/or challenged the confines of the patriarchal ancient Israelite culture.

1.5.2. Deconstructive Analysis

According to Efthimiadis (1991:44), Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction is not a methodological approach *per se*. Rather, it is a subversive principle, a *writing*, which exposes the 'gaps' or inconsistencies within Western metaphysical thought and then proceeds to rewrite in them the entire traditions, thus subverting it from within (Efthimiadis 1995:59). Even so,

Efthimiadis (1991:53) avers that deconstructive tenets may be adapted⁷ in a responsible way which promotes dialogue between it and other texts... without contravening it as an activity of *writing* and neutralizing its transformative action. For Efthimiadis (1991:54), this leaves the critic (exegete/interpreter/Bible scholar) with three alternatives:

- i) she/he can demonstrate how the text can be utilized to exemplify the deconstruction of its genetic context, i.e. the context in which it was generated, or
- ii) she/he can (subsequent to prior analysis (be it of the text's oppositional claims or by any other method)) demonstrate how the text may be used to launch a deconstruction of the text's citational context, i.e. the context in which the text is read (the context of the reader), or
- iii) A conflation of i) and ii).

In her approach, Efthimiadis (1991:56) focuses on the narrative technique of alienation and identification, which alienates/backgrounds the male characters of *Ruth* while identifying/foregrounding its female ones. Her analysis thus focuses on discovering the subversive elements within the text which overturn the male/female hierarchy of *Ruth's* patriarchal context and bring about a complete re-interpretation and transformation of certain legal institutions which endorse and enforce [this] hierarchy... by means of suppressing and violating the identity of its female members (Efthimiadis 1991:56-57). In other words, Efthimiadis opts for the first of the three alternatives referred to above.

Efthimiadis's insights and my reworking of them will be used to pry open the gaps in *Ruth's* patriarchal context, with the specific purpose of highlighting Ruth and Naomi's agency in reversing their socio-economic plight.

Combining the socio-historical and deconstructive approaches is apt to my chosen theoretical framework, which seeks, amongst others, to identify women-denying and women-affirming aspects of Biblical (ancient Israelite) culture and African context/s. The results of both analyses will enable me to suggest biblically grounded means of inspiring greater socio-economic agency amongst poor rural women today.

⁷ On the necessity of adapting Deconstruction when reading literary/Biblical texts, see Efthimiadis 1991:51-53.

1.6. STRUCTURE OF DISSERTATION

1.6.1 Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter provides a brief background for the need to do this study, its research questions and objectives, the theoretical framework informing it, the methodology it employs, and the overall structure of the dissertation.

1.6.2 Chapter Two: Setting the Scene

The chapter will analyse the probable socio-historical and socio-economic background of *Ruth* (including the role and position of women) according to its general date of composition, identify the main factors that contributed to the impoverishment of women in ancient Israel at that time, and identify the resources to which women could appeal for their socio-economic survival.

1.6.3 Chapter Three: A Socio-deconstructive Bosadi Reading of the book of Ruth

Having set the scene in Chapter 2, I will then build upon Eftimiadis' deconstructive reading of *Ruth* in order to elucidate the strategies which Ruth and Naomi used in overturning their socio-economic plight and securing their future.

1.6.4 Chapter Four: Tying The Knots- Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter will conclude on the research findings, drawing together the results of the preceding chapters, and make various preliminary recommendations as to how the insights gained may be used to inspire poor rural women to greater socio-economic agency.

CHAPTER TWO

SETTING THE SCENE

In order better to understand *Ruth*, I need to trace the various aspects of the sociological background which it reflects. In this chapter, I will confine myself to the socio-economic aspects of this background without going into a detailed critique thereof (see 1.4.). In order best to discuss *Ruth*'s socio-economic background, I will present the text's historical and sociological context. I will begin by deliberating on the date and purpose of *Ruth* as this will help me to determine the *Sitz im Leben* which it reflects. Having established the date, I will then discuss the nature of Israelite society at that time. I will focus primarily on the mode of production employed and the impact it had upon ancient Israel's social fabric. Since the study deals specifically with the socio-economic status of women during the time of *Ruth*, I will conclude by discussing the socio-economic role and place of women in Israelite society. This chapter will thus enable me to identify the main factors that contributed to women's impoverishment in ancient Israel as well as the resources to which they could appeal to alleviate their plight, thus satisfying the first three of the four objectives set out in 1.3.2.2. (The fourth and final objective will be satisfied through my deconstructive analysis of *Ruth* in Chapter 3).

2.1 THE DATE AND PURPOSE OF *RUTH*

Understanding the socio-economic context of *Ruth* is vital to determining the agency which *Ruth* and Naomi employed in securing their socio-economic wellbeing. However, it is difficult to date *Ruth* with any precision. The debates surrounding the date of this book have been extensive, engaging many Biblical scholars, with no fixed date emerging in any way. As such, Biblical scholars have variously dated *Ruth* in the monarchic (pre-exilic) and early post-exilic times (between the 5th and 4th centuries BCE), adducing reasons such as the book's language, its relation to Deuteronomic law, its perspective on intermarriage, and the genealogy of David (*Ruth* 4).

The dating of *Ruth* and its purpose are closely linked, in that one cannot be dealt with outside of the other. In this section, I will therefore try to grapple with *Ruth*'s date and purpose, utilising both internal and external evidence in support of my arguments. I will begin with the possible post-exilic dating of the book, as this is the dating which most appealed to me when I began my studies.

2.1.1 *The Post- Exilic Dating of Ruth*

2.1.1.1 *Internal Evidence*

Scholars who prefer a post-exilic date for *Ruth* propose that the book was written between the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. With regard to internal evidence, they rely heavily on linguistic clues within the text, primarily on the presence of Aramaisms and late Hebrew forms, as well as the book's reflection of Deuteronomic laws.

a. Aramaisms and Late Hebrew Forms

Ruth is found to have traces of the Aramaic language. According to Larkin (1996:19), Aramaic began to supplant Hebrew as the common language of Israel from the Babylonian period and onwards.⁸ Finding Aramaic traces within the book would therefore seem to support to its post-exilic dating.

In terms of the above, Larkin (1996:19) puts forward the Aramaic nature of two verbs, *šābar*, Piel, to wait [and] *āgan*, Niphal, to be chained.

Further, *Ruth* is found to have some characteristics of late Hebrew forms (Morris 1968:232). For example, it is averred that the idiom *nās'ā 'iššāh* for take a wife in 1.4 is of later origin than the more common *lāqah 'iššāh* (Larkin 1996:19).

b. Ruth's Relation to Deuteronomic Law

Some of the customs in *Ruth* find parallels with Deuteronomic law albeit not exact ones. The shoe ceremony as depicted in *Ruth* 4:8 is slightly different from that found in Deuteronomy 25:9. In *Ruth* 4:8 it is the anonymous kinsman who removed his sandal and handed it over to Boaz as a confirmation of the transaction in which he had given Boaz his right to redeem Elimelech's land. However, in Deuteronomy 25:9, the sister-in-law of the man who refuses to act as a *levir* removes his sandal and spits in his face as a symbol of his future fate. Furthermore, *Ruth* seems to allude to the levirate marriage set out in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 although the parallels are once again not exact. The *levir* in *Ruth* is not the brother-in-law as in Deuteronomy, but rather a distant relative: Boaz is a kinsman of Elimelech, not the brother of Mahlon.

⁸ Anderson (1975:472) states his agreement as follows: "Aramaic ... gradually became the common tongue of the Jewish people during the post-exilic period. Although Aramaic became particularly popular at this time, actually it is at least as old as Hebrew, and both belong to a common family of Semitic languages".

For those who adhere to the post-exilic dating of *Ruth*, the Deuteronomic laws are to be dated early within the history of ancient Israel, necessitating that any discrepancies with them are relegated to a later date. For example, they put forward that the shoe ceremony was no longer understood and that levirate marriage had fallen into disuse during the time in which *Ruth* was written, hence postulating that *Ruth* was written much later, during post-exilic times (Larkin 1996:21).

In the same vein, it is believed that *Ruth* counters the narrow exclusivism of Deuteronomy 23:3-8 (Sasson 1979:246), which forbids Moabites and Ammonites to enter the assembly of Israel up to the 10th generation, because they did not meet you with bread and water on the road when you came out of Egypt and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor (Deut 23:4). *Ruth* is therefore considered as a polemic against the legislations of Deut 23:3-8 (ibid). Given the above, along with the early dating of Deuteronomy, it is obvious for the propounders of this theory that *Ruth* must have been written in later, post-exilic times. For them, *Ruth* was written with the thrust of Jonah, to strengthen the theological position that non-Jews, provided they were faithful to Yahweh, and as such should be acceptable to the Jews (Laffey 2000:553).

2.1.1.2 External Evidence

Proponents of a post-exilic dating for *Ruth* also base their arguments on the canonical placing of the book and the universal attitude that it espouses.

a. Canonical Placing of Ruth

Ruth is classified under the *ketubim*, the writings (Laffey 2000:553). The canonical placing of *Ruth* suggests to some that it was written after the prophets, and that the latter corpus was closed by the time *Ruth* was accepted as canonical. This, for them, points to a post-exilic dating.

b. Universal Attitude

Ruth has a very positive attitude towards the traditionally despised Moabites, to the extent of applauding a mixed marriage between Boaz, a forefather of the iconic king, David, and Ruth, the Moabitess. In the early post-exilic period, mixed marriages between the Israelites and Moabites were prohibited (see e.g. Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 13:23-25). For some scholars,

this suggests that *Ruth* was written as a protest to Nehemiah's bid to annul all mixed marriages (Smith 1962:830).

By the same token, it is also argued that *Ruth* dates from a tranquil period between the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah on the one hand, and the conquests of Alexander on the other, (i.e. late fifth to mid-fourth century BC), when Moab was no longer an enemy, but when the prohibitions on mixed marriages imposed by Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 9-10; Neh. 13:23-29) were attracting some resistance (Larkin 1996:22). It is therefore assumed that *Ruth* was written to combat the narrow vision of a closed community propounded by Ezra (9-10) and Nehemiah (13:23-29) (Sasson 1979:246).⁹

2.1.1.3 Evaluation

For me, the internal evidence adduced for *Ruth*'s post-exilic dating is rather weak in and of itself. The presence of two possible (but disputed) Aramaic verbs is insufficient to date the entire book, particularly since *āgan* is a *hapax legomenon* and it would therefore be rather bold to consider it as an Aramaic verb, as Sasson (1979:244) indicates. Moreover, language is not static; it evolves from one generation to another. The Aramaisms may well have existed in earlier periods (see footnote 8), or their presence could point to the possible later editing of *Ruth*.

The same may be said of late expressions: one cannot base the dating of a book on the existence of two mere possibly late expressions. *Ruth* could have been composed earlier and edited later, thus accounting for late expressions and Aramaisms.

The same holds true for the canonical argument. *Ruth* could have been written earlier and only canonised as Scripture at a later date.

As for the dating of *Ruth vis-a-vis* discrepancies with Deuteronomic laws and injunctions, it may be said that it is possible that both shoe customs existed simultaneously and that Deuteronomy chose to focus on the one which was least understood at the time in which the latter book was written/compiled. It is also possible that *Ruth* predated Deuteronomy. The assumption that this is not the case is merely that - an assumption. Furthermore, *Ruth* may not be dealing with a levirate marriage at all (see 3.5).

⁹ Similarly, Harvey (1962:132) states that the "content of the book of *Ruth* and the story as it appears suits the special concern of post-exilic period with the problems of particularism".

With regard to the mixed marriage issue, it is clear that David had Moabite ancestry or, in the very least, strong Moabite connections (see Ruth 4:18-22). Ruth could, therefore, have been written to legitimate David's contested enthronement (see 2 Sam 20:1-2). Given Ezra-Nehemiah's policies against intermarriage, however, it is also conceivable that the book could have been written or at least used as a polemic against these policies. I will conclude on this matter once I have examined the arguments for the monarchic or pre-exilic dating of *Ruth*.

2.1.2 *The Pre-Exilic Dating of Ruth*

Taking note of the above counter-points to *Ruth*'s post-exilic dating, other scholars argue for a pre-exilic composition of the book which dates between 10th and 7th century (Trible 1992:843). Even so, those who spearhead this theory use the same type of argument as their opponents (see e.g. Von Rad, Hals, Gerleman, Beattie and Niditch in Larkin 1996:25 to name but a few).

2.1.2.1 *Internal Evidence*

Language forms one of the key components in an argument for an earlier date, just as it does in the arguments for a later date. Block (2008:673), for example, ascribes *Ruth* to an earlier dating, positing that its author employs at least ten linguistic features that are characteristics of [pre-exilic] Standard biblical Hebrew (SBH).¹⁰

Ruth is also said to contain archaisms (Sasson 1979:245) which, according to Harvey (1962:132), are entirely appropriate to the earlier period of Hebrew Literature. A few examples may be cited here: the use of *ʿyēbimah* 'for sister' (1:15); *ʿShaddai* 'for God' (1:20-21); and a possibly archaic divine epithet *m'ōd* (1:13) (Larkin 1996:20).

Furthermore, *Ruth* makes use of the *paragogic nun*, which is deemed a feature of earlier Biblical Hebrew. Still related to linguistic argument, is the use of *ʿ-ti* as a second person feminine singular suffixed to a perfect conjunction (Sasson 1979:245). This affects *ʿwēyārady* (3:3) and *wēšākābty* (3:4) (Morris 1968:236).

2.1.2.2 *External Evidence*

As indicated previously (2.1.1.3.), *Ruth* could have been written as an apology for David's kingship (Block 2008:673), thus placing its composition during his lifetime. The narratives in the book of Samuel suggest that David faced some resistance during his reign particularly

¹⁰ Unfortunately, these are not specified.

from the Saulide party (2 Sam 19:40-20:2). The opposition may have been due to his lowly place of origin in Bethlehem and his contemptuous Moabite connection. It is therefore in this context that Block (2008:673) believes that the author of *Ruth* intended to highlight Bethlehem as an oasis of tranquillity and honor in the troubled period of judges, and Ruth, David's Moabite ancestress, as a paragon of virtue.

2.1.2.3 Evaluation

To my mind, the linguistic evidence adduced by the proponents of *Ruth*'s pre-exilic dating is hardly any stronger than that adduced by the proponents of a post-exilic dating. For instance, one could easily argue that *Ruth*'s author may have used archaic forms in a later period to make the book sound more authentic and provide an antique flavour to his/her narrative.

Furthermore, the *paragogic nun* is not distinctive either to *Ruth* or to pre-exilic Biblical literature. As Sasson (1979:245) indicates, the morphology [of the *paragogic nun*] cannot be separated in function from that of the *energic nun* and therefore the usage is known to all phases of Biblical Hebrew.

Similarly, quoting GKC,¹¹ Sasson (1979:245) shows that the peculiar use of the *óti* may also be found in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, which date from the post-exilic period.

To my mind, the linguistic arguments proffered by both groups are thus hardly convincing. As Sasson (1979:224) opines, the use of linguistic arguments is difficult at best as we have too small a corpus of extra-biblical Hebrew vocabulary from which to draw comparison.

I find far more convincing the view that *Ruth* was written to legitimate David's kingship on account of his Moabite ancestry. This, for me, is supported by the Deuteronomic ban on Moabites (and Ammonites) as well as the clear links between David and Moab. As Gow (1992:182) contends, 'the book of Ruth [should] best be seen as a defence of the Moabite stain in David's ancestry'. *Ruth* therefore sets out to give an apologia for the kinship of David. I would, therefore, have to agree with Gottwald's suggestion that '[t]he story in final form need be no later than the united monarchy' (1985:554).

¹¹ GKC refers to the Hebrew Grammar Book by Gesenius, W, Kautzsch, E, and Cowley, A.E.

2.1.3 Conclusions regarding the date of Ruth

It is evident from the preceding discussions that internal evidence is inadequate to precisely date the book of Ruth. Inter-textual allusions, such as the shoe ceremony, are also of little help as their date cannot be determined exactly either. Neither can language be used convincingly to support an argument as it is dynamic and evolves from one generation to another. As Sasson (1979:244) rightly put it, "dating a Hebrew text on literary and linguistic bases will continue to be the most unreliable approach as long as [the] extra biblical corpus of Hebrew vocabulary remains as sparse as it is presently".

This leaves me with the external evidence which points to legitimating David's ascendance to the Israelite throne and Ezra-Nehemiah's anti-intermarriage policies. While these two periods are separated by some 550 years, I believe that both may obtain as *Ruth's* context. To my mind, the story of Ruth may well have been composed in the time of David's monarchy to legitimate his reign and then put to use much later as a polemic against Ezra-Nehemiah's policy on intermarriage. This would explain the presence of both archaisms and Aramaisms in the text as well as discrepancies between Ruth and Deuteronomic law. Given the above, I will therefore discuss conditions in both periods which may have given rise to *Ruth*: the time of David's reign and the early post-exilic or Persian period.

2.2 THE SOCIETAL STRUCTURE OF ISRAEL DURING THE PRE-MONARCHIC AND MONARCHIC PERIODS

In this section, I will begin by describing the nature of the Israelite society for both the pre-monarchic and monarchic period, this I will do based on the fact that the rise of the monarchy is firmly rooted in the pre-monarchic period. Moreover, understanding the conditions prevalent during the monarchic period *vis-a-vis* those of the pre-monarchic period will assist me to determine how and to what extent the advent of the monarchy changed the living conditions of ordinary Israelites, particularly ordinary women, who are the focus of my study on *Ruth*.

2.2.1 *The Nature of Israelite Society- Pre-monarchic and Monarchic Periods – An Overview*

The pre-monarchic period is referred to variously as the tribal¹² period, the period of the Judges¹³, the settlement/conquest period, or Iron Age 1 (Meyers 1988:14-16). The monarchic period may be placed between the time of Moses and the foundation of the monarchy. Since neither of these poles can be precisely dated, Meyers (1988:15) has postulated a working date of 1200-1000 BCE for the pre-monarchic period.¹⁴ The two periods, as I have indicated above, are interconnected in that the sociological setting of monarchic Israel cannot be understood outside the history and sociological background of the period which precedes it. The pre-monarchic period is the window through which the events of the monarchic period can be viewed and, as such, enables us to measure the extent of the changes that took place during the course of the transition from one period to another.

According to West (1995:31), during the pre-monarchic period,

Israel was made up of various peasant¹⁵ groups of families and clans who had left the cities because of the political conflicts in the cities and because of the burdens of having to pay tribute to the rulers of the cities ... These peasant groups were joined in about 1200 BCE by a group of Hebrew slaves that came from Egypt, where they had resisted the rule of Pharaoh.

Similarly, Gottwald (1985:284) opines that Israel burst into history as an ethnically and socioeconomically mixed coalition of a majority tribally organized peasants (80 percent or more of the populace), along with lesser number of pastoral nomads, mercenaries and freebooters, assorted craftsmen, and renegade and priests. Israel was therefore made up of migrants from both Canaan and Egypt. According to Bright (1981:162), Israel existed as a loosely organized system of (traditionally twelve) tribes, a view which West (1995:32) also holds: [f]or two hundred years Israel existed as a loose grouping of clans and tribes of peasants, surrounded by cities under monarchical rule, most of whom were hostile to Israel.

¹² The term "premonarchic," ... like 'tribal', is descriptive of the sociopolitical character of the time" (Meyers 1988:14-15).

¹³ Meyers (1988:15) opines that "the period of the Judges," relates the era to the biblical book that most scholars consider a product and reflection of the experience of Israel when it first established itself in the central hill country of Palestine. The word "Judges" represents not only the biblical book by that name but also the biblical term for the tribal and supratribal figures who provided some approximation of national leadership during a time when a formal, centralized government had not been established."

¹⁴ This period is often referred to as Iron Age 1(IA1) (John. C.H. Laughlin 2000:93).

¹⁵ 'Peasant' is "a term which means the politically-economically marginal element of society from whose produce elite drew their life. Peasant is characterized as one whose labor yields produce enjoyed by others" (Brueggemann 1993:203). This footnote is not part of the quotation from West.

In addition, Wright (1992:762) contends that Israel emerged as a social system based on a broad equality of kinship groups... without a centralized, elite power base.ö

In view of the nature of pre-monarchic Israel as a loose grouping of clans with no professional and permanent military force¹⁶ one would suggest that the Israelite political system may not have been structurally organized, as a result, the Israelites were failing to defend themselves against the Philistines raids. This has led scholars such as Mulk (1997:82) to suggest that the need for a monarchic state in Israel was initiated by attacks from the neighbouring cities.¹⁷

The monarchic period brought about a complete change in Israelite socio-economic structure. It brought about an evolution in leadership from the tribal confederation of the Judges period to the kingdom state. The end of the tribal confederation came with Saul being elected as the first Israelite monarch. Saul is therefore considered to be the first King of Israel¹⁸, reigning during what has become known as the period of the united monarchy.¹⁹

2.2.2 Socio-economic Strata of Israel during the Pre-Monarchic and Monarchic periods

In this section, I will discuss the mode of production in the pre-monarchic and monarchic periods. Describing the mode of production prevalent in these periods will assist me to determine the socio-economic place of the ordinary Israelite and, within that, the socio-economic status of ordinary Israelite women. I begin with a definition of the concept, ‘mode of production’

2.2.2.1 Definition: Mode of Production

According to Gottwald (1993:147), mode of production refers to ‘the combination of the *material forces of production* (including human physical and mental power) and the *social relations of production*, the latter meaning the way that producers (and nonproducers where there is class) organize [society’s] work and appropriate the labor product.’ Simkins

¹⁶1 Sam. 8:19-20 seems to suggest that there was no professional army in place.

¹⁷ The monarchy arose as a response to the people’s demand of wanting to be like other nations (1 Samuel 8:20). According to Muth (1997: 82), this demand was initiated by “the need to meet the external threat posed by the Philistines” who were always at war with the Israelites (see further 1 Sam 8:20). “The Bible reports that the Philistines asserted their hegemony over the Israelites by denying them knowledge and practice of iron smithing, thereby preventing their access to iron weapon (1 Sam. 13:19-22)” (Gottwald 1979:415). It is therefore in this context that Horsley (2009:51) posits that the Israelites could not “muster enough military power, with their ad hoc peasant militias, to fend off the raids by the Philistines armed with superior weapons of iron”. There was therefore a need for a strong, permanent, and professional military force. The monarchy therefore arose for security reasons.

¹⁸ Nevertheless “the oldest source (1 Sam. 9:16:10:1) carefully avoids calling him a king (*melek*), but describes him instead as a ‘prince’ or ‘leader’ (*nagîd*)” (Anderson 1988:215).

¹⁹ “The monarchy was the period when Israel was ruled by one king” (Kanis & Togarasei 2010:64).

(1999:127) observes that “the mode of production reproduces the social relations through which production is possible”. To my mind, this suggests that the structure of production determines the structure of distributions which in return forms or define the economic base of a society. The structure of the political system determines the mode of production.

2.2.2.2 *Household Mode of Production – Pre-Monarchic Israel*

Gottwald (1993b:6) names Israel’s pre-monarchic mode of production “communitarian”. Meyers (1988:142) names it “household mode of production”, a term which she equates to Sahlins’ “familial mode of production”. Similarly, Mosala (1993:266) posits that:

In the premonarchic period the basic economy unit was *beth-‘av*, or father’s house. The labor of the family was differentiated on the basis of age and sex to accomplish the process of producing the basic means of production. Grain and fruits were grown, and limited husbandry was practised if the *beth-‘av* owned some sheep and goats and few cattle.

The production unit was basically the family. “The *beth ab* was the self-sustaining unit, which owned the means of production – primarily the land (*nahalah*), which was shared in common by the members of the kinship unit” (Simkins 2001:4). Likewise, Gottwald (1980:292) states, “[t]he Israelite *beth-av* was economically autonomous in the sense that it did not owe any of its produce to higher authorities in the form of payments in kind which so heavily burdened the subjects of the feudal Canaanite city-states”. This view expounds on the fact that the peasants produce was specifically aimed at meeting their own needs and not those of the monarchic political economy. In other words, the household mode of production was anti-surplus in that it did not encourage any excess production. The peasants held the land for their self-sufficiency and livelihood. In this context, Chaney (1986:62) contends that “premonarchic Israel understood Yahweh to distribute this economic base [land] to peasant vassals in a manner which sought to assure secure and sufficient arable land and thereby to livelihood”. The peasants therefore consumed most of what they produced. To this Gottwald (1993b:7) adds “[a]ll members of the household enjoyed the fruits of their arduous collective labour”.

Since the social structure of the pre-monarchic period was guided and governed by kinship relations, Gottwald (1985:285) would like to argue that “[t]he socioeconomic relations of Israelites were egalitarian²⁰ in the sense that the entire populace was assured of

²⁰ Cryer (1992:541) quotes Lemche who argues that egalitarian ideology primarily serves to strengthen the ties of solidarity among the members of a society, but that it is also used to oppress less wealthy members of tribes. He is of the view that there are always economic inequalities.

approximately equal access to resources by means of their organization into extended families, protective associations of families. The assumption is that there were no class distinctions as a result of the egalitarian ideology. As such, it is assumed that all the people are on equal footing. However, 1 Samuel 8:3 suggests that this was not the case. It states that Samuel's sons "did not walk in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice." This verse presupposes socio-economic inequalities and imbalances. Some scholars therefore suggest that these imbalances are the deeper underlying reasons for the formation of the monarchy, over and above the external threat posed by the Philistines.²¹

The emergence of the monarchy gave rise to a new mode of production, which is discussed below.

2.2.2.3 *Tributary Mode of Production- Monarchic Israel*

The monarchy initiated a new economic base as a shift in the political system initiated a shift in the national economy and mode of production. As we have seen, the mode of production in pre-monarchic Israel was family-based and thus free from political claim. By contrast, in the monarchic period, the mode of production became intertwined with the political economy. Even so, the mode of production in the monarchic period resembles that of the pre-monarchic period to some extent in that the productive unit continued to be the family. Simkins (1999:127) argues,

The dominant mode of production in early Israel ... did not die out with the introduction of the monarchy. Although the increasing social and economic inequalities that resulted in the establishment of the monarchy produced new social relations, political structures, and symbols, the new mode of production appropriated, and was transformed by, the earlier mode of production. The social relations of early Israel continued to function in the social formation of monarchic Israel.

It should, however, be understood that production was no longer controlled by family and kinship relations as was the case in the pre-monarchic period but determined and controlled by access to material needed by the king. West (2011:515) contends that "the monarchy acquired the right to exact tribute in the form of products or a levy." It is therefore in this context that Simkins (1999:135) further argues that, during the monarchic period the political superstructure was "expressed most clearly by the establishment of kingship, [which] posed a challenge to the

²¹ Using 1 Samuel 8 as the basis for his argument, West (2011:514-515) contends that the Israelites were "[d]isillusioned by internal corruption (v.3) and the constant externally-driven rhythm of being a farmer one day and a soldier the next (v.5), the people yearn for another system of governance, more like the city-state systems they see around them (v.5b), where there is a centralised system of governance and where a professional army does the work of keeping the Philistines at bay".

economic base and ideological superstructure [by] transforming the social relations of production and distribution. The centralized government initiated a decline in household-based economy which shifted to a politically-based economy. Therefore, "communitarian" mode of production (Gottwald in Jobling 1991:241) or "household mode of production" Meyers (1988:142), shifted to "tributary mode of production" during the monarchic period.²² Jobling quotes Gottwald as he describes the tributary mode of production:

The primary producers were legally free cultivators who were in use-possession of their land and tools but who were tributary to a state in the forms of tax (= rent) in kind and labor conscription. The exploiting class was composed of state officials and clients groups dependent on the state favor or sponsorship (Gottwald in Jobling 1991:241).

Gottwald (1993b:6) avers that while the "Tributary Mode of Production... [left] the work relations of the great majority of people largely unchanged, it laid heavy tribute on the fruits of their labor." As Lewellen (1992:162) points out, production became a "political process, that is, it [was] manifested through the exercise of power and dominance."

I would like to suggest, with Gottwald (1993b:6) that this kind of production resulted in the production of two classes in ancient Israel: the dominators who represent the exploitative ruling class and the dominated who are represented by the peasants. The tax was extracted from the peasants' agricultural surplus.²³ "This extradition of surplus was accomplished by a variety of mechanisms, including imperial tribute, domestic taxation, commercial imposts, corvée, slave labor, rent, or debt servicing" (Gottwald 1993b:6). The political officials under the leadership of the king regulated the economy from their own strategic and political point of view (Heyns 1990:30). The ruling class became the surplus takers while the dominated became the surplus producers. Gottwald (1993b:6) contends that:

The dominated tribute-bearing class consisted of peasants, pastoralists, artisans, priests, slaves, and unskilled workers- all those who did not draw surplus from any other workers but who were structurally subject to their own surplus being taken by the members of the dominated class, or who were themselves dependent wage labourers.

²² Gottwald prefers the term 'tributary mode of production' to the Marxist' concept of 'Asiatic mode of production on the ground that "many important examples are not Asian" (West 2011:513). According to Gottwald (1993a: 153-155), the Asiatic Mode of Production is characterised by three main features: absence of private ownership, self-sufficient village communities and a highly central state in a commanding social role. Land in the villages is possessed and used both by the individual household and commonly for grazing purposes but the land villagers. Ownership, not necessarily spelled out directly in the law, is in the hands of the state as a sovereign and landlords.

²³ Muth (1997:82) defines "agricultural surplus [as] an excess of total food output over the amount consumed by food producers."

Gottwald (1993b:6) describes *the dominant tribute-imposing class* [as having] consisted of the political elite - native and/or foreign \acute{o} and their administrative, religious, and military retainers, together with landholding, merchant, and small manufacturing elites who benefited from state power \ddot{o} . As Horsley (2009:53) indicates, \acute{o} [u]nder a monarchy, the people were the economic servants as well as the political servants of the king \ddot{o} . Heyns (1990:30) opines that \acute{o} [t]his was not much of a give and take relationship- it was basically a one way traffic in which the [dominated] gave more than they received \ddot{o} . Power was exercised predominately by the dominators with the result that the elite few gained excessive wealth. Wealth was therefore the proceeds of power. The political structure of this time exploited and dominated the masses, as a result of which the gap between the rich and the poor deepened with the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer. The system was thus strategically designed to disempower and disenfranchise the masses. Horsley (2009:57) contends that \acute{o} economic exploitation became more and more important as the economic demands of the monarchy undermined the viability of families and their mutual support in village communities \ddot{o} . The economic principle of the monarchic period violated the family principle of production for livelihood. With this in mind, I will now discuss how the tributary mode of production was exercised throughout the \acute{a} nited \acute{o} monarchic period.

2.2.3.1 *Variation from one King to another*

What follows is a synopsis of how the tributary mode of production intensified from one king to another during the monarchic period. This will help to assess the extent to which the changes affected ancient Israelite society.

a. Israel under Saul

Saul \acute{o} lived in the transitional period between the collapse of the old Tribal Confederation and the birth of the new order \ddot{o} (Anderson 1988:214). As indicated (in section 2.2.3), the transition was accompanied by a shift in mode of production. During Saul \acute{o} s reign \acute{o} [he] made no change in the internal structure of Israel ... The tribal organisation was left as it was; no administrative machinery or bureaucracy was developed \ddot{o} (Bright 1981:190). \acute{o} [Saul] had a headquarters rather than a capital in the usual sense \ddot{o} (Gottwald 1985:320). Elsewhere, Gottwald (2001:176) further posits that \acute{o} [t]he headquarters were on his family estate in Gibeath \ddot{o} . Albertz (1994:109-110) agrees, indicating that Saul \acute{o} s permanent power base was limited to his family resources: a modest residence in his home town of Gibeath.

Saul's administration resembled that of the tribal confederation in that he did not develop a separate or independent wing of government. Administratively, the government was not centralized and this is proven by the fact that the biblical record makes no clear mention of any state organisation (1 Sam. 14:47-52). However, according to Dreher (1997:25), "[t]he Israelite monarchy had already developed under Saul within the framework of the tributary mode of production". Saul must have had an army that he used to fight the Philistines; Abner is named as the captain of that army (See 1 Kings 14:50). Notwithstanding Dreher's argument, "there is no sign that [Saul] set up a state apparatus for taxing or conscripting manpower or for exacting tribute from conquered people" (Gottwald 1985:320). Further, there is no mention of "an effective administration governing the economics and society of the entire territory" (Dietrich 2007:189). In light of such observations, Anderson (1988:215) avers that "[Saul] levied no tax, made no military conscription, had no hierarchy of court official and no harem". According to Albertz (1994:110), Saul "probably had at his disposal only voluntary offerings, and as yet no taxes" (See 1 Sam. 10:27; 16:20). There is no mention "of ministers, diplomats, or scribes" (Dietrich 2007:189).

It can be seen from the preceding, that the mode of production during Saul's reign was more or less the same as that of the pre-monarchic period and that the tributary mode of production had not yet developed. Similarly, it appears during his reign the social structure remained unchanged.

b. Israel under David - c.a. 1000-961²⁴

The tributary mode of production began to surface during the reign of David albeit not fully developed. During his reign, many changes were implemented. David extracted the source of income that was used to maintain the kingdom both from the locals and the foreign entities.²⁵ The tributary mode of production was not intense during David's tenure in that he maintained the state from "the tribute extracted from the conquered people. Arguing for the opposite, there are indications of an emerging tributary system, in that David had "an administrator of forced labor" (West 2011:516). He also embarked on a census of all Israel, with the aim of "military conscription, taxation, or forced labor" (Anderson 1988:227). Even though the bible is not explicit on David taxing the citizens (see 2 Sam. 24:1-9 and 1 Chr. 21:1-6), Gottwald (2001:49) correctly opines, "In all probability this census should be understood as an instrument for tax collection and military conscription". Since the Philistines were always a

²⁴ Bright 1981:195

²⁵ "King David amassed riches through his wars" (Dietrich 2007:197).

threat to Israel, David had to keep them at bay. In order to do so, he needed a strong defence force/ military. Deist (1991:113) believes that the mere fact that there was a permanent army to be catered for and a royal court to be maintained meant that taxes had to be levied, which meant that officials had to be appointed. People alike, locals to a lesser extent and foreign nations were subjected to forced labor and taxation (see 2 Sam 12:31). One would say, during David's reign the tributary mode of production was at its preliminary stage, it was still developing. In other words, he laid a foundation for this emerging political economy.

c. Israel under Solomon

The tributary mode of production intensified during the reign of Solomon, who initiated large-scale public works, particularly the building of the temple (Dreher 1997:28). West (2011:517) observes that the building of the temple, together with the extravagance of normal court life (I Kings 4:22-28), and the maintenance of security of the state, increased the need for tribute and forced labour. Heyns (1990:31) contends,

[T]he state took more and more control of the decision making process. The most important reason was that the state decided which products had to be taxed in by the farmers. Oil, wine and grain in particular were very important for the state. The state did, however, not only prescribe to the farmers what he should plant, but also when and how, as taxes had to be paid regularly at times determined by the state (cf 1 Kgs 4:7,27). In this way the goals of the state had been transferred to the agricultural basis and the farmer's rights to make his own farming planning decisions had been taken away.

In this context, Dreher (1997:25) argues that it was a shift in agricultural capacity which enabled a shift in political economy. In order to ensure the smooth running of the kingdom and easy extraction of taxes, Solomon divided his kingdom into twelve districts. To some extent, ethnic patronage protected the southern tribes from the demands of this political economy, while the northern tribes bore the brunt of the burden of economic extraction (West 2011:517).

[Furthermore], the importation of building material, luxury goods, military technology and skilled labour placed escalating pressure on the surplus of peasant farmers... Solomon's city-state became a part of the largest political economy of the region, including other states and empires. Just as local debt was integral to the tributary mode of production, so too was state debt. Solomon's excessive consumption and accumulation led to state debt. In order to service this debt, not only was it necessary to secure a stable surplus, but it was also necessary to dictate what must be produced on the peasant land (I Kings 5:11) (West 2011:517).

The temple was splendid and as such the building required special expertise and most skilful artisans were found outside of Israel. Therefore, "Phoenician craftsmen, as well as Lebanese cedar and cypress, were provided by King Hiram of Tyre..." (King 1988:69). The peasants felled and transported these timbers from Lebanon and at the same time they were expected to produce enough from their fields back at home (Chaney 1986:69, see also 1 Kings 5:13-18). With little time and energy, the peasants were expected to produce large quantity of agricultural products every year. The produce was used by the Israelite state to pay for the timber acquired from Lebanon (see 1 Kings 5:11). "When agricultural produce did not suffice to pay for timber and precious metals involved in the construction projects, Solomon simply ceded to Hiram, king of Tyre, twenty villages in northern Galilee along the frontier, along with people" (Horsley 2009:53).

Solomon's projects were not limited to the temple; the palace complex was architecturally more glamorous and imposing than the temple. The palace is said to have taken six years longer than the temple to be completed. Dimensionally, the palace complex was larger than the temple and it comprised "of the House of the Forest of Lebanon, the Hall of Pillars, the Hall of the Throne, and the House of Pharaoh's Daughter" (King 1988:70). Furthermore, "Solomon built "chariot cities" and other fortifications at Gezer, Megiddo, Hazor, and elsewhere" (Anderson 1988:237). Also among the projects that Solomon undertook was that he built the walls of Jerusalem. In all these he used forced labor (see 1 Kings 9:15ff). The expenses for both the temple and the palace were so enormous that it led to state debt.

On top of Solomon's magnificent, extravagant and splendid buildings and lavish daily menu²⁶, he had a large kinship and this meant an added burden on the labourers. This gives us an indication of how the monarchy exploited and abused the produce and labor of its subjects. One cannot help but imagine the intensity of labour the labourers were subjected to and the amount of wheat that had to be produced in order to feed the royal house and the military. Chaney (1986:69) argues that "[s]plendour and might in Yahweh's Temple and Solomon's palace meant hunger in the bellies of the peasant masses." This implies that, Solomon's extravagant lifestyle to a larger extent pinched and monopolised the lower class while the scale tilted in favour of the elite few. His oppressive policies as detailed in 1 Kings 4-10 widened the gap between the rich and poor.

²⁶ His daily supplies consisted of thirty kors of fine flour, sixty kors of meal, ten fat oxen, twenty pasture-fed cattle, one hundred sheep besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl (1 Kings 4:22-23).

Furthermore, the growth of the stratum of the officials, military men and merchants, put a strain on the egalitarian structure of the society (Albertz 1994:111). These resulted in shortfall in agriculture. "The peasants on their smallholdings could no longer produce just enough for their own subsistence" (Deist 1991:114).

The excessive taxation and forced labour of the Solomonic state led to both international dependency and internal revolution which resulted in the kingdom being divided into two, namely between the north and the south (1 Kings 12). West (2011:517) points out that the division of the kingdom into two did not end the tributary mode of production in Israel and Judah. However, it appears northern were more burdened than Judah because there is no allusion to the Judah showing dissatisfaction (1 Kings 12) during Rehoboam's reign.

2.2.3 The Societal Structure of the Post-exilic Period²⁷

Having discussed the socio-economic structure of ancient Israel in the pre-monarchic and monarchic periods, I now turn to *Ruth's* second context, namely the post-exilic period. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to feature a detailed discussion of the rise of the Persian Empire, a few observations regarding the return of exiles to Judah nature of the Judahite community in the Persian period are in order.

2.2.3.1 The rise of the Persian Empire

"In the year 539, Cyrus entered Babylon without a fight, became the king of Babylon and thus inherited all that Babylon possessed, to the borders of Egypt" (Kessler 2008:129). Persia became the new world power and Judah became the province of this mighty empire.²⁸ Bosman (1991:195) contends that "this period was characterised by the absence of a Jewish king and the heightened prominence of the priesthood". For some reason, Cyrus respected and was tolerant of the local's religious and cultural life to a point that after he captured Babylon, he reversed the locally disruptive policies of the Assyrians and Neo-Babylonians, and selectively returned captive people to their homelands and restored their lapsed religious temples (Gottwald 1985:428). The

²⁷ Scholars date the early post-exilic period differently: Blenkinsopp (1988:60) dates it between 538 to shortly after 432 B.C.E, while Liverani (2003:310) from 540 to 330, and Gottwald (1985:428) from 539 to 332, while Kessler (2008:128) opts for 539-333. For the purposes of this study, the "term early post-exilic period" will be dated to 538-332.

²⁸ "Neo-Babylonia declined rapidly under the internally divisive rule of its king, Nabonidus (555-539), just as a fresh military power from the Iranian highlands was rising meteorically. In 550 B.C.E, Cyrus of Anshan, a petty prince of the Medes - a people who had helped Neo-Babylonia overthrow Assyria - seized the throne of Media and speedily became master of the whole region north and east of Babylonia. The new empire was known as Persia, from Pasargadae, one of the tribes of Cyrus's native Anshan" (Gottwald 1985:428).

first group of Jewish exiles returned in 538 probably under the leadership Sheshbazzar of and the other group followed in 521 led by Zerubbabel (Liverani 2003: 271).

2.2.3.2 The nature of Judahite society during the Post-Exilic Period

It is difficult to reconstruct the history and socio-economic realities of the Jewish community during the Persian period mainly because the biblical evidence is sparse. For the most part, scholars rely on Ezra and Nehemiah, but the information given in these books is far from being a straightforward, factual account of events during that time.²⁹

While it is true that the events of the Babylonian exile wrought turmoil in Judah, Kessler (2003:133) contends that "social institutions and organizations, once developed, do not disappear; they are developed further and thus simultaneously transformed." He qualifies this statement by sketching a picture of the post-exilic family. He maintains that "[t]he family remained the basis for society, but it now took the form of a genealogically registered 'father's house'." This seems to suggest that the basic family structure of the pre-monarchic period (see 2.2.1) resurfaced during the post-exilic period, albeit in a slightly transformed manner. Eskenazi (1992:32) concurs, stating that the term "father's house" denotes "families" or "ancestral houses" which, in turn, signals the resurgence of the family and household as fundamental socioeconomic and political unit. The family thus regained its authority in the early post-exilic period and, therefore, kinship relations re-emerged as the basis of the society.

2.2.4 The Socio-Economic Strata of Judah during the Post-Exilic Period

2.2.4.1 Mode of production

It is no doubt that the socio-economic fabric of Judah was weakened by the political instabilities of the exilic period. It is against this backdrop that Eskenazi (1992:25) refers to this period as "a time of restructuring Jewish life in the aftermath of military, economic and religious devastation." According to Grabbe (2004:191) "the economy of the entire period was agrarian... [t]rade [also] had an important niche in each period, but it was always very secondary to farming...". As such, "the basis of production was allegedly that of the 'free' peasant who farmed land, whether privately owned or not, by means of his own labour and of his family" (Grabbe 2004:191). Accordingly, some of the peasants "owned their land, though

²⁹ For one thing, the information is chronologically inaccurate (Blenkinsopp 1988:60), and there are discrepancies between the data in Ezra and Nehemiah.

many worked as tenants on various estates owned by the aristocracy and the wealthy, especially royal lands (Grabbe 2004:195). During the post-exilic period, Judah and Samaria were under the leadership of a Persian king, in the satrapy of Ebernari or Trans-Euphrates, which was ruled by an appointed local governor (Kessler 2003:139).

The Persian Empire was governed by a central government and the people showed their allegiance (or submission) by paying tax. During the reign of Darius 1 (522-486), each satrapy had to deliver a fixed annual sum to the central government (Kessler 2003:141). If what is recorded in Nehemiah 5:4 is anything to go by, the people were severely taxed, to the point that they borrowed money to pay their taxes. Ezra (4:13, 20; 7:24) records that there were three taxes: tribute, toll and customs. According to Gerstenberger (2011:113) "the pressure of Persian system of taxation, plus the intra-Judean temple tax, may well have driven people to despair at times". However, Grabbe (2004:192) claims that "[t]he small agricultural surplus was extracted by the ruling class...through taxes and forced labour on behalf of the state," it is evident that the surplus was not sufficient to cover tax as people had to borrow money to pay it and Nehemiah pleads with the rulers to return to the people "their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the hundredth of money, grain, wine, and oil which have been exacted from them" (5:11).

Further, Yoder (2003:440) suggests that, during this period, unprecedented growth in international commerce was experienced and as such subsistence agricultural economy developed into a cosmopolitan marketplace (Neh 10:31; 13:15-16). Additionally, manufacturing and textile trade industry is said to have flourished during this period and the hallmark of this industry was the production and export of purple dye (Yoder 2003:441-442). One wonders how this trade impacted on the society. These developments seem to have increased the socio-economic gap between the rich and the poor.

2.3. THE WORLD OF WOMEN³⁰ IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Having discussed the overall socio-economic structure of Israelite and Judahite society in the preceding sections, I am now able to discuss the social role and status of Israelite women in the periods under examination. Before I begin, I would like to note that women did not exist

³⁰ "The role of mother [and wife] dominates OT reference to women" (Bird 1992: 953). In this study the social role of women in Israel would be reconstructed from that of the role wives and women as portrayed by the Hebrew Bible. This study would therefore employ the term 'women' instead of mother.

autonomously from the larger society but that they existed as part of the larger social unit. It is, therefore, crucial that we locate them within the bigger picture of the Israelite society. As Meyers (1988:123) argues, "to focus on the individual in Israelite society would be to give undue weight to a member of a group for which corporate existence was the fundamental grouping of life".

The following section will attempt to give a general overview of the Israelite family structure and go a step further to locate the societal role of women within the Israelite family. I will then discuss the socio-economic role of women from the pre-monarchic period through to the united monarchy and then the post-exilic period. I will only discuss these three periods as *Ruth* has variously been dated to the monarchic and early post-exilic period. Furthermore, I will focus on women's land ownership and means of survival as these are crucial aspects in my reading of *Ruth* which seeks to identify strategies of increasing the agency of poor rural women.

2.3.1 The general structure of the Israelite family and the place of women in it

Meyers (1988:122) contends that, in Israel, "the dominant social world for virtually all members of society was the [family³¹], or domestic living group. There were larger social units... still it was the household unit that shaped and sustained daily existence of nearly everyone." Given that the Israelite family was called the *bêth 'ab*³² or "the house of one's father, De Vaux (1974:20) describes it as patriarchal in nature. Similarly, for Meyer (1988:180), "the term "father's house" is clearly male orientated and reflects the patrilineal nature of the ancient Israelite society, i.e. "the way descent and property were reckoned along patrilineal lines". Further, Meyers (1991:41) posits that:

The father's house achieved its basic configuration in the rural communities in which it functioned at the time of Israelite beginnings and probably throughout much of the succeeding centuries; and its importance was integrally related to its role as the basic economic unit, producing virtually all of what was needed for subsistence of its members.

"The *bêth 'ab* customarily includes the family head and his wife (or wives), their sons and unmarried daughters, the sons' wives and children, and so on, as far as the biological and the

³¹ "The family consists of those who are united by common blood and common dwelling-place" (De Vaux 1974:20). Meyers(1991:41) prefers the term house-hold to family, her contention being that the household "included both biologically related individuals as well as those with affinal or other ties". She further posits that 'family household' is a preferable translation, because it incorporates the basic kinship orientation of a multigenerational family while allowing for the various functions of the household-residency, economic production, social activities, cultic practices, and so on.

³² This word is ambiguous and problematic to understand in the sense that it does not have one meaning, at times it is used in reference to tribe or clan. In the context of this study the word is used in reference to a living group and the same applies to family.

affinal links extended generationally (Gottwald (1980:285). The father was considered as the family head and his wife's master (the *ba'al*'). This clearly indicates that the Israelite society was patriarchal in nature. The father, as the family head, had absolute authority over his wife and children. The married woman was therefore her husband's possession, which suggests that the system rendered her a minor. The husband was the provider, while the woman's place was in the household. Masenya (2004:46) rightly points out that 'in the patriarchal Israelite context, women's socio-economic position was tied up with the men to whom they were attached: fathers or husbands'. This means that women's identity and economic wellbeing was derived from that of the men to whom they belonged, so much that the family [and women in particular] was represented in the public sphere by its male head or adult male members (Bird 1992:953). Further, the 'male genealogies, male oriented legal codes and cultic stipulations, masculine forms for generic speech, and the predominance of males in historical records and recollections all reflect male dominance of Israel's public life and formal structure' (Bird 1992:953).

2.3.2 The social role of women in the Israelite society- A general overview

According to Bird (1992:953), 'the life and the work of the Israelite woman centered in the home and duties to family'.³³ Similarly, Camp (1985:81) states, 'women had no explicitly legitimated authority in the public realm'. Even so, Meyers (1988:172) contends that 'the premonarchic society as a whole was nearly lacking in occupational specialists from outside the household unit, but the household itself had its specialists and the division of labor reflected the specializations'. De Vaux (1974:39) attest to this as follows: 'all the hard work at home certainly fell on [the mother/woman of the house]; she looked after the flocks, worked in the fields, cooked the food, and did the spinning, and so on'. Bird (1992:954) elaborates:

The role of mother included primary care of children of both sexes at least until the time of weaning (ca. age three), the education and disciplining of older children, and provision of food and clothes for the entire household. The latter required arduous and time consuming labor: sorting, cleaning, parching, and grinding grain, as well as kneading and baking bread; drawing water and collecting fuel (a task of both sexes); cleaning and butchering small animals; milking , churning butter and making cheese and yogurt; tending vegetable gardens and fruit trees; and preserving fruits and meat for storage.

³³ The same view is held by Grabbe (2004:184) and he contends that during the Persian Period "socially, women were confined to a clearly defined sphere of activity which tended to centre around the home and family".

The mother also groomed the girl children, taught them specialized female skills and traits, and she supervised all household activities including those done by daughters-in-laws and servants (Bird 1992:954).

2.3.3 The socio-economic place of women- Pre-monarchic Period

The biblical text is our only source regarding the socio-economic place of Israelite women but the information it offers is scant. Literature regarding the mode of production (see 2.2.2.2, 2.2.2.3 and 2.2.4.1) ignores or does not explicitly mention the role and contribution of women. Given the silence of both the Bible and the academic literature, it is necessary to analyse role differentiation in ancient Israel as a way of reconstructing women's role in economic production.

As Israel was intensively an agricultural society, most of the roles were subsistence related activities. Bird (1992:955) attests to the fact that "[w]omen's role and activities outside house-hold work were of two types, assistance in the basic tasks of production (agriculture and animal husbandry), and specialized professions and services". Meyers (1993:126) describes role differentiation as follows:

Men's role would have involved occasional militia duty, initial settlement tasks such as land-clearing and cistern digging, plow agriculture, and as many additional horticultural tasks as time and energy required. Women's role included the maternal ones (probably to a heightened degree insofar as bearing many children was essential), domestic or household chores, and considerable contribution to the subsistence chores involved in tending trees, vines and gardens in contrast to the usual tendency for maximized female economic productivity to be accompanied by a reduced biological productivity.

Naturally, men are likely to clear the forest, dig the cisterns and women are likely to perform certain regular food production tasks (Meyers 1988:56). Based on this, one would suggest that despite the patriarchally orientated *bēth - 'āv*, it appears there was equitable distribution of power for both men and women and as a result there was shared economic responsibility.

However, Bird (1992:955) contends that "[w]omen's contribution in the primary work of production is difficult to determine; [in that] it fluctuated not only in relation to seasonal need, but also to geographic, demographic, technological, and political factors (e.g., drought, war, and disease)".

2.3.4 The socioeconomic place of women - Monarchic Period

The transition to monarchy stripped women of their household status. Women were rendered non-productive by the increasing urbanisation in that the life pattern changed from the rural setting where women were productive to the urban setting which rendered women unproductive due to the city life. Men's role in urban structures devalued women's roles in traditional rural contexts. Albertz (1994:113) avers that "the transformation of Israel from an acephalous segmentary society into a modern territorial state ruled by the monarch certainly brought great [changes] in many places." It is therefore in this context that Meyers (1988:192) contends that "[t]he rise of the monarchy brought about the increasing centralized control of production." Furthermore, Jobling (1991:244) argues that "[c]entralization, based on exclusively male hierarchical structures, forces peasants into wage labor, leads to a decline in household-based economy, jeopardizes old kinship structures." This suggests that with the centralization of the economy, the family household was weakened and it became less self-sufficient in that there was a decline in household-based economy. The household mode of production was replaced by the tributary mode of production whereby the peasants paid tax to the state and thus consequently the family lost its voice in household economy. The monarchy destabilised the authority of the family. As indicated above, the life and work of Israelite woman centred in the house, this new changes therefore put a strain on the family hence weakening it and once the family household is weakened, it loses control and as a result women's power in the household recede. This minimised or reduced their contribution in the household close to nothing. However, Bird 1992:955 would like to contend that there were roles and activities of women outside the family and thus "[s]pecialized female labor was... employed by the palace, whose workforce of female slaves or impressed servants included perfumers, cooks and bakers."

2.3.5 The socioeconomic place of women – the early Post-exilic Period

It is evident from the above that the monarchic period distorted and undermined the role of women as full participants in the household unit. I have already noted that the family structure of this period resembles that of the pre-monarchic period. In other words, the essence, authority and meaning of family that was lost during the monarchic period was restored. Kessler (2003:134) avers that "the loss of state sovereignty elevated the importance of family for the life, and often for survival, of individuals [and as such][t]his made women more important." Even so, Grabbe (2004:184) argues that, "[l]egally, women were restricted in matters of inheritance, ownership, custody of children, and the power to act as a free citizen."

As indicated above, the manufacturing and textile trade flourished during this period, it is most likely that women were manual labourer in the textile industry. Furthermore, there is textual evidence made in reference to the *woman of substance* ó õshe makes linen garments and sells themö (Prov 31:24), it not unusual that the woman of substance may have got assistance from ordinary women. Even though it is not easy to construct establish precisely the socio-economic status of the post-exilic period women, one may conclude that the women of this period had more options as opposed to women of the pre-monarchic and monarchic period.

Now that I have established and located women's societal role within the Israelite family and their socio-economic status in both the Pre-monarchic, united monarchy and post-exilic period, this gives me ground to further delineate on women and land ownership together with means of survival for widows.

2.3.6 Women and land ownership

In the entire history of Ancient Israel land was the most important commodity and õa fundamental means of productionö (Mosala1991:20). It was viewed as a means of wealth, meaning that wealth was estimated mainly by ownership of land and non-ownership of land implied the opposite. Land was as such source of life since Israelite economy was predominately agrarian. Examining how this important commodity was distributed will help to determine whether women were economically advantaged or disadvantaged.

õThe nature of formal transactions such as marriage and property ownership and the male dominance of the public roles ... point to a patriarchal societyö (Meyers 1993:118). The pattern of land tenure was patrimonial: the wife could not inherit from her husband, neither could daughters inherit from their father except when there was no male heir (De Vaux 1974:39, See also Numbers 27:8). In the agrarian economy of ancient Israel, this meant that women were barred from direct access to a most powerful economic resource, thus limiting their economic independence (Sakenfeld 2003:40) and denying them the opportunity to experience their full identity as persons in their own right apart from men (Masenya 2004:46-59). Men/ husbands were the symbols of women's economic security and women were economically dependent on them. However, daughters inherited with a stipulated legal provision attached, and so they inherited õwith the proviso that they were to find husbands from the clan of their father's tribe, and so prevent the family property from passing to another tribeö (De Vaux 1974:54). The law governing land distribution was patriarchal and

andocentric hence discriminatory. The land was passed on from father to son so as to continue and preserve his name.³⁴ This is so because in the Israelite society, the lineage of the family membership was established along patrilineal line. Property was therefore guarded within tribal territory. Joseph Blenkinsopp (2001:177) argues that "the laws governing marriages and inheritance are dictated by the economic interest of the household of destination and its male head".

Since widows could not inherit property such as land, they were left with nothing to fall back on once their husbands died. As such, levirate law was put in place "to ensure their legal rights and keep the property in the family" (Blenkinsopp 2001:175).³⁵ A childless widow through levirate marriage was ensured of a home through an heir who will inherit his father's estate.³⁶ Levirate marriage therefore provided social and economic security for the childless widow. It should nevertheless be noted that levirate marriage was not obligatory; this is made evident by the condition that is given in case the *levir* declines to marry the widow (Deut 25:5-10). Furthermore, as it was the norm for Israelite land to be kept within the family or clan, at the death of a father the son succeeds his father as the head of the family, in this way the land is retained within the family and the widow benefited in return. The Israelite law deprived women of the opportunity to own this important commodity. In the case that a widow had no son, the daughter inherited, if no daughter the husband's brother inherited and if no brother, the nearest kinsman of the husband succeeded the estate (Num 27:8-11). This means that the widow would be dispossessed of the estate of her husband "a distressing situation, to be sure".

2.3.7 Means of survival for widows

There were legal provisions put in place for widows to survive since they had few options of survival. Minor concessions were put in place such as gleaning rights (Blenkinsopp 2001:175). Deuteronomy 24:19 delineate on leaving forgotten sheaves in the field for the aliens, the orphans and, the widows and it appears it was a moral obligation for the Israelite to intentionally leave part of their produce in the field. The text indicates that gleaning was part of social welfare

³⁴ To my mind, name should not be understood simply as name, it has more to do with lineage and posterity. Accordingly, the name is tied to issues of inheritance. "In Israel a *man's* name comes to mean his property. On the other hand his name is continued through his progeny" (Thompson and Thompson 1968:87). Zelophehad's daughter said "just because he had no sons, why should our father's name disappear from Israel?" (Num 27:4). It is evident from their statement that "name" refers to property and the continuance of the person is realized in inheritance, which would be obliterated if the land had to pass to someone outside his family.

³⁵ See Deut 25: 5-10.

³⁶ It should be noted however that the fundamental purpose for levirate marriage is to provide the brother with a posthumous heir and to perpetuate the dead brother's name (Deut 25:6).

system for the aforesaid hence an entitlement. Blenkinsopp (2001:175) contends that widows ... had to depend on public charity inclusive of the triennial tithe, a kind of social security system, see also Deut 26:12-13.³⁷ Bennett (2002:120-121) argues that:

These regulations did not instruct local farmers and herders to distribute the types of goods that would position these individuals to control their destinies. These laws demanded neither distribution of seed, land, domesticated animals, and tools for farming nor the allocation of other items that would position these persons to become self-actualizing. These codes, accordingly, guaranteed that these types of persons would be unable to change their historical predicaments. They relegated this social vulnerable social subgroup to a position of socioeconomic inferiority.

2.4 CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER TWO

In Chapter 2 my aim was to establish the various aspects of the sociological background which *Ruth* reflects with special reference to the socio-economic background. I began by deliberating on the dating of the book which, as I indicated, is difficult to establish. The arguments used for internal evidence by proponents of both the post-exilic and pre-exilic dating are inadequate to precisely date the book. Similarly, arguments based on inter-textual allusions with Pentateuchal law are hardly convincing. Even so, the internal evidence creates a small opening with regard to David's Moabite connections, making it likely that *Ruth* was composed in the time of his monarchy to legitimate his reign. Given the importance of David in the post-exilic period (see the work of the Chronicler), the book was then put to use as a polemic against Ezra-Nehemiah's policy on intermarriages.

In its description of Israelite society during the Davidic and early post-exilic periods, the study has shown that Israel began as a loosely organized tribal confederation with no structured political system. During the monarchic period, the political structure of the land was increasingly centralised around the king.

Despite governmental changes, and variances within the mode of production, the family remained the basic economic production unit throughout Israel's history. In other words, the family was the dominant social structure in ancient Israel, as is the case in most African societies today.

Moreover, as with most current African societies, Israelite society was patriarchal in nature. This means that women derived their identity and economic wellbeing from the men in their

³⁷One wonders the extent to which this legal provision was honoured and implemented. If this legal provision were followed to the core, why are there prophetic diatribes on behalf of the widows? Ezek 22:7; Isa 10:23; Jer 7:6.

lives. Women did not have any economic rights *per se*; their rights, if any, were secured and safeguarded by the men to whom they were attached. Furthermore, land was the most important economic commodity but Israelite law deprived the majority of women the opportunity to own this important commodity. In other words, patriarchal ideology and strictures underpinned rural women's socio-economic impoverishment during the time of *Ruth's* primary and secondary context, *viz.* the united monarchy and the early pre-exilic period. Paradoxically, it would seem that the women of those times could appeal only to the self-same patriarchal strictures in order to alleviate their plight which, naturally, placed them in a very precarious double bind.

The preceding discussion of ancient Israelite society encompasses two aspects of Masenya's *bosadi* approach, namely critiquing oppressive elements of biblical culture and establishing the importance of the family within them. Keeping in mind the economic limitations of the *bosadi* approach (1.4), the findings made in this chapter will now be used to read *Ruth* deconstructively in chapter three. The next chapter will, among others, elucidate how the two widows, Ruth and Naomi, overturned the very patriarchal strictures which confined them in order to transform what would have been a very bleak socio-economic future. More particularly, Chapter 3 will show how the two widows subverted patriarchal structures in order to secure land - the most important socio-economic commodity in ancient Israel which was patrimonially controlled (see 2.3.6).

CHAPTER THREE

A SOCIO-DECONSTRUCTIVE *BOSADI* READING OF *RUTH*

Ruth tells the story of two women, Naomi and Ruth, who are bereft of their husbands and left childless. As per the patriarchal culture(s) and customs of the time (see Chapter 2), this situation leaves them economically disempowered. Without men, their future appears bleak and hopeless. Given that the patriarchal Israelite society defined women according to the men in their lives, these women have no identity to speak of. Drawing upon the sociological insights gained in the preceding chapter, this chapter shows how Ruth and Naomi subverted and overcame the patriarchal strictures which confined them to a bleak socio-economic future. The chapter therefore, for the most part, labours on how the two widows overturned the stringent patriarchal structures which were disempowering.

I begin by briefly reminding the reader of the reading/interpretative method to be employed and its relation to the theoretical framework which informs this study. Having done that, I analyse the book chapter by chapter.

3.1 SETTING OUT THE METHOD OF READING/INTERPRETATION

The forthcoming analysis/reading will employ a deconstructive approach to *Ruth*. As I have previously indicated (1.5.2), deconstruction is neither a literary theory nor a methodological approach *per se*; rather, it is a subversive principle, a *writing*, which exposes the 'gaps' or inconsistencies within Western metaphysical thought and then proceeds to rewrite in them the entire tradition, thus subverting it from within (Efthimiadis 1995:59). Accordingly, deconstructive approaches to biblical texts have variously attempted to show how the text destabilises its own overt message or meaning or how it subverts either its genetic or citational context, or a conflation of two or more of the above.

In the course of relaying the widow's story, *Ruth* employs an array of binary opposites: Israelite-non-Israelite, woman-man, rich-poor, empty-full, famine-plenty, sweet-bitter, life-death (see Efthimiadis 1991:57), which seem to destabilise the overt patriarchal bias of the text. Seeing that deconstruction does not bind the reader with regard to method, I present a close deconstructive reading of *Ruth* according to these binary opposites. In so doing, I will utilize Efthimiadis' (1991 and 1995) application of deconstruction to *Ruth* while enriching it

with further insights from other scholars. To some extent, I will also be making use of inter-textual readings. Reading *Ruth* alongside other, similar, canonical Biblical texts will help me determine the extent to which *Ruth* intersects with such texts and so shed more light on the particularity of *Ruth* and its plot. It will also help me to determine to what extent *Ruth* subverts the overt patriarchy of its biblical context viz the early post-exilic period. In other words, deconstructive approach will help me to unmask the androcentric and patriarchal dominance in *Ruth* while simultaneously creatively rewriting the text from the perspective of the women in the story. This approach is consonant with the *bosadi* framework of this study, as it brings to the fore both the oppressive and the liberative elements of *Ruth*.

Having fore-grounded those deconstructive aspects of *Ruth* which affirm life for women I will then be able to draw from them strategies which poor rural women can employ to empower themselves towards greater agency (Chapter 4).

3.2 RUTH 1 - RETURNING HOME

The story of *Ruth* is set in the time during which the judges ruled, a period characterised by violence, apostasy and tribal war (Efthimiadis 1991:59). The story is set in Bethlehem (בֵּית לֶחֶם), which literally means 'the house of bread/food'. Ironically, the house of bread is suffering famine (Fewell and Gunn 1990:69). As famine or death takes over the place of life (bread), Elimelech immigrates to Moab with his family in search of food or new life (1:1):

a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons (RSV)³⁸.

In keeping with patriarchal customs, the man leads *his* family out of Bethlehem. The woman is defined by her husband ó she is *his* wife, thereby being denied her own identity (life), even though her name is mentioned in the next verse (1:2). Thus, the seeds of death ó the woman's lack of identity - are being carried into the new land where life is sought.

These seeds soon bear fruit as the man's death (1:3) is reported immediately after verse 2. The promise of life contained in the sons' marriage to Moabite women (1:4) is soon obliterated too: not only do both sons die, but they do so without progeny: 'And both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was bereft of her two sons and her husband'

³⁸ All English translations of scriptural passages are taken from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

(1:5). As Dubin (1994:132) states, “[t]he family was successful in its quest for food, but not in its quest for posterity. The quest for life has only produced death. Elimelech’s short term plan for sustenance seems to have brought about the long term death of his lineage.

Looking more closely at the text, I see that the sons marry Moabite women straight after Elimelech dies. This seems to imply that they took Moabite wives because they were left with a woman who could probably not (be expected to) give them proper guidance. Furthermore, the cause of their death is not mentioned. Textually, however, their deaths are closely connected to their marriage as if to suggest that that they died because they took Moabites wives. Given that Moabites were traditionally despised by the Israelites, their death could be seen as a punishment for marrying Moabite women, but there is no clear indication of that in the text. It is possible that the narrator merely wished to juxtapose marriage and death in her/his play with binary opposites.

It is worth noting that 1:5 reports, “*the woman* was bereft of her two sons and her husband” (my italics). No mention is made of her two Moabite daughters-in-law. It is as though they are non-existent. Neglecting to mention them at this point continues the lack of identity accorded them in verse 4, which does not mention which of the Moabite women married which of the Israelite men. Thus, the Moabite women are firmly identified in terms of death rather than life. This identification, which is in fact alienation, corresponds with the negative Israelite view of Moabites. It also seems to lend support to the intermarriage policies of Ezra-Nehemiah: marrying non-Israelite women results in death through childlessness and possibly physical death too. And yet, the text presents here a deconstructive fissure into which its polemical use may begin to be written: the Moabite women traditionally associated with death live, whereas the Israelite men traditionally associated with life die. If the text was indeed used to combat Ezra-Nehemiah’s policies, then we may say that the text is slowly beginning to undermine or deconstruct the basis of the intermarriage ban – namely fear of the (religious) death associated with non-Israelite spouses, particularly the fear of apostasy associated with non-Israelite women (Ezra 9:2).

As previously indicated (see 2.3.1), women’s identity, well-being, and life were directly related to that of their men within the patriarchal culture of their time. Consequently, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah are left with nothing after losing their husbands. They are, in effect, non-entities, lacking social and economic standing and security. Even though they are thus

identified with death, they have to act in order to secure their survival (life). Without the counsel of any man, Naomi takes the initiative to return to the house of bread (Bethlehem) in search of life: ðfor she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them foodö (1:6). The promise of life is denoted not only by the Lord lifting the famine, but also by Naomi's initiative. It is as though she is slowly beginning to rise from the dead. Ironically, the very lack that drove the man and his direct family to Moab is now driving the woman and her family-in-law from Moab. Furthermore, the man took his family out of Bethlehem because of what he had *seen* and experienced ó the famine (death), whereas the woman and her family-in-law leave Moab because of what she had *heard* (1:6b). This perceptual difference may serve to elevate Naomi's faith above that of Elimelech, thus linking women with life once again.

Interestingly, the text does not explicitly state that the women were poverty stricken. After all, the family must have built up some form of wealth during their (approximately) ten years in Moab (1:4). It therefore seems logical to posit that the men's death meant that the family wealth could no longer be sustained. Alternatively, given the fact that a man led the family into death, the text may also be suggesting that a woman will now be leading other women into life. This suggestion further links women with life and continues the deconstruction referred to at the end of the preceding paragraph. The fact that both Moabite women leave with Naomi (1:6) counters the negative view that Israelites had of Moabites, thus widening the deconstructive fissure referred to above. Not only are Moabite women surviving Israelite men, they are also showing covenantal loyalty (faithfulness, רַחֲמִים [*chesed*]) to Naomi, an Israelite woman.

Along the way, Naomi suddenly has a change of heart. She pleads with her daughters-in-law to return each to her mother's house (1:8). In keeping with the patriarchal culture, she further blesses them with the following words: ðthe LORD grant that you may find a home, each of you in the house of her husband!ö (1:9). As Tribble (1978:170-171) avers, ðIf their lives are to be fulfilled, then they must re-marry, because their male-structured society offers no other possibilityö.

Interestingly, and in contrast with the overriding importance of the *father's* house in the Israelite culture,³⁹ Naomi urges her two daughters-in-law to return each to her *mother's*

³⁹ It was common for a childless widow to return to her father's house. See for example Lev 22:13 which makes reference to childless widows returning to their fathers' house, the text makes reference to Priest's daughters but the underlying matter is that they are to return to their father's house if they are widowed or divorced with no children. In Gen 38:11, Judah commands Tamar to remain a widow in her father's house until Shelah is grown,

house. One wonders why. Efthimiadis (1991:63) posits that *mother's house* [is the] place where marriages are arranged and lovers meet in safety.⁴⁰ However, on the basis of Genesis 38, I suggest that there may be another, related reason:

After the women's initial resistance (1:9-10), Naomi states the reasons for her insistence that they return to their mother's houses (1:11-12): she is bereft of a husband and has no other (male) children. Moreover, she is ripe in age and it is impossible for her to have any more children, specifically any more sons whom she could give to the women in marriage. Even if she did marry and have more sons, she asks, would the Ruth and Orpah wait for them to be grown, thus denying themselves the opportunity of marriage? (1:12). In every possible way, with reference to herself and to the women, Naomi nullifies the possibility of levirate marriage for her daughters-in law, poignantly portraying the futility of their returning to Bethlehem with her.

After the example of Tamar (Gen 38:11), women returned to their *father's* house to wait for a young *levir* to grow up and take them in marriage. Given Naomi's argument, I suggest that she bids the women to return to their *mother's* house because in her mind there was no possibility of *levirate* marriage. By returning to their mother's house, they would at least have the opportunity to *re-marry*. Once again, Naomi's words are informed by the patriarchal culture that identifies women's security and economic wellbeing with that of their men. It is because of this that she portrays life without a man as futile (death) and asserts the certainty of death in following her to Bethlehem, over the possibility of life in returning to Moab.

If the text has already started to deconstruct the association of women with death, Naomi knows nothing about it. Despite having taken the initiative towards life, she is still steeped in death. In fact, it is clear from her argument that, in her mind, she *is* death because of her age and gender configuration. Given the text's play with the life and death binary up to this point, one would be hard pressed to find greater collusion with oppressive patriarchal ideology than this. Even so, through her words, the text once again associates the Moabite women with life, thus continuing its deconstruction of anti- alien (non-Israelite) thinking.

although this implies a temporal return – until the son is grown, but the command is that she returns to her father's house as opposed to mother's house.

⁴⁰ Rashkow (1995:29) contends that *mother's house* is rare term in the Hebrew Bible, occurring only three times. In Songs 3:4 and 8:2 it probably refers to bedroom of a woman's mother as a safe site for lovers to rendezvous. In Gen 24:28, Rebekah runs to her mother's house to report her conversation with Abraham's servant seeking a wife for Isaac. A related expression, 'her house', is used in Woman of Worth of Proverbs'. (Prov 31:21 and 27).

Due to their mother-in-law's second persuasive attempt, Orpah returns to Moab without any further resistance (1:14, 15). By contrast, Ruth insists on following Naomi to Bethlehem despite the latter's third attempt to dissuade her: "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law" (1:15). Seeing that the personal argument did not work, Naomi now tries an argument based on national and religious affiliation. Still, Ruth is not dissuaded. Acting against the will of her mother-in-law, Ruth counters the patriarchal ideology that would have her identify with a man. "Rather than choosing to get security from young men (cf. the constant advise of her mother-in-law), she decide[s] to cling [לְרֹבֵקָה] to an old woman" (Masenya 2004:51).

The verb לְרֹבֵקָה, *to cling, to stick*, expresses ideal marital closeness (Genesis 2:24) and describes a friendship that is more binding than brotherhood (Proverbs 18:24). It necessitates relinquished membership in one group to join another (cf 2 Samuel 20:2). Thus, it fulfilled a dual function. It signaled Ruth's resolve to "abandon" her Moabite roots to "rest" with Naomi and her people, and it sparked the hope that Naomi's prayer might be answered (Efthimiadis 1991:67).⁴¹

In clinging to Naomi, Ruth appears to be exchanging the potential life embodied in the mother's house for certain death with her barren (dead) mother-in-law. She is also exchanging possible identity in her homeland with almost certain alienation in Judah. Her words in 1:16-17, which begin with a commitment to life and end with a commitment to death, seem to confirm the exchange of possible life for almost certain death:

“for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge;
where you die I will die, and there will I be buried.

The statement "your people are my people; your God is my God" put in present terms, is an explicit indication that Ruth has *already* disavowed the solidarity of her family and the possibility of marriage and children; she has *already* abandoned her identity as a Moabite; she has *already* renounced her native religious affiliation (Rashkow 1993:32, her *Italic*). Brenner (1985:119) correctly states that Ruth's commitment to Naomi places the welfare of the family she has joined in marriage above her personal interest. Ruth effectively abandons her family and home, renounces her religious affiliation and culture, and chooses to accompany Naomi into a strange land and alien cultural milieu (Brenner 1985:119).

⁴¹ See also Sasson 1979: 27, 28 and Campbell 1975: 72.

Furthermore, Ruth forsakes the relative personal security symbolized by her country for insecurity abroad (Trible 1978:172). What would become of her if Naomi dies? I would suggest that, should Naomi die, Ruth would risk alienation and death in Bethlehem: she would be left doubly destitute in a foreign land which held the potential of harm and molestation for women who belonged to no man (see 2:8, 9, 15) - particularly Moabite women who were thought to be sexually licentious.

Contrary to all expectations, Ruth acts outside the bounds of patriarchal customs, thus challenging and deconstructing them. Her intentions are selfless and altruistic. "Culturally, she has chosen death over life, wandering over rest, alienation over identification" (Efthimiadis 1991:68).⁴² "One female has chosen another female in a world where life depends upon men" (Trible 1978:173). As Efthimiadis (1991:68) states, Ruth's words embody a reversal in role and sexual allegiance: it is a woman, not a man who vows support to another woman. Ruth's decision to go with Naomi is astonishing, radical, extra-ordinary, bold, audacious, daring and courageous. She stands alone with no external motivation in her decision to accompany Naomi. Unlike Abraham who was motivated by divine promise and had a wife, Ruth has no divine promise, no support group and no husband, she literally had nothing (Trible 1978:173) to go on except her love for Naomi. Herein lies a radical deconstruction: a Moabite woman has more internal motivation than the father of the Israelite faith.

Ruth's words (1:16-17) signify nothing less than a personal covenant. Her serenity, poise, resolve, and determination (Apfel & Grondhal 1994:59) in accompanying Naomi back to Judah and, moreover, committing herself to Naomi in the way described above, continue the deconstructive trend: a Moabite is showing covenant loyalty or *chesed* to an Israelite and, in so doing begins to sow the seeds of life. In its possible polemics against Ezra-Nehemiah's intermarriage policies, the text is setting the stage for a very potent argument: do not judge foreign spouses. Like Ruth, they may be exhibiting more *chesed* than the Israelites.

Ruth's eloquent speech is met with Naomi's silence: "And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more" (1:18). Still steeped in death, Naomi is unable to comprehend the life being extended to her. Instead of Ruth's hand of identification, she

⁴² See also Trible 1978: 173.

extends the silence of alienation and of feeling alienated, dead. Even so, it is Ruth's *chesed* which has the final word.

The women's journey back to Bethlehem is reported in six Hebrew words וַתֵּלֶכְנָה שְׁתֵּייהֶם עַד־בְּאֵנָה בַּיִת לְחָם (ōSo the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehemö, 1:19a). The hearer/reader is left to imagine that the journey was tiresome, long and possibly dangerous. The Hebrew word שְׁתֵּייהֶם (the two of them) indicates that the women embark on the journey by themselves, unaccompanied by men for safety. Motivated by their desire to transform their undesirable future, they tirelessly and courageously embark on a journey of potential death through the desert and across the Jordan River (life) to Bethlehem.

When Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, the townswomen ask - indirectly for it is not clear to whom the question is directed, öIs this Naomi?ö (1:19b). Naomi's geographical alienation for all these years has not prevented the women from correctly identifying her physical form, thus extending the hope that her return may mean life. Naomi's bitter exchange, however, seems to vitiate this possibility: öDo not call me Naomi, call me *Mara*, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with meö (1:20). Because of the afflictions which have beset her, Naomi yet again meets the possibility of life with words of death, to the extent that she exchanges the positive identity embodied in her name, Naomi - the sweet or pleasant one, for its opposite, *Mara* ö the bitter one. This switch in identity reflects her switch in fortune, and is accompanied by an explanation which further portrays her sense of death: öI went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has afflicted me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"(1:21). She blames her affliction on Shaddai (שְׁדַי) as she proclaims emptiness over fullness and death over life.

In her bitter exchange, Naomi fails to acknowledge the presence of Ruth. Steeped in death, she cannot see life, so the narrator takes it upon herself/himself to remind the hearer/reader of its presence: öSo Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moabö (1:22a, b). Whereas the hearer/reader is left wondering whether Ruth's *chesed* will be met with silence/inaction (death) or returned in kind, the narrator proclaims that the two widows came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest

(1:22b). Thus, in contrast to Naomi, the narrator forecasts life over death and so intimates that Ruth's *chesed* may well be met with *chesed* in this foreign land.

Ruth 1 begins with a family of three men and one woman leaving for Moab during a famine (death) and ends with two women, related by marriage, returning from Moab at the start of the barley harvest. Could Ruth's presence and the start of the barley harvest be a sign of the return of fullness of life? The following chapter will tell.

3.3 RUTH 2 - LET ME GLEAN AMONG THE SHEAVES

The narrator provides the hearer/reader with information which, at first glance, appears to be unknown to the characters. "Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband's, a man of wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz." However, Efthimiadis (1995:64) argues that both Naomi and Ruth knew of Boaz's existence because a) the clan had a very close networking system making it impossible for Naomi not to know of the existence of this new character, and b) Ruth would in all likelihood have learned about Israelite customs and her extended Israelite family while being married to Mahlon.

Interestingly, the narrator withholds the name of this kinsman until the end of 2:1. The narrator refers to his relation with Naomi, his wealth, strength and social status before relating his name. In other words, the narrator prioritizes Boaz's status above his name. For the first time *Ruth* associates a man with life and the potential of offering it "he is wealthy and he is a relative of Naomi's through her husband."

While Tribble (1978:175) opines that, by introducing Boaz in this way, the narrator "arouses interest, creates suspense and suggests importance," Efthimiadis (1991:72-73), with whom I agree, states that the introduction of Boaz at this point has a fourfold function:

- a. It perpetuates the narrator's affirmation of life over death (evidenced at the closure of Ruth 1)
- b. It emphasizes the wealth, strength and social status of this Israelite patriarch over against the poverty, powerlessness and social status of the two women
- c. It foreshadows the role of Boaz as the redeemer by suggesting that he has all the necessary potential both to provide the women with home and substance and to "raise the name of the dead"

- d. It restores the male/female imbalance (chapter one) by associating at least one male in the family of Elimelech with life.

Having introduced Boaz as a kinsman, the narrator immediately draws the reader's attention to a dialogue between Ruth and Naomi (2:2). Ruth tells Naomi of her decision to go and glean, to which Naomi responds with only two Hebrew words **לְכִי בְתִי** *ō go, my daughter*. The narrator portrays Naomi as passive, helpless and depressed *ō dead* - whereas Ruth, the Moabite, is portrayed as proactive and determined or full of life.

Ruth's words to Naomi, **אֲלֶכְהָנָא הַשָּׂדֶה וְאֶלְקָטָהּ בַּשָּׂבִילִים אַחֲרֵי אֲשֶׁר אֲמַצְאֶחֶן בְּעֵינָיו** are linguistically ambiguous. As such, they have been translated differently by various scholars. The ambiguity lies, amongst others, in the cohortative **אֲלֶכְהָנָא**. Efthimiadis (1995:65-66) describes the function of the cohortative as follows:

The cohortative often expresses the direction of the will to an action and thus denotes (especially) self-encouragement, i.e a resolution or a wish. The cohortative, standing alone, or co-ordinated with another cohortative frequently strengthened by the particle **נָא** is used to express the following:

- i) Self-encouragement, especially as a result of inward deliberation and fixed determination
- ii) A wish or request for permission (Gesenius (*et al*) 1910, paragraphs 48e and 108b). Ruth's words may therefore be translated as an assertive statement rather than a supplication.

Furthermore, Efthimiadis (1995:66) argues with Sasson (1979:42-43), that **נָא** is used in the idiom **נָא אֶחָד בְּעֵינַי**, the object whose favor is sought is never indeterminate.⁴³

Taking these (and other) factors into account, she translates Ruth's words as follows: *ō I will go out to the field to glean among the ears of corn in the hope of pleasing him* (Efthimiadis 1995:65).⁴⁴ This translation suggests that Ruth was referring to a specific and known person, namely Boaz. In line with her translation, Efthimiadis (1991:67) asserts that Ruth knew of Boaz

⁴³ Efthimiadis borrows this argument with reference from Sasson (1979:42-43). Sasson (1979:38) translates Ruth's statement as thus, "Let me go to the field in order to glean among the ears of grain since I shall find favor in his sight" This he translates more freely as "[s]hould I go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, in the hope of pleasing him?" (Sasson 1979:38).

⁴⁴ Vance (2003:26) translates Ruth's words with "I am going to the field so that I may glean among the grain behind him in whose eyes I should find favor". While retaining Ruth's assertiveness, this translation misses the point that it was impossible for Ruth and Naomi not to have known of Boaz's existence and kinsman status.

and that she specifically set out to please him. Against this backdrop, she contends that her translation depicts Ruth's assertiveness and characteristic determination that runs throughout the chapter (Efthimiadis 1991:74). In the same vein, Nadar (2001:165) contends that Ruth was telling her mother-in-law that she was going to the field, rather than that she was seeking permission to do so. For her, this demonstrates that Ruth is a strong-willed, independent thinker who makes autonomous and practical decisions informed by her situation.

While Ruth may indeed have set out to please Boaz, as Efthimiadis and Sasson would have it, I should like to contend that Ruth's reference to *him* may equally be informed by a known fact in patriarchal culture, namely that landowners were men and not women. Further, as indicated in chapter two, women did not inherit land except in exceptional cases. I would therefore like to suggest that Ruth is referring to any male landowner who would allow her to glean in his field, notwithstanding the fact that she knew of Boaz. When Ruth left the house, she might have had two plans in mind: going to glean in the field of anyone who would allow her to do so, and simultaneously scouting for Boaz's field. As she is unfamiliar with Bethlehem and presumably does not know the direction to Boaz's field, she cannot sacrifice a day of gleaning to scout for Boaz's field.⁴⁵

My reading, as well as those of Efthimiadis and Nadar, highlights the way that Ruth's portrayal challenges patriarchal stereotypes about women and further points to the deconstructive trend in *Ruth*. My reading is also supported by the text: "So she set forth and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech (2:3). According to this text, Ruth went about gleaning after the reapers in the communal field (see footnote 45) and only then happened upon Boaz's part of the field.⁴⁶ Here, she presents the foreman with the following request. In his words (2:7):

וְתֹאמֶר אֶל־קֵטֶה־נָא וְאֶסְפְּתִי בְעִמְרִים אַחֲרֵי הַקּוֹצְרִים וְתִבּוֹא וְתַעֲמֹד
מֵאִזְ הַבֶּקֶר וְעַד־עֵתָה זֶה שְׁבֵתָהּ הַבַּיִת מֵעַתָּה:

⁴⁵ According to Efthimiadis (1991:69), who follows Hubbard in this matter, the field mentioned in Ruth 2:2 was a large tract of land nearby Bethlehem in which many landowners shared. In order to make maximum use of the land, no boundaries or fences were set up and each field was identified by its owner's name.

⁴⁶ The narrator is quick to point out that that it was by *מִקְרָה* (accident, chance) that Ruth came to the field of Boaz (2:3b). Tribble (1978:176) sees Ruth's arrival at Boaz's field as an example of divine providence whereas Sasson (1979:44-45) on the contrary sees it as a deliberate act and contends that the narrator would have attributed the chance occurrence to the Lord had he wished to do so. According to Sasson (1979:45) [t]he author of *Ruth*, invokes YHWH's name eighteen times so he could have easily inserted it *one more time* in this most crucial of passages.

She said, 'Pray, let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers.' So she came, and she has continued from early morning until now, without resting even for a moment.

Contrary to Pentateuchal law which gave resident aliens like Ruth the right to glean amongst the rows of fallen grain, or to harvest the borders of a field (see Leviticus 23:22)⁴⁷, Ruth asks the foreman if she can gather amongst the already bundled sheaves (בְּעִמְרִים - bo÷ m r m) (Efthimiadis 1995:68, Sasson 1979:47-48). Clearly, this is a request which the foreman is not authorized to grant, as Ruth 2:15 shows. In this verse, Boaz grants her the permission to glean amongst the sheaves (בֵּין הָעִמְרִים) as she had requested.

For many scholars Ruth's request to glean among the sheaves (2:7) is inconsistent with the fact that Boaz only permits her to do so only after 2:15 (Efthimiadis 1995:68). That is why they emend bo÷ m r m, 'among the sheaves,' to ba÷ mir m, 'among the rows of fallen grain.' However, this emendation misses the point. I would like to argue, with Efthimiadis and Sasson (referenced above), that Ruth's request was deliberately designed to force a meeting between her and Boaz. In this, Ruth shows how creative and cunning she is in her resolve to bring life into a situation of almost certain death.

What she did after this request is a highly contested matter. Most translations render וְהָעִמְרוֹד as the RSV does, i.e. in a way suggestive of her working hard from the time that she had happened upon the field until the time of Boaz's arrival. Sasson (1979:48, his italics) contends that translating וְהָעִמְרוֹד as 'she continued' stretches the meaning of the verb עָמַד (stand) to breaking point: *Ruth had come with a request that could not be fulfilled by a mere overseer. All that he could do was to ask her to step aside and wait until the 'boss' arrived.* In other words, for Sasson, Ruth had waited patiently for Boaz to arrive and had done nothing since her request. However, this does not make sense given the rest of the verse, as contested as it is: מֵאֶזְרַח הַבֹּקֶר וְעַד-עֶתָּה זָה שֹׁבֶתָהּ הַבַּיִת מְעַט - literally 'from the morning and until now this her sitting (in?) the house a bit'. As indicated in 2:3, Ruth had been working in the communal field before she happened on that of Boaz. To my mind, the foreman was telling Boaz that she had indeed been working since the morning, as a possible motivation for him to grant her request. As an additional motivation, the foreman states that she had only rested in the house (the reaper's shelter?) a bit. In other words, the foreman puts Ruth's hard working nature forward in order to motivate Boaz to assist her. If this is indeed the case, then it is

⁴⁷ See further Lev. 19:9-10 and Deut. 24:19-22.

consonant with the characterization of Ruth thus far: faithful, loyal and hard-working. She wastes no time while waiting for Boaz to arrive; she occupies herself by gleaning behind the reapers as she had done before. This interpretation also makes sense contextually, for as Sakenfeld (1999:39) indicates, “[g]leaning [was] a primary means of support for the destitute prescribed in Israelite law. [As a poor alien widow], Ruth seeks out this means of survival designated for her by Israelite law.”⁴⁸

To my mind, Ruth had made a thorough analysis of the situation: she and Naomi had arrived in Bethlehem during harvest time, after the ploughing season. They therefore had little or no food readily available for them. She also knew that gleaning behind the reapers would not bring in enough food to sustain her and Naomi after the harvest was over.⁴⁹ As Naomi appears consumed by grief and/or depression (death) to do anything about their situation, she takes it upon herself to act decisively (life). Intelligently, strategically and innovatively, Ruth devises a plan to provide for the family beyond what the law could offer. As Masenya (2004:53) rightly puts it, “Ruth refused to have hunger stare both of them in the face [and as a result] [s]he took the initiative to carry the responsibility to support the family.”

In Ruth’s action, I see two things. First, I see Ruth’s proactive, daring and creative nature as opposed to the traditional portrait of her which presents her as being shy and docile (see Efthimiadis 1995:75-76). Second, I see a potent deconstruction of the legal foundation for Ezra-Nehemiah’s anti-alien policies: the law makes insufficient provision for these two widows and consequently spells out their death in their current circumstances. If this is the case with a law that was meant to protect vulnerable people like Ruth, then maybe the law effectively banning marriage to Moabites, Ammonites (Deut. 23:3-6) and others might also not be as good as it seems. It takes a despised *Moabite woman* to point this out and challenge the Israelites whose law it was to greater *chesed*.

To return to the text, Boaz arrives at the field and pronounces divine blessings upon his workers (2:4). He then notices Ruth and asks his foreman, “Whose maiden [הַנַּעֲרָה - 2:5] is this?” While Sasson (1979:47) may well be correct in contending that Boaz was asking after Ruth’s ancestry or clan affiliation (see the foreman’s response in 2:6), it is notable that Boaz’s question does not enquire after the young woman’s name. Rather, in keeping with

⁴⁸ Similarly, Nadar (2001:166) states that “[g]leaning provided subsistence for those lowest in social status.”

⁴⁹ This is corroborated by Naomi’s surprise at the amount she brings in at the end of the day (2:19), for which see the remainder of this section.

patriarchal culture, it enquires after the identity of her owner.⁵⁰ The overseer thus responds, ׀It is the Moabite maiden, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moabö. The overseer thus derives Ruth's identity from her foreign ethnicity and from another woman, thus continuing the counter-patriarchal trend Ruth established by leaving with Naomi.

After the foreman's report about Ruth's activities in 2:7, the narrator draws the hearer/reader's attention to Boaz and Ruth's first interaction. Boaz gives Ruth a firm instruction (2:8-9):

הָלוֹא שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּתִי אֶל־תִּלְכִי לְלַקֵּט׃ בְּשָׂדֶה אַחֵר וְגַם לֹא תַעֲבוּרִי מִזֶּה
 וְכֹה תִדְבְּקִין עִם־נַעֲרָתִי׃ עֵינֶיךָ בְּשָׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר־יִקְצְרוּן וְהִלַּכְתָּ אַחֲרֵיהֶן
 הָלוֹא צְוִיתִי אֶת־הַנְּעָרִים לְבִלְתִּי נִגְעֶךָ וְצָמְתָּ וְהִלַּכְתָּ אֶל־הַכֵּלִים וְשָׁתִיתִי
 מֵאֲשֶׁר יִשְׁאֲבוּן הַנְּעָרִים׃

öNow, listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my maidens. Let your eyes be upon the field which they are reaping, and go after them. Have I not charged the young men not to molest you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn.ö

Upon hearing who the young woman (הַנְּעָרָה - 2:5) is and how hard she has worked, Boaz grants her permission to glean in his field for the days ahead. In fact, he effectively bars Ruth from gleaning in another field or even leaving his field. Further, he instructs her, תִּדְבְּקִין עִם־נַעֲרָתִי - ökeep close to my maidensö, adding that he has instructed his young men (הַנְּעָרִים) not to molest her. Boaz commands this young Moabite woman to stay close to öhisö young women, barring her contact with the young men who have the potential to molest her. In this way the narrator less-than-subtly affirms the association of women with life and men with death, an association which began in Ruth 1. This is a powerful deconstruction of patriarchal binary concepts which pair women with death and men with life - and that through the mouth of an Israelite patriarch who had fallen prey to one of them only a short while previously (see öWhose maiden is this?ö above).⁵¹ Boaz's command may also be aimed at focusing her romantic attention away from them and onto himself. This serves as a further identification of Boaz with life.

⁵⁰ So too Trible (1978:176).

⁵¹ This question highlights the association of two sets of patriarchal binaries: women-possessions and men – possessors.

Ruth appears overwhelmed by Boaz's gesture to the point that she falls on her face in humility, gratitude and acclamation, asking Boaz, "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?"⁵² However, I should like to argue that Ruth's statement is ironic in that it is she who sought after Boaz and forced him to notice her. I suggest, therefore that Ruth is chiding Boaz as he clearly knew of the widow's return and of Ruth's *chesed* towards Naomi (see 2:11), but had done nothing to help them until prompted by Ruth. While his response to her may be described as one of *chesed*, his *chesed* is derived from hers, so that she is the actor while he is the re-actor. "It is *her* resolve, not his -kindness- which forces this encounter; it is her determination, her *hesed* which elicits his, allows her to glean and blesses her" (Efthimiadis 1995:70).

Boaz concludes his words to Ruth with: "the LORD recompense you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge" (2:12). How is this repayment and full reward to be experienced? Will he initiate and administer the repayment on behalf of Yahweh? The reader hopes so.

In her second response (2:13) *ó* which may be as ironic as the first (2:10), Ruth elevates her status from *נְכַרְיָהָ* - 'foreigner' (2:10) to *שִׁפְחָהּ* - 'maidservant'⁵³: "You are most gracious to me, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your maidservant, though I am not one of your maidservants". In 2:14, however, Boaz seems to treat Ruth like someone of a higher status than a maidservant: he invites her to eat and drink at his table.

And at mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, and eat some bread, and dip your morsel in the wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed to her parched grain; and she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over.

Boaz thus effectively raises her from the status of a foreigner and a maidservant to that of one of his reapers. Moreover, he takes care of her himself ("he passed to her parched grain"). This strengthens the association of Boaz with life, which is further underscored by the fact that Ruth is not only satisfied after her meal but has leftovers to take home to Naomi (2:18). It is obvious that Boaz is offering Ruth privileges which by right are not accorded to a person of lower status. Boaz's life-giving potential seems firmly established at this point: an Israelite patriarch is meeting a Moabite widow, life for life and *chesed* for *chesed*.

⁵² According to Rashkow (2003:34-35) the word *נְכַרְיָהָ* used by Ruth is an ethnic term which designates someone from another group with even lower social status than *גֵר* (resident alien).

⁵³ Sasson (1979:53) shares Joüon's opinion that "*שִׁפְחָהּ* was originally applied to females belonging to the lowest rungs of the social ladder." Even so, a maidservant had a higher status than a foreigner (see footnote 58).

When Ruth arrives home, and shares what she had left, her mother-in-law asks, “Where did you glean today? And where have you worked?” (2:19). Seeing how much Ruth brought home, she then extends a blessing to the man who took notice of Ruth: “Blessed be the man who took notice of you” (2:19). These are the most (recorded) words that Naomi has spoken to Ruth since they left Moab! It is also the first blessing that crosses her lips since then and contrasts sharply with her bitter response in 1:20-21. It would seem that the proof of potential life contained in Ruth’s gleanings is finally waking this destitute woman from the psycho-social and spiritual death which had beset her (see 3.4), apart from providing her physical sustenance. It is worth noting, again, that a Moabite is acting in *chesed* towards an Israelite, not the other way around: a young Moabite woman is bringing life to an aged Israelite woman. Contrary to patriarchal culture one woman is sustaining another.

Ruth does not respond to Naomi’s words directly. She tells her mother-in-law *with whom* she has worked instead: “The man’s name with whom I worked today is Boaz.” Hearing the name Boaz, Naomi exclaims:

בְּרוּךְ הוּא לַיהוָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָזַב חֶסְדּוֹ אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַמֵּתִים

Blessed be he by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!

Naomi’s exclamation of blessing is confusing in that it is not clear *whose chesed* has not forsaken the living and the dead, Boaz or Yahweh? Having uttered this blessing, she tells Ruth what both she and the reader know: “the man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.” Naomi is all-encompassing and embracing as her use of “our” includes Ruth. The “dead” woman who had attempted to send Ruth back to Moab and ignored her presence (1:19-21) finally embraces her. Naomi’s embrace is all the more apparent in her last words in this chapter: “It is well, my daughter, that you go out with his maidens, lest in another field you be molested.” These words show care for the young Moabite woman for the first time since Ruth made clear her intention to follow Naomi to Bethlehem. It would seem that Naomi now fully accepts Ruth as part of the family. The Moabite is integrated in the Israelite – another potent thrust against Ezra-Nehemiah’s policies.

The narrator concludes “So she kept close to the maidens of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law” (2:23). Harvest time has

come to an end, what does life hold for the two widows? Could the end of harvest time be suggesting famine and emptiness once again? Could the potential of life be annulled? The next chapter will ease the tension and suspense for both the reader and the characters.

3.4 RUTH 3 - BOLD INITIATIVE BY TWO CHILDLESS WIDOWS

The end of the barley and wheat harvest has come and life has to go on. Boaz has done nothing more than respond to Ruth's *chesed* by granting her special privileges in his field.

í Boaz has only ãrecognizedø Ruth (2:10) in granting her protection, food and drink; he has ãspoken kindlyø (2:13) to her with his blessing, but has done nothing to ãredeem herø. He has left her alone ó a deadly fate for a woman in a patriarchal culture (Efthimiadis 1991:88).

Given the seasonality of gleaning, and the urgency of their situation, it is crucial that the women devise a long-term plan of survival if hunger and poverty are to be defeated, if life is to proceed.

õAs chapter 3 opens, the storyteller places Naomi's role as mother-in-law in apposition to her name for the first and only timeö (Sakenfeld 1999:52), thus suggesting a change in roles and responsibility. Indeed, whereas Ruth took the lead in chapter 2, Naomi leads in chapter 3. For the first (reported) time since leaving Moab, Naomi initiates action; õshe í moves from being the receiver of calamity to becoming the agent of change and challengeö (Trible 1978:182). Ruth's *chesed*, actively concretized in the preceding chapter, has brought Naomi out of a place of depression (see discussion on Ruth 1 and 2), inaction and death, to a place of hope, action and life ó despite Boaz's inaction/death. Infused with life, Naomi challenges her fate and creates the possibility of new life for herself and for Ruth. õNaomi herself develops a plan to arrange for [Ruth's] security, hoping to bring an end to the stopgap survival represented by gleaningö (Sakenfeld 1999:53):

Her words, õMy daughter, should I not seek a home for you, that it may be well with you?ö, hark back to Ruth 1:9 where she expressed the wish that God would bless Orpah and Ruth by giving them rest each in her husband's house. This time, however, unlike Boaz, Naomi has moved from a place of wishing to a place of action. Seeing Boaz as a potential husband for Ruth, Naomi devises a well thought-out õsimple [plan which] capitalizes on Boaz's past kindness to Ruthö (Efthimiadis 1991:88). She instructs Ruth to wash and anoint herself, put on her best clothes and

go down to the threshing floor⁵⁴ where Boaz was sure to be winnowing barley that night (3:2). Not making herself known to him, Ruth should wait until he is well satisfied with food and drink (3:3). “[W]hen he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down.” Then, Naomi concludes “he will tell you what to do” (3:4).

The radicality and daring of Naomi’s plan is best understood against the socio-cultural background of the time. As Sasson (1979:67) indicates, “in Mesopotamian society bathing, anointing, and donning one’s fineries were activities, possibly ritualistic if not ceremonial in nature, which engaged the bride as she prepares herself for marriage.” Further, threshing floors were often places of “licentious orgy” (Kluger 1999:65) at the time of the harvest festival.⁵⁵ This festival took place at the end of the harvest season. In addition, Philips (1985/6:13) contends that the term “feet” (מְרִנְלוֹת) “often refers to private parts of both men and women (Ex. 4:25; Deut.28:57; Judg.3:24; 1 Sam. 24:3; 2Kings18:27; Is. 36:12; Is.7:20; Ezek. 16:25)”. So, Naomi is sending Ruth, dressed in her wedding finery, down to the threshing floor during the sexually licentious time of the harvest festival, with the instruction to uncover Boaz’s “feet” once he falls asleep! It would seem that Naomi is hoping that a “marriage” between Ruth and Boaz would be consummated that very night.⁵⁶

To return to the text, Ruth indicates compliance with Naomi’s plan: “All that you say I will do” (3:5). Her simple response prepares the reader for the happenings of the night and is a clear indication that the two widow-women collaborate, cooperate and combine their efforts to combat poverty and change their destiny. Life has joined life. Although Ruth’s original plan may not have been re-marriage (see her objection in 1:6-18),⁵⁷ she knows that it is only through re-marriage that she can secure herself a home and thus secure economic sustenance for both Naomi and herself. She therefore agrees with Naomi’s plan. In other words, Ruth

⁵⁴ “Threshing-floor is the place of treading” (Philips 1985/6:12).

⁵⁵ As Kluger (1999:64-65) correctly indicates, the Israelites not only took over the land of the Canaanites, but also “many of the local customs and... holy places... In ancient agricultural societies... where the god and/or goddess of grain played a leading role, the threshing floor itself was often a holy place... [and] the natural scene of revelry in celebrating the harvest festivals, and not only among the pagans... Harvest festivals were often a licentious orgy in which sexual promiscuity was of the nature of a religious rite... There is no doubt that the Hebrews took over such practices from their neighbors, as we can see from the condemnations of the prophets against their adoption of the heathen orgies”.

⁵⁶ This view is corroborated by the question Naomi asks her upon her return the following morning: “Who are you my daughter?” (3:16). This question effectively asks ‘whose woman/wife are you now’? (See Efthimiadis 1991:99).

⁵⁷ Tribble (1978:1820) argues that “[Ruth’s] reply differs from her earlier responses to the topic of a husband. In scene [chapter] one Ruth’s allegiances to Naomi superseded that need; in scene two Ruth’s struggles for physical survival submerged that need; here in scene three Ruth’s allegiance to Naomi accords with the need. Loyalty to self and to mother-in-law signifies for Ruth a movement from dissent to perseverance to consent.”

and Naomi use the oppressive aspects of patriarchal culture, which afforded women safety only in the house of their men, to ensure their survival (see section 3.5). They play the system to their own ends. Naomi proposes a cunning plan and, seeing the opportunity, Ruth grabs it with both hands. The message is clear: when life affords you an opportunity to create life in the place of death, do not let it pass by.

Next, the narrator moves the scene from Naomi's house to the threshing floor, whilst simultaneously stressing Ruth's obedience to Naomi (3:6-8):

- (6) So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had told her.
- (7) And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly, and uncovered his feet, and lay down.
- (8) At midnight the man was startled, and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet!

The narrator relates Ruth's unconventional act with ease (3:7). Startled by the presence of a woman at his feet, Boaz asks, "Who are you?" (3:9a). This question is similar to the one he asked in 2:5 and yet so different. If the one in 2:5 was a question of ownership, this one is of personal identity. She responds "I am Ruth your *maidservant*" (3:9b, my italics). By stating her name and then her status, Ruth first identifies herself as a person in her own right, and at the same time she relates herself to the man beside her (Bos 1988:62). She switches her status from **שִׁפְחָה** (2:13) to **אִמָּה** also translated as *maidservant*. The latter term has a potent rhetorical effect on Boaz and the reader as it refers to a woman whom a freeman might take as a concubine or a wife.⁵⁸ Contrary to her mother-in-law's instruction (3:4c), her assent to conform to it (3:5) and the narrator's indication that she "did just as her mother-in-law had told her" (3:6), Ruth takes matters into her hands (Efthimiadis 1995:72): she tells Boaz what to do. Not knowing how Boaz may react, she commands, "spread your skirt [**כְּנִי**]⁵⁹ over your

⁵⁸ Taking his lead from Joüon, Sasson (1979:53) states that "the terms were quite distinct, with [**שִׁפְחָה**] originally applied to females belonging to the lowest rungs of the social ladder, while [**אִמָּה**] probably represented women who could become wives or concubines of freemen." According to Rashkow (1993:39), while it is "difficult to translate **אִמָּה** and differentiate [it] from **שִׁפְחָה**, **אִמָּה** is appreciably higher on the social ladder than **שִׁפְחָה**."

⁵⁹ **כְּנִי** literally means "wing". It can also mean "cloak" or "skirt". Fewell and Gunn (1989:50) contend that the phrase "spread your wings over your maidservant for you are the redeemer" signifies "either an invitation to have sex, or an appeal for marriage and security or both."

maidservant, for you are next of kinö (3:9c). This is a radical attempt to bring Boaz back to life and action⁶⁰, as it effectively commands him to take her as wife:

Kruger (1984:79-83) connects Ruth 3:9 to Ezekiel16:8 in which a marriage covenant is made between Yahweh and Israel: öwhen I passed by you again and looked upon you, behold, you were at the age for love; and I spread my skirt [wing][אַפְרָשׁ כְּנָפַי] over you [עָלִיךְ], and covered your nakedness: yea, I plighted my troth to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord GOD, and you became mine.ö According to Efthimiadis (1991:93), öthe metaphor עָל כְּנָפַי אֶפְרָשׁ with further qualification כִּסָּה עֲרוּוָה signifies the legal requirement of a husband to make material provision for his wifeö. Given Ruth's strong character I suggest that she is clear on her prospects: she does not want to be taken as a concubine but rather as a wife. Not only does a wife have a much higher status than a concubine, but a wife's son/daughter could inherit land. Becoming a concubine would be tantamount to death. Ruth's is a bold step of and for life, backed by clear and well defined motives.

With her characteristic assertiveness (see Ruth 1 and 2) and quick wit, Ruth does not hesitate to call Boaz to duty as she motivates her request by stating a fact öfor you are next of kinö. For a pious man like Boaz, this is a call to duty which has social, legal and religious obligations. It is a call to meet daring with daring, *chesed* with *chesed*, and life with life. öWith a wordplay, Ruth calls Boaz to act on Yahweh's behalfö (Nadar 2001:168) and make good his prayer of 2:12.⁶¹ Her öclever and calculated use of the terms Boaz had used to introduce the subject of marriage and the on the obligation of human protection í underscore the pragmatic, as opposed to romantic, interest that motivate Ruth's solicitation of Boazö (Reimer 1994:103). Ruth thus breaks patriarchal taboos by effectively commanding Boaz to exercise *chesed* and marry her. Once again, it is an ethnic outsider, one of a despised race who calls life and *chesed* forth in a situation of potential death, not an Israelite. It is thus she who elicits transformation, not he:

It is *her* faith, character, resolve and non-androcentric perspective that enables Ruth to overcome limitation of patriarchal stereotype and face the crises and challenges of her life in the way she does - as an active worker of salvation rather than as a mere recipient (Efthimiadis1995:75).

⁶⁰ Boaz had effectively died as a result of his inaction at the end of the barley and wheat harvests (Ruth 2:23).

⁶¹ In the field Boaz had said to Ruth "May Yahweh repay you for what you have done, may you have the full reward of Yahweh, the God of Israel , under whose wings you have sought shelter" (2:12).

This is a powerful answer to Ezra-Nehemiah's policies, particularly given the marriage context underlying these verses: do not put away the foreigner who is among you, rather, show *chesed* to her/him. Through Ruth, the foreigner is calling out to the Israelite: do not put me away; show me *chesed* as you have been commanded to.

Nothing is explicitly stated regarding what transpired on the threshing floor thereafter, and the reader is left to guess for herself/himself. Explicit statements such as וַיָּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ (he went in to her) or וישכב עמה (he layed with her) or both of which are standard expressions for sexual intercourse (see e.g. Genesis 19:33, 35 and 38:18), are missing (Van Wolde 1997:445). The scene is ambiguous in that it is overlaid with sexual overtones and yet the existence and/or extent of sexual intimacy is uncertain. The scene is suggestive; there are indications which suggest that sexual intercourse might have taken place. The overtones of possible sexual encounter are heard also in the verb [שכב], which can mean literally to lie down, including lying down to go to sleep, but also in certain construction to sleep with, have sexual relation (Sakenfeld 1999:54).⁶² This is a deliberate ploy on the part of the narrator. It heightens suspense by making the reader wonder whether life would indeed ensue for these two childless widows who appeared to be heading towards certain death at the end of Ruth 2.

Contrary to patriarchal expectations, the narrator paints a picture of an innocent, restrained, submissive and passive Boaz, who does not take the initiative but only reacts to Ruth's instructions. He is presented as compassionate, as the one who is willing to help. He is not angry with Ruth nor does he question her action. Instead, he readily responds with praises, marvels at Ruth's proposal and pronounces divine blessing upon her. As has been the case so far (see 2:8), he responds to Ruth's request swiftly, with no objection. Here, Ruth's request sets the tone for the rest of the narrative. Boaz says in 3:10:

בְּרוּכָה אַתְּ לַיהוָה בְּתִי הַיְטַבְתְּ חֶסֶדְךָ הָאַחֲרוֹן מִן־הָרִאשׁוֹן לְבַלְתִּי־לָכֶת
אֲחֵרֵי הַבְּחוּרִים אֲסִדֵּל וְאִם־עָשִׂיר:

May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; you have made this last kindness greater than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.

⁶² Hubbard (1988:204) argues that "שכב followed by את or עם sometimes denotes illicit sexual relations."

The theme of divine blessing issues from Boaz's mouth here as it did in 2:12. Boaz invokes Yahweh's blessings upon Ruth, stating that her last act of *chesed* is greater than the first. According to Bos (1988:63), Ruth's first deed of **חֶסֶד** was her refusal to abandon Naomi and her decision to abandon the land of her kindred instead. The second deed of **חֶסֶד** though it ostensibly affected Boaz, is also aimed at Naomi. Accordingly, the act of Ruth finding a husband, Boaz in particular, is intertwined with her getting Naomi a **גֹּאֵל** (*gō ēl*).⁶³ Since a widow could probably not own arable property, that land was to be sold a *gō ēlō* (Sasson 1978:62). That is why Naomi needed a *gō ēl* to reclaim Elimelech's land on their behalf (see Ruth 4).

It can be deduced from Boaz's words in 3:10, that Ruth did not go after the choice men (**בְּחֹרִים**), literally meaning men on their prime age. This implies that Ruth had a choice of falling in love with young man but she did not do so, instead she chose Boaz, so as to secure her mother-in-law a *gō ēl*. Ruth by so doing chose life over death; a Moabite has chosen an Israelite to impart life on her.

In 3:11, Boaz assures Ruth that he will do all that she asks of him, additionally describing her as a woman of worth (**אִשָּׁת חַיִּל**). This description parallels the phrase (**אִישׁ נְבוֹר חַיִּל**) with which the narrator described Boaz in 2:1. In this way, it is stated that Ruth's status meets that of Boaz; the two are of the same nature, despite the one being a *rich Israelite man* and the other a *poor Moabite woman*. This is another powerful argument against Ezra-Nehemiah: we are all human, whether male or female, Moabite or Israelite, poor or rich.

Interestingly, Nadar (2001:169) argues that Boaz is not legally obliged to answer to the responsibility to which Ruth is calling him since she is a foreign woman.⁶⁴ As noted above, however, Boaz does not object to Ruth's proposal. Rather, he raises the issue of a nearer and unnamed *gō ēl*, who takes precedence over him (3:12):

⁶³ "The term *gō ēl* ...describes a close relative, a 'kinsman-redeemer,' who takes upon himself the duties of *ge'ullah* – 'redemption' or 'recovery' - on behalf of a needy family member" (Hubbard 1991:4). See also Lev 25 and 27. The law of redemption, as it appears in Leviticus 25:23-25, explicitly states that the law applied to the poor.

⁶⁴ The covenant code as it appears in the Leviticus does not mention marrying the widow as part of the *go'el's* duty. See Lev. 25 and 27. Nadar (2001:167) argues that levirate marriage applied to Israelites and there is no mention of foreigners because there were laws forbidding the union of foreigners with Israelites and as such the rules did not cater for redemption of foreigners.

- (11) And now, my daughter, do not fear, I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of worth.
- (12) And now it is true that I am a near kinsman, yet there is a kinsman nearer than I.
- (13) Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will do the part of the next of kin for you, well; let him do it; but if he is not willing to do the part of the next of kin for you, then, as the LORD lives, I will do the part of the next of kin for you. Lie down until the morning.

The introduction of the nearer kinsman disturbs the flow of events and heightens the reader's suspense. Uncertainty raises the specter of death as Boaz's agreement seems only provisional: his action is postponed to the future and made dependent on that of the unnamed nearer redeemer. Nevertheless, Boaz assures Ruth that he will take action if the nearer redeemer does not. In other words, he faithfully assures her of life, despite the uncertainty, going to the extent of adjuring the Lord's name (3:13), connecting this Name with his action and life for the first time.

As the reader and Ruth anxiously await daybreak, Boaz commands Ruth "Lie down until the morning" (3:13). The narrator dutifully reports: "so she lay at his feet until morning" (3:14a).⁶⁵ Boaz's command and the narrator's report are equally ambiguous. Is Boaz commanding Ruth to have intercourse with him? What kind of person is he if that is the case? Did Ruth and Boaz have intercourse or not? What if they did? What if Ruth is pregnant and the nearer redeemer "does the part of the next of kin" for Ruth? What will happen to the obvious relationship being built between Ruth and Boaz? The reader and, no doubt, Ruth, hope that Boaz will best the unnamed redeemer – a man who has been completely inactive and hence dead Boaz up to this point. His inactivity does not bode well for his future involvement in creating life. In Tribble's (1978:185) words, "Night surrounds morning; the immediate situation encircles the coming resolution; instruction encompasses condition and promise". Despite the promise of life, there is uncertainty, and so potential death all around!

Before daybreak, Ruth gets up (3:14) and Boaz states: "let it not be known that *the woman* came to the threshing floor" (3:14). Ruth is referred to as "the woman", which parallels Boaz's naming as "the man" in 3:3, 8 and 16. In the midst of uncertainty regarding the nearer kinsman, the narrator suggests that Ruth and Boaz may well be relating to each other as man and woman. The parallel is significant. Boaz could have addressed Ruth directly and said, "let

⁶⁵ It is noted that *בַּרְגִּלּוֹתַי* is spelled defectively without a *י* (it should be spelled *בַּרְגִּלּוֹתַיִי*). For some Jewish commentators this means that Ruth moved away from Boaz's feet out of modesty, i.e. that she did not lie down close to him (Efthimiadis 1991:97).

it not be known that *you* came to the threshing floor? However, as Sasson (1979:95) argues, the word **אִשָּׁה** bears the meaning of *ōwifeō* in addition to *ōfemale, woman,ō* and is well suited to the occasion. Neither **בַּת** nor **נַעֲרָה** nor any other term applies to Ruth at this point as Ruth was trothed to him.

The nocturnal scene at the threshing-floor ends with a gift. This sizeable gift⁶⁶ may be seen as symbolic of the life to come, a fair reassurance in the uncertainty of the day's ensuing events. Boaz addresses Ruth directly this time, instructing her to *ōbring the mantle you are wearing and hold it outō* (3:15). Once again, he does not address Ruth as *my daughter*, thus confirming her potential change of status. The narrator reports that Boaz measures out six measures of barley and lays it upon her. The purpose and significance of this gift are not explicitly stated, except through Ruth's report to Naomi in 3:17: *ōThese six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said, 'You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law. This brings the total amount of barley Ruth received so far (in terms of the narrative) to about seven ephas. About seven not quite seven because seven is a perfect number, for there were still unconcluded matters between them (Efthimiadis 1991:98).*

At the crack of dawn, Ruth arrives home and her mother-in-law asks, **מִי אַתְּ בַּתִּי** Naomi's question, which literally translates as *ōwho are you my daughter'?* (3:16), probes for Ruth's current standing as opposed to her identity (3:9). Naomi is curious as to whether or not her plan has worked. The narrator reports that Ruth tells Naomi all that the man has done for her. Ruth also adds the reason for his gift referred to above. As per 2:19, she does not respond directly to Naomi's question. *ōHer language is guarded, and subtleties persistō* (Trible 1992:844). Not a word appears to be said about her bold speech and action. In both cases, here and in 2:19, Naomi's question elicits an answer about Boaz. It would seem that Ruth may be quite taken with this Israelite patriarch. This once again heightens suspense for the reader. What if the nearer kinsman steps up to the plate? What would happen to Ruth's feelings for Boaz then? Would she be condemned to a possibly love-less marriage in the name of tradition? The critique of tradition inherent to these questions is a powerful one within the context of Ezra-Nehemiah's policies: is it better to have a love-less marriage which conforms to tradition or a love-filled one which does not. The chapter ends with Naomi's advice to Ruth: *ōWait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out. The man will*

⁶⁶ Sasson (1979:96) estimate this gift to be 174 lbs which equates to 79.2 kilograms.

not rest, but will settle the matter todayö (3:18b). For the first time, Naomi predicts a positive outcome. She is optimistic and displays a positive character. This lifts the reader's spirit. The character Naomi portrayed at the end of Ruth 3 is a far cry from the one the reader encountered towards the end of Ruth 1 and throughout Ruth 2. Moreover, she does not seem concerned about the role that the nearer redeemer may or may not play. It seems that she may now believe that Shaddai is not (or, is no longer) against her (see 1:20). Thanks to her Moabite daughter-in-law, Naomi has experienced a radical transformation, a complete resurrection, as it were. The process has reached a climax and Naomi's words give both the reader and Ruth hope that at least the matter will be settled *today*. Consequently, there are no concluding remarks from the narrator.

3.5 RUTH 4 - RUTH IS BETTER THAN SEVEN SONS

The day breaks and, as Naomi had predicted (3.18b), Boaz does not rest but heads to the town gate, the place where all economic and legal activities take placeö (Sasson 1979:193).⁶⁷ At the town gate, Boaz sits down and, behold, the close relative of whom he spoke comes passing by. Boaz calls the man, "turn aside, friend, sit down here" (4:1).

It is surprising that the nearer redeemer is not mentioned by name at any time in *Ruth*. He is only referred to as *פְּלִנִי אֶלְמוֹנִי*. Sasson (1979:106) contends that this appellative is often used merely as an indicator of an unknown place or personal name: "such and such,ö "so and so." Sasson therefore refers to this man as Mr. So-and-So. While *פְּלִנִי אֶלְמוֹנִי* may suggest that Boaz does not know the man's name, it is highly unlikely as Boaz knows exactly where the man fits into the extended family sequence as a redeemer. Sakenfeld (1999:69) avers that the man's name is not mentioned because "the actions of these minor characters serve as contrasts to highlight the more excellent way chosen by Ruth and by Boaz." While I agree with Sakenfeld, I would like to suggest that Mr. So-and-So remains unnamed because the narrator would like to paint a negative picture of this man over and against the positive picture painted of Boaz in Ruth 2:1. If this man has no name, he has no life. His lack of name calls to mind the stock phrase in biblical levirate marriage law "to perpetuate the name of the dead so that his name is not blotted out of Israel" (see Deut. 25:6 and Ruth 4:10). This stock phrase refers to the continuation of a dead man's legacy

⁶⁷ Sakenfeld (1999:68) indicates that "[j]uridical proceedings in Israel are often described as taking place at the town gate (e.g. Deut. 21:19; 22:15; Isa. 29:21; Amos 5:15); presumably an open public area adjacent to the gate is intended".

through his son's inheritance of his land. Mr. So-and-So's lack of name may, therefore, bode well for Ruth and Boaz: he has no name now and will have no future name. In other words, he may not be the one to marry Ruth. The absence of his name denotes possible death for him and life for Ruth's plan to marry Boaz.

Having sat Mr. So-and-So down, Boaz calls upon ten elders to be part of an assembly and sits them down too (4:2). Even though the assembly which Boaz calls is the direct result of a foreign woman's initiative, it is evident that the fate of both Israelite and Moabite woman is held exclusively in the hands of Israelite men. Given the overwhelming association of men with death in this narrative, the reader cannot but wonder whether this all-male cast will bring life or death for Naomi and Ruth. Would Boaz be another Elimelech and leave them stranded (effectively dead) in a foreign land?⁶⁸ Or, would he rise to the occasion and lead them to life here in Bethlehem? On the basis of Ruth's life-transforming, life-infusing presence, as well as Boaz's positive response to it, the reader hopes that the latter will be the case. The reader hopes that Ruth's character and positive forcefulness will indeed encourage Boaz to become the agent of redemption that she and Naomi need, that he effectively promised he would be towards the close of the preceding chapter in *Ruth* (2:19). Mr. So-and-So's and the elders' quick response to Boaz's commands associates Boaz with life and bolsters the hope of his success.

Next, Boaz surprisingly opens the legal proceedings by announcing Naomi's sale of Elimelech's land. He offers Mr. So-and-So the opportunity to redeem the land as first redeemer, and then indicates that he is interested in the land if Mr. So-and-So is not:

- (3) Then he said to the next of kin, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land which belonged to our kinsman Elimelech.
- (4) So I thought I would tell you of it, and say, Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you." And he said, "I will redeem it."

Mr. So-and-So's assent creates momentary tension within the narrative. Now that Mr. So-and-So has agreed to redeem the land, what would happen to Ruth and Naomi? Would Boaz still be able to marry Ruth? It would seem that Boaz is extending life towards the unnamed (dead) Israelite man and that the latter is receiving this life, but what would happen to the foreign woman through whom this life has been mediated? The tension is dissolved almost as quickly as it has arisen.

⁶⁸ It is worth noting that this time it is Ruth, not Naomi who is in a foreign land. Nevertheless, Naomi may also be said to be in a metaphorically foreign land, for as a widow, the land of her birth grants her few rights which can transform death into life.

Boaz reveals that, having redeemed the land, Mr. So-and-So also has to marry ðRuth, the Moabitess, the widow of the dead, in order to restore the name of the dead to his inheritanceö. Upon hearing this, Mr. So-and-So relinquishes his right to redeem the land: "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it."

Sakenfeld (1999:70) correctly states that ðthe actual conversation between Boaz and the next-of-kin raises vastly more difficult questions about the Israelite customs and the legal and moral rights and obligations presumed in this exchangeö. I would like to list them as follows:

1. Contrary to the reader's expectation, which is based on Ruth and Boaz's discussion in Ruth 3, Boaz begins the proceedings with Naomi's sale of Elimelech's land, without mentioning Ruth at all (4:3-4).⁶⁹
2. Elimelech's land has not featured once in the narrative until this point. Why does Boaz introduce it now?
3. How did Naomi come to be in possession of Elimelech's land? Could widows inherit land contrary to Pentateuchal law? If they could, should Ruth not have inherited the land as she was the most recently widowed?
4. If Naomi and Ruth had a piece of land, why did Ruth have to glean elsewhere?
5. What happened to Elimelech's land while he and his family were away in Moab?⁷⁰
6. Why does Boaz link the redemption of Elimelech's land with marrying Ruth, Mahlon's widow, in order ðto restore the name of the dead to his inheritanceö (4:5)?
7. Is Boaz proposing a levirate marriage between Ruth and Mr. So-and-So in relation to *ge'ullah*? Were the levirate and *ge'ullah* related?

A brief excursion into Pentateuchal law and the socio-economic circumstances of the time is necessary to appreciate these questions and make an attempt at answering them.

- 1) According to Numbers 27:8-11, if a man died without male progeny, his daughter/s would inherit his property. If he had no daughters, his brothers would inherit it, and if he

⁶⁹ Similarly Philips (1985/6:6) notes that "[t]he legal suit before the elders does not ...concern Ruth but a plot of land belonging to Elimelech".

⁷⁰ Efthimiadis (1995:65) thinks that the squatters were possibly living in this piece of land, "rendering it useless to Naomi".

had no brothers or uncles, then his closest male relative⁷¹ would inherit the land and hold it as his own. This means that Elimelech's land would have passed on to his sons and, since they died childless, to Elimelech's closest male relative as there is no mention of his having brothers or uncles. According to Pentateuchal law, it was thus not possible for Naomi to inherit Elimelech's land. If widows could indeed inherit land from their husbands, as Beattie (1978:256)⁷² suggests, then the piece of land may rightfully have belonged to Ruth as she was the most recently widowed. This is, however, unlikely given that Ruth was not an Israelite (see below). The land may thus have reverted to Naomi.

- 2) While the covenant code made provision for land to lie fallow every seventh year (De Vaux 1961:173), the mode of production and the closely-knit clan system render untenable the possibility of the land lying fallow for the entire. The clan would have needed to cultivate every bit of arable land for its survival. One might posit that someone had cultivated the land on Elimelech's behalf while he was in Moab, and that it may have reverted to Naomi upon her return, that is, if widows could inherit land from their husbands. However, this theory raises the question mentioned above, namely why Ruth went to glean in other fields if she and Naomi already had one.
- 3) The laws regarding levirate marriage are contained in Deuteronomy 25:5-10.⁷³ According to verses 5 and 6:
 - (5) "If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead shall not be married outside the family to a stranger; her husband's brother shall go in to her, and take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her.
 - (6) And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his brother who is dead, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

⁷¹ It is important to note that this relative is not the same as the redeemer kinsman or *gō ēl*. The phrase used in Num. 27:11 is לְשֵׂארוֹ הַקָּרֵב אֵלָיו.

⁷² Beattie contends that "[t]he fact that the author represents Naomi as being in possession of property "which our brother Elimelech's" (Ruth iv 3) must serve to indicate that it was possible in Israelite law for widows to inherit her husband's estate. From the fact that there is no mention of this practice in the Old Testament laws may be inferred that it had ceased to be possible by the time these laws, as we know them, were written, but the fact that it is represented in Ruth as having occurred must mean that it could and did occur in earlier times."

⁷³ This law does not, in clear terms, state wholly the purpose of levirate marriage. It only mentions perpetuating the name of the dead. Cairns (1992:216) deduces two other purposes of levirate marriage, namely "to preserve the balance in land inheritance and to provide for the widow". In the Israelite family institution, the land was to be kept within the family. This was achieved through patrimonial inheritance laws and the levirate marriage. Keeping the widow within the clan meant that the clan retained the land. At the same time, a childless widow was ensured of a home through the son who would inherit the estate of his father. Levirate marriage therefore provides security, in terms of land, for the childless widow.

As Efthimiadis (1991:101) states, the law of levirate marriage cannot be applied to either Ruth or Naomi's case; the duty of the *levir* fell upon immediate brothers dwelling together on undivided land. Neither of the two men is authorised to act as a *levir* because they are not Ruth's brothers-in-law (2:1). Furthermore, as Nadar (2001:167) posits, Boaz is a kinsman of Elimelech, not a brother of Mahlon, [and] [t]herefore if the possibility existed for levirate marriage, it had to be between Naomi and Boaz. This, according to Nadar (2001:167) is particularly so as the terms of levirate marriage applied [only] to Israelites [T]here was no mention of foreigners; since there were laws forbidding the union of foreigners with Israelites, these rules did not cater for the redemption of foreigners.

- 4) None of the Pentateuchal laws pertaining to redemption (Deuteronomy 24:19-22, Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22 and 25:23-34) mention marrying the widow as part the *gō'el's* duty. The duty of the *לֹאָהֵן* was to redeem persons or property already sold due to the original owners' poverty (Efthimiadis 1991:104).

Given the above, it becomes difficult to try to reconcile *Ruth* with Pentateuchal law. Efthimiadis (1991:107-108) may be correct; the matters may well be irreconcilable because *Ruth* is a narrative and therefore not an exact reflection of a real world. As a narrative, *Ruth* may be an interpretation of the real world at the hand of a narrator who may deliberately have included discrepancies as part of the overall picture s/he wanted to create before his/her audience. Alternatively, one could also suggest, as I do, that the Pentateuch does not contain all the laws which governed human transactions and inter-relationships. It only contains those which were possibly in dispute at the time when it and/or its various books were closed to further redaction.

I would therefore like to posit the following in answer of the questions raised above:

- i) Elimelech may have abandoned the land when he left for Moab and a close relative, perhaps the one mentioned in Numbers 27:11, may have taken possession of it. When Naomi and Ruth returned from Moab, they may have had the right to *reclaim* the land, particularly if they could produce a rightful heir (see Leviticus 25:25). They, therefore, first had to choose a suitable sire (Boaz) before attempting to reclaim it. Since the land was in use, they chose Boaz and waited until the harvest season was

over in order to reclaim the land. Ruth's nocturnal visit to the threshing floor is thus no poke in the dark (pardon the pun); it is an intelligently and strategically orchestrated plan for Ruth possibly to conceive a child by Boaz at the end of the harvest season, the time when they would reclaim the land. The land sale was thus not a sale in the traditional sense of the word.

- ii) Given that Israel was a patriarchal society, the two women needed a man to negotiate and administer the reclamation of the land on their behalf. The plan was, therefore, to get Boaz to have sexual intercourse with Ruth on the threshing floor so that he would have no option but to marry Ruth and then be motivated to reclaim the land on their behalf. Even so, getting Ruth married is secondary to the women's plan. Their primary plan is to secure the reclamation of the land and so their own survival. Marrying Ruth to Boaz is thus a powerful strategy for reclaiming the land. Ruth and Naomi used marriage as a means to their desired end. Boaz fell into the trap unknowingly. Naomi and Ruth moved in a negative direction in order to bring about a positive outcome. They tricked the system, challenging oppressive patriarchal structures from within, positively to alter their destiny.
- iii) Ruth is not mentioned at the outset of Boaz's discussion with Mr. So-and-So because, in the agrarian-based economy of the time, land issues took precedence over marriage.
- iv) By introducing the issue of redeeming the land, Boaz minimized suspicion and presented himself in the best possible light (Philips 1985/6:15). He effectively tricked the nearer redeemer into giving up his right to redeem the land (for the purpose of the women reclaiming it) by introducing marriage to Ruth and deliberately (and falsely) couching it in levirate terms. For, any progeny issuing from Ruth and Mr. So-and-So would then have a right to Mahlon's land, thus compromising the nearer redeemer's own inheritance, as he indicates in 4:6.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Efthimiadis (1991:109) relies on Fisch 1982:429-431 in making an inter-textual analysis of Genesis 19 and *Ruth* in order to establish why Boaz introduced the issue of land so oddly and to understand why he quickly acted on Ruth's marriage proposal (3:10-11, 18; 4:1-2). A cursory comparison of the two biblical texts reflects many similarities. It should be noted that both Ruth and Lot's daughters are childless and without husbands. They need children. Efthimiadis (1991:109) contends that they "devise[d] less than above-board method for fulfilling that need." Both Ruth (3:1-4) and Lot's daughters' plan (19:33-35) was dependent on their victims being 'merry' with wine. Lot had sexual intercourse with his daughters and they bore sons by him. Even though the text does not state in explicit terms that Ruth had sexual intercourse with Boaz, it is highly probable that there was a sexual encounter between Ruth and Boaz (see section 3.4). It is for this reason that Boaz would not rest any longer until the matter is settled, for Ruth, "like her ancestress, Lot's daughters, may be pregnant with his child (Efthimiadis 1991:110)." I suggest that Boaz reacted swiftly in order to minimize suspicion and embarrassment of having to marry Ruth by force in case she

- v) The marriage between Boaz and Ruth is not a levirate one. This can simply be deduced from Boaz's words in 3:10 that it was possible for Ruth to find a husband amongst younger men, whether rich or poor. Ruth was, therefore, a free agent when it came to remarriage (Sasson 1978:56).⁷⁵ The levirate did not pertain to her at all.

To return to the text, Boaz deceives the nearer redeemer into believing that the land is for sale, whereas it only needs to be reclaimed. He knows that Ruth's re-marriage cannot be dealt with apart from the land. He therefore tricks Mr. So-and-So into believing that Elimelech's land is being sold. Skilfully and strategically, Boaz factors in the issue of marriage in order to remove Mr. So-and-So from the equation and marry Ruth. This deals the final narrative death-blow to the nearer redeemer who exits the narrative at this point: "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it"(4:6).

With this, the nearer redeemer takes off his shoe and gives it to Boaz as a confirmation of the transaction that has just taken place (4:7-8). Boaz then declares it to the elders and all the people (4:9-10).

- (9) í . "You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon.
 (10) Also Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brethren and from the gate of his native place; you are witnesses this day."

Following Ruth's strategy of subverting patriarchal structures from within, Boaz has cleverly acquired Ruth for himself. Moreover, he has managed to do so legally, patriotically, by setting up the assembly ostensibly to redeem Naomi's sale of Elimelech's land. By linking his marriage to Ruth with perpetuating the name of Mahlon, he has shown himself to be a valorous man indeed (see 2:1), one who is more concerned about others than himself. In this,

is pregnant (see Deut.22:25-29). However, Boaz's reaction is elicited by Naomi and Ruth's plan of acquiring an heir to help them repossess the land.

⁷⁵ Had the marriage been levirate "Ruth should have entered Mr. So-and-So's household as she arrived in Bethlehem" (Sasson 1978:58) and, in any case, Mr. So-and-So was not Mahlon's brother. Furthermore, Naomi (1:11ff) had declared that there was no levirate possibility for Ruth and Orpah (Beattie 1974:265). Thompson and Thompson (1968:95) posit that "the union may take the character of a normal marriage since Boaz's relationship to Ruth is too distant". For Beattie (1974:265) the marriage between Boaz and Ruth "is a simple case of second marriage of a childless widow who has inherited her husband's estates and whose children, by her second marriage, will therefore be heirs, through her, to her first husband".

he has paradoxically identified himself with life rather than death, even though Ruth had to goad him to that position.

All the people and the elders exclaim with ululations and excitement: "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you prosper in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem; and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the children that the LORD will give you by this young woman"(4:11-12).

Interestingly, whereas Ruth is specifically identified as the Moabitess throughout the narrative - most recently in Boaz's exchange with Mr. So-and-So and the elders (4:3-10), this identification ceases in the witness and blessings of the people and their elders. Ruth, the Moabitess, becomes the woman, who is coming into your house (4:11). The final scene at the gate links with Boaz's words in 3:11, namely כָּל־שַׁעַר עַמִּי כִּי אִשָּׁת חַיִּל אַתְּ - all the gate of my people know that you are a woman of worth/valor.⁷⁶ Finally, Ruth is seen for *who* she is rather than *what* she is. Ruth's complete acceptance in the society is underscored by the blessings heaped upon her, which identify her directly with Rachel and Leah, two important Israelite matriarchs. The qualification attached to these matriarchs, namely who together built up the house of Israel (4:11) along with Ruth's acceptance make for a powerful argument against Ezra-Nehemiah's intermarriage policies: look at the person and her/his character, not her/his ethnicity. Do not reject someone as Leah was rejected by Jacob, that person may be just the one to build up the house of Israel.

In the next verse (4:12), Ruth is identified with Tamar, another foreign woman who built up the house of Israel.⁷⁷ Efthimiadis (1991:113) writes as follows concerning this explicit allusion to Genesis 38:

The allusion to Tamar in v.13 is not in vain, for she too transcended the stereotype norms of the patriarchal culture which oppressed rather than help her in order to

⁷⁶ This is my own literal translation. The RSV reads, "for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of worth".

⁷⁷ A cursory intertextualization of Gen 38 and Ruth shows semantic similarities between the two stories. The two stories "presuppose a similar social and legal background of levirate marriage and redemption, and are the only text in the Hebrew Bible that refer to this topic" (Van Wolde 1997:434-5). Both women, Tamar and Ruth are non-Judahite; one is Canaanite and the other is Moabite. It is also interesting to note that both characters are childless widows. Ruth and Tamar played their part in the procreative process of giving birth to a male heir (Van Wolde 1997:437).

survive. Neither is the frequent occurrence of *Moabitess* in vain for Ruth too was limited in the culture which she chose (1:16-17) not only by the gender, but also by the ethnicity. Yet, she heroically transcended the gender-ethical barrier and brought about the redemption of both Naomi and herself.

This allusion to another non-Israelite woman adds to the argument against Ezra-Nehemiah's policies: God built up the nation through intermarriage before. Why should God be prevented from doing so again?

The people's blessings are realized in the next verse (4:13): *So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. The Lord of Life has blessed the efforts of a valorous woman identified with life and called life forth from the death prevalent in Ruth 1.*

At the birth and naming ceremony of the male child, it is only the women who are present (4:14a). Whereas Ruth 4 had begun with an all-male cast, it now ends with an all-female cast with the exception of the male child. It ends with women surrounding this new life form. Given women's overwhelming association with life in this narrative, it is as though life should surround and protect life in order for it to grow and develop.

In jubilation, the women praise Yahweh for not abandoning Naomi: *blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next of kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel. He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him. The women celebrate both the birth of a child and Ruth. Ruth is portrayed as being of greater worth than seven sons, and so better than seven men. A Moabite woman is better than seven Israelite sons. Since seven is the number of totality or perfection, Ruth is effectively being hailed as more than perfect. This is a potent deconstruction of patriarchal-nationalistic Israelite beliefs and stereotypes.*

Once again, as at the outset of her journey with Naomi and throughout the narrative, Ruth is associated with life - new life, and it is her actions which prompt the invocation of blessings on Yahweh. Moreover, it is through Ruth's love for Naomi that this new life has come about, as *a restorer of life and a nourisher of your [Naomi's] old age* (4:15). The adjective *Moabitess* is absent from the women's mouths as it was from the mouths of the men previously. Finally, the outsider has become an insider.

In response to the women's blessings, Naomi takes the child and becomes his nurse. Finally, she has joined the circle of life (4:16).

The child's name, Obed, is given in the following verse and linked with the genealogy of King David, which is expanded upon in 4:18-22: "And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed; he was the father of Jesse, the father of David" (4:17). This marks the end of the narrative and also the end of Naomi's bitterness and emptiness. Her identity has been restored - A son has been born to *Naomi* not Mara, and all because of the love of her (Moabite) daughter-in-law.

The extended genealogy (4:18-22) begins with Perez, as per the blessing of the people and elders (4:12) and ends with David. There could be no higher praise or place for a woman than giving birth to the forefathers of King David, the forefather of the Messiah. The outsider has not only become an insider but part of the inner circle, as it were. For the Jews living in the time of Ezra-Nehemiah, there could not have been a more compelling deconstruction than this.

3.6 CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER THREE

In this chapter, I began by setting out the method of reading and then proceeded to read *Ruth* according to the binary opposites which subvert its overt patriarchal stance. My socio-deconstructive reading of *Ruth* has shown how women are mostly identified with life and men with death, contrary to patriarchal binaries which typically combine women with death and men with life. It has also shown how Naomi and Ruth took the initiative and devised shrewd plans in order to turn around their situation of certain death as childless widows in a patriarchal world. In so doing, they subverted patriarchal customs and laws from within, thus deconstructing them, and encouraged Boaz, an Israelite patriarch, to do the same. In its deconstruction of various binaries, *Ruth* thus proves to be a forceful, yet quiet polemic against Ezra-Nehemiah's policies on intermarriage.

My socio-deconstructive analysis of *Ruth* has, therefore, satisfied the third of the four objectives identified in 1.3.2. The next chapter will draw the study to a close by: a) providing a brief synopsis of Chapter two and three and b) suggesting ways in which *Ruth* can be used to empower poor rural women to greater socio-economic agency. These suggestions and recommendations will be based on the strategic principles that Ruth and Naomi employed to

subvert their own patriarchal context and ensure a brighter socio-economic future for themselves, thus satisfying the fourth and final objective of 1.3.2.

CHAPTER FOUR

TYING THE KNOTS - CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Having completed my socio-deconstructive reading of *Ruth*, I now aim to provide general concluding remarks regarding the findings of the study as a whole. It is important to note that this chapter will not offer any further discussion on rural women's plight (see 1.1 and 1.2). A detailed discussion of rural women's socio-economic affliction and a critique of the systems that underpin it will be taken up in my proposed doctoral work. Rather, this chapter will be satisfied to conclude on the findings of the preceding chapters. Doing so will enable me to determine whether or not the study has satisfied its aims as per Chapter 1. It will also enable me to make relevant recommendations regarding how the study's findings may be used to inspire poor, rural women towards greater socio-economic agency. The chapter ends by briefly reflecting on how the study may be developed further.

4.1. CONCLUSIONS DRAWN IN THE STUDY

While I set out the basic parameters of this study in Chapter 1, I devoted Chapter 2 to discussing *Ruth's* socio-economic background on the basis of its dating. With regard to the latter, scholars have put forward two possible periods in which the book may be dated, namely early monarchic (Davidic) and early post-exilic (Persian). However, I discovered that the arguments pertaining to these dates simply do not suffice to date *Ruth* with any precision (see 2.1.1.3 and 2.1.2.3). After careful consideration, I concluded that, while *Ruth* was written to legitimise David's kingship, it was later used to counter Ezra-Nehemiah's prohibitions on intermarriage (see 2.1.1.2). From the perspective of the modern reader, the text may therefore be said to have two genetic contexts within the Hebrew Bible corpus, namely Davidic and early post-exilic. For me, this meant that the socio-cultural and socio-economic background of *Ruth* could be examined against conditions pertaining in both these periods.

In order better to understand the changes which took place in the monarchic period, I began Chapter 2 with a discussion of the nature of Israelite society in both the pre-monarchic and monarchic periods (see 2.2.1). My discussion of the former showed that ancient Israel existed as a tribal confederation without any form of centralised government at that time. While it is

often assumed that this period was egalitarian in nature, my study showed that socio-economic inequalities existed and that they formed part of the reason behind the Israelites' demand for a king (see 2.2.2.2).

The advent of the monarchy changed the form of political government as well as the mode of production. The family-centred, household mode of production practiced in the pre-monarchic period became tributary in nature (see 2.2.2.3). Even so, the unit of production, namely the family remained the same. The new form of government, centralised around the king, put enormous pressure on the family which now had to produce for both itself and the political leadership, including the army. Production became a political process which exacted a heavy toll on the peasantry. For the most part, peasants worked for the sustenance of the kingdom. The change in political government thus put a heavy strain on the masses. It also resulted in a class system which divided the populace sharply along economic lines (see 2.2.2.3). The system impoverished the masses and enriched the elite few. The family lost its essence and authority as the basis of society.

The socio-economic changes ensuing from the rise of the monarchy also affected women adversely (see 2.4.4). Whereas women were probably full participants in the society, family, and economy of the pre-monarchic period, they were rendered increasingly unproductive during the monarchic period. Moreover, they were denied access to the most essential and powerful economic resource in Israel, namely land, through the patrimonial land tenure system which saw land bypassing widows and women who had male siblings (see 2.4.6). Undoubtedly, this too promoted the disenfranchisement and impoverishment of women during the monarchic period. As noted (2.4), the disenfranchisement of women was patriarchally based and women paradoxically only had recourse to patriarchal structures in order to alleviate their plight.

Interestingly, the family seems to have regained its importance in the early post-exilic period (see 2.4.5). During this period there was a viable manufacturing and textile trade and some women seemed to have had more economic options than their counterparts of the premonarchic and monarchic period. Even so, the socio-economic position of most women remained the same.

Having discussed the socio-economic background pertaining to *Ruth*, I proceeded to conduct a socio-deconstructive *bosadi* reading of the book in Chapter 3, using the early post-exilic period as the final genetic context of the book. My study established that *Ruth* employs an array of binary oppositions, e.g. woman-man, rich-poor, empty-full, famine-plenty, sweet-bitter, life-death, and

that it subverts most of them, thus deconstructing them. The aim of these binary deconstructions was to foreground women and, more specifically, Ruth, as agents of life, thus deconstructing patriarchal Israelite stereotypes which identified women, especially foreign women, with death. In so doing, the text offers a powerful critique on Ezra-Nehemiah's policies regarding intermarriage.

Moreover, my study found that Ruth's actions and behaviour subvert and transcend patriarchally cued cultural and ethnic boundaries and encourage other characters, such as Naomi and Boaz to do the same. While Ruth and Naomi do not effect any change in the patriarchal structures of their time, they significantly subvert them from within in order to gain control of their destiny. Taking the initiative, these two widow women, one Israelite and the other Moabite, became agents of positive change and inspired an Israelite patriarch to do likewise. In the midst of intolerable patriarchal structures, the two women created their own means of survival, using their intelligence, strategic acumen and wisdom.

The study has thus far satisfied most of its objectives as set out in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 has satisfied the first two secondary objectives (1.3.2), by examining the socio-economic conditions affecting women at the time in which *Ruth* was written. In this regard, the study established that the socio-economic condition of women varied from one period to another. In fulfilment of the second objective, the study also identified the main factors that contributed to the impoverishment of women in Chapter 2: the patriarchal nature of ancient Israelite society which tied women's identity and socio-economic survival to the men in their lives and deprived the majority of women from owning the most important economic commodity, namely land.

Chapter 3 then fulfilled the third objective by establishing the strategies that Naomi and Ruth employed in overcoming their socio-economic distress. Through their assertiveness, intelligence and innovation, Ruth and Naomi subverted oppressive patriarchal customs and structures, thus taking positive charge of their destiny.

Having provided a synopsis of the conclusions drawn thus far, I now bring the study to a close with some practical recommendations as to how the findings may be used to inspire greater socio-economic agency amongst poor, rural women ó the poorest of the world's poor (see 1.1). In order to achieve this, I will draw out strategic principles, deduced from Naomi and Ruth's plans, upon which I will base various recommendations in fulfilment of the last objective. This will satisfy the last objective of 1.3.2 and the main objective (1.3.1) of the study as a whole.

4.2 HOW CAN *RUTH* BE USED TO EMPOWER POOR RURAL WOMEN?

I concur with Meyers (1993:88) that Ruth and Naomi can be heralded as exemplars of an impressive range of traits and values worthy of emulation. Generally, women in Southern Africa, and Botswana in particular, understand marriage as crucial to their economic survival. Because they are generally dependent on marriage and relationships with men for their economic resources and are further constrained by systemic economic factors, they tend to fall for older and richer men, motivated by the incentives that these men offer. The situation leaves them vulnerable and prone to HIV thus putting their lives at risk. Further the fact that land tenure in Botswana is patrimonial constrains rural poor women and renders them poor and dependent on men. As such, poor rural women, who find themselves in similar circumstances of disenfranchisement and impoverishment, can use Naomi and Ruth as models of empowerment in their endeavour to improve their lives. Indeed, Naomi and Ruth are inspirational models of women's socio-economic agency. Rural women can emulate the survival tactics these women employed so as to transcend the patriarchal mindset that portrays women as dependent on men and incapable of bringing about their wellbeing.

4.2.1 Strategic Plan Devised by Naomi and Ruth

Naomi and Ruth devised a strategic plan for changing their dire situation: intelligently and independently, without the aid of any man, they first took the initiative to change their situation. As childless widows, they knew that no male was directly responsible for them and as such they had to act. They identified their problem (childlessness, inability to inherit land as women, inability to survive without land) and took the initiative to leave Moab for Bethlehem where they had heard that the Lord had remembered his people by giving them bread. While the text does not explicitly state that they were poverty stricken, it makes it evident that they left Moab out of a need for food and a better lifestyle. Their action subverts a common patriarchal misconception that "women cannot act independently from men" (Masenya 2004:51).

Second, it is clear that Ruth and Naomi were aware of/knowledgeable about the power structures which sought to define and restrict their socio-economic condition. They intelligently calculated the provision and limitation of the law. Strategically, they devised a plan that they used to challenge the patriarchal structures that oppressed them. Finally, they acted in accordance to their plan.

Using their intelligence, wisdom, and well-aimed words, they subverted the overarching patriarchal structures in order not only to survive but to live. They created an "opening" from within the system; they used the soft spot in the system. The opening which they created became an absolute weapon in their endeavour. While they acted within the confines of the law to transcend their hopeless situation, they courageously but not aggressively, challenged and forced the stringent law to provide beyond their entitlement, i.e. Ruth asked to glean *among* the sheaves as opposed to *behind* the reapers (2:7). Ruth and Naomi were encouraging each other, filling in each other's knowledge gaps, as they put their plan/s into action.

Ruth took the initiative in approaching Boaz, with the result that she and he married with the approval and blessing of the town's elders. By boldly forcing an encounter with Boaz at the threshing floor, Ruth and Naomi subverted patriarchy from within: they cunningly used marriage, as a means for her to secure land whereas this may not legally have been possible given Ruth's alien status. In this way, they challenged the law to be transformative and all-encompassing, thus putting it to their own use. Interestingly, these women also employed acts of subservience (Ruth) in order to acquire land and thus secure their socio-economic future. Their assertiveness thus saw to the subversion of patriarchal structures and the status quo which hindered them from owning the most important socio-economic commodity of their time, viz. land. It is these qualities of cunning assertiveness and planning that I would love rural women to emulate in their endeavour to improve their situation.

Naomi and Ruth did not bow to oppressive structures which were difficult to change. Their actions defied patriarchal structures and helped them to resist systemic oppression that was designed to render them poor for the rest of their lives. Ruth played the fool; she fell on her face as a strategy of transformation. While the situation Ruth and Naomi faced may not exactly parallel that of contemporary poor rural women, the latter can still make use of their attitude and strategies to overcome the strictures of their own time. Women still face wide-spread poverty and are rendered powerless by the adverse situations this engenders. *Ruth* teaches us that the powerless have a way of resisting the unfriendly circumstances patriarchy throw them at. Poor rural women who find themselves in a similar situation as Ruth and Naomi could put into practice the principles behind their strategic plans. The church can take a leaf from *Ruth* and help cultivate the spirit of independence and innovation among poor rural women, so as to help them take the initiative and change their lives for the better.

4.2.2 Recommendations and Way Forward

Having concluded my study, I am convinced that *Ruth* has the potential to be read liberatively with poor rural women. As a Minister of Religion, I know the influence that the church has in the society from which I come and the influence that the Bible has in the church. In line with this, I recommend that the Church conducts Contextual Bible Studies with poor rural women and men as a vehicle for transforming these women's lives. As *Ruth* has shown, women are competent and capable of changing their bleak economic future into a bright one. This is an indication that when women's lives are transformed so is the community in which they live in. The Church can thus use *Ruth* to develop a viable, contextually relevant model of transformation and theological tools that may assist in the process of economically uplifting poor rural women. If this book is read *with* the women through Contextual Bible Study, it may change their approach and attitude towards their situation and help them to develop effective strategies of resistance for life.

This study is by no means exhaustive. Future research, possibly for a doctorate, could concentrate on reading *Ruth with* the other, the nameless, the unrecognised, marginalised and oppressed, by means of Contextual Bible Studies. If the book is read contextually *with* the rural poor, it can offer liberating possibilities for poor rural women and facilitate their increased socio-economic agency and wellbeing.

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