

Home (bayit) and Bread (lechem): Masculine Power and Female Authority in the Book of Ruth

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Résumé de l'article

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Home (*bayit*) and Bread (*lechem*): Masculine Power and Female Authority in the Book of Ruth

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Abstract

A deep look at the Book of Ruth reveals a two-dimensional model that reflects two alternative realities of gender. One perception strives to manage the world and resolve its problems. It is an orientation based on justice, rules, and individualistic logic, and even a certain degree of manipulation. The other exists within human reality and is based on concern for others, sensitivity, and mutual responsibility. Although these perceptions are obviously not necessarily representative of different genders, they are often associated as such and can be referred to as masculine and feminine, respectively. This paper demonstrates how the story of Ruth in its entirety revolves around the tension between these two perceptions, until they ultimately merge into one.¹

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Introduction

The Book of Ruth begins “in the days when the judges ruled” and ends with the dynasty of David, the future king of Israel, symbolizing the transition from the era of the judges to the establishment of a monarchy, and from random, dispersed, and temporary leadership to an organized, dynastic system. This paper will explore the events of this book and the permutations that facilitate this transition. This paper proposes that this transition is related to the internal rift within the nation that characterized the era of the judges,² when authority was ignored and all hierarchy disintegrated. The Book of Judges ends with a bloody civil war triggered by the horrific events of *pilegish bagiva* (the concubine of Gibeah), which are recounted using wording reminiscent of the destruction of Sodom. This literary similarity suggests that the era of the judges brought the people of Israel to the brink of Sodom-like corruption. However, there is another surprising connection between the two stories. One of the outcomes of the destruction of Sodom was the establishment of the nations of Amon and Moab, which ultimately produced Ruth, the book's protagonist!³ Thus, it is the female figures, the descendants of Amon and Moab, who justify the existence of these nations. It seems that the link binding the two stories must be related to the development of a moral backbone that

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enables the nation to mature from scattered tribes into a united body that can accept the rule of a monarch.

In her comments on Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of development,⁴ psychologist and philosopher Carol Gilligan described a model comprising two parallel paths towards moral development. The first resembles the theory presented by Kohlberg, which is justice-oriented and based on rights, insistence on rules and regulations, logic, individualism, and autonomy. The second is a developmental process that revolves around concern for others, as reflected by sensitivity and personal relationships that are based on a desire to maintain those relationships even at the risk of self-sacrifice.⁵

The Book of Ruth proposes two models of humanity, as parallel options for navigating and managing reality, and discuss the extent to which they resemble the two paths of moral development suggested by Gilligan. This paper also describes the behavior of the main female and male characters based on the model of personal development she suggested.⁶

Chapter 1

The opening chapter of the Book of Ruth portrays a terrible crisis. The situation deteriorates as the characters reach rock bottom in their poverty and loneliness. This first chapter describes the events on two levels that can be seen as contradictory. One is the 'masculine' movement from Bethlehem to the fields of Moab, and the other is the 'feminine' movement in the opposite direction. This paper will demonstrate the profound differences between them, beyond the geographical direction of the journeys taken.

The first verses of Chapter 1 present the setting of the story, including the time and place of its occurrence and the background for all the events described.

The story begins with famine. Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and his two sons choose to leave the Land of Israel and travel east to the land of Moab.⁷ There, Elimelech dies, and his sons, Mahlon and Chilion, marry local women,⁸ Orpah and Ruth. Both sons then die as well, leaving Naomi as the family's sole survivor. Eventually, Naomi learns that there is food available in Bethlehem and returns to her homeland. The name Bethlehem is essentially the heart of the story. It is comprised of two Hebrew words, *Beth* (home), and *Lehem* (bread). All the significant decisions and turning points in the Book of Ruth

revolve around the dichotomy between **home** and **bread**. In the opening scene, Elimelech, a senior figure in his city and one of its leaders, chooses to leave his home in search of food for his family.⁹

After the death of their father (1:3), Mahlon and Chilion allow themselves to marry gentile women (1:4). It is interesting to note that in these verses, the men are defined by their wives, and the women are defined by the men in their lives. Elimelech is described as “the husband of Naomi” (1:3), and Naomi was described as solitary in this world, “left without her two sons and her husband” (1:5).¹⁰ The sole recorded action taken by Mahlon and Chilion during their entire ten years in Moab was marrying Ruth and Orpah. The Book of Ruth shines its literary spotlight on the question of identity. The protagonists are not described by their actions or their social status, but rather by their family relationships.

Another intriguing component of the story is the transition that occurs. Despite Elimelech’s decision to prioritize **bread** over **home**,¹¹ once they arrive in the land of bread (Moab), the **home** aspect is prioritized, as reflected by the emphasis placed on the home and family. Mahlon and Chilion start their own families, and the entire home of Elimelech ultimately collapses. In other words, the ten years spent in Moab are presented from the family perspective, as opposed to the financial perspective.¹² From Naomi’s perspective, the spotlight is on the fact that her home and her family have fallen apart.¹³ A choice must be made between present and future self-identity, and whether to focus on survival at a given time based on status, prestige, and control over others, or on a family legacy and birthright that will live on in the future. *Beit*, **home**, refers to the future generations, and *lehem*, **bread**, prioritizes current existence. Elimelech chose *lehem*, meaning immediate survival. Naomi’s perspective prioritized her family and its continuity, focusing on marriage, lack of offspring, and the death of her husband and sons.

When Naomi learns that there was now bread in her place of origin, she leaves the fields of Moab and returns to Bethlehem (1:6-7). Once *lehem* (bread) was no longer a problem, she could focus on matters related to her *beit* (home). She bids her daughters-in-law goodbye with two separate emotional, impassioned appeals (1:8-10; 1:11-13), insisting that she has nothing to offer them. They both initially refuse to leave her, as Naomi is

their home and family. Note that Naomi says nothing about her ability to support them. The lonely, helpless woman, with no prospects at all, talks only about what she can offer her daughters-in-law in terms of a family. Naomi's irrational suggestion in her second appeal (1:11-13): "Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons" also refers to the preposterous notion of her bearing new husbands for the young widows. Finally, Orpah agrees to return to Moab whilst Ruth clings to Naomi.¹⁴

Note that at this stage, all of Naomi's actions, including her appeals to her daughters-in-law, are motivated by her own survival, status, and the reputation of her husband and sons. According to Gilligan, in this initial stage, Naomi's self-perception is one of helplessness. It is rooted in her need to contend with rules and circumstances that were forced upon her by society and fate. Moral considerations are applied at this stage only when faced with two conflicting interests and after taking personal gain into account, without any consideration for others.¹⁵

This is a very accurate description of Naomi's state of mind at the initial stage. She responds out of a state of helplessness, shaken first by her husband's decision and later by the improved situation in Bethlehem, and determines her fate based on her survival instincts. Her conversation with her daughters-in-law focuses solely on personal gain. Although it is their personal interests for which she is advocating, she gives no indication of seeing them as a family with any type of commitment to one another beyond the need for survival and continuity. Their conversation revolves around the possibility of creating a future for themselves by forming a relationship with a man. A woman's future requires a man. There is an extreme emphasis in their words on the **home** – marriage, childbirth, future, and no mention at all of **bread** – the possibility of an income and immediate survival.¹⁶

After Naomi's second appeal, Ruth alone remains behind. Naomi speaks once again and attempts to convince Ruth to leave her: "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law" (1:15). The Hebrew term Naomi uses for 'sister-in-law' is *במתך*, meaning the woman your husband could have married after his brother died childless, thus redeeming the name of deceased brother. The connection between Orpah and Ruth is defined by an axis created by the men in

the family, around which future potential revolves. From a legal perspective, the term *יבמתך* is meaningless, as Ruth cannot redeem Orpah in any way. It is used only to define the relationship between them through the men in the family; the two brothers who tie them to one another.¹⁷

At this point, Ruth makes what Gilligan would call the ‘first transition’ in which morality begins to develop and the individual begins the transition from selfishness to responsibility as the needs of the other are prioritized over self-interests. Ruth declares her love and devotion in a moving speech that binds her own fate to that of Naomi (1:16-17).¹⁸ Her determination to convert and join the Jewish nation is secondary to her dedication to her mother-in-law. It is fascinating to see how Ruth shifts the focus to the possibility of a life that does not revolve around men. She offers an alternative to the male orientation that is reflected in Naomi’s use of the word *יבמתך*, which defines the masculine component as the backbone of the family, by presenting the possibility of a solely feminine association. Ruth’s speech incorporates all the components of a relationship – choosing a path in life (“I will go”); settling in a home (“I will lodge”); adopting a national identity (“my people”) and a religious identity (“my God”),¹⁹ and steadfast devotion until death (“I will die”) – though the context is a connection between two women! Ruth raises the possibility of establishing an alternative home; a family structure based on women without men to bind them to one another, based on love, devotion, and affection.²⁰

Ruth thus demonstrates that a home, meaning a family, a relationship, or an entire future, can be based on feminine commitment and not only on masculine breadwinning capabilities. The centrality of the home that revolves around masculinity is an illusion. The heart of the home is its feminine aspect.²¹ Ruth clearly and explicitly expresses the second stage of moral development described by Gilligan’s model, in which ‘good’ refers to taking responsibility for the other, even if self-sacrifice is required. At this stage, inner confirmation is not obtained by satisfying the need for survival, but rather by others’ confirmation of the need to lean on the individual, to the point of complete dependence.²²

The description of Ruth and Naomi’s return to Bethlehem is both moving and interesting: “So, the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they

came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, ‘Is this Naomi?’” (1:19). With exquisite literary skill, the story delicately demonstrates the insight of the previous verses. The entire city, which is generally seen as serving masculine-style socio-political functions, is here portrayed as a collective feminine identity: “The whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said...”²³ The entire city reacted to the return of Naomi, however the response came from the women of the city. Though a city is usually defined by its men, in the Book of Ruth, Bethlehem is a city of women as it is full of feminine activity in a masculine context.²⁴

Naomi responds poetically to the women of Bethlehem in verses 20-21.²⁵ She changes her name from Naomi, which means sweetness and pleasantness, to Mara, from the word *mar*, or bitter, to reflect the turmoil in her life.²⁶ It is interesting to note that the imagery that Naomi chooses when describing the turn her life has taken for the worse is taken from the world of food and flavor, which is reminiscent of the theme of bread discussed above: “I went away full, but God has brought me back empty” (1:21) – from considerable wealth to devastating poverty. However, a second look at her words makes it clear that she is referring to the calamity that befell her home and her family. Her sense of “fullness” was created by her husband and children, and by the future that once lay ahead. The emptiness with which she returned represented the destruction of that future.²⁷

The last verse of Chapter 1 shifts the focus back to bread and its components, which were ripening in the fields surrounding the city upon Ruth and Naomi’s return. This mention is a gentle, literary allusion that shifts the focus ever so slightly from the feminine perspective to a masculine perspective of survival, as will be discussed regarding the next chapter. Noting the time of the events based on agricultural-fiscal considerations returns the discourse to the masculine realm of breadwinning and farm work, and lays the groundwork for the possibility of feminine activity within this masculine context.

Chapter 2

The second chapter of the Book of Ruth covers a period of approximately two months – from the beginning of the barley harvest until the end of the wheat harvest. The setting is the fields of Bethlehem, a site of ‘masculine’ production and livelihood that leaves

no active role for women other than as accessories to the main events. In Chapter 2 the reader first encounters Boaz, the male protagonist of the Book of Ruth, a man with unique qualities, and sensitivity and attentiveness that were not considered typical of his gender.

The setting is the wheat and barley fields during the harvesting season, a setting that reflects that productivity of the land and the prosperity for which man is responsible.²⁸ This background presents a harsh contradiction to the barrenness and impoverishment of Ruth and Naomi, the family of women introduced in the previous chapter.²⁹

Chapter 2 begins with a description of the (masculine) family connection between Naomi and Boaz.³⁰ It is interesting to note, however, that although the connection is presented from the male side of the family, this description begins with Naomi, as she is the main character of the story.

Ruth offers to go to the fields to glean sheaves of grain that were left behind in the fields (2:2). Note that it is Ruth, the foreigner from a gentile family, who suggests a course of action rooted in Jewish law. This may be another example of the gap between the commonly perceived law and order that is characteristic of the masculine way of thinking and acting, and the spontaneous, initiating, reactive behavior that is characteristic of how women navigate themselves in the world.³¹

By coincidence, which the narrator does not consider a coincidence at all, as is hinted to the reader,³² Ruth happens to glean grain in fields owned by Boaz, her wealthy relation, who is introduced here (2:3) as a relative of Elimelech. On that particular day, Boaz chooses to go out to his fields to oversee the work there.³³

Boaz asks about the identity of this new young woman, and the person in charge of the reapers answers by indicating her connection to Naomi and her nationality.³⁴ He goes on to describe her request to gather sheaves among the reapers, and seems to show disdain for her minimal achievements so far.

Boaz observes the situation from a masculine perspective; He notes the crop yield, the fields, the reapers hard at work, and the new young woman who he and his foreman judge based on her productivity. Describing her as “the woman who returned from the fields of Moab with Naomi” also alludes to her financial impoverishment.³⁵

This scene depicts a woman within the masculine field where **bread** is grown. She stands out within the predominant male environment and physical hard work being carried out in the field. The first verse of this chapter, which describes the family relationship between Ruth and Boaz, offers a first glimpse at the possibility of a **home** that is emerging behind the scenes, as a connection is formed between the male and female protagonists of this story:

[8] Then Boaz said to Ruth, “Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my **young women**. [9] Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the **young men** not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the **young men** have drawn.” . . . [21] Then Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi: “He even said to me, ‘Stay close by **my servants**, until they have finished all my harvest.’” [22] Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, “It is better, my daughter, that you go out **with his young women**, otherwise you might be bothered in another field.” [23] So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law.

The events in the field on the day of Ruth’s arrival is almost a comedy of errors created by the cultural and gender gaps between Ruth and Boaz, and the foreign Jewish environment in which this Moabite woman now finds herself.

In an act of generosity, Boaz affectionately refers to Ruth as “my daughter”³⁶ and invites her to remain in his field and stay near the group of young women. These women either work for him, or are also poor women themselves gathering sheaves among the harvesters. He adds that he will protect her in other ways as well “I have ordered the young men not to bother you.” This hints to the fact that the young men would often (sexually or otherwise) harass the young women in the field, and Boaz’s authority was needed to ensure their safety.³⁷

However, when Ruth returns home to Naomi carrying the abundance of grain that Boaz had given her,³⁸ Naomi seems surprised to discover that Ruth had spent the day in the fields of their relative. Ruth tells her mother-in-law about the kindness the man had shown her, and mistakenly quotes him as having told her to “stay close by my servants,” though he had actually emphasized that she should stay near the young women. This mistake may be read as a subtle cultural sting, hinting at a possible cultural gap, portraying a more promiscuous Moabite culture, and Israelite culture as one which is more modest by nature. It also may have been the product of the more feminine,

innocent perspective of a young woman who is unaware of the dangers that these young men might pose.

To a certain extent, this may be the point at which Ruth undergoes the second transition described by Gilligan, from conformism to renewed inner judgment.³⁹ Although Ruth does not explicitly say so, one might very carefully suggest that this slip of her tongue or misunderstanding reflects her desire for self-realization and possibly even repressed sexual desire that she herself might not be aware of. At this stage of development, the individual begins to question whether morality actually requires self-sacrifice, and considers alternative ways of caring for others without fully sacrificing the opportunity for self-realization. Gilligan specifically states that at this stage, the individual is not yet decisive enough to attribute equal value to personal needs and to the needs of the other, and generally prioritizes the latter. This is exemplified by Ruth's somewhat hesitant behavior.

Naomi realizes Ruth's mistake and gently corrects her: "It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field." (2:22) Ruth internalizes her mother-in-law's message and from that point on, "stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests." (2:23)

The topic addressed here goes beyond the cultural gap encountered by Ruth. It is a dialog about masculinity and femininity - how men contend with the world around them, and other men create defenses against their inappropriate behavior; and how women conduct themselves in a more innocent way. The different styles of discourse are carefully outlined here as well, placing the commandeering style utilized by men alongside the more empathetic, sensitive, and gentle style attributed to women. The men in the story are shown attempting to manipulate reality and achieve instant gratification, including in relationships with young women that are not based on emotions or any type of connection or long-term commitment. The women in the story are portrayed as offering a feminine, cautious, perspective that looks ahead into the distance and is guided by long-term intentions.⁴⁰

It is interesting to note that Boaz is presented in the Book of Ruth as a unique individual who is capable of distancing himself from the present and looking ahead into the future.

He possesses perspective, and possibly even something of what may be seen in the system of axes that outlined in the story as a feminine perspective that considers the future and sees the broader context beyond the immediate benefit.

In verses 10-12, Ruth and Boaz hold a private conversation with several fascinating components that highlight the differences and similarities between these two protagonists. Ruth opens the encounter (2:10) with a physical gesture that reflects her inferiority to Boaz, “then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground.”⁴¹ It expresses her perspective of her origin and foreignness, which make her unworthy of Boaz’s kindness. Ruth adopts the more masculine perspective when noting that her origin in a foreign land is what differentiates her from Boaz and makes her unworthy of the bread he is offering her. Boaz responds (2:11-12) that all that he had heard about how her compassion for her mother-in-law overrode her own self-interests and about the infinite kindness Ruth had demonstrated by conceding her own future for the sake of Naomi, made her worthy of Godly rewards and of human kindness.⁴² Boaz thus rectifies Ruth’s perspective of the source of kindness by addressing the question of whether it is granted because of national affiliation and proximity, or in response to moral behavior. He carefully refines the definition of national affiliation from the perspective of the “home.” The person deemed worthy of being brought into the home and deserving of kindness is not only a blood relation; it is her good deeds that justify her acceptance.

The two perspectives intertwined in the story of Ruth can also be found in the meal she shares with Boaz after their conversation. Boaz invites Ruth to eat “bread” with the reapers (2:13-14) and encourages her to be active, and to “dip her bread in the vinegar.” Shy, modest Ruth⁴³ sits among the reapers but does not reach out to take her own portion until Boaz prepares it and serves it to her. Boaz is sensitive and generous. He invites her to join in their meal, to break bread with them “at mealtime”, but Ruth is preoccupied by Naomi, who is waiting alone at home for Ruth to return, and saves some of her bread for her mother-in-law.

The conversation between Naomi and Ruth that concludes Chapter 2 (19-23) reflects the new roles within their small family. Ruth is now the provider. She is the one responsible for the **bread** in their home. Naomi quickly puts Ruth’s connection with

Boaz in the context of the **home** by describing the family relations between them and their benefactor.

The exchange between the two women, in which Naomi instructs Ruth to stay near the young women in the field as opposed to the young men, can also be associated with this line of thought. Ruth's suggestion raises the possibility of a sexual relationship or even marriage with one of the reapers, while Naomi insists that she remain with the young women and avoid the men. Naomi also blatantly ignores Ruth's mention of time and productivity ("until they have finished all my harvest"⁴⁴). As the next chapter will show, Naomi has much grander plans for her daughter-in-law.⁴⁵

Chapter 3

The scene that takes place at the threshing floor is one of the most heightened reflections of masculine vs. feminine conduct in the Book of Ruth. Naomi sees that the barley and wheat harvest is coming to an end and fears that Ruth will miss the opportunity to build a home with Boaz. Naomi therefore decides to intervene and instructs Ruth to proactively pursue the next stage in their relationship. (3:2-4) Naomi realizes that on the following day, the reapers would complete one of the most critical stages of the harvest, winnowing the grain. Therefore, she had no doubt that Boaz, the owner and manager of the field, would spend the night there in order to oversee the important work being done early the next day. Naomi instructs Ruth to meet with Boaz at the right opportunity, after his meal and before he goes to bed. Ruth is to wait for him at the foot of his bed and do as he tells her.

Naomi's clear intention is for Ruth to seduce Boaz that night, when he is full from his meal and tired after a day's work,⁴⁶ in order to secure her future. Naomi deviates from her feminine role and takes "masculine" action to initiate the physical consummation of their slowly-developing relationship in order to obtain a full commitment from Boaz and ensure Ruth's future.

However, the story does not proceed as Naomi had intended. In verses 7-14, Ruth goes to the threshing floor and carefully follows Naomi's instructions,⁴⁷ but nothing happens between her and Boaz.⁴⁸ Later that night, Boaz suddenly discovers a woman laying at his feet and asks who she is. Ruth acts differently than she was instructed at this point (or in her innocence, did not understand the manipulation required in this case⁴⁹) and

reveals her true intentions: “I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.” (3:9)

Ruth now enters the third stage of moral development described by Gilligan.⁵⁰ She stands up for her rights and best interests, but takes her responsibility for the other important people in her life into consideration. Had she seduced Boaz, as her mother-in-law had planned, she would have conceded her own self-respect or even lowered her value in the eyes of Boaz. Had she rejected Naomi’s plans entirely, she would have hurt Naomi and risked her own chance of building a relationship with Boaz. In this scene, Ruth has developed a self-perception of strength and initiative. She uses her own judgment to modify the original plans in order to maintain her relationship with her mother-in-law and pursue a relationship with Boaz.

Surprisingly enough, it is Boaz who postpones the consummation of their relationship until it can be respectfully arranged. He has deep respect for Ruth and her reputation and does not want to proceed with their relationship before resolving the legal matter regarding a closer relative who has the right to marry her. He also protects Ruth from local gossip by telling her to sneak out of the field before dawn, to avoid being discovered.

Boaz’s strength is reflected by his preference to delay his own gratification to ensure that order is maintained.⁵¹ He modifies the course of events that Ruth and Naomi had planned, each in her own way, and shifts it towards a justice-oriented plan that involves a complete course of action in the legal, public, and masculine arena.⁵²

The feminine, though masculine, manipulation proposed by Naomi in order for Ruth to actively take her relationship with Boaz to the next level and obtain his irreversible commitment for the future, is faced with a unique, masculine, though feminine, response from Boaz. He restrains himself, follows his good judgment, overcomes his inclinations, and delays gratification to ensure a more respectful, organized consummation of his relationship with Ruth. Boaz focuses on the future and on the legal and public context of the story and takes full control over the situation.⁵³

In this scene, the symbolism of **bread** and **home** are confronted with one another. The precise time at which action is taken to trigger a process that would guarantee a secure

future from the perspective of **bread**, is the time and place in which an even deeper process of self-sacrifice began that would ultimately guarantee a **home**.

Before Ruth leaves early in the morning, Boaz makes a practical commitment.⁵⁴ He gives Ruth a measure of raw barley (3:15) to symbolize his commitment to supporting her in the future as well. He gives her **bread** as a symbol of his commitment to ultimately give her a **home**. It is interesting to note that when Ruth returns to her mother-in-law's home, she presents the six measures of barley she received as a gift for Naomi that Boaz had given her so that she would not return empty handed.⁵⁵ Naomi instructs Ruth to wait for a short while, as Boaz is known for acting quickly and without delay. She is fully confident that Boaz will fulfill his commitment in the near future. (3:18)

Chapter 4

In the final chapter of the Book of Ruth, Boaz attempts to resolve the family's complex legal situation⁵⁶ using a certain degree of manipulation of his own. (4:1-8) This is the only scene in the Book of Ruth that plays out on an entirely masculine level. In the world of men, problems are resolved in a structured, organized, legalistic fashion. However, it seems that the act of manipulation that Boaz uses when dealing with the anonymous next-of-kin,⁵⁷ which has been attributed to Naomi's feminine world, can be associated with the female world that is attributed more to the home. Although on the surface, the discussion underway is related to the kinsman who has the right to redeem Elimelech's field. By the way, it is interesting that only now does it become clear that Naomi had sold it, possibly after returning from Moab. Therefore, she was not as poor as it had seemed until this point.⁵⁸ (The field, i.e., the means of producing **bread** that Elimelech had left behind.) However, during the discussion, Boaz "remembers" to mention that this is a package deal, and whoever redeems the field must marry Ruth, the widow of Elimelech's son, and give her a **home**. The kinsman, who had originally agreed to redeem the land,⁵⁹ was deterred by the marital obligation that it would include. In an ancient ceremony that involved the removal of a shoe [*halitazh*] and symbolized transfer of ownership, the kinsman waived all his rights and obligations. The implications of the package should be made explicit: Should he father a child with Ruth, that child will build the name of Mahlon, not him. The field that he buys will not be

inherited by a son he may have already, and the line of Mahlon will be blessed with continuance.⁶⁰

After the ceremony, Boaz goes on to establish his connection with the family of Elimelech. (4:9-11) He begins by addressing the elders, i.e., the male authority of Bethlehem that is responsible for running the city on the public level. He expresses his interest in purchasing all of Elimelech's property (his **bread**), and in preserving the memory of the deceased (the **home**). This completes the official stage of the process, but before the crowd disperses, Boaz is blessed by "all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders:"

[11] May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; [12] and, through the seed that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah

This authoritative group of men suddenly shifts its focus and addresses various aspects of the **home!** The feminine dimension is now adopted by men, who use the 'seed,' the man's contribution to the construction of his home and family, to link this dimension with the masculine world of **bread**. The historical role model is feminine ("like Rachel and Leah... Tamar."⁶¹) The two matriarchs are acknowledged for the centrality of their contribution to the establishment of the nation ("who together built up the house of Israel"),⁶² and an allusion is made to Tamar's contribution to the tribe of Judah, to whom all those present belong.⁶³ From the men's perspective, the woman is the center of the home and the one who constructs it, although it is the men and their seed that are responsible for ensuring the future of that home.

The story has a happy ending. Boaz and Ruth are married and Ruth is blessed with a pregnancy that ends with the birth of a son. (4:13) The women of Bethlehem react positively to the birth of this child (4:14-15) and confirm Ruth's ability to provide a home that is not based on the presence of men: "your daughter-in-law... who is more to you than seven sons." It is the women of Bethlehem who name the child, and within the celebration revolving around the establishment of this new home and family, they address the economic dimension as well "He shall be to you... a nourisher of your old age." (4:15)

Summary

The Book of Ruth tells a story that on the surface is predominantly masculine. However, beneath the surface, a parallel story is told on the feminine dimension.

Outwardly, it is the men who are the movers and shakers. They are responsible for finances and for the practical aspects of the people's survival and immediate existence. However, the women are active behind the scenes. Their motives are different, and their perspective is long-term.

Elimelech leaves his city for reasons of survival, in search of **bread** and a livelihood. However, shortly after he dies, his sons marry gentile women with the consent (or at least the knowledge) of their mother, out of the desperate need to ensure the family's future in a foreign land. When the sons die before bearing children, this aspiration fails as well. On the surface, the next stage of the story occurs when God remembers the people of Bethlehem and give them **bread**, which inspires Naomi to return to the city of her people to seek a future there. She tries to leave her daughters-in-law behind because she cannot promise them a future. She then returns to Bethlehem as a desolate woman, and Ruth presents the option of an alternative future that can be constructed by women. Ruth begins to develop the interim possibility of masculine-style survival and existence that does not depend on men. However, the alternative she presents cannot resolve the matter of continuity.

Ruth crosses the lines into the world of men when she arrives at the barley field. There she meets Boaz but does not fully comprehend the masculine codes of behavior in this setting. Her achievements there are not optimal, and she is unable to make progress in her relationship with Boaz.⁶⁴

At this point, Naomi, the woman who pulls the strings, decides to intervene. She sends Ruth to the field to seduce Boaz and establish a future for herself with him. However, Boaz is gallant enough to stop a chain of events that would have established a connection, but would be rooted in manipulation, loss of dignity, and deception, and finds a respectful solution.

Gilligan's conclusion is that the full potential of human morality can only be obtained by merging the masculine, justice-oriented approach, and the feminine approach that is motivated by concern for others.⁶⁵ In the context of the Book of Ruth, this refers to

marriage with dignity and consummation of their relationship through mutual commitment as opposed to physical manipulation or coercion. This is the solution offered for a genuine merger of the masculine world and the feminine one. This union is symbolized by the six measures of barley that Boaz gives to Ruth. On the one hand, they are material, practical, financial commodities that can provide immediate nourishment, and on the other, symbolize a long-term commitment for a future home that would also include Naomi. Marriage is a legal institution with fixed traditions and ceremony that also reflects the deepest levels of concern and sensitivity towards others. At the gates of Bethlehem, the complex masculine world validates the actions of a woman, a seemingly weak widow, who has been pulling the strings from the privacy of her home. The men and elders do nothing but confirm what has already been done. The blessing that Boaz receives from the elders is an acknowledgement of the existence of a feminine world that reaches the surface. The blessing given by the women of Bethlehem has a similar purpose, from the feminine perspective. The close feminine connection between Ruth and Naomi produced a better future for Naomi than seven sons could have given her. The women continue to impact reality by giving the newborn child a name.

The outcome is the genealogy that concludes the Book of Ruth, leading to the birth of David and the possibility of a monarch. The appointment of a monarch can also be perceived as combining the two dimensions discussed in this paper.⁶⁶ It requires the ability to manage the present while looking towards the future. Unlike a judge who deals with immediate, pressing issues, the monarch leads his people and passes laws from a broader, longer-term perspective. The monarch, in this context, is a masculine symbol of justice and power, who can also leverage his position to express enormous concern and sensitivity towards others. In order to become worthy of a monarch, the nation had to mature from the masculine perspective of resolving problems in the immediate term, to the ability to respectfully combine the mutual contributions of the two perspectives of the world – the concrete, and the futuristic.

¹ This paper is dedicated with deep thanks and appreciation to two wonderful women who I had the privilege of growing with and learning from – my mother and teacher, Prof. Tova Cohen, who taught me the meaning of straightforward reading; and my educator and mentor, Prof. Tova Hartman, who demonstrates sensitivity towards other in every one of our meetings.

There are many different commentaries and interpretations of the Book of Ruth. Amongst the most prominent are:

In Hebrew:

Yair Zakovitch, 'Ruth, with introduction and commentary', in the series *Mikra LeYisrael*, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, Magnes and Am Oved, 1990.

Orit Avnery, 'Book of Ruth: Between Acceptance and Alienation', Jerusalem, Shalom Hartman Institute, 2014.

Jonathan Grossman, 'The Book of Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries', Alon Shvut, Herzog College Press-Tvunot, 2016.

Yael Ziegler, 'Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy' (translated by Bruria Ben Baruch), Jerusalem, Maggid Books, Koren Publisher, 2018.

In English:

Nancy M. Tischler, 'Ruth', (L. Ryken & T. Longman, eds.), *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* Grand Rapids 1993, pp. 151 - 164

M. M. Caspi, *The Book of Ruth: An Annotated Bibliography*, New York 1994

Judith A. Kates & Gail Twersky Reimer (eds.), *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, New York 1994

Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*, Sheffield 1993

K. Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary (OTL)* Louisville 1997

Athalya Brenner (ed.), *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, Sheffield 1999 ,

Edward L. Greenstein, 'Reading Strategies and the Story of Ruth', Alice Bach (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, New York & London 1999, pp. 211 – 230

Tamara C. Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer - Kensky, *Ruth*, The JPS Bible Commentary, Philadelphia 2011.

² The Jewish sages accurately described a “generation that judges its judges”.

³ The midrash quoted in the Baba Kama tractate of the Babylonian Talmud, 38a:

(Deuteronomy 2:9) The Lord said [to Moses]: “Do not harass Moab or engage them in battle” Now [we may well ask], could it have entered the mind of Moses to wage war without [divine] sanction? [We must suppose] therefore that Moses of himself reasoned a fortiori as follows: If in the case of the Midianites who came only to assist the Moabites the Torah commanded 'Vex the Midianites and smite them,' in the case of the Moabites [themselves] should not the same commandment apply even more strongly? But the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: The idea you have in your mind is not the idea I have in My mind. Two doves have I to bring forth from them; Ruth the Moabitess and Naamah the Ammonitess.

For further elaboration on the connection between the stories of Lot and Ruth, see Zeigler (note 1 above), 65-80.

⁴ As described in his books: Kohlberg, L. *Essays on Moral Development*, Vols. I and II, Harper & Row, 1981.

⁵ The highlights of Gilligan's theory can be found in the following sources:

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 1982.

Idem. *Mapping the moral domain: a contribution of women's thinking to psychological theory and education*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Idem.; McLean Taylor, Jill; Sullivan, Amy M. *Between voice and silence: women and girls, race and relationships*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 1997.

Idem. "Woman's place in man's life cycle", in Nicholson, Linda (ed.), *The second wave: a reader in feminist theory*, New York: Routledge 1997, pp. 198–215, Idem. *The birth of pleasure*. New York: 2002.

⁶ All this is said with awareness of the criticism voiced against Gilligan for the unequivocal arguments she makes, for example in: Christina Hoff Sommers, *The war against boys: How misguided feminism is harming our young boys*, Simon & Schuster, 2000. However, the model she proposes offers a literary and personal explanation for the main story line of the Book of Ruth, and serves as a powerful literary means of explaining the internal development of its protagonists.

⁷ Recall that Moab was actually an enemy country. Elimelech's decision to travel there instead of to Egypt during the famine deviates from other journeys taken in search of food. See also D. Rozner, *The*

Moabites and their military, political, and cultural relationships with the kingdoms of Israel and Judea, Jerusalem, Bialik, 1977. (In Hebrew)

A. H. Van Zyl, *The Moabites* (Pretoria Oriental Series 3), Leiden 1960.

J. Kautz, "Tracking the Ancient Moabites," BA 44, 1981, 35-27.

⁸ The language used in the book of Ruth hints at criticism of their actions by using the term נָשָׂא instead of the word used in the more positive context of marriage, נָקַח. See Grossman (note 1 above), 81, and compare with the explanation offered in P. Joüon, *Ruth: Commentaire philologique et exégétique*, Rome 1953 (Reprint) 11-13.

⁹ Another explanation might be that Elimelech limits the definition of "home" to include only his nuclear family, instead of his place of residence and community.

¹⁰ Nielsen (see note 1), 44, and see also Van Wolde, *Ruth and Naomi*, (J. Bowden trans.), London 1997, 9.

¹¹ Grossman (see note 1), 76, where he emphasizes the transition from "home" to "field".

¹² The verse could have been "and Naomi was left without anyone to provide for her", but instead, chose to define her situation from the perspective of her lack of family.

¹³ Grossman (see note 1) interestingly pointed out that Naomi refers to her adult, married sons as "her children", 83-84.

¹⁴ For commentary on this unique verb and the main role it plays in the Book of Ruth, see:

G. Wallis, *Dabaq*, TDOT 3, 80 – 81.

E. Jenni, *Dbq*, THAT 1, 432.

¹⁵ On the stages of moral development from the perspective of concern for others, see:

McHugh, Nancy Arden. *Feminist Philosophies A-Z*. Edinburgh University Press. 2007, 39.

Tronto, Joan C., "An ethic of care", in Cudd, Ann E.; Andreasen, Robin O. (eds.), *Feminist theory: a philosophical anthology*, Oxford, UK Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 251–263.

¹⁶ See the detailed discussion in Zeigler (see note 1), 142-146.

¹⁷ Zakovitch (note 1), 60, and the discussion in J.M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with A Philological Commentary and A Formalist - Folklorist Interpretation*, Sheffield, 1989: 29.

¹⁸ See: W. Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth, Das Hohe Lied 196. Die Klagelieder (KAT)*, Gütersloh: 40.

E. E. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation 1975 with Introduction and Commentary (AB)*, New York: 61-62.

P. Humbert, 'Art et leçon de l'histoire de Ruth', RTP 26, 1938, 257-286.

¹⁹ Gerlemann claims that Ruth's goal in her speech was to integrate the three dimensions of an identity – land, people, and faith.

G. Gerlemann, *Rut, Das Hohelied (BKAT) Neukirchen – Vluyn 1965*, 20.

²⁰ On the difference between the stances taken by Ruth and Naomi as representative of two main approaches, see André LaCocque, *Ruth: A Continental Commentary* (trans. K. C. Hanson), Minneapolis, 2004.

²¹ Here too, the term 'femininity' refers to a category of thought and conduct, and does not necessarily indicate any connection between biology and psychology.

²² See note 17.

²³ Rashi's commentary on this verse (1:19), which is based on the Midrash (Lequach Tov, Lamentations 2:15), is fascinating: He explains that the entire city was in a turmoil because all had gathered to bury the wife of Boaz, who had died that same day. This Midrash describes a feminine underworld that surfaces for the moment into the public arena.

²⁴ See B. Jongeling, 'HZ'T N'MY (Ruth 1:19) VT 28, 1978, 474-477.

²⁵ See also: M.D. Gow, *Ruth Quoque – ACoquette? (Ruth 4:5)*, *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, 1990, 302-311. W. F. Bush, *Ruth / Esther (WBC)*, Dallas, TX 1996, 90.

²⁶ Grossman (see note 1) discusses the change of name and its different meanings in depth, 119-123. See also Zakovitch (note 1), 64.

²⁷ Some commentaries identified the term used by Naomi to refer to God, 'שדי', as the feminine side of divinity. However, it is not necessary to go this far. See note 23, 141, and Zakovitch (note 1), 30-31. A summary of this topic can be found in Grossman (see note 1), pp. 123-126.

²⁸ See Genesis 3:17-19, compared to verse 16.

²⁹ Grossman (note 1), 133.

³⁰ Boaz's name hints at his essence. He is one of the only protagonists in the bible who is acclaimed for his civilian courage as opposed to military valor. His name, בּוֹאֵז, meaning his strength lies within him.

hints at the source of this courage and power. See also Campbell (note 21), 90-91; H. W. Hertzberg, *Die Bucher Joshua, Richter*, Ruth, Göttingen 1969, 267; and the excellent summary by Zakovitch, pp. 69.

³¹ The distinction made here between the different approaches renders redundant the long discussion by Grossman (see note 1), 140-146.

³² וַיִּקְרַח מִקִּרְיָהוּ- It was a coincidence for Ruth and Boaz, but not for God.

R. M. Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth*, 1969, 12.

³³ The city of Bethlehem is located in the hills of Judea, and its fields were far to the west in the Ayalon and Ella valleys. Crossing this distance would take several hours, and therefore it is possible that the rich landowner would only occasionally visit the field. Another possibility is that Boaz had several fields, and happened to visit the one where Ruth was gathering sheaves on the day she arrived.

³⁴ This scene has been analyzed in depth in J. Grossman, “Gleaning among the Ears – Gathering among the Sheaves”: Characterizing the Image of the Supervising Boy (Ruth 2),’ *JBL* 126, 703 – 716.

³⁵ Even the Midrash is sensitive enough to shift the focus to Ruth’s good deeds:

"Whose maiden is this?" And he did not recognize her? Rather when he saw that she was pleasant and her demeanor modest, he began to ask about her. All the women bent to glean, but she sat and gleaned. All the women raised their dresses [to work], but she let down her dress. All the women laughed with the reapers, but she was reserved by herself. All the women gleaned between the sheaves, but she gleaned from the public leavings (Ruth Rabba 4, translation source:

https://www.sefaria.org.il/Ruth_Rabbah.4?lang=en).

The Midrash focuses on Ruth’s moral and even her sexual behavior. This falls into the category of a masculine perspective directed towards the woman.

³⁶ In direct contrast to the derogatory reference to Ruth as the “Moabite” used by the servant in charge of the reapers. See Grossman (note 1), 162-163, and P. Tribble, “Two Women in a Man’s World: A Reading of the Book of Ruth,” *Soundings* 59, 1976, 263.

It is interesting to note that Boaz calls Ruth by the same name that Naomi used when talking to Orpah and Ruth (1:11), which demonstrates the feminine components of his personality, as will be discussed in further detail.

³⁷ See Bosch (note 28), 122, and Zakovitch (note 1), 75.

³⁸ An *ephah* of barley is about 20-25 liters of grain, which is a very large quantity for one day of collecting leftover sheaves. See O. Sellers, ‘Ephah (Measure),’ *IDB2*, 107.

³⁹ See note 17.

⁴⁰ See D. Shepherd, “Violence in the Fields 63 ,Translating, Reading, and Revising in Ruth 2,” *CBQ* 2001, 444 – 461.

⁴¹ Grossman (see note 1), 168.

⁴² Gilligan would certainly be glad to see the male protagonist expressing such a deep understanding of the moral development of the female protagonist from the perspective of concern for others.

⁴³ Zakovitch (see note 1), 78.

⁴⁴ Neilson (see note 1), 64.

⁴⁵ On the gap between Ruth’s account of the events and Naomi’s response, see Neilson (see note 1), 62-63, though this explanation differs from Zakovitch (note 1) 83, who points out the doubling opening to Naomi’s words (2:20) “Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law... Naomi also said to her”, which Zakovitch claims indicate her realization that Boaz is the key to changing their situation.

⁴⁶ Campbell (see note 17), 121.

Neilson (see note 1), 206.

Zakovitch (see note 1), 89.

⁴⁷ Ruth makes slight changes, as Rashi explains (3:6), Naomi told her to wash and anoint herself and put on her best clothes, and then go to the threshing floor, but that is not what Ruth did. She said that if anyone sees her dressed that way, they will think she is a prostitute. Therefore, she first goes to the threshing floor and then follows her mother-in-law’s instructions.

See Grossman (note 1), 226.

Zeigler (note 1), 305-306.

⁴⁸ At least nothing is told explicitly in the text. Many interpreters have suggested that intercourse did take place that night (see ...) but that is not in accordance with the design of the characters as they have been formed so far.

⁴⁹ A similar explanation can be found in A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, Sheffield 1983, 90-91.

⁵⁰ See note 17.

⁵¹ The Midrash describes this strength as follows: "Rabbi Yudan and Rabbi Hama said that all through the night, he battled with temptation. You are unmarried and she is unmarried; you are looking for a woman and she is looking for a man. To his inclination, he swore in the name of God; and to Ruth he said to stay there till morning. Rabbi Hanina said (Proverbs 24:5) that the "wise man" is Boaz, who is the "man of knowledge who musters his strength" (Leviticus Rabbah, 23:11).

⁵² The statement "for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman" (3:11) is especially fascinating in this context as it reflects the meeting point between the worlds analyzed in this article – the masculine world of law, justice, and institutions acknowledges that Ruth's kindness and concern for others grant her value and status as well. It is also interesting to note Boaz's use of the feminine version of the term with which he was first introduced with regard to Ruth. He calls her אשת חיל, a woman of valor, which can be compared to איש גיבור חיל used to describe Boaz in Chapter 2. This reflects the similarities between the two protagonists of the Book of Ruth – a man who is sensitive to others, and a woman with a status in the legal world.

See the detailed discussion in Grossman (note 1), 247-248, which offers a different perspective.

⁵³ To use Gilligan's terms, Boaz can be presented as one whose concern for others is reflected by his offer to provide assistance in the domain of "justice".

⁵⁴ Campbell offers a similar explanation for Boaz's actions (see note 21), 138, and Herzberg (note 32), 277. Grossman (note 1), 256 and other commentators he quotes may be correct by saying that Boaz gives the barley to Ruth as a "cover story" for her being at the threshing floor at night.

⁵⁵ This may be part of the process of presenting Ruth as an innocent woman who does not fully understand the cultural codes and misses the symbolism of the barley she receives from Boaz.

⁵⁶ See an interesting discussion in J. Gray, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (NCBC) 1967, 370-371.

⁵⁷ Regarding the reason for the kinsman remaining anonymous, Rashi explains that his name was not written, because he did not redeem her (4:1). He refused to uphold the name of the dead (as required by Deut 25:6), and therefore his own name was never recorded. See also Tribble (note 36), 251-279.

⁵⁸ See the long discussion on this matter in Grossman (note 1), 287-290.

⁵⁹ This is how many commentators explained the somewhat convoluted words of Boaz. See summary in Gow (note 26), 309.

⁶⁰ The specific order in the text is unclear. See Baba Metzia 47a, and a summary of the different opinions in Speiser, E.A., 'Of Shoes and Shekels', *BASOR* 77 1940, 15-20.

⁶¹ Zakovitch (note 1), 110. He explains how this blessing is the opposite of Jacob's blessing to Joseph's sons "In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh'" (Genesis 48:20).

⁶² Some have even suggested that Ruth reflects the combination of the qualities of these two matriarchs, as well as those of the Patriarch Abraham, who blindly follows God's word to Canaan. See Pardes, I, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1992, 107.

⁶³ Many commentators discussed the similarities between the women in the story and Ruth's personal journey. See Avneri (note 1), 47-48.

⁶⁴ It is interesting to note that the servant in charge of the reapers chooses to describe Ruth as one who wants to take the sheaves she had gathered to her home (2:7).

⁶⁵ Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (see note 7), 168.

⁶⁶ This refers to the regime of a monarch from the political perspective. The regime of a king from the Kabbalistic perspective has many similarities to the description here. See Dion Fortune, *The Mystical Qabalah*, Antiquarian Press, Northamptonshire, 1987, 162.

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