

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST

RUTH AND NAOMI'S RELATIONSHIP: A PARTNERSHIP BUILT ON

CHESED

BY

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DECLARATION

Candidate's Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own original work and that no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or elsewhere.

Candidate's Name: Abraham Nortey

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Supervisors' Declaration

We hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of this thesis were supervised in accordance with the guidelines on supervision of thesis laid down by the University of Cape Coast

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ABSTRACT

The relationship that the author of the book of Ruth shows to exist between his characters, Ruth and Naomi has been read or interpreted by scholars in various ways. Some say it is a lesbian or bisexual relationship, others a type of patriarchal structure that ties a woman to her mother-in-law even after the death of her husband (Nelson, 1967 & Fuchs, 1983) and still for Dube it is an unfair relationship where mutual love is lacking (Dube, 2001).

This thesis, on the other hand understands it differently: It is a relationship driven by *chesed* (loyalty). This is a reading by means of narrative critical approach, focusing among others on characterization and narrative view point. In other words, the submission of the author of this thesis is that it is an underlying loyalty that the author of the book presents as keeping the young woman, Ruth and the aged woman, Naomi together. The main significance of the study is that it offers another perspective to understanding the Ruth and Naomi's relationship by offering an opposing view to others who have read the story as a homosexual relationship or a permanent bond established between a mother and her daughter-in-law in a patriarchal household.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the honour of the late Mrs. Anita Osei Kwarteng and my late father Rev. S. K. Nortey.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

Human relationships are of various forms or categories. There are relationships between husbands and wives, between sons and daughters, between cousins and nephews, and there are those between in-laws. The latter is what exists between a woman and the parents of her husband or a man and the parents of his wife.

We see some of these relationships at the beginning of the book of Ruth. Elimelech and his wife Naomi, and their sons, Chilion and Mahlon come down to Moab from Bethlehem and have their children marry Ruth and Orpah. This starts off an in-law relationship, for the parents, when the story starts now become in-laws to the Moabite women (Ruth 1:1-4). It is as if to say that the whole story is about relationship. Alicia Ostriker would talk of this as "...personal and family relationship" (Ostriker 2000, p. 346).

It is the relationship between Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth that has arrested attention. A daughter-in-law, whose husband has died and has no longer any attachment to the mother-in-law, decides to accompany her (Naomi) or commit her life to her. This devotion of a daughter-in-law to

a mother-in-law to whom the latter has no longer any responsibility because the husband is no longer alive is what has impressed many biblical scholars. Phyllis Trible, for example, reflects on the daughter-in-law's action: "It forsakes the security of a mother's house for insecurity abroad. It forfeits possible fullness in Moab for certain emptiness in Judah. It relinquishes the familiar for the strange" (1978, p. 172).

Renita Weems on the other hand, indicates that as "emphasizing her (Ruth's) good attachment with Naomi which she [Ruth] did not want to lose" and that, "Ruth was not interested in what Naomi's womb could or could not offer. Her pledge was to Naomi, the woman. It was Naomi whom Ruth had grown to love and care for" (Weems, 2000, p. 28). For Bollinger, the young woman's action represents one of the unusual instances where the Bible depicts profound female solidarity (1994). In Carmody's thinking it is an example of how women can co-operate in a hostile, empty and solitary environment (1988) while Julie Chu (1997) finds Ruth's action as demonstrating how a mother and her daughter-in-law can co-operate rather than compete, as is sometimes the case in her cultural context.

Statement of the problem

The relationship between Ruth and Naomi holds an important place in biblical scholarship. One of the main debates has been about the kind of relationship that the author depicts as existing between Naomi and Ruth. Some Queer Readers interpret the relationship as one between homosexuals. Thus, Alpert would ask "... readers to read between the lines of the text and imagine Ruth and Naomi to be lovers", because, "without romantic love and

sexuality the story of Ruth and Naomi loses much of its power as a model for Jewish lesbian relationship” (Alpert, 1994, p. 190). It is a similar view that West (1997) projects as she describes the relationship as offering a powerful biblical example of same sex intimacy.

Dube (2001) reflecting on the relationship between Ruth and Naomi understands it as one between a slave and a master. This is due to the fact that it is Ruth not Naomi that pledges faithfulness. In this way, she likens their relationship to that of a treaty between a developing or a third world country and a developed or a so called first world country where it is the former that bears the burden of submitting to the decisions of the latter.

Others also view the relationship as necessitated by Ruth’s desire to have a son or a child for her deceased husband (this is reminiscent of levirate marriage, a custom designed to protect widows within the family as well as to ensure the preservation of the husband’s name, see Deuteronomy 25:5-10). This is for reason of her love for him. Thus, Nelson (1967) and Fuchs (1983) for example see the relationship as having Ruth as its enforcer.

Reading the story of Naomi and Ruth closely gives a different view of what is being said about Ruth and Naomi that their relationship as one of a lesbian affair or that Ruth is so much in need of a child to perpetuate the name of the deceased husband or to ensure that his name is not forgotten and so she gets herself committed in friendship with her mother-in-law.

By means of narrative reading one endeavours to show that the relationship between these two women is not about a lesbian affair or a need for a child but about loyalty or what in Hebrew is called a *chesed*.

Objectives of the study

1. To show the unlimited kindness that Ruth showed to aged Naomi as motivated by *chesed*.
2. To demonstrate that Ruth and Naomi's relationship was a kind of co-operation rather than any patriarchal or societal obligation or demand.
3. To examine the story to draw out lessons for mothers and daughters-in-law relationship for Christians, readers of the Bible in general and Africans.

Research Questions:

1. How has *chesed* been used throughout the Hebrew Bible and how does this theme give a clear literary understanding of Ruth and Naomi's relationship?
2. In what ways did Ruth show loyalty (*chesed*) to Naomi?
3. How did Naomi also demonstrate *chesed* to Ruth?
4. In what ways can we understand Ruth's sacrificial commitments to Naomi as an independent decision not compelled or enforced by any patriarchal influence? Or how can we say Ruth is an independent woman?
5. How can we use Ruth's pledge in chapter 1:16-17 to justify Naomi's advice to Ruth to marry Boaz not as an infringement on Ruth's right?
6. In what ways do Ruth's marriage with Boaz strengthens her loyalty to Naomi?

7. What is the implication of Ruth's statement of commitment in 1:16-17 to die where Naomi will die to her marriage with Boaz? Or how will that marriage consequently tie Ruth to Bethlehem, all things being equal?
8. How did the narrator use the Hebrew term *chayil* (strength, wealth, might or valour) to show that Boaz and Ruth were suited or destined for each other?
9. How can one prove that the theme of *chesed* can better explain Ruth and Naomi's unique actions in their relationship?

Significance of the study

1. Many researchers have shown that the relationship that exists between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law usually do not go well, the paper would show how the story of Ruth deviates from such views about the relationship in so far as the two related perfectly as mother-and-daughter-in-law when bound by marriage and when they were not.
2. Practically, it will also portray how persistent loyalty (*chesed*) can demonstrate how affective bonds can still exist in human relationship especially, in times of intense loss.
3. It will read differently from certain Post-colonial readers' take in condemning Ruth's act of choosing Naomi as a betrayal of native people and prove from another perspective that the story portrays rare virtues that one ought to offer to humanity out of an enduring loyalty at all times.

4. To make readers understand how *chesed* works in relationships to improve situations of the destitute and unite the strong and the weak.
5. It will also help in a better understanding of other relationships in the Bible that operate on the principles of *chesed*.

Literature Review

The review aims at situating the study within biblical scholarship on the book of Ruth. It sets out to review works on the study of Ruth and to find out what their focus is and what new thing can be added.

Approaches or Methods used to study the book of Ruth

Approaches or methods that have been used to study the book are diverse. According to Berquist, the dominant method used by scholars is literary reading (1993). There are scholars who use various theories that impinge on the story of Ruth to give literary reading of the book (cf. Rashkow, 2011, Berquist, 1993 & Lau, 2011). These approaches however differ due to what they set out to unravel in the text and they always produce multi-faceted results. Few of these works need to be discussed.

Social scientific theory is one method that has been applied to the discourses on the book of Ruth to understand the social issues in the text. Jon Berquist, in his article on role dedifferentiation applies the sociological process of role dedifferentiation to the book of Ruth. The theory emphasizes that during crises both male and female roles merge, as each person assumes additional roles. In the book of Ruth, he observes that, the social roles of the main characters (Naomi, Ruth and Boaz) undergo observable changes involving the addition of uncustomary roles (1993). Berquist expresses the

view that this process of characterization corresponds to the sociological theory of role dedifferentiation by which persons respond to crises through addition of roles, including roles that would be socially inappropriate in normal times. For instance, he notes, that when Ruth clings to Naomi, she takes the male role in initiating a relationship of formal commitment, similar to marriage (1993). He finally concludes that, “Once all the characters are adding non-standard roles, the narrative’s problem attains solution” (1993, p. 28).

One can see from his work that his theory was adequately proven and supported from the roles (usually non-traditional) that the characters in the book of Ruth assumed in their moments of crises. If we look at the bearing of this theory on the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, he perfectly explains why Ruth assumed societal roles meant for males (clinging and fending for Naomi as if she is her husband) due to the situation that both found themselves in Bethlehem. Berquist’s work is very fruitful in explaining how the social theory of role dedifferentiation works in explaining the roles of all the major characters in the story of Ruth.

In similar vein, Peter Lau’s unique contribution is seen in how he makes readers understand the social identity of the main characters. He demonstrates this by exploring the ethical principles that can be deduced from the actions of all the major characters. In view of this, each of the protagonists in the book of Ruth is examined with regards to their personal and socio-ethical components.

Boaz, for instance, is said to have been presented by the implied author as a wealthy and a morally upright man. Whatever personal and social roles that he performs in the narrative are made to be consistent with this identity. For instance, Lau wrote, “Although Boaz is initially flattered by Ruth’s selection of him, he is also cognizant of the wider implication of her decision for the family of Naomi (3:10). Furthermore, he notes even when his (Boaz) romantic interest is piqued on the threshing floor, he is still concerned to act in a way that is consistent with his social identity as a clansman (3:12-13). Because of this decision of Boaz at the threshing floor, Lau praises him for not allowing his personal interest to override the normal community structures (Lau, 2011).

Lau’s article is praiseworthy in its stimulating attempt in highlighting the potential of social scientific theories in understanding a biblical text. His approach can however be flawed on some genuine grounds. He, for example, assigns the characters with strict moral roles and presents them as people bereft of moral flaws. Such presentation makes it become difficult for readers to accept Lau’s view of the characters in the story as perfect moral agents. This lapse becomes visible for readers who in their reading of the story come across these same characters such as Ruth, employing seduction to procure marriage with Boaz and later Boaz himself is seen making fictitious effort to ward the next of kin in his attempt to win Ruth's hand in marriage. Such behaviours that they demonstrated prove that actually the characters have moral flaws. Such stereotypical presentation by Lau does not make the characters appear as human who are susceptible to

make mistakes. But as usual every analytical method has its defect, because each approach concentrates attention on specific aspects of a text.

Contrary to Lau's argument, Kristin Moen Saxegaard's (2010) theory was about the complex nature of the characters. He points out the complexity that is seen throughout the Old Testament on most characters and indicates that the characters in the story of Ruth are not an exception. She, for instance, spelt out the complexity of Ruth in these words: "Ruth is a Moabite and also a foreigner. She also dresses up and offers herself to drunken Boaz at night, calling herself your handmaid" (p.133). Unlike the usual portrayal of Ruth as a loyal daughter-in-law, the theory on the contrary concentrates on portraying both the positive and negative traits of the main characters of the story. Such ambiguity is said by Saxegaard to be regarded as unacceptable within the broader literature of the Old Testament, and therefore makes her identity more ambiguous than her traditional portrayal as a loyal daughter-in-law would suggest.

It may be said that Lau's negative depiction of Ruth's seductive attempt towards Boaz is very sound. It is good that such depiction came first before he further argues that, the story teller ensures such negative advances are corrected and at the end of it all, Ruth's actions were justified as showing ignorance of the law and both Ruth and her mother-in-law's plot to have Ruth marry Boaz in this case has to be corrected to make it a moral attempt before the story ended.

In one's opinion, Ruth's sexual advancement towards Boaz has nothing to do with her traditional depiction as a loyal daughter-in-law as

Saxegaard presented since such a trait does not rule out the fact that she was a good daughter-in-law. Again, as illuminating as Saxegaard's reading turns to be, its focus just points out the multi-dimensional function of the characters but ignores the circumstance(s) that motivated the characters to exhibit certain behavioural traits. Without understanding the motivations of characters, it makes it difficult to understand whether there is any justification for a character's behaviour or not. However, motivation for a character's action plays a very important part in constructing the plot of a story. Saxegaard ignored this factor but such factor needs to be considered if one wants to understand the characters. This would prevent judging the characters actions as wrong without any sound justification.

Ilona Rashkow's (2012) contribution to the text is on how she argues that women in the Hebrew Bible are portrayed as secondary or inferior in fundamental ways to men especially in discourses in the Hebrew Bible. In her work, she uses the theory or method of "Discourse Analysis" to prove how denigration of women in discourses is misplaced or changes in the story of Ruth. In Ruth's story, she sees that "female experiences" are placed at par with that of the males in discourse or communication. In another way, unlike in most biblical stories where men monopolize conversation, the book of Ruth, assign monopoly of discourse to women. "As a result, the female characters' discourse (56 of the 85 verses report speech act) carries the narrative forward" (2012, p. 26).

The relevance of this work is clear. First, her argument in some way supports the view that women in the story, especially Ruth, are independent entities with opportunities to make decisions and to act on their own

discretion. Again, her theory makes a weak case against people (Levine, 1982 & Nelson, 1967) who think that Ruth and Naomi were forced to conform to patriarchal structures in which they found themselves. One may support this view on discourse opined by Rashkow in the sense that in the book of Ruth, the women are independent minded in even expressing their views. Their acts and words sometimes could rather be seen as opposing patriarchal structures in the society and this presents them as dignified people whose views are respected. For instance, Naomi daringly speaks of sending Ruth to cajole Boaz (3:1-4) to marry Ruth. Ironically, the norm for Jews supports only men to be the sole initiators of marriage but the vocal nature of the women to speak-out what they desire defeated this long held tradition. It even becomes more surprising for readers to discover from the text that women can even name their babies (4:17) unlike in other stories where such role is presented as male prerogative. They do not always wait for their men to always take decisions for them.

The thesis of Alicia Ostriker's work on the book of Ruth was that it is a counter-text that forms a counter current to certain dominant biblical concepts and motifs and thereby enriches and deepens the Bible as a whole (2002). Consequently, she pinpoints why the book of Ruth deviates from biblical norms while yet remaining seamlessly attached to them. In her topic, "The book of Ruth and the love of the Land", she attempts to espouse the unique view of the book on land and boundaries between lands not duplicated anywhere but yet tied to biblical themes of land and inheritance.

In addition to this main focus, she shows three other crucial ways that the book of Ruth departs from biblical norms: The genre of Ruth is

essentially pastoral, though woven into history; It is gynocentric, where most of the Bible centres on male figures, though its closure returns to male story; God's presence in the book of Ruth is uniquely tied up with fertility. What Alicia clearly mentions about these additional three themes and that of land was that though they are totally different in the Bible as a whole they are interdependent on it. On the contrary, what she does not tell readers is whether these three additional themes are to help her build a case on the uniqueness of the discourse of the text on land. This is important because she speaks elaborately on them before coming to discuss her views on land which is her main topic.

In providing a literary study on plot, Green's (1982) approach to the story of Ruth depends on throwing light on distinctive elements in the story to unfold the plot of the story and to suggest techniques of the plot used by the author to aid fuller understanding of the story. She gave eight assumptions that would help readers of the story to understand its plot. One factor is that "the plot of the story is plausibly constructed so that there is no serious discontinuity or incompatibility within the text" (p. 53). In addition, she mentioned some of the assumptions that can be raised from the plot. She points out that the story of Ruth is a love story, thus time or cultural gap does not deprive us of much insight that comes from simply sharing human nature with the storyteller, characters and an audience contemporary with them. On legal customs repeated in the story of Ruth, she states that we are meant to inter-relate the stories, though not necessary to include that they are referring to exact the same legal custom. What one sees about her work is that it enhances our understanding of the plot of the story. In this study,

her work will be very helpful in also understanding the plot of the story as a whole.

Besides the literary readings, a contextual reading of Ruth was also given by Madipoane Masenya (2004) in which case she compares the story with her native situations in South Africa. As a South African, she looked at what relevance the story has for her native people. With this as her focus, she argues that since the troubles or problems of Ruth and Naomi were resolved at the end of the story, South Africans should free themselves of the social injustices of the apartheid and hope that the problems that confront them such as HIV/AIDS, hunger and racism would likewise end.

The benefits of her contextual reading lie in its support of the situational context of the people of South Africa. On the contrary, though justified by her methodological principle, her reading almost decontextualizes the story in an attempt to lift up motivational ideals for appropriation in the South African situation. In this sense, she mostly leaves issues in the text and talks extensively about her indigenous problems without any logical connection to the text in some instances. Another glaring difficulty from her reading is that, as a hermeneut with a feminist background, she depicts how the book of Ruth defeats the idea of idolization of marriage (without marriage women cannot survive). In this attempt however, her argument was weak since she condemns “idolizing marriage” with a text that strongly suggests the extreme significance of marriage for the survival of the very women that she was advising to be independent from marriage (cf. Ruth 3 and 4:1-10). She seems also to be contradicting herself as a feminist advocate, by confirming in her reading that Ruth’s

decision to remain with her mother-in-law was appropriate for her Northern Sotho culture because their security lies with their husband's people (2004).

On one hand, her justification of Ruth's decision to follow Naomi as made voluntarily is very laudable since Ruth decides to follow Naomi by herself. However, her appropriation of such decision to her context where the daughter-in-law is presented as bound to her late husband's people by virtue of marriage would not sit well with other feminist readers. This is because in that culture it has been made an obligatory norm for the daughter-in-law not to choose whom she wants to marry after death of their husbands. In other words, the daughter-in-law is bound to stay with her husband's mother even after her husband has died.

Discussions on Ruth and Naomi's relationship

Besides the various approaches used in reading the story, scholars from various fields have also expressed many interesting views about the relationship between Naomi and Ruth. There are feminist and womanist scholars who have lauded the story as revealing female bonding that can develop among women despite age differences. Feminist scholars are group of scholars (usually white women) and womanist scholars are a section of African-American female scholars whose interpretation of a biblical text tries to point out key issues about women (black women in the case of the womanist) usually neglected by male biblical interpreters. By female bonding, they are trying to say that it depicts how women, either of the same age group or of different ages, could develop strong attachment for themselves. Renita Weems for example, explains this attachment as a kind

of special friendship that can often develop between women, despite differences in age, nationality and religion (Weems, 1998).

In a similar vein, Phyllis Tribble comments on this issue as: “A young woman’s commitment to the life of an old woman rather than to the search for a husband, and she has made this commitment not until ‘death us do apart’ but beyond death. One female has chosen another in a world where life depends upon men” (1978, p. 172). While Weems pointed out the extremely different backgrounds and age as the most intriguing aspect of the bond between Ruth and Naomi, Tribble’s emphasis was on the age differences, reversal of sexual allegiance and the perpetuity of Ruth’s strange commitment. Such readings point out what makes Ruth and Naomi’s relationship beautiful model for women in friendship. Tribble in emphasizing Ruth’s devotion to Naomi as extending beyond death was pointing out the unprecedented nature of Ruth’s love.

To others it is about a woman who has identified with another woman. By saying woman identify with woman, what they are about is to point out a group of women whose activities indicate discomfort in associating with men or who only want to share their enthusiasm, remorse and life with other women. Masenya for instance, in her reflection on Ruth and Naomi’s relationship suggests that it is about a woman-identified with another woman who is forced into the patriarchal institution of levirate marriage in order to survive” (2004, p. 58). By the statement, “who is forced into patriarchal institution of marriage in order to survive”, was Masenya saying that even when Ruth got married it was under coercion? Is she trying to indicate that at a point in time women who want to be in close

relationship sometimes face some challenges and as result make them force themselves into marriage? For what is known, it was Naomi, another woman, who advised that Ruth should marry. If this is the case, it then turns out to weaken the idea of woman identify with another woman as these proponents suggest.

In a related example to support this theory, Levine also gives evidence from the book of Ruth to project the idea of woman-identified woman. She says: “Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to return to ‘your mother’s house’, rather than the usual reference to the father’s house (1:8). Again, Naomi and Boaz recommended that Ruth stays among the women in the fields (2:8, 22-23), indicating that it is ‘the company of women that Ruth like Naomi, will find safety’” (1998, p. 28). Anderson also adds to this trend of thought. He says, “Finally, when Ruth’s son is born, the women of the neighbourhood named him and he is referred to as Naomi’s son rather than that of the deceased husband” (Ruth 4:17) - (2009, p. 6).

It can be said that what this theory has overlooked is its failure to recognize that just as the women in the story were doing things in an uncustomary way, such as young widows staying in their mother’s house or women naming their children, they still maintained good relationship with their male counterparts. On that score, the focus of these groups of feminists should have been women’s ability to co-operate with both gender, rather than females ignoring males in their lives.

Also following the feminine line of thought are other scholars who say that the story of Ruth indicates a positive relationship for women. These

scholars see their relationship as female co-operation. For example, the Taiwanese biblical scholar, Julie Chu, finds in Ruth “a demonstration that a mother and her daughter-in-law can co-operate rather than compete, as is sometimes the case in her cultural context” (1997, pp. 51-52). Similarly, Carmody (1988) also notes that Ruth and Naomi’s story is an example of how women can co-operate in a hostile, empty and solitary environment. One may agree with Chu and Carmody’s views on Ruth and Naomi’s relationship as a beautiful model of co-operation between women or daughters and mothers-in-law. This has a strong support in the book of Ruth on how the relationship met many challenges and the two widows manage to handle each other beautifully to solve them.

Another paradigm views Ruth and Naomi’s relationship as submitting to the agenda of males (men who always want women to be subservient under them fancy this story). Levine (1982), for instance, views the Naomi and Ruth story as a weapon used by men to achieve their own ends. She argues: “The book of Ruth offers no prescription for the changing circumstances in which women, either native or foreign, finds themselves impoverished and unprotected. Their fates are determined by men: their husbands, sons and town elders” (p.27). Esther Fuchs (1983) on her part views Ruth’s apparent dedication to Naomi and her willingness to leave her own homeland to go with Naomi to a strange land negatively. She remarks: “Ruth does not merely fight for life’ or the ‘future’ as abstract and general, but for the life and future of her deceased husband and father-in-law. Thus Ruth is a paradigmatic of patriarchal ideology. She is willing to exchange her own family, country and God for those of her dead husband” (1983, p.

151). In a similar vein, Nelson (1967) would also argue that Ruth follows Naomi solely to demonstrate her love for her dead husband and seeks Boaz solely to provide her dead husbands with named heir.

It can be said that such proponents are dragging the story too far than necessary. Levine stressed on the story of the women as offering no solution to the poverty and insecurity ignoring the subtle caution in the text for poor young widows to take the initiative to do any decent work they could find to improve their standard of living rather than relying on the kindness of the people in their society for survival. Though it is true that the women relied on the men for their security but the men themselves do not see this role as their normal responsibilities or obligations. The story did not fail to show the behind the scene manipulation of the men by women to gain this security that they want from men. Even Ruth herself has to give her son to be Naomi's protector in chapter four as her own initiative to help the poor old lady. This makes the men agents to follow the manipulations of women in the story.

Also, Nelson's (1967) view that all the sacrifices Ruth made to Naomi was for the love she has for her late husband can be faltered. This view is more of his personal sentiments than what might have been Ruth's motivation for all the sacrifices she made. In the context where Ruth made her sacrificial vow (1:16-17), she kept telling and promising Naomi her desire to go to Bethlehem with her. In no instance did she mention her late husband's name as her motivation for following Naomi to settle in Bethlehem. Again, Ruth never mentioned in the text that she wants to marry Boaz to raise an heir for her late husband; such views were held solely by

the male members that constitute the assembly mentioned in chapter four of the story. In my view, Ruth's motif for marrying Boaz is to be with Naomi as she vowed in 1:16-17. That is what Boaz also realized in 3: 10 and that is what the womenfolk of Bethlehem stressed when Obed was born (4:13-17). If actually Ruth was doing all these for Boaz, never was she ever mentioned as accepting such a conviction. All the time Ruth speaks in the story, Naomi becomes the rationale for her actions and inactions. Nelson therefore has no strong argument because Ruth really cares about the living (Naomi) than the dead (Mahlon).

On the contrary, there are others like Nelavala (2014) and Masenya (1998) who see the story of Ruth and Naomi neither as a patriarchal attempt nor a feminist move, but a choice of a relationship of sisterhood which is established with no terms, expectations, benefits or rules. Power dynamics do not constitute its premise; instead it is based on understanding a sense of responsibility, accountability and support. The independence and voluntary alliance between Naomi and Ruth stressed by Masenya (1998) and Nelavala (2014) make this school of thought very unique. This fact becomes clearer when one realizes from the text that the two were not struggling for equality as most feminists do nor were their friendship determined by any patriarchal order. That is why Nelavala suggested that the relationship they share is not of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, where hierarchical power is the focus, but of mother and daughter relationship or even true sisterhood, where the focus is on empathy, care and support for one another. This is very true because their relationship is free from patriarchal enforcement.

Besides what womanist and feminist readers are saying, the relationship has been read through an African Post-colonial lens. Post-colonial interpretation is a kind of 'resistance hermeneutics' i.e. a hermeneutics that argue against all forms of ideological, economic, cultural and political hegemonic power. In their reading of a biblical text, Post-colonial readers try to look for instances in the text when one nation seems to suppress another ideologically, politically and economically and then try to argue against such undue influences.

One way that some of this group have read the book of Ruth is to reveal instances of unfairness in the relationship between Africans and their colonial masters vis-à-vis the perceived unequal relationship that exist between Ruth and Naomi. Apart from that some group of Post-colonial readers that have experience forms of western colonization have also noticed striking similarities between their stories and that of Ruth and they try to point out these similarities in their reading. Issues that these readers point out include the loss of land and of indigenous traditions by a given community due to colonization. In this context, these readers have proposed a reading of Ruth that places emphasis on Orpah, the other Moabite daughter-in-law in the narrative, the one who does return to her mother's house (1:4-14) as a model.

Dube's Post-colonial reading of Ruth, *Divining Ruth for international relations*, for instance, sees in Ruth and Naomi's relationship, the same unequal relationship that exists between nations in international setting (Dube, 2001). Dube continues her argument by specifically showing that the relationship between Ruth and Naomi is an unequal one since Ruth

pledges herself to Naomi but Naomi does not reciprocate. Due to this, she perceives Ruth's pledge to Naomi, as having the tone of slave to master relationship rather than expressing mutual love between women or two friends (2001).

However, Dube's rejection of mutual love in Ruth and Naomi's relationship is where I think she missed the point. This is because *chesed* (persistent loyalty) is one dominant theme that we can figure out in the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. One may say that Ruth and Naomi stand out because of the loving acts that each performs out of devotion to the other. This is what would be illustrated in the reading.

Laura Donaldson, looking also for a model for colonial people, argues in her reading that Orpah is a model for native people. She asserts that Orpah should be praised by natives who have experienced loss of land and native tradition due to colonialism and she should be seen as the central figure in the story. This is because Orpah does not reject her tradition or her sacred ancestors unlike Ruth whose action in the story betrays her people.

One may argue that Post-colonial readings as an equally accepted principle for interpreting a text, try as much as possible to clearly link a past colonial experience of a people to a similar scenario seen in the text. Such arguments seem very convincing when compared with the colonial problems. However, such readings would not be seen as convincing when it make blatant comparison between the text and colonial experience in a way that the textual evidence is weak to support the colonial situation. This would make literary readers of such readings find it difficult in their attempt

to understand the bearing that such readings have on Ruth and Naomi's relationship in general.

Such misunderstanding would be as a result of the inability of postcolonial readings, such as given by Dube (1999), to portray clearly the closeness in the unfairness in the colonial situation to the relationship of Ruth and Naomi within the confines of the text. On what basis can some Post-colonial readers conclude that Naomi was exploiting Ruth unfairly or was not committed to Ruth? Is there not enough evidence in the story to also show that the care exhibited by Ruth and Naomi among themselves was mutual?

Dube's argument for instance would have been more convincing for literary readers, if she had argued against the author's unfair depiction of Moab in relation to his (the author's) positive depiction of Bethlehem. This is seen in her depiction of Moab as a place associated with death and misfortune and not emphasizing much on the support and hospitality that Moab and its citizens offer to strangers like the Bethlehemite family of Elimelech (1999).

If the focus of the story of Ruth now turns to be on warning against rejecting one's culture, traditions or native ancestors would it not be for literary readers a distortion from the focus of the story? Did the narrator ever advocate for rejecting of native people, culture and traditions? In coming up with a literary reading, just as Post-colonial readers can perceive Orpah as a model, so would one think that Ruth should also not be condemned. If it is said that only Orpah is the model, then what is so extra-

ordinary in her act of choosing her own people as far as human relationship is concerned?

Apart from Post-colonial readings, there is also, what is called “Queer Hermeneutics’. This is in reference to “a variety of critical approaches characterized by their questioning and destabilizing of sexual identities and countering cultural prejudices against sexual minorities” (Donovan, 2011, p. 266). Sexual minorities in this sense mean sexualities other than heterosexual relationships or unions. Within this category of hermeneuts are Queer biblical interpreters who generally accept the relationship as a biblical antecedent of same sex bonding. While some of them lay claim to Ruth and Naomi as a lesbian couple (Alpert, 1996, Jennings, 2005 & Hunt, 2001), others see the text as generally talking about both heterosexual and homosexual relationships (West, 1997).

Lesbian readers, such as Rebecca Alpert for instance, sees a possibility in Ruth’s oath to Naomi in Ruth 1:17, as that of intimate lovers. Thus, she says, “if the speakers here were opposite sex, such statement would certainly be read as a poetic statement of sexual love and affirmation of commitment of and to results in its widespread in lesbian ceremonies – both Jewish and Christian ”. She continued, “And that to add such elements is a form of Midrash, ‘reading between the lines’, is supposed by literary, historical and logical possibilities”. She cited a literary example: “A literary possibility is based on the statement in 1:14. That ‘Ruth’ clung to Naomi because in Hebrew, the verb there ‘*davaq*’, is the same used in Genesis 2: 24 to describe the model heterosexual relationship: “Therefore a man leaves his

father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Alpert, 1996, p. 92).

In one’s estimation, it would be said that such interpretation of the relationship between Ruth and Naomi is not a convincing *Midrash*. If their argument is the case, then the following questions remain quite puzzling especially to contemporary and literary readers: Why is it that the narrator never mentions Ruth and Naomi as copulating as we hear lesbians do in contemporary time? Since the Bible frequently reports instances where carnal knowledge takes place between a married man and his wife in euphemistic terms like “He knew her”, “He washed his feet”, “He entered into her”, “went up to your father’s bed” (Gen. 4:17; 43:9; 49:4) to mention but these four.

There are stories like that of the Sodomites where homosexual attempts were emphatically suggested in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 19:5). Alpert (1996) may be partly correct in retorting to critics who do not want to see the story as a lesbian love story, that “much sexual love between women is hidden from public view” (1996, p. 95). But this does not rule out certain sexual acts that are not common but we find them recorded in other biblical narratives when they actually occurred (cf. Gen 19: 5). Another problem that lesbian readings pose is that in modern lesbian marriages as we observe, oaths sworn in marriage are exchange between the couple (Oram & Turnbull, 2013 & Raymond, 2001), but in this story, Naomi swore no oath to Ruth. Coming from the literary perspective, one can argue against the use of *davaq* as the basis for Ruth and Naomi’s relationship as that of a lesbian affair. There are two other instance that *davaq* was used between Ruth and

other women at the gleaning field but nowhere was it also used to express a lesbian affair (2:21, 23).

Mona West agrees that Ruth and Naomi's relationship offers a powerful biblical example of same sex intimacy. However, she also thinks that the story of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz provides a biblical example not only of same sex love (possibly sexual), but also affirming, life giving procreative strategies for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people (1997). Furthermore, when West gave a threesome marriage scenario for instance, she suggests, "Boaz is lauded for his willingness to support Ruth in order to continue living with Naomi" (1997, p. 56).

There are a lot of criticisms that could be raised against West's views. It is obvious that West was not talking about intimacy as ordinary closeness but sexual or marital intimacy. The fact that she talks of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz story as offering a procreative strategy for gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered people prove that she meant Ruth and Naomi to be lesbian couple. One may then ask: why did West (1997) not give any strong evidence to support her assertion that their relationship is a powerful model of same sex bonding? Since it is not enough to use their closeness to suggest they are lesbians. This is because lesbians are not just close friends but they have marital obligations that bind them towards each other.

Another problem that one may see with West (1997) interpretation is her use of "threesome marriage" to describe Boaz supportive function to Ruth and Naomi. If Boaz was actually described by West herself as a mere giver of support, then she has already weakened the idea of a threesome

marriage or such a term should not come in at all. To later say, “Boaz and Ruth might have been both gay and bisexual and thus the three thus manage to create a unique family of Ruth, Boaz and Naomi” (1997, p. 57) creates confusion for readers, especially, about the Boaz that we know in the story of Ruth.

How could West (1997) present Boaz at one point as serving as a supporter to a certain lesbian couple (Ruth and Naomi) and at another time be in a threesome union with them (Ruth and Naomi)? If Boaz is a bisexual just as West accused Ruth, everybody expects to see his gay partner mentioned in the text but since this is missing in the story, it makes it hard to accept such interpretation or depiction of Boaz and if it about a threesome union, then his sexual affair should not only be limited to Ruth but also be extended to Naomi. However, as the text stands there was no sexual union between Boaz and Naomi.

Duncan (2000) who also named the relationship as bisexual also contradicted herself in certain instances by indicating her confusion about her position. One reason is when she states that the author of the story did not name the relationship and any attempt by anyone to name it does not actually describe the union. If that is her observation why should she also attempt to make us see it as a bisexual union? Again, he said bisexuality is not about sex but knowing each other and establishing strong bonds with time. Here also, one may disagree with her because if she refuses to use sex to describe bisexual union how can that relationship differ from any ordinary strong female bonding?

Similarly for Jennings, the Ruth-Naomi and David-Jonathan relationships serve as models for both same-gender and cross-gender loving partnerships. Jennings thus reflects on the stories: “The Ruth-Naomi and David-Jonathan stories are also linked together thematically; both deal together thematically; they both deal with persons of same gender loving one another. Because of the passionate romance that characterizes the relationship, and the deep feeling and undying loyalty of the love narrated, these two stories have regularly served as models not only of same sex but also cross-sex friendship and lifelong loyalty” (2005, p. 227). One would agree with Jennings’ view that the relationship between Ruth and Naomi serves as a model of lifelong loyalty. This observation relates with the concept of *chesed* which is about persistent loyalty. What can be seen to be unclear in her interpretation of the text is her conviction of a passionate romance in the relationship between Ruth and Naomi.

There are other Queer hermeneuts who have used the story of Ruth and Naomi’s relationship to moot forward the need for their church to use it as a model of lesbian relationship in their theology. In this line of thought, we have Mary Hunt, a Roman Catholic lesbian feminist, who has critiqued her church, that the example of Ruth and Naomi is missing from the discussions on Roman Catholic moral theology on homosexuality, something which in her assessment reveals the androcentric tendency of the debate.

In criticizing the Roman Catholic theology, Hunt says,

We are understood, if at all, as some deem reflection of gay men, or some odd permutation of heterosexuality. Happily, this is not the

case in real life. Our [lesbians] experience needs to be reflected in theology. And, just as important as we need to ‘do theology’ out of our particularity, if the Christian community is to be whole then its reflections on questions of ultimate meaning and value are to be valued’. (2001, p. 298)

This final argument from Hunt (2001) points out how the issue of interpreting the story of Ruth and Naomi’s relationship as lesbianism stems from desperate want for a lesbian model. Looking at the difficulties that these Queer readers face, Bollinger (1994) appropriately suggests that Ruth’s determination to choose Naomi does not represent an explicitly lesbian decision; however, it does represent one of unusual instances where the Bible depicts profound female solidarity.

Conclusion

The above discussions have looked at the views of some scholars on the book of Ruth in general and specifically Ruth and Naomi’s relationship in particular, pointing out what seem to be interesting about this relationship; and what is disturbing or difficult to understand on such presentations of the relationship. The main take of the researcher on the discussions on Ruth and Naomi’s relationship is that the readings of most Queer and Post-colonial hermeneuts take the story of Ruth and Naomi out of biblical context. In this reading, the theme of *chesed*, persistent act of kindness, will be considered as the undergirding principle that explains this relationship depending on the text itself. The next chapter will be a critique on some selected readings on the book of Ruth to look into detail at the interpretations that they have given to certain key issues in the story since

this reading would pick-up those issues again from the narrative point of view.

Methodology

The methodology to be used for this research is narrative criticism. Many works have been already written on the book of Ruth using various biblical methods. Such readings are distinctive in understanding what the story of Ruth can mean from various perspectives. What, however, becomes difficult for readers of the Bible, both trained biblical scholars and untrained biblical readers of the text, is that some of these interpretations take their conclusions far from what the text suggests. Despite the fact that all interpretations have the Bible as their primary source, there are some interpretations that are difficult to follow from the text it interprets. Such approaches are not wrong but serve as a way to interpret the story from another perspective other than literary. While some readers who do comparative assessments of biblical stories in their context mostly fail to relate the biblical story to a situation or a phenomenon in their context comprehensively and clearly.

Even though non-literary readings increase readers understanding of the Bible in its own special way, those who read from the literary context see most of the views that come up in these other readings not to be easily followed from the biblical text that such scholars interpret. It can rightly be said that most non-literary interpretations follow their own accepted principles in the biblical interpretive world, narrative criticism is quite illuminating to understanding the actions and activities of characters in the

story world. For readers who tend to seek an interpretation from the text itself, narrative criticism becomes more illuminating and meaningful. There is the need at this point to look at how some of these methods operates and how narrative criticism promise to be unique for literary reading

Laura Donaldson gave a post-colonial interpretation on the book of Ruth. This interpretation was given in the context of the Cherokee people (a town in modern day North Carolina) and their colonial experience looking at how the book of Ruth shares light with that history. Her intent was to read the book of Ruth to reflect the colonial concerns of the Cherokee people. As a result, she reads the book as a Contact Zone. She explains Contact Zone as a reading taken from contact perspective forged by the interaction of biblical narrative, the realities of Anglo-European imperialism and the traditions of Cherokee women. In such contextual reading involving imperialist and colonialist, the main problem that Donaldson identifies is the emergence of conflicts and inequality. In looking at the book of Ruth, Donaldson presents Contact Zones as Moab, where Moab represented by Ruth and Orpah encountered Bethlehem which was represented by Naomi and her family.

She prefers this kind of reading because it is a re-reading of the Bible, which she perceives as not only marked by subjugation of indigenous people but also by their resistance. In view of this, she adopts a stance of resistance to “the biblical author of Ruth for insistently identifying the protagonist as Ruth of Moab” (1999, p. 135). By reading the book of Ruth from this perspective, Laura Donaldson hopes that her reading will function as a form of learning that would enable native people to understand more

thoroughly how biblical interpretation has impacted on them, and to assert a perspective that supports their people more strongly.

The work deals with the historical contact between Israelites and Moabites and how it has made the Israelites to tag the Moabites as degenerate, a pejorative identity that Donaldson thinks has its root in the sexual behaviour of Lot's daughters. She emphasized that this degenerate identity has created a biblical notion about Moabite women as hyper sexualized threat to Israelite men.

Since her interest was to make the story of Ruth appealing to native people, when she was talking about the contact between Euroamericans and Amerindian women on sexual degeneration, she was influenced by this motive to think that Moabite women's degeneration is similar to that of Cherokee women during the colonization era by European Christians. This comparison made Donaldson to accuse Ruth as repeating the promiscuous behaviour of the Moabite at the threshing floor with Boaz. According to Donaldson, this sexual advance made by Ruth towards Boaz in the Hebrew Bible was synonymous to the sexual advances that native Amerindian women were accused of by Euroamerican women as making towards their men.

Donaldson's conclusion on Ruth as promiscuous in this case becomes quite an imposition on the text. If she refers to Ruth's action at the threshing floor as typical of the promiscuity of the Moabites then one may be tempted to suggest that she becomes bias towards Ruth if we are to consider the context and events surrounding that encounter. One may

wonder why Donaldson even exempted Naomi from the same accusation or did not brand her degenerate matriarch of Israel when she is deeply implicated in planning that encounter. This is because the text indicates that Ruth went to the threshing floor to secure marriage and security for herself as Naomi bid her to do.

Besides, the point on sexual promiscuity is missing in the threshing floor encounter because there is no instance that Boaz was reported as having sex with Ruth. In this event, Naomi and Ruth's views in taking a step to propose marriage to Boaz cannot be overlooked if one is to fairly judge the threshing floor encounter. Since it is only the perpetrators of an act that know the motive behind what they are doing we may take it that the women were seeking security and marriage and nothing else (3:1). For Naomi, Boaz was their next of kin (3:2) who can be a good husband to Ruth that is the reason why she encouraged Ruth to go and make marriage request to him. Moreover, when Ruth told Boaz that he should spread his cloth over her at the threshing floor, she again emphasized that Boaz should do so because he is the next of kin (3:9). Boaz also understood Ruth to be requesting for marriage and thus avoided sleeping with her since there was a nearer kinsman who appropriately qualifies to marry Ruth (3:12-13). With these facts made clear in the book of Ruth, Donaldson missed the point by claiming that Ruth is a sexually wanton woman.

If her intent was to understand the threshing floor meeting between Ruth and Boaz from the point of view of the narrator too she would have realized that Ruth had already taken a pledge of loyalty in Moab not to forsake Naomi and this declaration conforms to her choice of a partner to

fulfil this dream of perpetual attachment. Naomi on her part wants to promote Ruth's welfare and in conjunction with Ruth's pledge, she purposely chose Boaz. That is why when she was sending Ruth to Boaz, she says "he is one of our kin" (Ruth 3:2). And when Ruth met Boaz she also repeated Naomi's words to Boaz that "spread your garment over me for you are the next of kin" (3:9). With such strong emphasis on kinship by the women, they proposed marriage to the next of kin because Boaz has been extremely kind to Ruth and in view of this he is made to become the next of kin by the women.

If Boaz had not been kind and has not shown interest in Ruth by showering gifts on her, the women would not have chosen him for the fulfilment of their dream that is geared towards their welfare. But because Donaldson wants to support the fact that the promiscuity of the Amerindians has precedence in the history of the Moabite towards Israelite men, she missed the point by not considering the intentions of Ruth and Naomi in the threshing floor event.

Donaldson's main argument was that the book of Ruth foregrounds intermarriage as an assimilation strategy. Here also she made some comparisons between Cherokee colonial history and the book of Ruth. She emphasized that both adopted assimilation to integrate native people. In her interaction with the history of Anglo-European imperialism, she suggested that when Thomas Jefferson, the second president of the United States, adopted intermarriage as a policy for assimilating the Amerindians his policy consequently wreaked havoc upon tribal organization and development. She pointed out how intermarriage disrupted the tradition of

Cherokee women in which case their children inherit from their mothers since time immemorial. Such inter-racial marriages on the other hand, shifted this responsibility of the native women to the fathers of such mixed-marriages thus curtailing the power of Cherokee women.

Following from this, she relates the issue of assimilation in Cherokee colonial history to the book of Ruth. Donaldson sees in Ruth's marriage to Boaz a similar phenomenon. In Ruth's story, Donaldson's observation was that after the birth of Obed, Ruth disappeared into the household of Boaz in the literary and social context. Donaldson sees this transfer as making the assimilation of Ruth replete through the transfer of Obed to Naomi, the proper Jewish woman and through her marriage to Boaz, her Israelite husband.

These suggestions made by Donaldson on the completeness of Ruth's assimilation are also quite unconvincing. Assimilation as it is popularly understood means absorption and integration of a people, ideas or culture. If that is the case, Ruth before her marriage to Boaz and before giving birth to Obed can be said to have assimilated Jewish culture already and not as Donaldson makes it appear as if it was through her marriage with Boaz that she was assimilated. For one reason, this is not the first time that Ruth married a Jew and if that is the case, grounding Ruth's so-called assimilation on marriage is not appropriate. Again, Ruth has accepted to be a proselyte Jew and practice Judaism before marrying Boaz and giving birth to Obed. Her words in 1:16-17 also supports the fact that she has already been assimilated prior to her marriage to Boaz and birth of Obed.

When one takes Sarojini Nadar's (2001) reading for instance, literary readers strive to obtain clarity from some of her interpretation on Ruth. For example, she comments on the book of Ruth from a womanist perspective by articulating the power of Ruth's story in the following words: "At the beginning, Ruth is portrayed as oppressed in every sphere. She is a woman, a foreigner, a widow and childless. By the end, we see that Ruth, through dexterity and intelligent action, has managed to cast aside all oppressive roles assigned to her (Nadar, 2001, p. 171). Such an interpretation challenges and even confuses literary readers. Oppression according to the Cambridge dictionaries online is a situation in which people are governed in an unfair and cruel way and prevented from having opportunities and freedom. Or a feeling of being very uncomfortable and worried. If this is the case, where at the beginning of the book of Ruth can we convincingly admit that Ruth was oppressed? Is there any instance that Ruth, at the beginning of the story, was prevented from obtaining certain privileges because she is either a woman, or a widow or childless? Neither did Ruth personally exhibit any feeling of discomfort or worry apart from openly expressing her sadness for her mother-in-law trying to separate herself from her (1:10-14). From what one reads from the story, Ruth was not maltreated as a widow at any point as we see in some cultural settings. She was though childless but free to move about and even re-marry anybody and go anywhere if she so chose. Even though Ruth was a woman we cannot say that, that is a sort of oppression, as far as the story of Ruth and treatment of women is concern. No man or authority put any restriction on women even at the beginning of the story as Sarojini Nadar wants to suggest. Then again, when we come to

the end of the story, Nadar tells us that “Ruth through intelligent action has managed to cast aside all oppressive roles assigned to her” (2001, p. 171). What oppressive roles these are remain unclear in her presentation. Is Ruth, for instance, not still a woman and a foreigner after the end of the story? If that is the case, why do we not see her neither fulfilling her oppressive roles nor casting them off in the story itself? Such conclusions make the literary understanding of the text difficult.

Eissfeldt has also critiqued the book as having a primary document and a secondary document. In this regard, he takes the chapters 1-4:17a as belonging to the first component and chapter 4:17-22 as a secondary document later added. According to Eissfeldt (1966), the purpose for this addition was the author’s conscious effort or desire to make Obed into the grandfather of David. This is because, the original story from which it was taken from has no connection to the house of David and the child born to Naomi (pleasantness) was originally not called Obed (servant or worshipper in Hebrew) but *Beno ‘am* (son of pleasantness in Hebrew). This argument was premised on historical observations of names in the Hebrew Bible having a link with their interpretation. *Beno ‘am*, however, correlates with the explanation given by the womenfolk when Obed was born. In this sense, it is clear that *Beno ‘am*, “a son has been born to Naomi correlates with the giving of Obed to Naomi as if he were her biological son than the meaning of Obed, servant or worshipper. Especially, when Obed is neither a worshipper nor identified with any unique role in the worship of Yahweh.

Eissfeldt (1966) did not consider the story as an autonomous work and looks out for issues that are not found in the book of Ruth itself to

discuss the possible change of name of Obed as presented in the story. However, *Be'noam* is not known to the literary reader and a literary critic will not see this change since all that he/she has is what is in the text.

Athalya Brenner's work, "Naomi and Ruth", is another historical reading on the story of Ruth. Dwelling on Source Criticism, she presents the final MT version of the book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible as composed of two distinct tales, a Naomi story (variant A) and a Ruth story (Variant B), put together by the Masoretes to create a single composite tale. The work is a response or an attempt to debunk scholars like Otto Eissfeldt (1966) who divides the story completely and discourage any sign of unity among them. Brenner writes to prove how the two variants were two separate tales but were joined together in MT based on discernible seams. She tries to point out these noticeable seams and show how they helped in hemming these two distinct tales.

In showing these seams, Brenner reconstructs the two tales by outlining their details before pointing out the seams. In so doing, she came up with these conclusions- both heroines are widows, childless, destitute, both experienced separation from their own people, finally both have satisfactory solution of their predicaments. Brenner explained that when the author of Ruth was uniting the stories, the two widows were brought together as a mother and a daughter and were assigned interchangeable role in which the two come together for Ruth to bring forth a son to serve Naomi to bridge the gap of childlessness of the women. She pointed out that the author of Ruth, however, maintained distinctive differences of Ruth and

Naomi's accounts when he combined the tales, keeping inconsistencies in the two variants intact.

Brenner's hypothesis of dual tale(s) of Ruth and Naomi's stories united by their seams has its own strengths and weaknesses for literary readers. In terms of their strengths, it was clear that there are a lot of similar themes in both tales (widows, strangers among others) that make the author of Ruth find it easy to combine them as a composite story. Secondary, the fact that the final edited story by the Masoretes abounds with contradictions is also very correct, especially when readers do not hear of Naomi's land when she returned to Bethlehem until chapter four, in the face of her poverty before this revelation. Another contradiction is also pointed out by Brenner in the accounts of the birth of Obed and inconsistency about whom Obed is related to if the accounts are to be taken as two distinctive stories. Brenner, just like Eissfeldt, sees a misrepresentation of Obed's name in the Masoretic text. Instead of Be'noam (a son is born to Naomi), the Masoretes maintained Obed (a servant). She did well by showing how the correlation of the roles of these women helps in removing this inconsistency by suggesting that Obed is to serve Naomi. At this juncture some of the weaknesses of her hypothesis for a literary reading would be considered.

From the reconstruction of the two hypothetical tales, so many lacunas can be seen in the independent variant accounts which points to the fact that both stories can never be replete in themselves and needs coordination to reach that effect. On her presentation of the Naomi's tale or Variant A as a unit, so many things could not be convincingly clarified. How the reversal of Naomi's misfortune of loss of children came about was

not explained. This is significant, especially, when she tries to tell her readers that Naomi was an elder widow. How did an aged widow get a man to impregnate her? Or how did she adopt a son or even conceived? This is a big gap since readers need a better and clearer explanation to these issues which she left unexplained. This makes Ruth's role in the Masoretic text rings in the minds of readers of the Variant A or single-Naomi-tale as important to bridge this gap or for solving Naomi's childlessness. However, one may understand Brenner, because if such gaps are not there she would not have any grounds to show the need for coordination of roles by the heroines of both variants in the combined account by the Masoretes. This would not have been possible if not necessary.

In the Ruth-single-tale account also, Brenner raised some issues which are highly dubitable or somehow not convincing. She made a case that Ruth's migration to her late husband's people was spontaneous. The only factor she gave to explain this was Ruth's quest for a re-union with her late husband's people and that is where she confuses readers. How can Ruth on her own or without any external force putting pressure on her go to a people she has never met, especially, when she has no child with her husband. Logically, no married woman who married her husband outside his hometown and has never been to her husband's country would take such a risk of seeking a re-union with her husband's family. If Ruth gets to Bethlehem and narrates her story who would believe that she married a man from that town since she has no evidence to justify her claim. Brenner never spoke of how Ruth met her late husband's family but just skipped that

information to tell us that Ruth met her late husband's relative, seduces him and raised a child for her late husband's lineage.

Moreover, Brenner thinks that Ruth's story (Variant B) is an independent story but it is in a series which begins with Lot's daughters and the birth of Moab and Ammon (Gen. 19: 30-38). It continues with Tamar's tale (Gen. 38) before the Ruth's tale finally comes. Brenner shows that what links all the three stories to the Variant B or Ruth story is a common theme-foreign women, Moab, the seduction of male for the purpose of giving birth to a male heir... and the fact that they belong to the Davidic genealogy etc.

Brenner thinks that the goal of all these series of stories anticipates David's foreign connection and his weakness for women by overtly tracing the sexual weakness in the king's blood from the Moabites story in Genesis to the book of Ruth. According to Brenner, the need to show David's weak sexuality explains why the author of the Variant B or Ruth's story retains sexual incidence in that account to purposely link his/her story with King David's sexual affairs. Here, the challenge one may perceive is why Brenner does not just keep to issues in the book of Ruth to indicate the common seams in the Naomi-Ruth-tale (Variant A for Naomi and variant B for Ruth) that he talks about but goes beyond that to include other stories not connected to how the two variants were united. Brenner's search for a justification for the seductive behaviour of David which she traces to his Moabite connection with Ruth actually drove her that far. This connection however creates problem for literary readers since it extends the Ruth story to other stories in even Genesis without adding any understanding to the final text.

Nelavala's article, which though is a contextual reading brought up issues from the book of Ruth that are more illuminating for literary readers looking at how her context enlightens the biblical story. The work focuses on discussing Ruth and Naomi's relationship in the light of the household and joint family system, which led her to give an impressive reading. Another minor goal of the article was to examine the patriarchal dynamics that are common to ancient Israelite household system not necessarily from the book of Ruth and to compare it with the contemporary joint family system in India.

To achieve this goal, she divides the paper into four parts: "Sisterhood: Naomi and Ruth" where she refutes Ruth's choice to cling to Naomi as neither a patriarchal attempt nor a feminist move but a bonding of mutual empathy in which each gives to the other the best of her ability. The strength of this portion of her work is its ability to demonstrate how patriarchy creates hierarchy and power disparities among people in the household by putting the husband at the top, followed by the wife and sons and then the daughters-in-law. From this hierarchy, she deduced that the success of the family is based on the husband. On this section again, she points out how a good husband can be a blessing to the whole patriarchal household and the bad, makes things difficult for everyone in the household.

After telling us the nature of patriarchal structures in India and ancient Israel to serve as a map for literary readers to see the connection, "The story of Ruth and Indian marriage and family structures" is presented as the second section of her work. This part is great in showing the profound similarities that a typical Israelite patriarchal household shares with an

Indian one. It is also key to understanding how patriarchy limits the power of women, especially, the daughter-in-law in the patriarchal household. This is because it assigns subservient roles to the daughter-in-law. The essence of this part of the work was Surekha's attempt to tell readers that both Ruth and Naomi are not under any patriarchal influence since their husbands who are the bosses that tie them to a patriarchal household are all dead.

“Ruth's freedom of choice - An interpretation” is the third part. Surekha indicates why the three widows who once belonged to the same patriarchal household are no longer related to each other after the death of their husbands according to kinship definitions per patriarchal understanding. In this case, the only thing that binds a daughter-in-law to the mother-in-law is marriage. The major focus of this section is to determine whether Ruth's relationship with Naomi has its origin in their mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship; or whether it derives from their internalized boundaries that confined them to Elimelech's household. Her answer to this question points out the weakness in describing Ruth and Naomi's relationship as a patriarchal one.

Her reasons to prove this contention was basically on her views on Ruth 1:16-17. She concludes that, unlike the good daughter-in-law in the patriarchal household who has to listen to her mother-in-law's bidding, Ruth is not like that or transcends the daughter-in-law's role by disobeying Naomi in not going back to Moab and thus establishes a new relationship on her own definitions with her mother-in-law. This relationship is not based on the hierarchical power structure that would have existed in the former patriarchal household (presumably under Elimelech) but one of equality, a

woman-to-woman relationship of sisterhood that gave both of them liberty to act differently from their expected social roles. On a more important note, she suggests to those who want a patriarchal model of a daughter-in-law to consider Orpah. Since in the patriarchal household the father is the head, Orpah's cause of action to go back to her family and people would definitely make her revert to the subservient role of the daughter-in-law in her father's household. Such comparisons are easily discernible for literary readers since the relationship between Ruth and Naomi in the story of Ruth also presents the relationship of the women as weakened due to death of Ruth's husband, thus making them people who came together voluntary.

The last section, "Ruth: A liberationist and Humanist" gives Surekha Nelavala's reflections on who she thinks Ruth is or what kind of role she perceives was assigned to be undertaken by Ruth in the story. Here, all her comments go down to admiring Ruth for choosing to stay with her mother-in-law. In view of this, she projects Ruth as liberationist and a humanist who acts outside of traditional influences and according to what she thought is just and right while exercising her freedom and responsibility.

The strength of Nelavala's work lies in her ability to distinguish it from patriarchal and feminist oriented readings. These two, as she pointed out, have their centre in power issues in which case patriarchy enforces control of power, while feminism demands an equal share of power. In her work, she shows how Ruth and Naomi's relationship is bereft of power politics but rather built on trust. She explains that under the patriarchal household a daughter-in-law is subservient to her mother-in-law because of her husband and nothing else. On Ruth's side, the death of her husband

ended that patriarchal bossy role of the mother-in-law. That is why she thinks Ruth stands by Naomi out of freedom and not desperation or compulsion. All these conclusions taking from the daughter and mother in law relationship in her context has strong textual support.

Literary reading, since it takes its conclusions from the text itself makes a lot of important contributions to the understanding of the final text. For instance Tribble's feminine reading of Ruth which was purely literary becomes more essential to understanding of the text. Readings like Tribble's dwell more on the grammatical structure and the content of the story for its interpretations. She titles her chapter one as "Death abounding", which is an exegesis on the chapter 1:1-4 to discuss the tragedy the male characters encountered. In this case, she interprets the narrator's speaking for the characters at the onset of chapter one as an indication of their death since she observes that it is only when the characters are allowed to speak for themselves that they become living beings in the text. Interestingly, she remarks that the narrator spoke for all the males in Elimelech family and all of them died but the women spoke and they lived (1978). If anyone wants to follow her reading, every deduction that she comes up with are easily to be followed and uncovered in the text itself. This makes her reading very comprehensive to the literary reader since the issues she addressed are all conclusions from the text.

In another instance, she observes that the story begins with a man leading his family to Moab but before the close of chapter one, this masculine flavour of the story changes when the man died and thus a woman has to now lead her daughters-in-law back to Bethlehem. Reading

with an eye of a feminist, she was here unearthing from the text itself how women at times can become the main decision makers of their families under certain circumstances. Also, when Boaz suggested to Ruth that he has heard of how Ruth left her family, people and god and came to a people she did not know at all because of her mother-in-law, Tribble realizes that the text did not censure Boaz for dereliction of duty but what she sees to be clear was that it makes the women on top of controlling their destiny and not their male counterpart.

The beauty of such deductions for both lay and learned readers is that her conclusions are based solely on the biblical text. Such exegesis makes her comedy of Ruth very interesting in satisfying the needs of those who seek understanding of the story of Ruth from the story world itself. This makes narrative criticism as a literary method which also interprets the text as a story by relying on the narrative techniques like repetitions and variations, setting, characterization and plot etc. (Walsh, 2010 & Amit, 2001) to be much promising or more interesting for literary readers. Upon realizing the difficulty that other interpretations on the story of Ruth and Naomi have faced in other readings, another reading of the story of their relationship as the narrator presents it then becomes very necessary.

If the story of Ruth is read narratively what better way can we comprehensively interpret Ruth and Naomi's relationship from the story world itself to make their story meaningful to literary readers. What clue has the narrator given in the text itself to be used to explain the unique relationship between Ruth and Naomi? By relying on the narrative techniques, this work wants to prove that one best way to comprehensively

explain what binds Ruth and Naomi in their relationship is *chesed* as it has been used in the text. As narrative criticism relies on words of characters and the narrator to draw its characterization and point of view of characters among others how has the narrator used *chesed* as an underlying principle to explain the deeds and conversations of the characters to explain the relationship that existed between Ruth and Naomi? The thrust of this work is to use the Jewish concept of *chesed* to define the bond between Ruth and Naomi from the literary perspective. This would explain why their relationship is one of any woman to woman relationship not bound by any obligations or rules but just exhibiting a sort of enduring loyalty.

Delimitation

The story of Ruth, as a literature has been studied from various angles. There are scholars who delight in exploring the literary features of the text. Barbara Green's (1982) work, for instance, was to aid a better understanding of the plot of the story. Others will also want to write on the various themes that are discussed in the text such as levirate marriage, the treatment of the 'Other', widowhood and many others. The relationship between Ruth and Naomi has also received multiple interpretations. There are those who want to read lesbianism and bisexuality into the relationship (Alpert, 1994, Hunt, 2001 & Duncan, 2000). Others also want to accuse Ruth for being unfaithful to native people due to her commitment in that relationship (Donaldson, 1999 and Dube, 1999). This study has concerned itself to consider these readings and give another reading of the relationship between Ruth and Naomi by considering their relationship as a partnership built on *chesed*.

Organization of work

The work is organized into five chapters. Chapter one is on the introduction. It looks at background to the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, objectives, research questions, significance of the study, organization of work, scope of the study, methodology and literature review. The second chapter looks at: Various interpretations on the book of Ruth. “*Chesed* and the book of Ruth” forms the third chapter. The fourth chapter is about lessons from Ruth and Naomi’s relationship for contemporary readers. The last chapter is about the summary, findings and conclusion of the work.

CHAPTER TWO

VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS ON THE BOOK OF RUTH

Introduction

Chesed is an important term that occurs three times in the book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible (1:8, 2:20 & 3:10). One meaning of the term is loyalty. However, the issue of loyalty as an important element in Ruth and Naomi's relationship has been noted but has never been the central focus of many works so far. Renita Weems (1998), Phyllis Trible (1978), Celena Duncan (2000) and Bollinger (1997) are some of the key scholars who have touched on the concept of loyalty in the Ruth and Naomi's relationship. Though coming from various theoretical backgrounds, these scholars dedicated a line or two in their readings that hint on loyalty in Ruth and Naomi's relationship. The main thesis of Duncan's work on bisexuality in the book of Ruth seems not to have any strong textual or literary support but more significantly she touched on the issue of loyalty. Also, Weems (1998) and Trible (1978) also glossed over the issue of loyalty in their interpretation but did not make it their focus in their discussion. The main work that came close to employing the term *chesed* in the relationship between Ruth and Naomi is that of Bollinger (1997) but even in this work, it uses few ideas from the story of Ruth to draw a similarity between the loyalty of a certain young female character shown to her mother who despised her strongly because of her sexual orientation and that of Ruth to

Naomi. At this point, a quick overview of how these works briefly touched on loyalty (*chesed*) but rather diverted attention to other issues as the undergirding principle of the relationship is given below.

I. A WOMANIST READING

Renita Weems, for instance, interprets Ruth and Naomi's relationship as depicting one of the oldest testimonies in the Old Testament of female bonding that can often exist between women despite age, national and religious disparities. In emphasizing on this strong female relationship, she suggests that, such bonding does not imply that the story is about women being attached to only women but women maintaining good friendship among themselves and with their male counterparts without necessarily letting one affect the quality of the other at any time. The majority of her argument is to prove how this female bonding comes to play in the story of Ruth.

First, she shows how the bonding between Ruth and Naomi begins with death of their husbands after which the two widows lived together in Moab. They were bound together by their mutual love for and memories of the same dead men- Mahlon, Chilion and Elimelech. In which case, her logic is faulty since it is not reasonable for a widowed daughter-in-law to still maintain a relationship on the basis of past memories with her mother-in-law, especially when she has nothing to offer them. This is because the relationship cannot be merely maintained by dead memories of men after death has dissolved the marriage that brought them together. She suggests that at a point in time when Naomi had to leave after the hunger in

Bethlehem has eased, she tries to break this bond, a decision taken somewhere between Moab and Bethlehem. Naomi's decision in asking her daughter-in-law to return to her people was explained by Tribble as made on the grounds of its unfairness since it demands the daughters-in-law giving up the familiarity of their homeland in exchange for the unknown of Naomi's. Weems clearly and convincingly explains Naomi's disapproval of her daughter-in-law's decision to follow her as stemming from clear conscience and her good concern for her daughters-in-law. This is because Orpah and Ruth were not Naomi's daughters to take with her to Bethlehem and besides they would not gain anything from a continued relationship with her in a strange land. At this point, one would think that Weems' explanation points to the fact that these two Moabite widows are free agents whose marital responsibilities to their Bethlehemite husbands have ended and are not under the subjection of their mother-in-law.

A good point that Weems correctly makes is that Ruth and Naomi were not bound by the desire of Ruth to have a child for her late husband since Naomi cannot produce a son to unite them. That is why the first bond between the two as a daughter and a mother-in-law naturally ended. Naomi officially announced this by her insistence that her daughters-in-law must recognize this fact and go back home. This interpretation given by Weems is helpful for readers to understand why there is the need to explain why Ruth still followed Naomi in a more convincing way.

Weems moves to what she considers as the second stage of their relationship. At this point, she makes interesting remarks on the importance of Ruth to Naomi. She thinks that this relationship was initiated by Ruth's

words expressed to Naomi which she termed as a testimony of sisterhood, committing herself to serve, care for and stand by the older woman, in spite of what lays ahead. The challenges that both women faced and Ruth's ability to stand by her promise to Naomi to the core makes Weems explanations on Ruth's pledge unique. Weems thinks that their renewed relationship at this point is a reflection of their realities. It is Naomi's aged condition that made Ruth to commit herself to a woman who for all practical purposes had nothing to give her in return, an explanation which is a very plausible suggestion.

Weems position on the rationale behind Ruth's commitment to Naomi was that it is for the sake of the good friendship with Naomi that Ruth did not want to lose. She loved and cared for her more than she cares for anything. This explains why she elected Naomi so that they could build on bonds she (Naomi) had already erected and in so doing, Weems, interestingly, suggests that Ruth's decision to follow Naomi out of love is a risky one. This is due to the fact that her decision to attach herself perpetually to Naomi was made at a time when there was no help from any intervening power, both divine and mundane. In her attempt to present such strong friendship on Ruth's risky love to her friend her view somehow becomes too close to scholars who closely accept such strong attachment to be that of lesbians. This is because, it does not answer the reason why a young woman would lay all her interest aside for the sake of the strong love she has for an old widow friend.

In the final stage of their friendship, Weems talks about their interest to live with men. She suggests that even after men came into their lives

when Ruth married Boaz, she did not belittle and take for granted her friendship and love for Naomi. Ruth still clings to the woman she had clung to in poverty. She explains the rationale behind Ruth's commitment to Naomi after marrying Boaz that Ruth still remembers the promise she made to Naomi to stay at all times by her side when they were between the plains of Moab and Bethlehem. This argument is in support of her conclusion that "Consequently, Ruth's blessings of husband and child became Naomi's blessings of a family and future. More importantly, she suggested at the concluding part of her work that each woman found in the other's loyalty and companionship the future they thought they had lost in Moab" (1988, p. 33). She reiterated this once more by suggesting finally that the story is also about faithfulness, devotion, commitment, and stubborn loyalty, ideas which are fully linked to *chesed*. It is this unique or stubborn loyalty that Weems suggested that the reading propose as the underlying basis of Ruth and Naomi's relationship. Weems is also one scholar who fully admits that the loyalty between the two women was mutual but did not emphasize it or explain why she says so.

II. A FEMINIST READING

Phyllis Tribble (1978) also hinted on Ruth's loyalty to Naomi in her famous work, "A Human Comedy". As a comedy written from a feminist perspective, she narrates Ruth and Naomi's story as it moves from deepest despair to well-being, gradually, in four scenes that she divides the story, pointing out how they managed to challenge and transform the male culture within which the story was recounted.

The work sets out to demonstrate or give “a theological interpretation of feminism: women working out their own salvation with fear and trembling, since it is God who works in them” (p.192). In this sense, Tribble points out how Ruth and Naomi shaped their destiny against all challenges that the male world posed to them. To do this, she heavily depended on the structure and content for the analyses of the story. This is because she perceives the story’s meaning as inseparable from its content and form. This is to be skimmed through briefly.

In the scene one, Tribble discusses tragedy in the family of Naomi at Moab. Here what she says is about the beginning of calamity in the life of Naomi. She points out how the death of sons and husband kills the dream of a better future for Naomi and security of husband and children that patriarchy affords women. She opines that the death of the men made both Naomi and Ruth worthless culturally. Naomi desires that Ruth marry from her natives in Moab is interpreted by Tribble as a demand of Naomi’s male structured society which makes women to marry at all cost.

When Ruth determines to follow Naomi to Bethlehem, Tribble says a lot to praise such decision: First, Ruth has chosen emptiness and rejection. The choice made Ruth to break with family, community, faith and reversed sexual allegiance. This decision is seen by Tribble as unique and unprecedented since one woman has chosen another in a world where life depends on men. At the end of chapter one, Tribble interprets Naomi’s life as having faced two kinds of famine both physical and familial. The migration of Ruth with Naomi to Bethlehem is interpreted as purposely to assist Naomi in her woeful condition.

In scene two, Tribble talks about how the women struggle to survive physically with Boaz being a reactor to their initiative. Its title, “This Day our daily Bread” is a reflection of the women’s struggle for food and marks the start of Naomi’s movement from emptiness to fullness worked-out by Ruth. In the third scene, “Salvation by Courage Alone” Tribble deals with Naomi and Ruth’s struggle to survive culturally. This led her to explain why Naomi has to act upon Boaz’ kindness by planning a scheme geared to unite Ruth and Boaz in marriage. She explains this scheme as Naomi’s attempt to avert her afflictions without waiting for matters to take their course or for God to intervene with a miracle. Instead, Naomi herself moves from being the receiver of calamity to becoming the agent of change and challenge. Tribble also talks about Ruth’s proposal of marriage to Boaz at the threshing floor. More appropriately, she avers that Naomi knows the necessity of marriage in patriarchal environment but was powerless to help Ruth get a husband. In the scene three, she returns to that need with power of a plan: “My daughter, should I not seek a home so that it may be well with you?”(3:16 RSV). Tribble observes that Ruth welcomes this marital news at this juncture because her allegiance accords with Naomi’s decision. What she does not tell us is what she meant by Ruth’s allegiance tie in with the choice of Boaz. This gap calls for further exploration to bring out the connection that Ruth’s choice of Boaz has for her allegiance to Naomi.

She also points out that the women were seeking marriage for their own welfare but tells us that they chose Boaz out of his kindness. Tribble sees Ruth’s marriage proposal to Boaz at the threshing floor as showing her persistent portrayal as defier of custom, the maker of decision and the

worker of salvation. It is at this point that Tribble noted that Boaz responded to this proposal with praise and emphasized on the theme of *chesed* of Ruth to Naomi: 'You have made this kindness greater than the first' (3:10). This emphasis is of no little importance for one who wants to interpret the relationship as demonstrating *chesed*.

In the last scene, Tribble discusses how Naomi and Ruth's actions made it mandatory for the town people to meet at the city gate to decide about them. Here, she demonstrates her feminist disposition at its best. According to her, the scene shows a manly world where the concerns of Ruth and Naomi were subsumed and subverted by the male gathering. The assembly discussed the issues of selling land and marriage as part of the transaction. Tribble remarks that if Boaz took charge to represent the voice of Ruth and Naomi, it is because these two women have summoned him to duty. She tells the processes that Ruth and Boaz's marriage passed through: "A chance meeting in the field, followed by daring meeting on the threshing floor, has worked its way to denouement through proper and customary channels of patriarchy (p.190)". The scene four also indicates how these women make a new beginning with men. Tribble defines scene four as an answer to scene one (loss of husbands and sons).

In Tribble's view, the threshing floor scheme that Naomi proposes in scene three has as its purpose finding a home for Ruth that it might be well with her. Ruth respects this scheme when she asks Boaz to marry her (3:9c). Nowhere did either women mention or imply the restoration of a male name to their late husbands as the male gathering did (4:1-5). Their emphasis was life for the living. All that Tribble has said show the weakness in interpreting

the relationship as enforced by Ruth's desire to have a child for her late husband.

Trible also joins the debate of scholars (Pressler, 2002 & Lau, 2011) who interpret Ruth and Naomi's story as patriarchal. On the contrary, she sees the relationship as depicting two women who fought against patriarchal structures of their society. In opposing those who subject the story to patriarchy (Levine, 1982 & Fuchs, 1983), she observes that the patriarchal cast of scene four which views Ruth exclusively as a vessel for male progeny is alien to the spirit and letter of the first three scenes, even if it is not alien to the culture of marriage in Israel. Following from this, Trible gives readers a better understanding of Ruth and Naomi's view on marriage and birth as a means of restoration of life for the living as opposed to that of their male counterparts in scene four and challenges the patriarchal status quo which places them as restorer of male child for their husbands who died childless. In this case, Trible rightly makes it clear that the restoration of male child is for Ruth and Naomi's own benefit and not for their late husbands.

Trible ends the scene by talking about the birth of Obed as climaxing the happy scene of Ruth and Naomi's story. Trible led us again to the concept of *chesed* by praising Ruth as a daughter-in-law "faithful beyond death" (a picture that is similar to David's *chesed* to Jonathan in 1 Samuel 20 which he repeats after Jonathan's death to his (Jonathan's) son, Mephibosheth, in 2 Samuel 9) who stands as the mediator of this transformation of their lives as poor widows. Naomi, the woman of emptiness becomes a woman of plenty through the effort of her daughter-in-

law. Tribble remarks: “All together they are women in culture, women against culture and women transforming culture. What they reflect they challenge and that challenge is a legacy of faith” (p.192).

Generally, Tribble argues against the popular notion that men are the agents for improving the condition of lives of women. She instead shows in her reading how women can work together to control their destiny. However, her work left behind finger prints of *chesed* in the chapter three and four as pointed above.

III. A BISEXUAL READING

Celena M. Duncan’s bisexual reading, “The book of Ruth on boundaries, love, and truth”, also touched on the issue of loyalty in Ruth and Naomi’s relationship but her focus was to project the story as a bisexual one.

Her work claims to adopt a tone of bisexual affirmative of the book of Ruth to show how bisexual unions are ordained by God for which reason it should be accepted as another strand of relationship. This position is reflected in her interpretation throughout her reading. Following rabbinic tradition, she considers the book of Ruth as a Bisexual Midrash, making room for alternative relationship and sexual desires. Duncan desires to write on the subject of bisexuality due to suspicions held by many heterosexuals, homosexuals, and transgendered groups against bisexuals because these other sex groups do not want to accept other forms of sexuality other than their own. Her essay was to prove that bisexuality is part of God’s creation and thus must be accepted as the creator’s desire for variety in his creation.

In explaining why some forms of sexuality should not be cherished than others, Duncan suggests that what has become sexual boundaries are labels or human construct and God and the writer of book of Ruth love to see all boundaries broken down and swept away for diversity to become the created norm. She argues, bisexuality should not be understood only in terms of sexual attraction. Sex should not also be the bottom line for discussions on bisexuality. Instead, from her lived experience and perspective, it is a slow lengthy process over months and years of getting to know a person as friend before any physical relationship can develop. She goes ahead to argue that, “there are some forms of bisexuality that has nothing to do with sex or even sensuality but its nature like the story of Ruth and Naomi go far beyond simple friendship” (Duncan, 2000, p. 93).

However, the problem Duncan poses for readers lies in her attempt to remove sex and sensuality as a distinctive feature of bisexuality, especially when bisexual relationship is distinguished or even defined on the basis of sex (Donovan, 2001). In this case, one may ask how different is her proposed so-called bisexual relationship that she confers on Ruth, Naomi and Boaz from ordinary female bonding? Besides this difficulty, Duncan occasionally contradicts her position by sometimes admitting that sex is key in bisexual union and in another instance trying to deny this fact in her discussion. What she means by “physical relationship” later develops between bisexual couples clearly seems to suggest sexual affair. And also by saying some forms of bisexuality has nothing to do with sex means there are other forms of bisexuality which has something to do with sex.

She also contradicts her position again when she asked: what kind of relationship exists between Naomi and Ruth? And answered herself that the author does not name it and any attempt to name it does not describe the relationship. If she admits the author's position, why does she have to surprise her readers by saying that the relationship is a bisexual affair especially when her own perception on this union is full of distortions? Due to the difficulties she faced in naming the relationship as bisexual, one may suggest that she could have also left the relationship unnamed as she thinks the author of the story did rather than affirming her ideas of bisexuality on a relationship that is not about that.

Duncan praises Ruth and Orpah's friendship with Naomi and suggests that their friendship crosses ethnic boundaries and outlasts the deaths of husbands. She adds her voice to various views that others have expressed on Ruth's words in chapter 1:16-17 that it makes Ruth's bond with Naomi stronger than her bond with Moab and it crosses ethnic and patriarchal boundaries. Impressively, she comments that Ruth used this vow to create a family with Naomi. However, what she does not explain is whether this family created could also be said to be bisexual one or not since there is no bisexual relationship that one of the couples is referred to as daughter while the other functions like a mother as it is presented in the story of Ruth.

She examines the implication that Ruth's pledge in 1:16-17 has for womanhood. She says it relinquishes one thing that a woman's value was measured i.e. her ability to bear children, in particular sons. She explains: "Her love for Naomi superseded her procreative responsibilities. Not even

family ties could draw her back when measured against the forward pull of her love for Naomi. Contrary to what Duncan has attempted to make one see in this vow, nowhere did Ruth suggest in her statement that child bearing is of no significance as compared to her love for Naomi and nowhere did Ruth confess that she has forfeited her procreative responsibility. If what Duncan says is the case, why did she marry and give birth in the chapter four (4:13)? One may agree with Duncan when she says that Ruth gave up everything that she valued in her society for a dried old woman but not necessarily her ability to bear children. Duncan rightly says that even so in silence, Naomi accepted what the younger woman offered, a bond of support, companionship, assistance, loyalty and love. Duncan's view that Ruth offered a bond of loyalty to Naomi drives home what this work is suggesting that the relationship depicts a bond underpinned by loyalty.

She strongly thinks that the relationship between Naomi and Ruth has element of marriage. This is because the relationship was a bond unbreakable by death because the God of Naomi forged it; they were both being drawn forward by God, who was weaving a grand tapestry that would forever include the names of these two humble women. God broke the boundary that separated the two, and who will break apart or deny what God has wrought? Though, one may agree on the idea that Ruth and Naomi's relationship has strong elements of marriage by way of one forfeiting all human relationship to move to a new territory with another but that does not mean it is a bisexual or any form of marriage relationship. Duncan herself seems to be aware of this fact that is why she did not make any bold suggestion throughout her reading to claim that they were married. Such an

attempt would be too challenging and no one can easily prove that from the book she interpreted.

IV. A PARODIC READING

Bollinger's (1997) review of Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are not the only fruit* is the closest work that pointed out the issue of loyalty as an essential element in Ruth and Naomi's relationship from Winterson's parody. Winterson's work reviewed by Bollinger is a parody that accounts for her own lived experience and what it has for maturation for female. The parody challenged traditional stories of maturation which held that maturation comes by physical and/or emotional separation from home and family. On the contrary, Winterson's work indicates that this theory fails for female development because the female child is forever attached to her home and family during and after adolescent. Winterson uses the book of Ruth as the principal source of her parody in the sense that the book of Ruth shows an example of profound female loyalty and maturation of women. Bollinger, appreciated the central relationship in Winterson's text between the principal character, Jeanette and her mother. In the story, Jeanette mother's commitment to evangelism leaves her uninvolved in her daughter's lesbian sexuality but despite this Jeanette does not reject her mother but continued the relationship even after her mother has forced her to leave her home. Jeanette return to her mother after her lesbian affair failed is an act which shows that for this text maturation consists of the continuation and not the elimination of mother and daughter relationship. Thus, in Winterson's parodic retelling of the Ruth story she juxtaposes the Ruth story with her autobiographical parody to show the similar acts of

loyalty between the protagonists in these two stories. In Winterson's estimation, Ruth's profound female loyalty is her strong decision in 1:16-17 to forgo her people in order to follow Naomi while for Jeanette it is her poignant devotion to her mother by returning to her despite their conflict.

Bollinger's (1997) remarks on what Jeanette's work has for *chesed* which one may also agree is of important to note now. First, she suggested that the concept merges the book of Ruth in a way that offers insight to Jeanette's decision. She also commented that though Winterson may not have had the Hebrew word *chesed* in mind, *chesed*, a difficult term to translate, proves to be the dominant description of the relationship between Naomi and Ruth rather than *ahab* (love). She concludes that *chesed* in Winterson's story is about not betraying a friend. Afterwards, she gives an extensive discussion on Sakenfeld's elements of *chesed* that ties in with Jeanette's loyalty to her mother from Winterson's work. What one may generally say is that this work offers a strong support to the reason why *chesed* is an important concept that explains Ruth and Naomi's relationship. However, Winterson's work itself does not delve into the issue of loyalty or more specifically *chesed* itself in her treatment of the text since she does not even have the Hebrew concept in mind. Thus, there is no explicit detail account given on how this concept works throughout the relationship in the entire story. The next chapter would elaborate on what *chesed* has for Ruth and Naomi's relationship.

CONCLUSION

Various actions by Ruth and Naomi shown as their story is recounted mean something different to different scholars. In the above readings such meanings have been pointed out and explained from various perspectives by these scholars. It is against the background of certain challenges that one may perceived occasionally in these scholars readings and their subtle references to loyalty that have served as the basis for looking at the relationship of Ruth and Naomi as that of unflinching loyalty. The study supports this subtle view in these works and uses the Hebrew Bible to point out how this plays in Ruth and Naomi's relationship.

CHAPTER THREE

CHESED AND THE BOOK OF RUTH

Introduction

The relationship between Ruth and Naomi in the book of Ruth has been an interesting one in scholarly circles. Existing literatures have shown many schools of thought concerning what underlies the attitude the two women showed towards one another as it has been proved in the literature review. Questions still remain with regard to the proposal that some of these readings make. Which means that there is more to the relationship between these two women than what scholars are making it out to be. If so, what then is it? What is it that makes these women behave the way they do in this narrative? The answer from one's point of view is *chesed*. This is what a close reading of the story tells us; that it is the strong loyalty the two women have for each other which is the basis for their actions. For the rest of the discussion in this chapter then one would attempt to demonstrate how this occurred in the narrative.

The Hebrew term *chesed* is a positive quality that many such as Clark (1993) and Sakenfeld (1979) have generally translated as “loving-kindness”. However, as used in the book of Ruth, *chesed* is more accurately defined as “covenantal loyalty” that is a loving pact arising out of loyalty

(Baer & Gordon, 1997). The term covenant as used for *chesed* is not about a legal covenant but a description of the strong nature of the bond that binds two people in persistent acts of kindness to each other. Andrews (1991), referring to Genesis 21:23, 27, asserts that mutual responsibility in a covenant can also assume some measure of *chesed*, though the institution of a covenant is not a prerequisite. Similarly, in Clark's (1993) opinion, the word covenant as used for *chesed* can hardly be a document drawn up in a strict legal manner to ensure that both parties are bound by the terms of their agreement and answerable to each other in case of default. That is why in a covenant duties render to each other in both parity and suzerainty types are obligatory but in a *chesed* it is a voluntary act (Judges 8:35, 2 Sam. 9) since it is not about a legal covenant but a description of the strong nature of loyalty shown.

In human relationship also, when *chesed* binds two people the strong nature of their bond appears like a covenant that cannot be broken but endures for a long time. An example is the *chesed* in David and Jonathan's relationship that was even extended to Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 9:1, 7-8). As opposed to "random acts of kindness", *chesed* implies consistency: an act arising out of an enduring bond, whether between God and human beings (Exod. 15:13; Exod. 20:6; Gen 19:19; Jer. 31:31; Dt. 7:9, 12) or between parties to a treaty, or simply between people as creatures in the divine image (Gen. 21:23; 40:14; 1 Sam. 20:15; 2 Sam. 9:1, 7-8; Jer. 2:2).

Chesed depicts covenantal loyalty established whether through family ties or, in its best known expression between David and Jonathan, through friendship and love (Bollinger, 1994). As Edward Campbell puts it,

chesed is more than even the loyalty which one expects if he (or she) stands in covenant with another person- it is that extra which both establishes and sustains a covenant (1975). He further explains that the concept appears to be more than ordinary human loyalty because it imitates the divine initiative of love which comes without being deserved (Campbell, 1975).

The practice of *chesed* also goes beyond the mainstream understanding of undying loyalty shown to someone. Hendel (2008) for instance provides five scenes of *chesed* that offer non-mainstream insight in the practice of *chesed* (kindness). Among these scenes is the practice of verbal *chesed* (kindness) which he explains as the act of providing people with verbal, in contrast to monetary or gifts as a form of kindness. This is in support of Naomi's acts of verbal *chesed* that she shows persistently to Ruth throughout the story.

Katherine Doob Sakenfeld (1993) gave some principal features or parameters for the use of the word *chesed* in the Hebrew Bible under circumstances that also tie in with Ruth's *chesed* to Naomi. These features are to help one to know why Ruth's actions are a *chesed*. She pointed out that for *chesed* to be shown in a relationship such relationship must be a good one but the act of *chesed* itself is not incumbent on this positive relationship. It must be voluntarily offered by a situationally powerful person to a situationally weaker person not because the person is bound to do so for their relationship (1993). The following parameters given by Sakenfeld emphasize this further. First, an act of *chesed* takes place within the context of an existing established and positive relationship between the parties. Secondly, *chesed* is an action performed by a situationally powerful

party to a situationally inferior party. Thirdly, in acts of *chesed*, the situationally powerful party, because of a more powerful status, is always free not to perform the act of *chesed*. It is therefore a *chesed* that explains Ruth's actions in her relationship with Naomi and not any external factor binding her (Ruth) to do that.

Chesed proves to be the dominant description of the way Ruth and Naomi related in the book of Ruth since both show persistent loyalty to each other in their actions and words. This unflinching loyalty shown in their words and actions would be emphasized in all instances in the book of Ruth where it is demonstrated to prove the story not as love between two lesbians as some Queer readers try to make us understand or relationship bound by patriarchal laws. This would be shown in four ways, two of them for Ruth and two for Naomi. In reading between the lines, the narrator shows Naomi's persistent loyalty through her caring advice given to Ruth throughout the story and through her prayer to God to help Ruth succeed (see Russell Jay Hendel (2008) notes on verbal *chesed*). On Ruth's part, she demonstrates *chesed* in her actions which portray her profound concern for Naomi. Again, the narrator also explicitly emphasizes Ruth's *chesed* throughout the story in commendation passed by characters like Naomi and Boaz (Direct Showing) on several occasions in the story.

Ruth and Naomi's relationship stands out because of the continuous loving acts that each performs out of devotion to the other. Their story in the book of Ruth, illustrates the power of relationships. Ruth is in partnership of persistent loyalty with Naomi; they share a mutual bond of *chesed* though in different forms. Prior to Ruth's speech, Naomi cites the goodness of both

daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth in 1:8. Here, she uses the idea of *chesed* in an extraordinary manner when she urges them to return to their mothers' houses and then wishes them well.

As Tribble comments:

Strikingly, the basis upon which Naomi invokes Yahweh's *chesed* is the gracious hospitality of her daughter-in-law: 'May God bring you *chesed* in return for the *chesed* you have shown to the dead and to me.... (1989, p. 169)

Bollinger (1994) remarks on this that perfect loyalty (*chesed*) between women sets the standard for the divine mercy.

The verse (1:8) accentuates the deep commitment, love and respect between these women. Naomi acknowledges their acts of devotion to her, as their mother-in-law, as well as their dead husbands but releases Ruth and Orpah from any obligation to her. Naomi then prays that they find peace and security of marriage upon returning to their ancestral homes, having left home ten years earlier to marry foreigners this separation would not be easy for any of them. At this point their relationship has been officially brought to an end because the men who brought them together as a family were dead and Naomi cannot take the women along to Bethlehem. When Orpah decides to obey Naomi's request, turning her back on her mother-in-law and choosing the Moabite way of life, neither Naomi nor the book's author or narrator criticizes Orpah's decision. Devotion can take different forms; for Ruth it entails rebellion and closeness, while for Orpah it means both obedience and separation.

Ruth's decision to accompany her mother-in-law back to Bethlehem, thereby leaving her own home, family and culture behind is her most

outstanding example of an act of *chesed* in the book. The decision must not be misunderstood as an infringement on her right as a woman or a daughter-in-law since she does everything out of love as an independent person, knowing consciously the implication. Ruth's famous words written in stunning Hebrew poetry, speaks of undying loyalty, as she voluntarily promises to follow Naomi even beyond death:

And Ruth said,

Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you. (Ruth 1: 16-17 NRSV)

This particular statement emphasizes her undying loyalty to Naomi since it shows her persistency to be committed to Naomi and since she made all these important sacrifices voluntary. Ruth, a situationally powerful person has voluntarily decided to accompany Naomi, a situationally weak person to Bethlehem. Not even Naomi can force Ruth to forfeit her native religion and people to follow her to Bethlehem. The statement is key to understanding Ruth's further acts of *chesed* from this point onwards. From the context of the declaration, Ruth in her utterances indicates elements of a sacrificial kind of commitment that she is intending to observe if Naomi does not object to her desire to come with her to Bethlehem. This decision was pure loyalty born out of love for Naomi and Naomi could not have asked her to make such a sacrifice. Unlike the Israelites at the time of the Judges who failed to exhibit *chesed* to the house Jerubaal, Gideon (Judges 8:35) in return for all the good that Gideon did for Israel, Ruth differed. This

strong and persistent loyalty that Ruth showed in the face of an almost ending relationship is in line with David's decision to extend his past relationship with Jonathan to Mephibosheth by showing the latter *chesed* (2 Sam. 9). Here, both Ruth and David are the situationally powerful persons who showed *chesed* to situationally weak persons like Naomi and Mephibosheth who need their services for a better life. Ruth, a young widow with family (1:8) and people (1:15) relinquishes affinity with her own people and opted to follow an empty old widow (1:21), with no nuclear family (1:3-5) and wealth (2:18) for her sustenance. The verses need full elaboration to understand what these words of *chesed* imply.

In the first place, Ruth's reply is actually a rebellion against Naomi's advice to have her return to Bethlehem but it shows consistency with the previous response that she and Orpah gave to follow her (Ruth 1:10). For the sake of her determined loyalty, instead of a negative exclamation with a passive assertion of what she will do, "No we will return with you", as she usually does with Orpah, she still appeals to Naomi to stop pressing her to leave. Her first expression of her intentions to follow Naomi in 1:10 is a more polite form of interaction than telling Naomi at this juncture not to press her to leave as she suggested in her pledge. Here it is not because Ruth was impatient with Naomi but in actual fact she was telling Naomi not to prevent her because it is her own decision. On a positive side, it implies that Ruth has determined not to leave her mother-in-law in both good and bad times. The words imply that she is getting worried with Naomi's stubborn resistance to cause them to return to Moab.

The “for” clause in 1:16 provides Ruth’s reasons for disobeying Naomi: She intends to go with Naomi and remain with her people even after death has separated the relationship. Whereas the travelling and lodging mentioned or dying and being buried can all be said to have yet to happen, it is entirely possible to infer from the story that Ruth had already identified herself with Naomi’s family, tribe and people when she married Naomi’s son (Holmstedt, 2010). In fact, these references strengthen her argument against Naomi’s objection. If they were all future projections, Naomi could continue to argue with Ruth, but if most of the issues that Ruth raised reiterate the fact that she has already had an experience with Naomi and her people some years ago by marriage, Naomi then has a weak case to ask her to return.

Her determination and her convincing plea to Naomi not to press her, raise questions whether that impressed Naomi to be silent. Naomi had expressed all the dangers Ruth is to face in Bethlehem (1:8-14), Ruth is still determine to follow her. As a result Naomi was possibly dumbfounded. Her silence in this context seems to mean more of consent and also surprise of the strong loyalty that Ruth has intended to show her.

The speech which may also be described as her (Ruth’s) “conversion”, emphasizes that she loves Naomi’s values and faith, and desires to emulate her mother-in-laws’ devotion to her God and make her (Naomi’s) kinsfolk her (Ruth’s) family. Ruth’s devotion is therefore grounded in a sense of the holy and transcendent which augment their bond. As she emphatically made reference to Yahweh (the divine name of the God of the Israelites) and not any Elohim (a generic term for any god or gods

including Moabite gods), Ruth shows how serious she has taken her pledge. She would either be loyal to Naomi or the deity (Yahweh) she has chosen as her god kills her. Such motivation therefore drives the plot of the story from this time onwards. Ruth is now choosing a new god and nation/people and rejecting her own just because of her genuine love for her mother-in-law.

The pledge therefore suggests the fact that Ruth is here trying to establish or strengthen her personal tie with Naomi. After the pledge has been said, Ruth's bond with Naomi is meant to be closer from this time onwards than what they have already shared in Moab as former in-laws. She also implies that she would relate very closely and lodge with Naomi as a loyal relative who desires to be very close to an aged woman as they go to Bethlehem. Ruth choice of subordination to leave everything to be with Naomi is therefore voluntarily and it is grounded on bringing them together. What is very important is that their relationship supported by *chesed* which is emphasized in 1:8 continues from here as the story develops to its end.

Upon returning to Bethlehem, Ruth and Naomi each demonstrates their devotion to God and their commitment to each other when they are most needed. As noted earlier, Naomi uses prayer and praise, while Ruth is a woman of action. They work as a team, combining Naomi's wisdom with Ruth's energy. The younger woman heads to the fields to collect the fallen grain of the harvest. There, she is introduced to Boaz, a distant relation, who insists that she be treated with hospitality and respect, another act of *chesed*.

Boaz was the first person in Bethlehem to laud Ruth for her loyalty to Naomi in their first encounter. His speech of praise on the field honours and re-echoes Ruth's extraordinary commitment to her mother-in-law:

All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and native land and come to a people that you did not know before. (2: 11 NRSV)

The words spoken by Boaz are in reference to Ruth's last deed shown to Naomi before leaving Moab. If we are to be taken aback, what role or specific thing has Ruth done for Naomi since the death of her husband? The narrator allows Boaz himself to tell readers these. Boaz alludes to Ruth's loyalty shown in leaving her parents, people and choosing to stay with a totally different people.

At first, Naomi's family was a small Jewish settlement in Moab but now Ruth has come to face the full community who stand as total aliens to her in a totally new environment but she is willing and daring to cope. Many interpreters looking at Ruth's migration compare the gravity of her loyalty to Naomi with that of Abraham to God by going ahead to show how Ruth's outmatch the patriarch (Ostriker, 1999 & Tribble, 1978). Tribble for instance, suggests that for Abraham, divine promise motivated and sustained his leap of faith. While Abraham is a man with a wife and other possessions to accompany him, Ruth on her part stands alone when she decides to follow her mother-in-law to Bethlehem (1978).

Upon returning home to Naomi at the end of a full day gathering of barley, Ruth surprises her mother-in-law with her provision. The fact that she came home with bounty gleanings also expresses something important

about her deep concern for Naomi. At this point, the temptation of assigning her bulky gleaning to Boaz's magnanimous privileges on the field (cf. 2: 15-16) is high. However, Ruth's effort was part. The narrator carefully gave readers details to Ruth's hard work on the field as if to tell us that she was more industrious than her fellow female gleaners:

So she came and has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without even resting for a moment.... So she gleaned in the field until evening.... (2:7, 17 NRSV)

Ruth knew that if she does not work hard her gleaning cannot be adequate to feed herself and Naomi. Hence, on her own she worked as hard as she could to the point that even the foreman seems to be surprised if not alarmed about her hard labour (2:7). This diligence is an indication that she is willing to help Naomi at all cost.

Immediately she brought her gleaning home, the next act of kindness she showed is feeding Naomi with her leftover from Boaz's table (2:18). This is an important clue pointing to the fact that there has been absolutely no food for poor Naomi, possibly, for the whole day. Naomi responded to this kindness by thanking God, noting that divine *chesed* has brought them good fortune: "Blessed is this man (Boaz) before Yahweh, who has not stopped showing *chesed* to the living and the dead" (2:20 NRSV).

Here, Naomi recalls how Yahweh has used Ruth and Boaz, to show her kindness following the deaths of her husband and sons, and marvels that divine providence does not flag or cease. In essence, she is blessed that the relationships with those she has lost continued in those she has gained (Ruth and Boaz).

In response, Naomi shows her concern for her daughter by probing further how Ruth came by all her gleanings. Such conversations in human relationship, after a laborious work is a good way of relaxing and relief from stress and that is what Naomi was very good at offering Ruth to make their home lively (2:19-22). She is always ready to know every bit of progress in Ruth's gleaning to ensure that she works at a safer and comfortable place.

Naomi's reference to Boaz that "he is one of our relatives" (2:20 NRSV) also expresses her realization of another sense of hope. She has seen that she now has a male relative from her late husband's family. Ruth has mentioned his name but did not know his relationship with Naomi. Immediately Naomi heard this name, she told Ruth, Boaz is their kin. On a more interesting note, just as it was Ruth whose initiative helped Boaz to begin to think of assisting them economically so was it Ruth who has enable Naomi to remember Boaz as an existing family member of her late husband, Elimelech. Through Ruth's mediation Naomi receives favours from Boaz and also gets the joy of an old male relative remembering them (in this case Naomi and her late family).

Reading between the lines, readers observe that the story teller has given the praise that Boaz deserves for assisting the family to Ruth. If Boaz has lifted Naomi from her abject poverty by providing her food, this discovery has materialized because of Ruth. Tribble for instance, rhetorically asks why Boaz seems to have heard about Naomi's return but never visited her own relative until Ruth comes to his field (1987). This attitude of Boaz would later make readers understand why the end of the gleaning would likely put the two widows (Ruth and Naomi) in danger of hunger if they

refuse to take any proactive measures to help themselves. As the story develops to the end of the gleaning, Naomi can envisage the unfolding of the tale, as she realizes that Boaz, a distant relative might marry Ruth. As if the narrator is tracking Ruth's pledge of loyalty in 1:16, before chapter two ends he/she stressed the fact that Ruth has so far kept her pledge of saying "where you lodge, I will lodge" to the core: "... and she lived with her mother-in-law" (2:23 NRSV).

This small note is very important since it makes us realize that at the end of chapter 2, Ruth has so far kept to her pledge of *chesed* to lodge with her mother-in-law (1:16). She has fulfilled her pledge to stay at where Naomi is.

Another way Ruth proved loyal was in accepting Naomi's advice to marry Boaz. As Ruth's marriage has forever been Naomi's focus, she begins making efforts to bring it to fruition as the chapter three begins. Referring to Naomi's desire to have Ruth marry in Moab, she expressed two concerns. One is her desire for Ruth's happiness in her mother's house and the other is security in the house of her husband. At that instance when these proposals were made, Ruth refused both offers because her immediate concern was to see to it that she comes to Bethlehem with Naomi no matter the challenges that await them and to settle with her. Ruth's previous response on Naomi's marriage proposal and wish for her stay in her biological mother's house in a way can be explained as her refusal of Naomi's view that the only security she could envisage for her (Ruth) can be found in her own mother's house in Moab, as well as, in marrying a Moabite man (see also Pressler, 2002).

When they came to Bethlehem, Naomi on her part has never abrogated her positive wish for Ruth to go to her mother's house and desire for her to get a good marriage. By the close of chapter two, it becomes clear that Naomi has fulfilled her first wish for Ruth herself. Ruth is now a happy woman staying in the same house with Naomi whom she has allowed to function as her biological mother. After the first ambition has been achieved, Naomi visits the second option with a plan to get Boaz and Ruth marry. In so doing, she made this suggestion to Ruth in a very affectionate language:

My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you"... Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he finishes eating and drinking. (3:1-3 NRSV)

In making reference to Naomi's previous suggestion on marriage as a way to compare her consistency in that quest, her rationale giving was to seek security for Ruth in the house of her (Ruth's) husband (1:9). At the beginning of chapter three when Naomi re-visited this quest, her rationale was the same: "I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you" (3:1).

The context in which Naomi gives this advice supports her intention. At the end of chapter two, readers were clearly told by the narrator that the barley harvest was over which in fact was a bad news for both Naomi and Ruth. This is because it means Ruth can no more go to Boaz's field to glean. And since Boaz has only been helping them when Ruth goes to his field, it implies his help remains uncertain. Ruth would not also have any reason to go to the field since the gleaning was over. The end of gleaning in Boaz's

field or elsewhere puts Naomi and Ruth in danger similar to the famine that forced Elimelech to migrate to Moab (1:1-4). While Boaz provides generously for the widows beyond the legal requirements, by the end of the harvest season the predicament of Ruth and Naomi is essentially going to be the same as he intervened (Lau, 2011).

Concomitantly, the end of the harvest and the hunger awaiting these two women as well as the absence of any certain alternative for survival put the security and welfare of Ruth, especially, in danger. This is because Ruth's domestic burden will be heavier since she is the breadwinner of the family. If she can even get any other job in future it implies he has to still toil outdoors and face possible molestation from men as Naomi and Boaz insinuated in chapter two (2:9, 22). Boaz, the man Naomi proposed for Ruth to marry has proven himself in chapter two of being capable or worthy of providing this security and welfare that Naomi wants for her daughter-in-law. This is shown in his extreme care and protection shown to Ruth on their encounters at the field. Naomi is therefore pushed to come-up with a hasty plan for Ruth to propose marriage to Boaz (3:2-9).

This hasty plan becomes necessary if one looks at Boaz's lackadaisical attitude or disinterest in marrying Ruth or his failure to even come forward to propose to her. It is clear from Boaz's actions that unlike majority of biblical men, he is not an initiator of action. While the historical context demands that Boaz becomes the financial support for these two widows, the narrator feels no need to disguise the behind-the-scene manipulation of events by both Ruth and Naomi. He seems to be the closest man to Ruth at the gleaning period and has already started welcoming Ruth

gradually into Elimelech's family. He was the second person after Naomi to accept Ruth in the language of kinship by calling her my daughter (2:8) which also indicates his fondness of Ruth.

When Ruth receives favours from Boaz the first time, Naomi thanked God for remembering her dead children and herself (cf. 2:20). The words used here in thanking God for Boaz's favours (2:20) are the very words Naomi used to thank Ruth when remembering their wonderful stay in Moab (1: 8). The essence of this repetition or the connection between them is to indicate that Ruth and Boaz are good people God has used to bless Naomi. If they eventually marry or if Boaz accepts the marriage proposal, Naomi knew her own husband's distant relative would also not leave her out.

On a more significant note, marriage with Boaz in a way will remove extra burden on Ruth for always desiring to go where Naomi goes and making Naomi's people her people (1:16) and also for taking upon herself to be Naomi's provider. If Boaz would only accept Ruth by showing interest in their desperate plan then surely it would be well with both Ruth and Naomi. Their relationship would promise a lifelong support and security for both of them. In reality, Ruth would not struggle to convince Boaz to include Naomi in their new family since Boaz has already started doing so. The success of the plan, would also mean Ruth's pledge of loyalty (1:16) would still not be broken. In this sense, Naomi's proposal is not an imposition on Ruth as one may be tempted to suggest since Ruth's statement in 1:16-17 favours this decision and since it is a voluntary advice from Naomi. Naomi saw the difficulty in asking Ruth to propose marriage

to Boaz and so she psychologically prepares Ruth for that mission: “Is not Boaz our kinsman?” (3:2).

Unlike in chapter one where Ruth refused to obey Naomi’s advice on marriage, here she agreed. This is because the objective of the mission agrees with her purpose to be with Naomi. She was now sent to the threshing floor to meet Boaz, “her kinsman”, who now knows her identity and has called her my daughter. On the threshing floor encounter, Ruth as intelligent as she was realized the difficulty of her mission and has to also psyche Boaz that her intent was for nothing but marriage. Thus she said: “I am Ruth your maid servant spread your garment over me, for you are the next of kin” (3:9 NRSV).

That is to tell Boaz that once he thinks she is the next of kin he can spread his garment over her. In this case, she was actually telling Boaz that she is doing this because he is the next of kin. In other words, Ruth came to the threshing floor purposely for family business that would secure a brighter future for both herself and Naomi. In referring to Boaz as kin, Ruth was particularly repeating what her mother-in-law has told her about the man’s relationship with them (cf. 3:2) based on which she has the right to propose marriage and to share bed with him if possible.

Boaz was not startled about Ruth’s proposal after listening to her. He expressed extreme happiness for Ruth’s decision to marry from the family of Naomi’s late husband. In connecting Boaz earlier words of appreciation of Ruth’s previous sacrifices to Naomi, readers observe that he has been following Ruth’s records or activities ever since she arrived in Bethlehem

(2:11). Just as in his first meeting with Ruth, he appreciated her sacrifice of forsaking everything to be with her mother-in-law; in this second instance too, Boaz sees her choice as pointing to nobody but Naomi. This is because, for him, Ruth has alternatives of choosing young rich men outside Naomi's family (3:10). But such a choice will not keep both of them (Naomi and Ruth) close together because Ruth would now get a new mother-in-law and husband who would not be related to Naomi. However, Ruth's decision made in Boaz's favour would still keep both of them very close together as Boaz is not an outsider but "their kin".

If Ruth has married another man who is not Naomi's kin, the man may not necessarily see any reason why he should offer any assistance to Naomi. Boaz asked Ruth to cheer up and protected her from outsiders making news of her nocturnal visit at the threshing floor (3:13). This is because he was impressed by Ruth's act of loyalty (3:11). He fully understood Ruth and Naomi's plan to be marriage proposal and promised to see to it that Ruth gets properly married into Naomi's family even if he would not marry her (3:13).

The wisdom in both women craving for Boaz becomes obvious looking at the external benefits that Naomi has obtained during the gleaning period on Boaz's field. Before the end of chapter three, the narrator prompts readers on how beneficial Ruth's possible future marriage with Boaz in particular would be for Naomi. First he quotes Boaz as saying to Ruth: "Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out" (3:15).

And he further gives readers details of Boaz's munificent gift given to Naomi at the end of this meetings: "So she held it, and measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her back; then he went into the city" (3:15).

Finally, the narrator informs readers what Boaz might have whispered in Ruth's ears as he gives her grain to be sent to Naomi. This is told as follows: "He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, 'Do not go to your mother-in-law empty handed'" (3:17).

The irony of this scene is that Ruth was the one who went to the threshing floor to propose marriage but she did not receive any gift. Naomi advised Ruth to choose Boaz and instead gets a gift from Boaz as if Boaz was congratulating Naomi for helping him to be close to almost getting a good woman as wife.

Naomi's last concern shown in chapter three to Ruth was seen in her interest to know how successful Ruth's mission to Boaz sleeping hideout went. After receiving Boaz's gift and hearing how he treated Ruth kindly at the threshing floor, Naomi now advised Ruth to patiently wait because she trust Boaz as competent to solve their desire for a good husband and for that matter Boaz would remain restless until all is over.

Consequently, Boaz becomes a willing partner to the two women in carrying out the scheme they have devised. The bonds of human compassion and loyalty, *chesed*, outweigh any of his other possible concerns. Indeed, Boaz seems to have no objection to Ruth and works

quickly and deliberately to fulfil his destiny to marry this pious stranger. He too cites the acts of loyalty that he has heard about Ruth:

May you be blessed by the Lord my daughter; you have made this last *chesed* greater than the first (3:10 NRSV)

Since she has reached out to him so honourably, he honours her by accepting her proposal. Once again the story teaches us the power of relationships and their godly quality.

At the threshing floor, Boaz also praises Ruth, calling her an *eshet chayil* (3:11). This phrase is best known from the book of Proverbs 31:10-31, in a lengthy poem that portrays the ideal woman. The mention of an *eshet chayil* calls forth an image of a hardworking generous and devoted wife and mother. But the Hebrew word *chayil*, which appears in the book of Ruth three times (2:1; 3:11; 4:11) connotes more than the traditional depiction of a “woman of valour”. Alternate translations include, “a fine woman”, “a woman of substance”, or “a virtuous woman” (Walker, 2009 & Ostriker, 2002).

Modern Hebrew uses the term *chayil* to mean a soldier (Hoffman, 2009). The Hebrew root “*ch-y-l*” encompasses strength, energy, wealth and courage. Not surprisingly, the text also refers to Boaz in 2:1 as *Ish gibor chayil*, translated as a man of wealth as well as might. Ruth and Boaz fit well as a man and woman of wealth as well as might. Thus, by the use of *Chayil* for both of them it means Ruth and Boaz are well suited for each other. Ruth’s strength, both physical and emotional, and her perseverance and integrity can all fall under the description of *chayil*, a word denoting heroism. Boaz praises Ruth for all these noble qualities. Similarly, at the

story's conclusion, the leaders of the town use this same term to celebrate the union of Boaz and Ruth:

All the people who were at the gate, and the Elders, said, "We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman, who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah who together built up the house of Israel! May you prosper (*chayil*) in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem. (4:11-12 NRSV)

Ruth and Naomi's relationship was climaxed with the marriage between Boaz and Ruth at the city gate (4:1-12). Boaz was the choice of these two poor widows and fulfilment of their plan helps them escape marrying any other man who would not be willing to support them economically. The successfulness of the plan hatched by Ruth, Naomi and later Boaz (who dissuaded the next-of-kin to marry Ruth (4:1-6)), helped Naomi and Ruth to carry their relationship forward with all its quality and beauty as it began.

As indicated earlier, on their way from Moab, Naomi told Ruth that she should go back first to their mothers' house (1:8) and then later find security in their husbands' house (1:9). Even though Ruth disobeyed this advice due to her desire to stay attached to Naomi, both have been fulfilled in Bethlehem. The fulfilment of these would make Naomi the happiest woman due to the joy that her daughter-in-law has also gotten.

Ruth on her part has promised to stay with Naomi even beyond death. She has achieved this aim to some extent ever since they returned to Bethlehem. However, after marrying Boaz the narrator gave us a clue that she moved to stay with her husband (4:13). Obviously this man would take care of Naomi since he is not only her kinsman but was in charge of her

land (4:3, 9). But what about the fulfilment of Ruth's promise (1:16-17) to lodge where Naomi lodges, now that she stays with her husband and Naomi stays at a different place. Immediately, the narrator reports to us the good news that is the birth of Obed. This is a reminder of Ruth's inability to give birth after ten years of marriage to Mahlon (1:4) and also Naomi's bitter complaint of not being able to give birth again due to her advanced age (1:11-12).

After this marriage, Naomi cannot be spoken of as mother-in-law of Ruth. This is because Boaz also has a mother who would become Ruth's new mother-in-law. Which means that though they all belonged to the family of Elimelech nothing can bring them together as former in-laws since this connection has been broken and weakened totally. Despite this barrier, Ruth still remains closer to Naomi, her former mother-in-law. Surprisingly, while Boaz's own mother was not even mentioned in the story for us to know Ruth's relationship with her, the narrator reports how Ruth gives her first son to Naomi for Naomi to become her nursing mother (4:16). By this act, Ruth's relationship with Naomi is further strengthened and Naomi seems to have regained a full protection through this last gift from Ruth. From this time onwards, Naomi's fullness has begun because he has started creating new close relatives via Ruth. This shows how Ruth's loyalty to Naomi as she promised earlier on their way to Bethlehem has been fully fulfilled to the core. It is obvious henceforth to suggest that Ruth's pledge to Naomi (1:16-17) and her loyalty to each other has come to its peak. The village women, who were the first people to welcome them into Bethlehem

(1: 19), now hail Naomi by espousing the benefits of this last act of Ruth's *chesed*:

Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and May his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him. (4:13-15 NRSV)

The emphasis on the restoration that Obed will bring to Naomi over all that she has lost was because Ruth is the mother of Obed. The persistent loyal act of Ruth was assessed by the women as greater than what seven sons could offer. When Naomi was first called by the women of Bethlehem by her name, she rejected it and opted for *Marah* (bitterness), the opposite of the name Naomi (pleasantness). Now being called by the same name (4:17), she did not comment and seems to have accepted her name again.

Through Ruth's effort, Naomi has moved from emptiness to fullness, bitterness to pleasantness once more and the end of the story celebrates Ruth's extraordinary *chesed*. Now Ruth lives with her husband in a different house but with Obed in the house of Naomi, Ruth would forever visit Obed and Naomi until death will part them. Whenever Naomi needs Ruth, Obed, Ruth's strong boy, is there to represent her absence. Interestingly, Ruth's marriage with Boaz has now permanently bound her to the soil of Bethlehem as long as Boaz stays there. She would possibly die there and be buried later in that same land where aged Naomi might first be buried (if they die according to their age) as she foretold (1:17a). At the end of the story, Ruth has proven every bit of her pledge of undying loyalty and Naomi's advisory role has also ended after she finally told Ruth to marry.

Conclusion

Chesed is a value that matches human experience allowing us to participate in weaving a web of human life no matter what our social or economic position. The loving relationship between Ruth and Naomi, succeeding as partners in a world dominated by men, teaches that God works through human interactions. There are some scholars who have documented or argued how Ruth and Naomi's love resonates powerfully with lesbians in search of role models (West, 1997 & Duncan, 2000). Whether we view Ruth and Naomi as loving companions or devoted kin, they can teach us that those who appear marginal, even invisible, make valuable contributions to community. They serve as models of compassion and co-operation, as well as strength and integrity. They also teach us the power of female bonding- that indeed sisterhood is powerful!

On the whole, the depth of character portrayed in this book provides the reader with an astonishing vision. It promotes qualities of partnership and peaceful co-existence between wealthy and the poor, between strong and weak and between "insiders" and "outsiders". The book of Ruth presents a model of co-operation, even while predicting the ultimate monarch, king David, with the hope that he will inherit some of the *chesed* so ever present in his great-great-grandmother Naomi and his great-grandmother Ruth in his friendship in future with Jonathan. In the next chapter I would look at some general lessons that one can deduce from this story for contemporary readers.

CHAPTER FOUR

LESSONS FROM RUTH AND NAOMI'S RELATIONSHIP FOR CONTEMPORARY READERS

Introduction

The story of Ruth and Naomi since it is about human relationship has much to share with our experiences in everyday life. The few problems and issues that are overt in the story among others are childlessness, the beauty of a mother and daughter-in-law relationship, societal role of supporting the underprivileged, relationship with people in one's community, the benefits or strength in unity as offering effective support and healing to the weary as well as apportioning of natural havoc to God and not vulnerable relatives. As the author weaves these beautiful issues together he makes readers see issues that pertain to their day to day life as they read the story of Ruth and Naomi's relationship and its happy ending.

i. **Childbearing is a Gift from God**

Childlessness is one big problem that is seen as the story of Ruth begins. Both Orpah and Ruth are married for at least a decade without a child and yet their mother-in-law did not use that against them. There are many cultures that place much emphasis on children as very important in marriage (Jensen & McKee 2003 & Rosenthal, 2012). Childbirth has been identified

as one obvious means that many see marriage to be strengthened (Mbaku, 2005 & Kuefler, 2001). In such cultures, inability of a daughter-in-law to give birth can create a big tension between her and her mother-in-law. If care is not taken the mother-in-law may press charges of barrenness against the childless woman.

The problem of childlessness is often blamed on the women and not the men (Covington & Burns, 2006). Such accusations may have no medical proof to support it. In some African countries for example, there are instances where childlessness may force an inconsiderate mother-in-law to insist that her son should consider marrying a second wife so as to give her grandchildren. There are other times that it may even lead to a divorce of the barren wife (Weigl, 2010 & Covington & Burns, 2006). The husbands are usually pressurized to take the advice of their mothers if the problem endures for a long time. In the story of Ruth a similar problem was seen but was not blamed on the daughter-in-law despite the fact that this problem might have persisted for a decade (1:4). In all these years, the mother-in-law did not change her attitude towards her daughters-in-law not even when her sons died without a child. The families of Naomi's children were still presented as a peaceful one even without children. At the end of the narrative the lesson we deduce is that child bearing is a gift from God (4:13). It was not surprising that such a caring attitude exhibited by Naomi elicited pure love from her childless daughters-in-law.

ii. Supports inter-ethnic marriage on grounds of love between partners

One important issue that comes up in the story of Ruth and Naomi's relationship was inter-ethnic marriages. From the historical perspective, as some scholars have stressed, Jews were not permitted to marry Moabites (Duncan, 2001 & Donaldson, 2007). Moabites were also exempted from mingling with the Jewish assembly (cf. Deut. 23:3). However, Naomi and the Jewish community in Bethlehem had no problem admitting marriage between a proselyte Moabite woman like Ruth and a Jewish man like Boaz. At the end of the story Ruth was even celebrated by the women folk as being more than seven sons to Naomi. Her marriage with Boaz was given full acceptance when Obed was presented as David's great-great-grandfather. This in a way was to show full acceptance of their marriage since David was Israel's most respected king. Ruth's marriage with Boaz was accorded further respect by invoking the blessings of Israel's matriarchs that begot their twelve tribes on her (4:11-12). This blessing is also welcoming news to Judeo-Christian intermarriages as acceptable by God.

Similarly, the issue of inter-ethnic marriage has a lot for countries like Ghana and others as well. For a marriage to be contracted, sometimes the historical records of the would-be-couple are seriously considered before their marriage would be allowed. The would-be-couple may usually come from either the same tribe or from different tribes. Both families would have to investigate whether there has been any historical conflict between the supposed partner's families (Weber, 1812). Other things that they look out for are whether they do not have any record of barrenness or

chronic/communicable diseases before (Yussif, 2013, Mensah, 2013 & Tanye, 2010). These factors if affirmed can be serious grounds for preventing a relationship or marriage. As some scholars, especially, think that the book of Ruth was written against Ezra-Nehemiah's injunction that the Israelites were not to marry the gentiles in the post-Exilic period (Rao, 2010 & Swidler, 1979), it becomes a promising material for supporting inter-ethnic marriages. In the book of Ruth, all that was important was the couple's readiness to be joined together based on qualities that each partner desires from the other. If Naomi as a Jewish woman could endorse the marriage of her sons to Moabites then her effort is an important motivation for families not to avoid marriage between two people based on past conflicts that are not extant and problems which are not persisting in our contemporary times.

iii. Loving-kindness among in-laws as antidote to the occasional friction between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law

Most mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law relationships are not harmonious in most cultures (Cotterill, 2005 & Merrill, 2007). The book's portrayal of Naomi and Ruth's relationship under positive light serves as a big lesson. Here the major factor that worked out the miracle for such wonderful relationship was loving-kindness (*chesed*) between in-laws. Naomi is a caring mother-in-law who never overlooked the kindness of her daughters-in-law. She has observed their love towards her sons and herself and thus when the opportunity comes, she quickly appreciated her daughters-in-law with kind words and a blessing (1:8). She is not selfish to take her daughters-in-law to Bethlehem knowing that she can never give

birth again for her children to marry them. Whatever suggestions she perceived as good for her daughters-in-law, she did not hesitate to point it out to them for them to reflect on. For instance, she told them after the bereavement that they should go to their mothers' house and find security in the house of their husbands. Such unselfish words and attitude might have been a pulling factor to attract her daughters-in-law to herself. As a result when she was leaving Moab to Bethlehem both daughters-in-law would not allow her to take the possible risk of allowing her to go all the way to Bethlehem by herself.

From various literatures on mothers-and-daughters-in-law relationship what mostly ruin or breed antagonism between the two are unkind attitudes and bitter words expressed to each other (Merrill, 2007 & Angelich, 2009). Such negative attitudes and words are absent in the story of Ruth but rather caring words and attitudes abounds in the communications of Naomi and her daughters-in-law. These virtues become a model for contemporary relationships.

iv. Conversion to any religion should be voluntary and not compulsory

In our contemporary world where religious persecution is rampant in certain countries, conversion to a religion on one's own volition is one principle that the story of Ruth and Naomi teaches. History tells us that while Muslims used Jihads to force people to accept the Muslim faith (Khan, 2009 & Yakos, 2006), Christianity also used crusades (Jean, 1999 &

Kedar, 2014). People from certain religion different from one's own are branded infidels by some religions and are treated with contempt.

Another form that religious persecution takes is preventing and punishing people for practicing apostasy. Such people are sometimes totally ignored by their family members. If the offenders are rounded up at the national level in the case of religious countries (Arab and other Muslim countries), they would be tried and prosecuted. In the story of Ruth and Naomi, one observes that Ruth might have been worshipping her native gods even when she was married to Mahlon in Moab. This is possible if we deduce from her statement that Naomi's god will be her god at the time that Naomi was leaving Moab (1:16). If that is not the case what was Ruth's point in saying to Naomi when the latter was leaving that her god will be her god (1:16) and Naomi also saying to Ruth that Orpah has returned to her gods and Ruth should do the same (1:15).

Before this declaration, Mahlon and his family lived amicably with Ruth despite her foreign religion and so are the Moabite community with Naomi's family. The major lesson from this scenario is that no religion should make conversion compulsory for its converts. Members of a particular faith should be allowed to move out of their faith if they so wish without being persecuted. A current case in the international media on religious persecution is that of Mariam Ibrahim Yehya of Sudan who was imprisoned on the 7th February, 2014 and almost hanged for converting from Islam and marrying an American Christian.

v. Yahweh is the architect of fortunes and misfortunes

Again, Naomi and Ruth's relationship teaches us the appropriate way of handling misfortunes. Naomi apportioning of her misfortune to Yahweh (1:13) is an important lesson for people of Judeo-Christian faith who like blaming their afflictions on those they suspect to be demons or practice witchcraft. There are some instances in the media and other records where people are burnt, abandoned and severely chastised for a supposed conviction by their family members, society or some men/women of God that they are possessed with evil spirit (Carter, 2013 & Jones, 2011). Crimes against such victims are usually against their fundamental human rights. These are highly spiritual accusations and the perpetrators can be accosted if exposed since it is a criminal offense. In spite of the law protecting such victims who are usually the fragile or the weak in the society such as women, children and old people such crimes keep augmenting.

In some prayer camps such victims are chained and denied food for days under the guise of putting them on fasting for exorcism. The loss of Naomi's husband and two sons look weird since it came in a quick succession and the inability of Naomi's daughters-in-law to give birth for ten years would have been equally blamed on someone if it were to be a story in Ghana. There are similar stories where without any medical prove, bareness have been attributed to people who are accused as witches and wizards. Naomi's speech that God has dealt with her bitterly is a realization that in terms of such natural occurrences no person can mastermind it than the giver of life and natural things. This is further confirmed by the narrator when he/she says: "And Boaz went into her (Ruth) and the Lord gave her

conception” (4:13). Ghanaians are to think in a similar fashion of most of the antagonisms and neglect of especially the aged as the perpetrators of barrenness and untimely death. It is therefore important for Judo-Christians facing similar challenges to consider that their natural predicaments such as cited above are from the Lord or the one they believe in.

vi. In a relative’s choice of work, a caring family advisor must prioritized peaceful working environment over remuneration

Naomi’s advice to Ruth to keep working in Boaz’s field because elsewhere she will be molested also has undertones of jobs with peaceful working environment as the best to be considered over remuneration. According to Hendel (2008), we traditionally measure competing jobs by salary, so that the job with higher salary is better or most preferred. In Hendel’s opinion, a good job not only requires a good salary but a good working environment. There are many people who are engaged in disreputable jobs like prostitution, armed robbery and contract killing. There are other jobs which are not illicit but rather hazardous to health. Sometimes some of the bad contracts or jobs that such people do are known to their loved one’s or partners or close relations but because of the ‘quick money’ attached to it both the person involved and some people they relate in one way or the other seem not to be so much bothered about the consequences.

When Naomi learns that Ruth is gleaning in Boaz’s field she says: “It is well my daughter, that you go out with his maidens, lest in another field you would be molested (Ruth 1:22). The emphatic phrase suggests that Naomi prefers a decent and peaceful job to remuneration. By this Naomi

negates the importance of possibly finding more gleanings in some field with an inferior working environment. Jobs with hazardous conditions or poor reputation attached to them must not be the best option for one to choose and society must discourage that. In this regard, we glean from Naomi and Ruth's story that favourable work conditions which offer security and promise a better life should be considered if one wants to endorse a place of work for his/her loved one.

vii. Kindness to one's neighbour

Another importance that Hendel (2008) suggests is what he termed as neighbourly gestures and social kindness. Naomi has a deep and lasting friendship with the women of Bethlehem. They come out to welcome her when she returns (1:19-20). They are a concern group who care for her welfare. They rejoiced at the good fortune when Obed was born (4:14-17). Hendel (2008) thinks that the most dramatic act of *chesed* (kindness) is what he calls Ruth's social loyalty to her mother-in-law (1:14-18, 2:11). Ruth voluntarily gives up her people and past in order to remain with her widowed mother-in-law, accepting a future with a people that she really does not yet understand. He stressed that the degree of this kindness is not the amount of sacrifice and self-abnegation needed for the act but rather the amount of good resulting from the act or how much good is being effected.

viii. Seduction is not a good thing to use to lure people to procure a job and privileged men are not to sexually exploit under privileged women

The story also gives subtle caution of indecency. It is clear from the text that Ruth was advised to go to the threshing floor to propose marriage to Boaz but the author gave enough evidence to suggest that the approach was not appropriate. Ruth herself left the threshing floor before anybody could recognize her and Boaz was said to have advised his servants that Ruth's presence at the threshing floor should be kept secret (3:14). On these events, Carolyn Pressler advised that "we would not want to teach our daughters or nieces that their best road to success is to dress up seductively and go to the threshing floor (bars) to catch themselves wealthy men" (2002, p. 286).

On this same note, the story of Ruth offers subtle caution to employers not to attach sexual strings to jobs they offer to their female workers. At the threshing floor, Boaz did not take advantage of Ruth's unexpected presence at his sleeping hideout to rape her (3:4-8) which he could have easily done. Instead, he comports himself as a man of honour and did not take advantage of Ruth's condition of abject poverty that brought her to his field. We see here a male generosity to the opposite sex that do not look for sexual favours. It is common to hear from the media and from the society how rich men and employers, especially, sexually abuse young women in exchange for offering them job, financial and material assistance.

ix. Care passionately about the quality of another friend's life

Weems (1989) suggests that to care passionately about the quality of another friend's life is one lesson that the story of Ruth and Naomi's relationship teaches. Ruth's marriage to the prosperous land owner Boaz did not signal the end of her friendship to the woman she has clung to in poverty. Ruth remembered the promise she had made to the older woman when there was no one but she and Naomi in the wilderness. She also remembered the role Naomi had played in advising her during her courtship with Boaz. Consequently Ruth's blessing of a husband and child became Naomi's blessing of a family and a future. Each woman found in the other's loyalty and companionship the future they thought they had lost in Moab. Love and loyalty between many friends get misplaced as they get older. As people grow up they take their friends for granted, forgetting their histories together.

By the same token the story also highlights the care that society must offer to widows. Ruth and Naomi were two destitute widows who could barely provide a daily meal for themselves. In the face of this difficulty Boaz emerged as their true hero. He protected Ruth from harassment (2:9, 15) and provided sustenance for Naomi (3:15) and completed the redemption of Naomi's field (4:10). In many societies poor widows without children are the most vulnerable in terms of fending for themselves. The childless aged widows especially have difficult feeding themselves and procuring other basic needs. The story of Ruth and Naomi shows how those who are endowed with wealth should support widows.

x. Acknowledge and appreciate the good in everyone or people in one's religious fraternity and otherwise

Heijkoop (1985), also suggests that one thing that the relationship teaches is for people to acknowledge and appreciate the good in everyone or people in one's religious fraternity and otherwise. The good testimony that Naomi renders of Orpah and Ruth is recorded. Naomi gratefully acknowledged all that her daughters-in-law had been and had done for the living and the dead. She realized that her foreign daughters-in-law had behaved admirably as wives and as daughters-in-law, both in marriage and widowhood. He thus advised that it is good in the eyes of God to acknowledge and appreciate the good in anyone. In appropriating this lesson, we hear of many people who have negative perceptions about others from different tribes or religion other than their own. Such attitude if found with employers can lead to tendencies of nepotism and other forms of tribalism which can hinder productivity in the nation. In this way, it is common to hear people awarding contracts and jobs to only people from their own tribes and ignoring those who are from different tribes despite the fact that those denied might even be better qualified.

xi. Close relatives are to personally take care of their aged relatives or be closer to them, especially, when they are alone

Ruth's decision to move out of her own home to stay with her aged mother-in-law and to provide for her needs has also caught Madipoane Masenya's attention. She thus offers this as a lesson for close relatives to personally take care of their aged relatives or be closer to them, especially,

when they are alone. Masenya thus stood against the concept of retirement home in Europe, America and other places. More importantly, she noted that one reason why parents take care of the needs of their children in Africa or at least in Northern Sotho in South Africa is that they expect the children to take care of them in old age. That is to say if a parent fails to take care of their child, the child may opt to look after them in their old age.

She noted that the desire to personally look after aged parent accounts for the few retirement homes on the African continent. As she noted, most children in Sotho prefer to care for their aged parents themselves rather than taking them to such homes. In the story of Ruth, Ruth gleaned and brought her left over to the house to feed her aged mother-in-law who has taken her as her own daughter ever since they arrived in Bethlehem. Since, Ruth and Naomi are in-laws, Ruth's care for aged Naomi becomes even more spectacular and it could serve as a model for children to render effective care for their aged parents.

xii. An old culture can be maintained and its dysfunctional aspect that does not promote human welfare be transformed

The story also teaches how a culture can be maintained and its dysfunctional aspect that does not promote human welfare be transformed. By selecting Boaz and not the next-of-kin, Naomi prefers a good husband for her daughter-in-law to marrying an ill-mannered man all in the name of honouring an archaic custom. It is unseemingly for Naomi to easily forget the next-of-kin after leaving Moab for just about a decade. But she shrewdly boycotted the norm to scheme with Ruth to trap Boaz into their marriage

plan. The fact that the next-of-kin is selfish and would not be a good husband is very clear from his own actions and conduct at the city gate (4:3-6). This is a lesson that suggests to customs that practice levirate marriage to consider the mutual love, affection and concern that the woman and the man have for each other when honouring such marriage custom.

If a widow and her brother-in-law are united under levirate marital terms without any love for themselves the results would obviously be detrimental or the future would be bleak. We can say Ruth and Boaz equally love themselves if we look at how Ruth was so passionate in using her cerebral powers to control her connubial dialogue with Boaz at the threshing floor [compare Ruth's words to Boaz at the threshing floor (3:8-9) with what Naomi asked her to actually say (3:4)]. The way Ruth went about convincing Boaz at the threshing floor by always being the one to suggest and command what the man has to do for her speaks volumes of her passion for that affair.

Boaz on his part, love Ruth and deeply interrogated the next-of-kin with carefully chosen questions that dissuaded this other man from marrying Ruth (4:3-5). The unpleasant questioning enabled Boaz to have Ruth for himself (4:1-7). Here, their choice is not merely about honouring their custom but changing the spirit and the letter of that custom to get a favourable result for both parties involved.

xiii. Heterosexual marriage and motherhood as requisite for female fulfilment

Bollinger (1994) sees the story as promoting heterosexual marriage and motherhood as requisite for female fulfilment. In this way she stood against those who suggest the story to be supporting lesbian relationship. She explains that although the Ruth story offers a powerful model of female bonding, it still visualizes [heterosexual] marriage and motherhood as requisite for female fulfilment. That is why heterosexual relationship is given much attention in almost three parts of the stories chapter (1:1-5; 3; 4:5-13).

Conclusion

The book of Ruth presents the story of the relationship between Naomi and Ruth. As a story which presents human experiences about life through the actions and words of characters, it relates to most issues that we have in our physical world. In the lessons presented above the issues expressed are entirely about interpersonal relationship and what the story offers to improve upon it.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This chapter consists of a summary of the entire thesis and a presentation of the conclusion. The conclusion presents the findings from the research that answer the questions raised at the beginning of the research.

The study was to interpret what defines Ruth and Naomi's relationship as a *chesed* as another way that their relationship can be understood literary. Thus it was meant to meet certain objectives:

1. To indicate clearly that the sort of character traits that Ruth exhibited was supported by the Jewish concept of *chesed*.
2. To explain why Ruth still stood as a loyal friend to Naomi after the death of her husband and still subordinated herself to Naomi.
3. To give a literary prove that Naomi's plan to send Ruth to Boaz at the threshing floor was for marriage and for Ruth's welfare.
4. To show how Ruth's marriage with Boaz is in line with her pledge in 1:16.

5. To point out from my reading how Ruth fulfilled her pledge of commitment to Naomi in Ruth1:16-17 to the fullest from that time up to the birth of Obed.

6. To indicate how Naomi also showed her loyalty to Ruth in their relationship.

The thesis started with a chapter which generally introduced the study and placed it within readings or interpretations on Ruth by various scholars. Within this introductory chapter, the researcher looked at the background to the study and the statement of problem. In addition, the purpose of the study, objectives, research questions and significance of the study were discussed. These were followed by the organization of work, scope of work, methodology and literature review. The methodology that was deemed fitting for rendering another interpretation of Ruth and Naomi's relationship from a literary point of view was considered. Narrative criticism which interprets the story as a literary art allows characters and the narrator to explain the actions of characters and it proved to be the most appropriate method for this study. This choice called for a discussion on some interpretation given on the bond between Ruth and Naomi by various scholars to provide a justification for choosing Narrative criticism for this study.

Chapter two focused on selected works on Ruth and Naomi. It pointed out the various arguments that have been put forward on Ruth and Naomi's story by various scholars and offered a criticism on these works when necessary. In view of this, some of their interpretations were

challenged by the researcher while there were some interesting ideas espoused that give credence to some of the views acknowledged by the researcher.

Having pointed out the different ways the story has been read, the researcher proceeded to give a narrative interpretation of the partnership between Ruth and Naomi's as built on *chesed*. This was done in the chapter three. Here since narrative techniques help readers to interpret a story, the researcher relied on the techniques of characterization, point of view, repetitions and variations to give a narrative reading of the relationship pointing out how their actions best suited the concept of *chesed* and how the narrator has directly emphasized on *chesed* as explaining their bond.

The fourth chapter, identified lessons from their story for our contemporary world. The lessons were generally deduced from basic issues recounted in the story of Ruth and Naomi for all readers. However, most of the lessons are for Africans. The conclusions that were drawn for this thesis in chapter five directly relate with the objectives of this study or this interpretation.

Findings

The research sets out to answer nine questions. The following are what the research provided as literary answers from the book of Ruth to the questions that directed reading.

First, the research sets out to answer how *chesed* has been used throughout the Hebrew Bible and to limit the concept specifically to how it works in Ruth and Naomi's relationship. The work has indicated that the classical definition for *chesed* as pointed out by Clark (1993) and Sakenfeld

(1999) is loving kindness but in the book of Ruth it contextually means covenantal loyalty (see also Baer & Gordon, 1997). It has been explained that the word covenant does not mean it is a legal covenant where a loyalty shown to somebody would be statutory requirement but rather when the word covenant (*berit*) is employed by scholars to indicate such loyalty it shows the strong nature of these particular acts of loyalty shown in *chesed*. This kind of loyalty is close to and even goes beyond legal forms of loyalty that people in a covenant would show to each other. This explains why Ruth's decision to bind herself to Naomi after her statement of commitment is a key point which emphasize that the bond between Ruth and Naomi is a voluntary one and has no romantic underpinning.

The second research question was to answer ways in which Ruth shows her *chesed* to Naomi. The work explains that she does this through various acts of commitment that reflects her strong desire not to separate herself from her mother-in-law in both fair and bad times. The first effort she made is to decide to follow Naomi despite the fact that there was no perceived reward awaiting her in Bethlehem after her unprecedented words to voluntarily sacrifice all her formal relations to follow Naomi. In another effort, while she would not listen to Naomi's advice to marry from her Moabite folk (4:11) she chooses to marry a man from Naomi's kindred (3:1-8) to keep Naomi close to herself in the same family. Again, when her relationship as a daughter-in-law shifted to Boaz's mother, Ruth would still not distant herself from her former mother-in-law but gives her boy, Obed, to Naomi to still keep them close.

Another question that the research sets out to answer was to point out how Naomi shows *chesed* to Ruth. The research indicated that the kind of *chesed* that Naomi shows to Ruth was a non-mainstream one that ties in with Russell Hendel's definition of verbal *chesed*. Such *chesed* shows itself in how a superior person persistently speaks words of kindness to a subordinate. The narrator of the story of Ruth consistently shows Naomi as depicting this kind of *chesed* to Ruth through her advice and prayer. Naomi prayed for Ruth that may Yhwh recompense Ruth for the *chesed* she showed to her late family (Ruth 1:8). Naomi again unselfishly advised Ruth to stop jeopardizing her life by following her to Bethlehem (1:6-15). She also asked Ruth to stay close to Boaz' young men at the gleaning period to avoid possible molestation from another field (2:22). Finally, she advised or encouraged Ruth to marry a generous man who has treated her (Ruth) as a daughter (3:10) so that it would be well for her (Ruth) (3:1). In this way Naomi fulfilled her non-mainstream *chesed* as proposed by Russell Hendel's verbal *chesed*.

The fourth research question attempts to exonerate Ruth from those who read meaning into her effort to leave everything to follow another woman or her mother-in-law as indicating either sexual or familiar bond. Here, the research pointed out that Ruth's desire to follow Naomi was not as a result of her connection to Naomi as a daughter-in-law or as a lover. This is because there was no sexual affair between them nor was Ruth bound to Naomi by virtue of marriage to Naomi's son. In view of this, Ruth's commitment to Naomi was fully proved in the reading as a decision made by an independent woman not on such grounds. In *chesed*, people who show

themselves such strong loyalty are usually good friends (David and Jonathan in 1 Sam 20 and 2 Sam 9) or family members (Judges 8:35) (Sakenfeld, 1997) but the particular act of *chesed* itself is always shown by one party to the other voluntarily in a way that a good relationship cannot even enforce or call for.

The fifth question was to use Ruth's pledge in chapter 1:16-17 to justify Naomi's advice to Ruth to marry Boaz not as infringement on Ruth's right. The research indicated that Ruth's pledge which profess that wherever Naomi goes she will go and more importantly Naomi's people will be her people justified that marriage. Since Boaz is a relative of Naomi, Ruth's pledge that only death could part them makes it understandable why Naomi could come up with such advice to help Ruth not to estrange her in her choice of husband.

The sixth research question follows from the fifth. This was to find out how Ruth marriage strengthens her loyalty to Naomi. The reading shows that the marriage made them family members forever. This marriage again brings to mind what Ruth pledged to do for Naomi in Ruth 1:16-17.

In another related question to the one just discussed, the researcher was curious to know how Ruth's statement to die where Naomi would die means for her marriage to Boaz. The answer to this is not explicitly in the text but it is implicit. Marriage binds a woman to a man the rest of their lives. In the same way Ruth would remain and die in Bethlehem so far as the story did not indicate that she was divorced by Boaz.

Since it is the relationship between Ruth and Naomi that brought Boaz and Ruth together, the eight question is to get a literary connection to

prove that the narrator meant Boaz and Ruth to be together by exploring how *chayil* has been used for the two in the text. In the reading, the Hebrew term *chayil* was used for Ruth when she was called an *eshet chayil* (woman of wealth, strength or valour) and also for Boaz when he was referred to as an *Ish gibor chayil* (mighty man of valour, strength or wealth). In both characters we see this trait. While the strength of Ruth lies in her cerebral powers to always act proactively to solve her problems (such as taken the initiative to glean and to propose marriage to Boaz), the strength of Boaz is his wealth. Again, as Boaz shows his generous acts in speech and kind, Ruth also show generosity to Naomi and this also becomes the common strength of the two based on which the reading makes it clear that they suited each other.

The last question is quest to prove to scholars who have read the story as same sex marriage or as a relationship that patterns itself after what exists in patriarchal household that indeed the union is a *chesed* (strong loyalty). It has been shown in the reading that there was no Hebrew word or any practical scene where Ruth and Naomi related as lesbians do, and with the death of the men in the lives of Naomi and Ruth the idea of the bond between a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law in the patriarchal household is weakened since mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship is solely enforced by marriage to a man

Conclusion

The bond between Ruth and Naomi has been variously interpreted by scholars. Some as a lesbian relationship (Jennings, 2005 & Alpert, 1994) and others as a bisexual union (Duncan, 2000 & West, 1997). This work

sets out to describe how the relationship has been presented by the author in a new light by suggesting that what defines their relationship is a *chesed* which in English may be translated as covenantal loyalty i.e. a loving pact that arises as a result of loyalty (pact in this case should not be understood as legal agreement which may end when one defaults).

On the side of Ruth, one sees her greatest loyalty in her decision to follow her mother-in-law to Bethlehem especially when the mother-in-law has nothing to offer. One can see this in what she says,

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die—there will I be buried. May Yhwh do thus and so to me and more as well, if even death parts me from you! (1:16-17 NRSV)

Out of loyalty Ruth chose to be a proselyte Jew (1:17) and proved her reverence to Yhwh and not any Elohim to see to it that she fulfils every promise she made to Naomi. True to her promise Ruth lodged with Naomi when they went to Bethlehem (2:23) and fend for her throughout the gleaning period.

Ruth also showed her loyalty to Naomi by accepting a marriage with Boaz that will maintain both of them in the family of Elimelech. That is why she refused to marry in Moab (1:9) since marriage with a Moabite man would not be in accordance with her allegiance to stay close to Naomi. This argument is further supported by Boaz recognition that Ruth's marriage with him is the greatest act of loyalty that she has shown to Naomi since she chose to limit her choice of husband to favour Naomi in that consideration (3:10).

When Ruth got married to Boaz and left Naomi's home, she presented Obed, her first son to Naomi. This last act is another way that she showed her profound loyalty to Naomi in as much as it further strengthened their closeness. In this case, Obed presence in Naomi's house represents Ruth's personal presence since he will in future take over Ruth's duty to fend for Naomi.

Naomi on the other hand demonstrated her loyalty through her persistent advice and prayer to see to Ruth's welfare. Naomi prays for Ruth that Yhwh recompense her (Ruth's) *chesed* shown to her departed family (1:8). The underlying motive in that prayer is that Ruth is a good woman who deserves to be rewarded with blessings that commensurate to her kindness.

When she emphasized that Ruth returned to Moab, she wished that she finds security in the house of her husband (1:9). Again, when after the end of gleaning season in Bethlehem, Naomi revisited the plan to have Ruth marry, she (Naomi) wished that Ruth gets security and welfare in such marriage. In ensuring this, she guided Ruth to get a husband that would love both of them (3:13, 15).

Again, Naomi showed her loyalty to see to Ruth's welfare by advising that Ruth sticks to Boaz's field and continue working there to avoid possible molestation in a different field (2:22). Throughout the story, Ruth's welfare served as the heartbeat of every advice that Naomi rendered unto her (Ruth). Her acts of loyalty ties in with Russell Hendel's (2008) verbal *chesed* (a non-mainstream *chesed* which is about showing kindness

to someone by continuously speaking kind words to the fellow). It is therefore loyalty that explains how the two women related and nothing else.

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