



Structure and Intention of the Book of Ruth

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THE NARRATIVE² IS AN INDEPENDENT LITERARY FORM WITH A HISTORY THAT runs through the entire Old Testament. Ruth is one such narrative and must be interpreted accordingly. Interpreters of Ruth frequently speak of its genre as something like a novella or an idyll, but those terms stem from a different time and a different culture than that of the story itself. Still, it is quite natural to ask about the genres of particular Old Testament narratives and their structures. In the case of Ruth, the answer is simple: it is a family narrative or an ancestral narrative. But all such stories belong to the larger genre of narrative, itself one genre among many in the Old Testament.

All Old Testament narratives have the same basic form:

¹This essay has been translated and edited for publication by Frederick J. Gaiser.

²Translator's note: Westermann's term *Erzählung* is normally translated in this essay as "narrative," although occasionally, for English usage, "story" is used. The verb *erzählen* is normally translated as a form of "to narrate."

CLAUS WESTERMANN, *professor emeritus of Old Testament at Ruprecht-Karl-Universität Heidelberg, will be 90 years old on October 7, 1999. Word & World is pleased to publish this new essay in honor of that milestone and as a sign of Professor Westermann's untiring efforts to expound the Old Testament for the sake of church and world.*

The book of Ruth is one of a group of family narratives that celebrated the daring undertakings of independent women who, in threatening situations, seized the initiative to find a solution.

The formal narrative is distinguished from informal narrating by two characteristics: First, the former has a recognizable beginning and end. Second, between beginning and end, the narrative has a simple structure: the action develops in a narrative span rising from a particular situation to a climax and then back down to another (newly transformed) situation.³ “A narrative formulates an event from a moment of suspense to its resolution.”⁴

This definition encompasses narratives of many different kinds; put together they constitute a history. One can distinguish between the simple, brief ancestral narratives, which arose orally, and those narratives that arose later in written form.

With this, we can now describe the story of Ruth more precisely. It belongs to the family narratives, but is one of the longer narratives that arose in written form. Since the very similar story of Tamar (Genesis 38) is shorter and arose orally, the comparison of the two is particularly instructive: the basic structure remains the same for both, and in each the conclusion relates back to the beginning; in each the narration comprises a single span of suspense. This structure comes from an early phase in the history of narratives, in which the story had a social function: the established form allowed retelling of the story. Even the later Old Testament narratives retain something of this strict form.

The narrative is a human literary form with a history that stretches back millennia, beginning with an oral phase. Once it was the only literary form available for passing on and preserving events. It played, therefore, an indispensable social function; this function must also be investigated for the later narratives, along with the social *Sitz im Leben* of individual motifs.

I. EARLIER INTERPRETATIONS

Previous interpreters have generally understood the book of Ruth as a prose text, part of a larger literature. But the narratives in the Old Testament are artistic compositions (Hermann Gunkel: “poetic prose”) that are as independent as individual poems. They do not belong to a larger prose text but, like every poem, have a firm beginning and end and a common structure. Because authors have understood the Ruth narrative as a prose text, they have not asked about its parallels.

Further, there has been little or no investigation of its relation to the ancestral narratives of Genesis. But that relation should have been obvious. The social unit in which the ancestral narratives arose—and the only one they mention—was the family. The same is true for the story of Ruth. It begins with two great dangers, childlessness and hunger, which we encounter frequently in the ancestral narratives. Many other motifs are also held in common.

³Translator’s note: Throughout this essay, Westermann uses the common German literary terms *Spannungsbogen* (arc or span of suspense) and *Geschehensbogen* (arc of events). Critics sometimes call this movement Freytag’s pyramid (Gustav Freytag, *Technik des Dramas*, 1863): inciting moment, rising action, climax, falling action, moment of last suspense. See, e.g., C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 3d ed. (New York: Odyssey, 1972) 236.

⁴Claus Westermann, *Erzählungen in den Schriften des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1998) 17-18.

Family narratives, part of the oral tradition, are told because they concern mothers and fathers and ancestors. To keep alive the memory of these people, even at a much later time, the stories were retold from one generation to the next, from the elders to the younger. It is incomprehensible to me that the interpreters who have sought the purpose of the story of Ruth have come up with all manner of strange ideas. One of them thinks that no purpose can be found.⁵ But, clear as day, these narratives exist for their own sake. Ruth 4:11-12 itself reminds us that stories were told about Rachel and Leah and Perez. So, why not Ruth?!

That the narratives are self-contained compositions with established structures has one further consequence for the interpretation of the Ruth narrative: it is not composed of individual scenes, one following another, each with its own suspense, but is governed by one narrative span, wherein, as always, there is correspondence between the beginning and the end. The story of Ruth begins with a series of troubles plaguing Naomi; it ends with Naomi having been freed from these (Ruth 4:14-15). In the course of the story's retelling, a supplement was added: it seemed good to make the child who was born into an ancestor of David. So originally the account of Ruth's naming of the child was left out and the notice was added that the women named him Obed—a name from David's ancestry. Both changes are understandable, both make sense. One can read the story with or without them. The final additions provide enrichment by making it possible to follow the tradition at several levels.

A. A Comment on Method

Interpretation of the Old Testament remains dominated by the view that the final form of a text, as we now have it before us, is the correct, normative, trustworthy, and only dependable form. Scholars have set aside the older common opinion that “a major portion of the literature of the Old Testament did not come from a single casting, but has grown over the millennia.”⁷

The “canonical” method of interpretation presupposes that the Old Testament consists only of written, or even printed, letters, words, and sentences. Even when it is admitted that the words of Jesus or the words of the prophets were first spoken orally and only subsequently written down, the object of interpretation remains the now extant written words. In this view, the oral phase of the tradition is none of the interpreters' concern; of it nothing certain can be said.

This position asserts something that it cannot prove. It cannot hold its own against a study of the text using scientific criteria of investigation. In the extreme, it functions as a new form of verbal inspiration: only the written words, as passed down, are valid.

The problem is that stories were once living words that required both a narra-

⁵Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *Die Bücher Josua, Richter, Ruth*, Das Alte Testament Deutsch 9 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965).

⁶One reason for our present difficulty with these stories may be that we have lost a sense of family history.

⁷Christian Frevel, *Das Buch Rut* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1992) 25.

tor and hearers. Narratives have now been fixed in written form in scripture, but once they were living words. Certainly there are narratives that originated in written form; but even these presuppose that once there were living stories, narratives that were narrated. Investigation into the narratives and the interpretation of narratives counts as scholarly investigation only when it recognizes this fact and asks how the stories that arose in written form relate to those that arose orally, and what are the consequences thereof.

If it is true that many Old Testament texts developed gradually in a long process—a fact that no one can dispute—then each stage of development has its own right. Evaluative judgments about whether a given strand is genuine or not genuine must cease altogether. If, for example, it can be proved that in the story of Ruth, the passage in which the child is given the name Obed (4:17) is a later addition, the verse is not thereby devalued; rather, it simply presents a later stage of growth. If in this case the name has been changed, this provides a new meaning for the story, a move that happens often in the growth process. Whether this meaning is right or wrong, it has its own *Sitz im Leben*; someone (or some group) had this view and expressed it by emending the text. The written texts passed down to us do not always speak with only one voice, but often many. It will be necessary to investigate the *Sitz im Leben* of every addition, every supplement, every gloss.

In this work, the term “tradition” loses its usual meaning in which it refers to the objective content (*traditum*). To be sure, a study of tradition history requires a given *traditum*; but prior to the written form of the tradition there was a process of handing the tradition down in speaking and hearing (*tradieren*). We must ask how the one relates to the other. The *traditum* can be traced back only to the stage of the pre-literary oral tradition, and, indeed, in many cases, the oral tradition continued alongside the written forms.

In reading previous interpretations of Ruth, I often had the impression that the authors dealt with the written word as though it were something timeless—which is a fundamental misunderstanding. Words are always, in themselves, events, whether they are spoken or read or heard aloud. The words of the story were once living words, coming alive as they were spoken and heard, an element of being human. In written form words lose this vitality. They take on a secondary character, recording a process that once was but is no more. The actual word is the living word. (The situation is different with words that are thought but not spoken.)

B. Ellen van Wolde on Ruth and Tamar

Among the previous interpretations, an essay by Ellen van Wolde on the relation between Tamar and Ruth gives new impetus to the discussion.⁸ Following a presentation of her method, intertextual research, van Wolde describes points of

⁸Ellen van Wolde, “Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar,” in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1997) 426-451.

similarity and agreement between the book of Ruth and the story of Tamar, of which there are surprisingly many. Both stories begin with a time designation and a brief report providing the prehistory and the names of the participants. Both leading characters are women and both strangers to Israel. These are the only two narratives in the Hebrew Bible that deal with levirate marriage and next-of-kin redemption. The husband is dead in both stories, for Ruth also her two sons. Both women seize the initiative in the midst of a hopeless situation. Both stories deal with matters related to women and speak from the woman's perspective. Each reports not only actions and speech, but also considers thoughts and emotions. The narrators know well how to steer the emotions of the readers or hearers; they speak often of perceptions, feelings, and awareness.

The stories carefully consider the different ways of thinking in different generations. The decisions and actions of the two main characters are often comparable. In each story, conversation produces a transformation in the partners: they come to see what they formerly did not. The distinction is a fine one: the foreign women had previously been *seen* by the male partners, but not *noticed*.⁹

C. Ruth and Tamar Revisited

In contrast to the work of Ellen van Wolde, I am interested not only in particular similarities between the two stories but in a comparison of the narratives in their entirety.¹⁰ A narrative is a unique and independent literary form, clearly the case in the two stories compared here. They must first be studied and compared as whole units. The structure of one must be seen alongside the structure of the other. Doing this will make the differences just as important as the similarities.

Both stories are introduced with a prehistory in the form of a report (Ruth 1:1-3; Gen 38:1-11). Only then does the report form give way to narrative. But already there is a difference: the background report in Ruth introduces a second significant motif (famine) alongside the problem of childlessness that is common to both stories.

Another difference arises from the fact that the story of Tamar (30 verses) is much shorter than the story of Ruth (85 verses). Genesis 38 is a narrative with a single track; Ruth is a more complex composition.

In the Tamar story, the main section follows directly upon the prehistory. It consists of two parts, Tamar's undertaking itself (vv. 12-19) and the consequences thereof (vv. 20-26). Then comes the conclusion, the birth and naming of the twins (vv. 27-30).

Ruth is quite different. The narrative is built on a temporal structure marked by departure and return that runs all the way through. This theme occurs also in Tamar, but with very short time intervals.

The two chief motifs in Ruth, famine and childlessness—both God's work—

⁹This summary presents material developed in much greater detail by van Wolde, *ibid.*, 432-451.

¹⁰For a discussion of my method, see my *Erzählungen* (note 4 above).

are already linked in 1:1-5. Though both are God's doing, people can also be liberated from both by God's action. God works in human destiny in giving blessing and also in withdrawing it, in growth and maturation. The first chapter is marked by Naomi's lamentation, the counterpart of which is the praise of God at the story's end. The theme of God's work and human response runs through the whole Ruth story; in the Tamar narrative it plays only a minor and marginal role. This is a major difference between the two narratives.

Duality plays an important structural role in Ruth in other ways as well. The main characters are two women, and two sisters speak and act in chapter 1. In both cases, the two represent markedly different types. The narrative takes place in two widely separated locations, Moab and Bethlehem. Other dualities occur as well.

The most striking difference between the two texts was not discussed by van Wolde, since she was interested only in the similarities. The legal transaction described in Ruth 4 is lacking in Genesis 38. This difference is a strong argument for seeing this element as an addition to Ruth, that is, for postulating an earlier Ruth narrative without it.

We can already draw one conclusion from this comparison of the two stories in their entirety. Both consist of three similar parts. The same kind of occurrence stands in the middle of each: the undertaking of Tamar and the undertaking of Ruth. This agreement at the center is not merely one among many; it marks the climax of both stories. Other similarities and differences must be viewed from this perspective.

The Tamar narrative is simple; the Ruth narrative is more fully developed and unfolded. The only explanation for this is that the Tamar narrative arose earlier, the Ruth narrative later.¹¹ The two together comprise a group (though a very small one) of narratives about daring and self-confident undertakings of women. Now only these two stories remain, though once there would have been more. We can draw this conclusion because the two stories in question present two clear stages in the history of such a group. This explains also the similarities in the two narratives.

The two narratives have characteristics that clearly distinguish them from other Old Testament writings. These are the only two that deal with redemption and levirate marriage. Van Wolde points out that in both stories the central discourses "are presented in such a way that the reader is able to share the feelings, thoughts or mental spaces of the characters, especially Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, Judah and Tamar."¹² She observes that the narrators of both stories (though especially of Ruth) refer to the reflection on events by those engaged in them, demonstrating this fact conclusively by the transformations produced by the conversations and the reflection that follows. Most often the reference is indirect; the reader must pay close attention. In Ruth 1, for example, Naomi bases her request to the young women to turn back with the sentence, "For your sakes I feel bitter that the Lord

¹¹Most interpreters agree that Ruth originated after the exile.

¹²Van Wolde, "Intertextuality," 437.

has inflicted such misfortune on me” (1:13 REB). In the midst of her own complaint against God she retains room in her thoughts to consider the fate of others. This peculiarity allows us to entertain the possibility that women were involved in forming and passing down this group of narratives.¹³

At the beginning of her essay, Ellen van Wolde speaks of the general literary phenomenon called “intertextuality,” a phenomenon that produces a dialogue between texts, and then between text and reader. Here, though, she investigates only Genesis 38 and the book of Ruth without drawing further conclusions.

However, when one observes such striking similarity between two Old Testament narratives, one is compelled to ask whether anything analogous happens elsewhere and in other connections. The phenomenon that van Wolde describes appears different when one sees the prehistory of the written narratives in narratives that arose orally. These oral stories were independent units that had their own life. They had a particular function in the community that was common to all examples of the genre. Obviously, similarity and agreement will exist among individual narratives of the same genre, as we see in the variants of the story of the endangering of the ancestral mother (Genesis 12, 20, 26) or in the scenes at the well in Genesis 24, 29, and Exodus 2.

This is the background which must inform a consideration of the similarities between Ruth and Tamar. They belong to a group of mostly lost narratives of which only these two remain. These narratives told of the daring undertakings of independent women who, in threatening situations, seized the initiative in order to find a solution. It is possible that women participated in the production of these stories. Ruth and Tamar take their place in the series of ancestral stories in which characters take the initiative against established custom and order and revolt, stories like Hagar, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel, and Lot’s daughters. This kind of revolt is told only of women in the ancestral narratives.¹⁴ The probability of the existence of such a group of stories about women is enhanced by the fact that the period of the judges produced a group of narratives in which young men seized the initiative in the face of threats by enemies; these men carried out their undertakings with the same kind of independence.

The relationship between Ruth and Tamar, therefore, is based not so much in the literary phenomenon of “intertextuality” as in a process in the life of a community that gives rise first, as in the case of Genesis 38, to oral narratives. These stories were preserved in a group of ancestral narratives. It is their common origin that produces the similarities and agreements between these two narratives.

Athalya Brenner argues that the book of Ruth has been put together from two strands, a Naomi story and a Ruth story.¹⁵ Each was originally an independent folk story. Each dealt with a common theme, probably local family traditions reminis-

¹³This is the opinion also of Athalya Brenner, “Naomi und Ruth,” *Vetus Testamentum* 33/4 (1983) 70-84.

¹⁴C. Westermann, *Genesis 37-50: A Commentary*, trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 56.

¹⁵Brenner, “Naomi und Ruth.”

cent of the ancestral narratives. The authors emphasized the initiative taken independently by women in a difficult situation. The same motif is found in the stories of Lot's daughters (Gen 19:30-38) and Tamar (Genesis 38). A particular characteristic of both stories (Ruth and Naomi) is the praise of unconditional faithfulness and love.

Brenner goes through the four chapters sentence by sentence to demonstrate the seams between the two variants—a questionable method because such seams need not point to two variants but can be explained in other ways. A firm conclusion would require working with the text as a whole, comparing directly the precise structure of the two supposed variations. One could presuppose separate stories only if two distinct and different structures could be discovered.¹⁶ But Brenner is on the right track when she assumes that one of her variants belongs to a series of narratives that includes also the stories of Tamar and Lot's daughters. All have the same main theme, the bold, independent actions of women. But then one must go back to the oral phase that gave rise to such variations, in which they comprise an identifiable genre (which Brenner does not do). Further, one must take into account the fact that the relationship with God and the work of God make up a significant portion of the story of Ruth. This, too, dare not be overlooked. One can make the same critique of the essay by van Wolde.

II. CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF RUTH 1-4

What follows does not constitute a full interpretation of the Ruth narrative. I simply examine its literary structure or organization to discover what that investigation will yield.

A. Content and Structure of Chapter 1

- 1:1-5 The prehistory (report)
 - 1 Famine in Judah; a certain man departs
 - 2 Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons arrive in Moab
 - 3 Elimelech dies; Naomi is left with her two sons
 - 4-5 After ten years, the sons die; Naomi is left with her two daughters-in-law
- 6-22 The narrative: On the way from Moab to Bethlehem
 - 6a Naomi determines to return home
 - 6b She had heard that the famine had ended
 - 7a They depart
 - 7b-17 Conversations along the way
 - 7b-9 Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return home
 - 10 They decline, pledging to stay with Naomi

¹⁶*ibid.*, 77.

- 11-13 A second encouragement to return, with basis (i.e., no hope)
 - 13b “For your sakes I feel bitter that the Lord has inflicted such misfortune on me” (REB)
- 14-15 Orpah returns; Ruth clings to Naomi
- 16-17 Ruth’s profession: “Nothing but death will part me from you” (REB)
- 18-22 Conclusion: The two proceed to Bethlehem
 - 18-21 Arrival and reception in Bethlehem
 - “Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me”
 - 22 So Naomi returned home with Ruth

B. Comments on the Structure of Chapter 1

The book of Ruth has an overall temporal structure marked by departure and return (like Genesis 25-36). The departure, along with its rationale, is briefly mentioned in 1:1-5; 1:6-22 already depicts the return. It takes the form of an itinerary, agreeing in every point with the itineraries in the ancestral narratives. As is the case there, remarks are made at the various stations, here regarding the characters and their fate.

The narrative begins with a long conversation (1:6-21). The motifs of the first chapter take us back to the ancestral era. Famine and its avoidance occur often in the ancestral stories. As in the ancestral narratives, all the speakers and actors are members of a family and are always identified only as such. No mention is made of another social unit. The story takes us back to the period before the beginning of Israel’s history. What happens takes place in the framework of genealogy and itinerary. The book of Ruth belongs to the genre of family narrative.

The introduction to the story by the report in 1:1-5 shows the composite character of the larger narrative by combining the motifs of childlessness and famine. Another typical development is Naomi’s return with *two* daughters-in-law.

In 1:7-10 Naomi encourages her daughters-in-law to return. After a second encouragement, Orpah decides to return; Ruth, however, remains, basing her decision on a passionate profession of fidelity: “Where you go, I will go...” (1:16-17). This has a rhythmic form, often found in Old Testament narratives. Ruth’s profession falls intentionally between Naomi’s two laments, one along the way (v. 13), one upon arrival (vv. 19-22). In this, the narrator indicates how the story will proceed. Naomi bases her lament in v. 13 with the cry, “For your sakes I feel bitter that the Lord has inflicted such misfortune on me” (REB). The daughters-in-law had wanted to spare her this fate.

At the end of the journey, the lament is continued: “Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me” (vv. 20-21).

Ruth’s pledge of fidelity between the two laments of Naomi already intimates

the suspense of the whole narrative. The story's beginning finds its counterpart in the conclusion: the liberation of Naomi from her distress, including there the response of praise in the mouth of the women for what God has done (4:14-15). Each of the decisive sayings is rhythmic in form, thus showing how narratives resemble poetry.

The end of the first chapter already forces a decision about the conclusion of the narrative. The conclusion has to remain within the suspense so clearly established in the first chapter. The end of the story has to bring conclusion to what has been introduced in the beginning. Therefore, the original story itself cannot have ended with David.

Chapter 1 makes splendidly clear that the narrative is conceived as a whole, from beginning to end, and that, with every sentence, the narrator is thinking of the whole.

C. Structure of Chapters 2 and 3

The narrator likes to develop the story in dualities (in contrast to Genesis 38). Alongside an event, he or she places a corresponding and similar one. There are, for example, two main characters, two women. The main part of the narrative is comprised of two courses of events: the preparation in chapter 2 and the success in chapter 3. In each of these, a conversation is the central factor, both between Ruth and Boaz (2:8-18; 3:8-15). This common structure indicates a development that leads from the first encounter to the marriage, one which the hearers or readers are meant to discover on their own.

Here, too, as in chapter 1, there is a temporal structure; but now, unlike there, events occur at shorter intervals, marked by the times of day, and in the limited space of a village. The resolution is achieved through small steps.

D. Content and Structure of Chapter 2

2:1-7 Preparing for the conversation

1 Naomi has a kinsman: Boaz

2-4 In the morning: Ruth asks to glean; she comes upon the field of Boaz, who greets his workers

5-7 Boaz learns about Ruth from his steward

8-13 Conversation between Boaz and Ruth

8-10 Concern for Ruth; humble response

11-12 Blessing for Ruth

13 Ruth to Boaz: "You have comforted me"

14-17 Events at midday

14-16 Boaz invites Ruth to eat

15-16 Boaz's gifts

17 Ruth gleans until evening

18-23 Ruth returns to Naomi; conversation between them

- 19-20 Blessing for Boaz, “whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead”
- 21-22 Naomi’s counsel to Ruth
- 23 Ruth continues until the end of harvest

At the center of the chapter stands the conversation between Ruth and Boaz (vv. 8-13). Its way is prepared in the encounter between Boaz and Ruth (vv. 1-7). The conversation is followed by Ruth’s return to Naomi (vv. 18-23) and the blessing for Boaz (vv. 19-20). Most important for the entire narrative are the two blessings.

E. Comments on the Structure of Chapter 2

This part of the narrative, developed in a span of events, is structured by what happens between people and between people and God. It is framed by a temporal structure based on times of day, and it takes place entirely in the fields and at the village threshing floor. Naomi and Ruth need something to eat, so Ruth decides to glean. Everything else follows naturally. While gleaning, she meets Boaz, who is friendly to her. Nicely, the narrator does not describe the attraction between the two; everything happens in everyday circumstances—the earth, the fields, the threshing floor. Playing in the background of all of this is the fact that there is once again food to be had, that God has turned again to his people in mercy (vv. 14-16).

All interpreters speak here of God’s providence, calling this a narrative of divine guidance. But the story’s view of providence is not the same as ours. At that time everything that happened between people was seen as divine providence. Twenty other stories could be given this same designation. It would have been impossible at that time to envision a story of human events that was not guided by God’s providence.

On the other hand, the second chapter indicates that after Naomi’s lament a different work of God has begun, his work of blessing. He has once again caused the grain to grow. Thus, Ruth can go out to the field in the morning to glean. In chapters 2 and 3 (but not in chapter 4!) God’s blessing accompanies the words and deeds of the people. The scene itself makes that clear: the field of grain, the stalks and the ears that play their role here, the threshing floor, the meal in the field. The climax of these two chapters is marked by the continuing rhythm of sowing, growing, and maturing, the quietly progressing divine acts of blessing in the ups and downs of human affairs.

Then Boaz appears (v. 5), leading to the conversation (vv. 7-18). Note that the preparation for the decisive conversation is placed completely in the milieu of the grain, the harvest, the bread, and the parched kernels. The narrator’s artistry thereby combines the two great troubles of the Ruth story. The steward’s information about Naomi and Ruth already brings the two themes side by side (vv. 5-7).

The central conversation is found in vv. 8-13 and is continued in vv. 14-16. Boaz’s every sentence shows concern for Ruth and her advancement. Ruth prostrates herself and asks, “Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take

notice of me, when I am a foreigner?” Boaz answers in effect, “I know. I know a lot about you. And I know that you are seeking a place of rest.” Then Boaz offers a petition on Ruth’s behalf, “May you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!” (v. 12; cf. Ps 91:4). These solemn words, in the language of the psalms, hint already at promise. Ruth thanks him in the same solemn tone, “May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord; for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant” (v. 13; cf. Isa 40:1-2). Here again we find a rhythmic form of speech.

A word must be said here about a peculiarity of Old Testament narratives. Often, to call attention to the climax of the story, the language at that point becomes solemn and rhythmic.¹⁷ The language of narrative becomes the language of poetry, which is at the same time the language of emotion, thus emphasizing the climax. There is a great difference between merely reading such a text and hearing it aloud. Only the latter allows full recognition of its special use of language. Something decisive is already going on between the two characters here.

The invitation to the meal follows as a confirmation of the agreement that has been reached (v. 14): Boaz invites Ruth to eat with him, and Ruth accepts. The occurrence resembles treaty-making in the ancestral period, which was also confirmed in a meal (e.g., Jacob and Laban in Genesis 31). Boaz’s gift for Naomi, given through Ruth, should be seen in the same light (vv. 15-17).

When one overlooks how the conversation between the two continues during these two actions, one fails to understand the conversation. It makes no sense here to ask about a train of thought. The text’s structure is based not on thoughts, but on events. When we encounter a conversation in the text, we must understand each individual sentence and sometimes each participant from the perspective of the harmony of word and response that comprise the conversation as a whole. When an interpreter calls these “speeches,” he or she misses the point.¹⁸ There are no speeches in the book of Ruth. The conversations are events between two people. They always assume a particular situation or setting, and that setting has its own role in the conversation.

The day ends as it began with a conversation between Ruth and Naomi (vv. 17-23). In the midst of this conversation, Naomi pronounces a blessing on Boaz, “Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” Naomi has reflected and understood. She had complained that the Lord had withdrawn his favor from her, but now she discovers that this is no longer true. So she thinks back on her husband and her sons: God has included even the dead. The family is saved! We see here better than anywhere else in the narrative how people’s thoughts are included in what they say.¹⁹

Though unmentioned, the work of the blessing God is carried from Ruth to

¹⁷See C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 231.

¹⁸See note 20 below.

¹⁹Van Wolde makes this point convincingly also in her essay (see note 8 above).

Naomi along with the ripe grain, countering the temporary withdrawal of blessing in the time of famine.

F. Content and Structure of Chapter 3

Chapter 3 begins (vv. 1-5) and ends (v. 18) with words of advice from Naomi. Within this framework it is temporally structured: evening, midnight, early morning.

- 3:1-5 Naomi's advice to Ruth
- 6-7 Evening: Ruth carries out Naomi's advice
- 8-9 Midnight: Boaz is startled; he asks, "Who are you?" Ruth responds, "You are the לַאֲדָמָה [redeemer or next-of-kin]"
- 10-11 Boaz's response: he accepts Ruth
- 12-13a A roadblock: another kinsman must be questioned
- 13b "...as the Lord lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you."
- 13c-14a Boaz asks Ruth to lie down; she does so (a second time)
- 14b Boaz thinks the situation should not be known
- 15 Boaz's gift for Naomi; return to the city
- 16-18 Ruth with Naomi; conversation; Naomi's advice

G. Comments on the Structure of Chapter 3

A difficulty arises. One can see that the story runs smoothly and simply from 1:1 to 3:11, without disturbance. The disturbance arises when the second next-of-kin turns up with no previous mention. (Had he been in the plan from the beginning, he would have been mentioned in the earlier notice that Boaz was her kinsman [2:1]; otherwise that notice would be incomplete.) Moreover, 3:8-13 is the climax of the entire narrative, so the disturbance is particularly noticeable. In vv. 9-13 Ruth proposes marriage to Boaz and he accepts. This had been anticipated in the conversation in 2:10-13; it is now confirmed.

In Ruth's very brief proposal, she says, "Spread your cloak over your servant, for you are the לַאֲדָמָה." This is spoken with the greatest emotion and suspense, which means that the words "You are the לַאֲדָמָה" cannot mean "You are obligated to do this, because of your role as next-of-kin" as many interpreters and translations state. Boaz has already clearly expressed the wish to have Ruth as his wife in the conversation of 2:10-13; now he thanks her for choosing him above all others. Therefore, the term לַאֲדָמָה in 3:9 cannot refer to an institution of familial law; it is meant in the broader sense of the verb לָאָדָם (to redeem, to save): "Boaz, you are our savior!" (This meaning is already heard in Ruth's answer to Boaz in 2:13.)

Boaz, too, is highly charged. He answers, "As the Lord lives, I will save you!" Of course, that response does not follow directly in the present text. Something has been added (see above). But the oath (which now comes in 13b, following the addition in 12-13a) cannot have been spoken as the second half of a conditional sentence, for then it would be only a conditional oath.

There is another inconsistency or absurdity as well. When Boaz in the traditional text responds to Ruth's passionate words with, "But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another...", it sounds remarkably disillusioning, if not out of place altogether. One interpreter remarks, "Boaz provides this information to Ruth in an artistic speech."²⁰ But one hardly makes artistic speeches in such a situation! We must hear (not read!) the word in its setting. Boaz's oath can only be spoken directly after his promise. Both inconsistencies can be explained by an addition that plays on the word לְאֵל. In the addition, לְאֵל refers to the institution of kinsman/redeemer, about which a special scene is here adeptly added to the Ruth narrative. The addition 3:12-14 prepares the way for the legal scene in chapter 4. In fact, we see that the extended scene with the legal process in chapter 4 is attached to the Ruth-Boaz narrative through the addition in 3:12-14.

Certainly, at first reading the lively description of the transaction at the gate fits the narrative well. One can easily read it without knowing that someone other than the original narrator added it in order to enrich the scene. But if one pays careful attention to this section, it is clear that things don't proceed as smoothly as they have been doing. The sentences in 3:12-15 do not flow naturally from one another, but are simply pieced together. One can see this from the fact that Boaz's counsel to Ruth to remain lying down in v. 13a is repeated again at the end of v. 13. Abruptly, v. 14 reports what Boaz is thinking, followed in vv. 15-17 by an exaggerated repetition of the gift of grain to Naomi.

Vv. 16-18 return again to the framework: Ruth tells her mother-in-law what has occurred, and Naomi advises her to wait.

H. Content and Structure of Chapter 4

4:1-12 The transaction

1-2 Boaz takes his seat and opens the proceedings

3-4 Boaz to the other kinsman: "If you will..."; the other: "I will..."

5-6 Boaz to the other kinsman: "You are also acquiring Ruth"; the other: "I cannot....Take my right of redemption for yourself"

7-8 The custom of taking off a sandal

9-10 Boaz to the witnesses: "You are witnesses that I have acquired..."

11-12 Conclusion

11a The people: "We are witnesses"

11b-12 Wish for Boaz (and Ruth): "May you produce children..."

13-17 Conclusion of the narrative

13 Ruth becomes Boaz's wife; she bears a son (no name is given)

14-15 The women's wish for Naomi: "Blessed be the Lord, who has not

²⁰Erich Zenger, *Das Buch Ruth*, Zürcher Bibelkommentar AT 8, 2d ed. (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag und Buchhandlung, 1992).

left you this day without next-of-kin [לְאָלֶיךָ]; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age”²¹

16 Naomi takes the child and becomes his nurse

17 The women: “A son has been born to Naomi.” “They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.”

18-23 Genealogy

I. Comments on the Structure of Chapter 4

With no transition at all, Boaz takes his seat for the legal process (4:1). Chapter 3 ended with the return of Ruth to Naomi, a conversation between the two, and Naomi’s counsel to Ruth (3:16-18). Now one expects, “The next morning..”; but this is lacking. The temporal structuring of the narrative ends with the close of chapter 3. Although there are, of course, time intervals in what follows, they are not mentioned. This lack of temporal structure is an important peculiarity of chapter 4, but there are other peculiarities as well. Of the characters in chapters 1-3, only Boaz remains in 4:1-12. The second kinsman is a new addition. Naomi and Ruth do not appear. The transaction is not first about the fate of Ruth or Naomi, but about a field of Naomi that has previously gone unmentioned. The agreement is sealed with the ancient sandal custom (vv. 3-8). The legal transaction is concluded in vv. 9-10; Boaz attests that he has acquired the possessions of Naomi and that he has also taken Ruth as his wife. The people certify it: “We are witnesses.” Then comes, according to custom, a blessing for the woman’s fertility with Leah and Rachel and Tamar as historical examples (vv. 11-12).

This concludes the legal scene.²² There is no transition at the end, just as there was none at the beginning (4:1). The sentence that now follows, “So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife” (13a), is *not* the conclusion to the legal scene, but to the conversation between Boaz and Ruth in 3:3-11, the climax of the narrative. Nine months lie between the close of the legal scene and the notice in v. 13 that Ruth “bore a son”!

The concluding section beginning with v. 13 is no longer a narrative. In part, the sentences are merely pieced together without connections. V. 13 itself is a genealogical announcement, an independent unit. In the early period, a narrative often flowed into a genealogical announcement. The announcement of v. 13 lacks the customary naming of the child, which is wanted here. One expects the giving of a name that relates to the narrative, and it would be the mother who would give it. In the Tamar story, the naming of the child follows directly upon the announcement of the birth.

The naming is omitted in v. 13 because the newborn should have been given a

²¹The parallelism suggests that we should probably read: “Blessed be the Lord, may his name be renowned in Israel; he has not left you this day without a לְאָלֶיךָ, he shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher in your old age.”

²²Such a scene often closes with a blessing.

different name, in line with Isa 9:5: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us...and he is named....” Such an emendation of the text is understandable and is supported by the tradition. It is confirmed by v. 17 where the naming that should have had its place in v. 13 is now supplied. But now it is a different name, Obed, one of the ancestors of David. Here it is the neighbor women who give him this name.

This also explains the somewhat confusing sequence of three blessings that follow closely upon one another in the conclusion (vv. 11b-12, 14-15). The blessing of Boaz and his household in vv. 11b-12 closes the legal transaction and is spoken in front of all those still standing at the gate. The blessing in vv. 14-15 is spoken only after the birth of the child; it is directed by the women to Naomi and clearly relates to her previous suffering. The action of Naomi in v. 16 is like a response to this blessing: the birth of the child also provides redemption for Naomi. Naomi’s action closes the narrative that began with Naomi’s troubles. This then is the appropriate conclusion of the whole narrative.²³

The naming by the neighbor women, who give the child an entirely unexpected and unfounded name (v. 17), is a later supplement, added for reasons explained above.

The original conclusion of the narrative (vv. 13-16) follows the scene at the gate that closes with the people’s blessing in 4:11-12 and has its own cohesiveness:

- 13 Announcement of the marriage of Boaz and Ruth and the birth of a child (in which the naming by the mother is omitted)
- 14-15 Blessing of the women, related to Naomi’s personal history
- 16 Naomi cares for the child

Following this in the present version, we find:

- 17 An addition, changing the original name of the child to that of one of David’s ancestors
- 18-22 Part of a supplementary genealogy that arose elsewhere

III. SPEAKING OF GOD IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

God is present in everything of which the book speaks. Though not said directly, this follows from what takes place between the human characters.

The presence of God is seen in the greetings and wishes. When Boaz comes to his workers (2:4), he greets them with “The Lord be with you”; they answer, “The Lord bless you.”

The wishes are similar to this greeting. Boaz says to Ruth, in effect, “May the Lord bless you, my daughter! God grant that you find rest” (2:11-12; cf. 2:20; 4:11; cf. also Ruth’s oath in 1:17 and Boaz’s in 3:13).

²³That in the course of the narrative all participants receive their own blessing corresponds to the intention of the narrator. Each blessing contributes to the narrative as a whole. When interpreters pay no attention to the blessings, seeing them as mere formulae, they miss an essential aspect of the meaning that the narrator has built into the story.

A fine parallelism between the saving and blessing acts of God runs through the entire narrative. God turns his grace toward people or he withdraws it from them. God makes the grain grow or he brings drought. Naomi returns to Judah “for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food” (1:6).

God’s redeeming work for people dominates the narrative; but God’s blessing work is also a necessary part of the action. The narrative presupposes things that remain unspoken, including, but not limited to, God’s accompaniment in the departure and along the way, bringing all to the desired goal.

IV. THE RESPONSE IN LAMENT AND PRAISE

Events in the story happen reciprocally between God and human characters. At the outset stands Naomi’s lament, which defines the first chapter. We find it first in the conversation between Naomi and the two young women, “The hand of the Lord has turned against me” (1:13), then again at her arrival in Bethlehem, “Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me” (1:20). God’s judgment, only implied in the introductory report, awakens in Naomi her laments of suffering. At the end of the whole narrative span, however, praise awakens in the mouths of the witnesses: “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin [לְבָיִת]” (4:14). A tone of divine praise is found already in the words of Naomi’s response to Ruth’s report: “Blessed be he [Boaz] by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” (2:20).

But the narrative span of events encompasses more than this one line of direction, that is, from a beginning marked by lamentation to an ending marked by praise. The story is a segment of real life with a variety of other features that are meant to connect with the hearers but that do not speak at all of God and the work of God.

Take, for example, the main character (or the two main characters). They are not merely praised, they are presented as exemplary. Ruth is a Moabite, and, unlike the other daughter-in-law, she stands by the suffering older woman, remaining faithful to her. Ruth’s rhythmic pledge of loyalty in 1:16-17 marks the climax of the first part of the story. She becomes recognized as a valued member of the Bethlehem community. This stands in clear contrast to one stream of thought in the postexilic period according to which the Jerusalem remnant was supposed to separate itself from everything foreign, especially from foreign women. Here, though, the narrator gives priority to humane concerns.

But there are two main characters. The interplay of these two very different women is presented in high artistry—the wisdom of the older woman and the self-conscious daring of the younger, how they get along with one another and how both cooperate to turn events around.

Another feature was also meant to speak to the story’s contemporaries: Ruth remains faithful to her mother-in-law in Naomi’s great need even though she must

thereby give up not only her home country but even the God of that country. “Your God shall be my God.” To be sure, this statement assumes a worldview in which it would be impossible to belong to a people without also participating in that people’s religion, but Ruth’s sacrifice in giving her loyalty to the older woman is not thereby diminished.

A third feature: Boaz does not propose marriage to Ruth, but Ruth to Boaz. For the narrator this is the proper action in this instance, appropriate to the situation. This assumes an attitude that ascribes to women the same rights as to men. In the light of this feature, the fact that the book of Ruth is one of the few narratives in which the thoughts and actions of a woman comprise the events that to a large degree characterize the story takes on enormous weight. We encounter here an attitude in the postexilic period that publicly counters the dominant patriarchal perspective.

The climax of the first part of the narrative—Ruth’s pledge of loyalty, which the narrator so obviously emphasizes—is also to be understood from this point of view. Ruth deliberately breaks the firmly established order, according to which a woman is a dependent being. Ruth chooses a way that allows her, independently and subordinate to none, to help free another human being from her deep distress.

On the other hand, it would be false—and a curtailment of the narrative—to limit what it wants to say to this one feature. For even this strong feature of the woman’s independence and self-determination remains within the encompassing context of the work of God. Had Ruth not chosen this path with trust in God and the certainty of God’s guidance, she would not have been able to embark on her daring journey. She knew that it was God’s will that the distressed woman be helped.

This view is confirmed by the astoundingly close parallels to the book of Job. In Job, too, the main character is a non-Israelite. Although the book of Job takes another form, it too begins with a person who suffers greatly. There, too, the person is dealt a series of terrible blows. There, as in Ruth, someone is brought to despair by the withdrawal of God’s grace. In both stories, the way leads from suffering to liberation. In each, lament is transformed into praise. ⊕