

Orpah and her Interpreters: Evaluating the Justifications for the Traditional-Stereotyped Readings

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ABSTRACT

The traditional readings of the book of Ruth normally treat Orpah either in the semi-category of a villain or a full-fledged villain who turned her back on Naomi, monotheism, and the messianic lineage and hence disappeared from the sacred history into polytheism. In these traditional Jewish and Christian perspectives, the character Orpah is largely denied presence, importance or voice in the biblical text. This tendency primarily comes from the imposing ideological context of the book of Ruth as a royal story and the subsequent readings of this particular character within this ideological template or even further possible readings in canonical and ecclesiastical mappings. Taking sides with Orpah, this paper evaluates the various interpretative traditions by midrashic, feminist and conservative interpreters. It critiques the justifications for the traditional-stereotyped readings and notes the power dynamics involved in Orpah finding herself as a minority in the story of the most powerful royal family in Jewish history.

A INTRODUCTION

There is a gross injustice commonly perpetuated in the writing of history or the telling of stories because often the stories of commoners are not only ignored but deliberately silenced in the light of the imposing stories of empire builders, kings, royal families and aristocrats.¹ Unfortunately, this treatment of the

¹ In the ancient world, writing a text is an expensive enterprise, hence scribes and historians often collaborate with the aristocrats in order to see their work published. Interestingly, the scribes themselves are part of the aristocratic class because writing entails literacy and literacy is a luxury of the elites and the aristocrats. In fact, the commoners are illiterate who largely cannot read or write, and while fending to make a living, usually care less of the babbling from the literary world [for a description of the pre-Hellenistic scribal practice see David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 111-173. See also Ehud Ben Zvi, "Introduction: Writing, Speeches, and the Prophetic Books—Setting an Agenda," in *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy*, (eds. Ehud Ben Zvi and Michael H. Floyd, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 6–16. Similarly, the influence of the aristocratic class on ancient stories and histories is also seen in the scribal practices of dedicating their works to a person of nobility or of aristocratic status. In some cases, their works are dedicated to a popular deity or even deities which are worshipped by the elites

ordinary people takes them out of existence and exterminates their presence in history. It is in this perspective that the ordinary people have been described variously as the "people without history," "little people," "silent subjects" and the "invisible folks."² Consequently history is often about the few rich individuals whose stories and achievements are described and embossed in human memories and the historical archives while the vast majority of commoners are entirely left out and their deeds are placed at the footnote or margin of these magisterial characters.³ Similarly, this biased character of

especially the royal and the priestly classes. Consequently, the scribal culture of patronage and dedications often compromised the stories or historical writings since it describes and tells events from the dominant perspectives of the rich and the affluence who often sponsored these writings. (On the significant role of patronage in ancient Near East see Raymond Westbrook, "Patronage in the Ancient Near East," *Journal of the Economic & Social History of the Orient* 48/2 [2005]: 210-233. See also Niels Peter Lemche, "Kings and Clients: On Loyalty between the Ruler and the Ruled in Ancient 'Israel,'" *Semeia* 66 [1994]: 119-32.) Framed within these ideological commitments, ancient stories and histories largely tell the story of the aristocratic class and their interests while the stories of the commoners are largely reflected on the margin or in parentheses. In reference to the Bible, Stephan Geller has observed that the biblical text does not represent the masses, but "a small elite" (see Stephan A. Geller, "The God of the Covenant," in *One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World*, [ed. Barbara N. Porter, Bethesda: CDL Press, 2000], 317). Similarly, Karel van der Toorn has drawn attention to the part played by the aristocratic class and scribes in the writing of the Bible. To this end, van der Toorn observed, "the Hebrew Bible is a product of the scribal workshop" and to a great extent, the result of an aristocratic production or making (see Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007], 4). In addition, Kurt I. Noll has also observed "a relatively arbitrary invention" of the present canonical versions of biblical stories which are crafted by "a handful of scribes and not the Jewish community" (see Kurt I. Noll, "Was there Doctrinal Dissemination in Early Yahweh Religion?" *Biblical Interpretation* 16 [2008], 400). Without attempting to be comprehensive, the preceding works underscore the elitist character of biblical narratives and its tendency to speak from the scribal ivory tower of the ancient Jewish society rather than from the world of commoners. Admittedly, the biblical text is populated with stories of commoners, however, the Bible predominantly told its stories from an elitist point of view (see Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* [Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1998]).

² Lynn Rainville, "Locating the 'People without History' in Histories of Ancient Near East," *Reviews of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 37-59.

³ For example in the story of David's affairs with Bathsheba, the story is told primarily from the perspective of king David and at the expense of Bathsheba who lost a husband and have to carry an illegitimate child. In addition, she also has to bear all the attending stigma of this very act. Describing the role of Bathsheba, Adele Berlin observed, "Throughout the entire story the narrator has purposely subordinated the character of Bathsheba. He has ignored her feelings and given the barest notice of her actions." Bathsheba was treated "as a complete non-person...not even a minor

history and story also extends to the place of minorities⁴ within the biblical text because often the voices of minorities are either repressed, silenced or caricatured⁵ in the overriding rhetoric and interests of the dominant characters, worldviews and ideologies of the biblical text.⁶

Coming from a minority, I have cultivated over time a deep interest in minor characters of biblical or secular literatures.⁷ For example, it would be insightful to see or understand the biblical stories from the perspectives of Asenath, Zipporah, Jochebed and Tamar. Indeed, it is not an accident that all

character, but simply part of the plot" despite the pain of her unfortunate circumstance. See Adele Berlin, "Characterization in Biblical Narrative: David's Wives," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982), 73.

⁴ In more recent times, the plight of minorities has become a subject of great concern in biblical studies. On this concern and related issues see Richard A. Horsley, "Submerged Biblical Histories and Imperial Biblical Studies," in *The Postcolonial Bible* (ed. Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 152-57; Fernando F. Segovia, "Racial and Ethnic Minorities in Biblical Studies," in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark G. Brett, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002), 469-92; Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, ed. *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006).

⁵ For the ambiguous characterization of minor characters particularly in the study of New Testament fourth Gospel see Colleen M. Conway, "Speaking through Ambiguity: Minor Characters in the Fourth Gospel," *Biblical Interpretation* 10/3 (2002): 324-341. See also James M. Howard, "The Significance of Minor Characters in the Gospel of John," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163 (2006): 63-78. On the place of minor characters in Mark see David M. Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 130-135; Andrew D. Clarke, "'Do not Judge who is Worthy and Unworthy': Clement's Warning not to Speculate about the Rich Young Man's Response (Mark 10. 17-31)," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 (2009): 447-468; Joel F. Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus: Minor Characters as Major Figures in Mark's Gospel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 60-67. Specifically in the gospel of Mark, M. McVann noted the significant role played by minor characters in the death of Jesus and John the Baptist, hence he observed, "In both cases, the seemingly arbitrary presence of a minor character has a startlingly determinative effect on the course of events leading to the death of the prophets: the dancing girl in John's case and Barabbas in the case of Jesus; both provide the excuse or the 'cover' for the rulers' 'saving face' by acquiescing to public pressure (6:26; 15:15)." See Mark McVann, "The 'Passion' of John the Baptist and Jesus Before Pilate: Mark's Warning about Kings and Governors," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 38 (2008), 153.

⁶ On the ideologies of biblical texts see David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 10-25; Stephen Fowl, "Text Don't Have Ideologies," *Biblical Interpretation* 2/1 (1995): 15-34.

⁷ See Bernard M. W. Knox, "Minor Tragedians," in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, (eds. Bernard M. W. Knox and Patricia E. Easterling, vol. I, Part 2, *Greek Drama*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1989), 87-93.

the minor characters that I mentioned here are women since women formed a bulk of minor characters in biblical literature.⁸ While often these minor characters are glossed over or even entirely overlooked,⁹ nevertheless, they occupied a significant place in the plotting of the storyline, which often provides fresh insights in the reading of the biblical narratives.¹⁰ Concerning the defining importance of these minor characters in biblical narrative, Shimon Bar-Efrat noted,

the minor characters play a structural role in literature, paralleling and highlighting the main ones, whether through correspondence or contrast. The positive or negative parallel between the primary and secondary characters is not enough to shape the characters, but it provides emphasis and colour. The minor characters serve as a background against which the personalities of the main ones stand out.¹¹

Orpah is a minor character in this sense. According to Ellen van Wolde, "[t]he name Orpah is sometimes explained from the word 'orep, neck. Because she is the one who later turns her back on Naomi, her name has something to do with neck.'¹² In fact, Leon Morris opined that her name might have derogatory connotations particularly in relationship to the idea of "firmness" of the neck or the popular biblical term "stiff-necked" which is commonly used for

⁸ There are also minor characters within biblical literature that are unnamed and faceless. Concerning these anonymous characters, Adele Reinhartz observed, "I found unnamed characters wherever I looked, in virtually every corner of biblical narrative and in every social circle: among the ostracized lepers at the city gates, among the widowed and poor, in the households of Israel's founding families, in the courts and armies of the monarchs, and in the heaven themselves." Reinhartz also added, "Unnamed incidental characters often provides crucial links in the plot and contribute to its impact upon the reader." See Adele Reinhartz, *"Why Ask My Name?" Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3, 19.

⁹ In his study "Ideology, Geography, and the List of Minor Judges," Richard D. Nelson shows how these minor judges in Judges 10:1-5 and 12:7-15 posed an anti-monarchical ideology within the book of Judges which was modelled after the scribal conventions for summarizing royal successions in the book of Kings. In this sense, these minor judges are significant in understanding the political rhythm of the book of Judges, however, often we merely glossed over them because our attention is clearly blinded by the exploits of the mainstream Judges. See Richard D. Nelson, "Ideology, Geography, and the List of Minor Judges," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31/1 (2007): 347-364.

¹⁰ Uriel Simon, "Minor Characters in Biblical Narrative," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 46 (1990): 11-19. See also Frank Polak, *Biblical Narrative: Aspects of Art and Design* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1994), 255-61.

¹¹ Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 86.

¹² See Ellen van Wolde, *Ruth and Naomi* (London: SCM, 1997), 8.

the description of the rebellious nation of Israel.¹³ Ironically, it appears that "Orpah sounds like 'rebellious' and Ruth sounds like 'friend,'"¹⁴ Using the Bakhtinian Carnavalesque lens, Nehama Aschkenasy has further observed,

Orpah's synecdochic name is also comical... for we will forever see her not as a full human being, but as a 'back of the neck' disappearing into the horizon. This, too, may very well be an after-the-fact nickname given by the flippant voice ... using a measure of humorous "poetic license" while recounting the family's saga to the audience.¹⁵

This observation points to the derogatory nature of the name and it is even possibly that this is not her real name.¹⁶ Similarly, like many minor characters in biblical narrative,¹⁷ the story of Orpah is a sympathetic one because often she is placed unfairly in comparison to her sister-in-law Ruth, whose virtue is celebrated by a whole book, which bears her name, and also devoted towards the telling of her story as the great grandmother of "the greatest and most dearly loved king of Israel."¹⁸

On the other hand, Orpah is mentioned by name only twice in the entire book.¹⁹ This took place in her first appearance in 1:4 and the last in 1:14. The other times when she is mentioned, she is jointly mentioned together with her sister-in-law Ruth as "daughter-in-laws." Significantly, she was only mentioned by name at the beginning of the story when we are introduced to the two daughter-in-laws of Elimelech in verse 4 and at the exit in verse 14 when she

¹³ Leon Morris, *Ruth* (Tyndale Old Testament and Commentaries, London: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 251.

¹⁴ Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Ruth*. (Helps for Translators, 15. London: United Bible Societies, 1973), 8.

¹⁵ Nehama Aschkenasy, "Reading Ruth through a Bakhtinian Lens: The Carnavalesque in a Biblical Tale," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127/3 (2007), 443.

¹⁶ Concerning the names in the book of Ruth, Rabbi Judah J. Slotki noted, "All the persons in the story bear names which in a measure describe their characters. Naomi personifies everything that is sweet, Elimelech the pride that goes before a fall, Mahlon the sickly... Chilion, denoting 'destruction,' married Orpah, from whom sprang the destroyer, Goliath the Philistine." See Judah J. Slotki, "Ruth: Introduction and Commentary," in *The Five Megilloth: Hebrew Text & English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, (ed. Abraham Cohen; London: Soncino Press, 1965), 40.

¹⁷ For the study of other minor characters in the book of Ruth see Jonathan Grossman, "'Gleaning among the Ears—'Gathering among the Sheaves': Characterizing the Image of the Supervising Boy (Ruth 2)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126/4 (2007): 703-716; Yair Zakovitch, *Ruth: Introduction and Commentary* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990), 7-8.

¹⁸ Slotki, "Ruth," 37.

¹⁹ Orpah is mentioned by name in 1:4 and 14. In biblical narratives, there is characterization by the means of naming. For the poetics of naming see Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 59-61.

left the story. Thus the narrator stylishly mentioned her name at her first appearance and at her exit from the narrative. However, even when her name is mentioned in these two significant points, she is not mentioned alone, but she is mentioned jointly with her sister-in-law.²⁰ In the introduction of the two daughter-in-laws, her name was given first, however, immediately following this, was the name of Ruth. Similarly, at her exit, Orpah's farewell kiss was juxtaposed with Ruth's cleaving to Naomi, and thus showing further the different course of actions of these two characters.²¹ Indeed, the story of the book was told dominantly from the point of view of Ruth, and thus making Orpah the lonely character without a story, and whose brief appearance in the book is merely a margin in Ruth's story.²² In the subservient role as a secondary and even a flat character,²³ Orpah becomes a footnote to the royal tale which primarily seeks to celebrate the ancestry of David through Ruth. To this end, E. Campbell has observed that Orpah has "heightened the remarkable character of Ruth" and she became a foil for Ruth just like the "near redeemer is a foil for Boaz."²⁴

In this light, the story describes the nobility and virtues of Ruth at the expense of Orpah, hence placing Orpah at the background. The narrator hurriedly told the story of Orpah while he beamed his staged light entirely on Ruth. In refusing to tell us more about Orpah and concentrating solely on Ruth, the narrator denied us a better understanding of the character of Orpah, and

²⁰ For the use of dramatic characterization through naming see Shimon Levy, *The Bible as Theatre* (UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), 101.

²¹ In her study that seeks to show how lay women are reading the book of Ruth in rural African areas, Musimbi Kanyaro contrasting the two characters noted, "Naomi hears that the famine has ended in Bethlehem and decides to return to her homeland. Her daughters-in-law plead to accompany her, but she admonishes them to return to their families. Orpah accepts the admonition, and the Bible is silent about what happened to her. In fact in the story, the mention of Orpah seems to be offered only as a contrast to Ruth who defied Naomi's admonition and chose to show her faithfulness by her complete assimilation to Naomi's culture and religion." She also observed how these groups of African women are studying Orpah in order to tell their untold story. See Musimbi R. A. Kanyaro, "Biblical Hermeneutics: Ancient Palestine and the Contemporary World," *Review and Expositor* 94/3 (1997), 366, 369.

²² Praising the virtue of Orpah, Van Wolde noted the significance of Orpah's decision to go back, she noted, "For the first time here we have 'her mother-in-law'. It is as if Orpah now for the first time has her own perspective, as the possessive pronoun 'her' shows." That is, "Only on going away has Orpah become an independent person, and ceased to be more or less a daughter-in-law." See Van Wolde, *Ruth and Naomi*, 17.

²³ On the descriptions of a "flat character" in biblical and Hellenic narratives see Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 164–167.

²⁴ Edward Campbell, Jr. *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Bible, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1975), 30.

created partly the ambiguity which now surrounds the character of Orpah. Unfortunately, the story of Orpah is always told, read and interpreted via the imposing character of Ruth, thus often leading to a kind of caricature of Orpah especially in light of her decision to return to Moab rather than go to Bethlehem. The present work critiques the various stereotyped interpretations and evaluates their literary and theological justifications. In particular, it reviews the stereotyped readings by midrashic, feminist and conservative interpreters. We will consider the nature of these various interpretations and evaluate how these readings accords rightly or wrongly with the brief appearance of Orpah in the biblical text.

B MIDRASHIC INTERPRETERS

The Midrash identified Orpah as the mother of Goliath, and also described her as the mother of other three Philistine giants.²⁵ She was also known in the Midrash as *Harafah*, who because of the tears she shed for her mother-in-law at the departure, was rewarded with four giants who perished at the hand of David.²⁶ According to Rabbi Isaac, she was not only the mother of these vile giants but Orpah was also considered an immoral woman who had sexual relationship with hundred men that night when she bids Naomi farewell.²⁷ These hundred men are said to have "penetrated" her all night. Similarly, according to Rabbi Tanhuma, Orpah was also said to have participated in an act of bestiality with a dog that same night.²⁸ Describing the reason for this characterization of Orpah in the Midrash, Eliezer Segal noted,

[T]hey originated in the widespread rabbinic tendency to portray all gentiles (that is, heathens) as wicked. These embellishments also suit the need of dramatically preaching the Goliath story before the folk by filling the audience with scorn and loathing for the depraved villain. Such burlesques are standard fare in the homiletical repertoire and must provided immense emotional satisfaction to Jews whose day-to-day existence was marked by oppression at the hands of latter-day successors to those biblical scoundrels.²⁹

These midrashic interpreters realizing the etymological connections between the name Orpah and Goliath and his giant brothers who were described as descending from the "raphaite" explore arbitrarily this linguistic relationship. In Hebrew, "raphaite" the tribe of biblical giants is written as הַרְפָּה hence providing the justification for the calling of Orpah as *Harafah* or the "rafah" which for them, is an indirect reference to Orpah (written in Hebrew as

²⁵ See Eliezer Segal, *From Sermon to Commentary: Expounding the Bible in Talmudic Babylonia* (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 85-88.

²⁶ Segal, *From Sermon to Commentary*, 85.

²⁷ Segal, *From Sermon to Commentary*, 86.

²⁸ Segal, *From Sermon to Commentary*, 86.

²⁹ Segal, *From Sermon to Commentary*, 86.

עֶרְפָּה. Both הָרַפָּה and עֶרְפָּה have the consonants *resh*, *peh* and *heh*, with the difference of הָ and עֶ which could easily be ignored by the frenzies of the midrashic interpreters. Thus etymologically the midrashic interpreters through questionable exegesis and homiletical necessities connect Orpah and the giants of the Philistines.³⁰ By such connection, they formed a deliberate parallel between Ruth who gave birth to David who later defended Israel, and Orpah who gave birth to enemies of Israelites especially Goliath. In this way, Orpah and her descendent became clearly stereotyped as enemies of the Israelites even though the exegesis was primarily founded on a midrashic reading of the Ruth and the Goliath's stories. Like her forbears, the wife of Lot, Orpah was stereotyped as given birth to enemies of Israel, thus making Ruth to go down in history as mother of kings, while Orpah, on the other hand, went down in history as a prostitute and the enemy of the nation of Israel.³¹

On the other hand, the midrashic interpreters also proposed that both Ruth and Orpah were daughters of Eglon king of Moab, and hence assigned royalty to the two characters. King Eglon was described as the son of Balak, who both became connected to the lineage of David because Yahweh rewarded them for their acts of piety.³² First, Eglon was rewarded because he rose at the name of Yahweh mentioned by Ehud in Judges 3: 20 even though he was a fat person; and secondly Yahweh rewarded Balak because he built an altar in Number 23 even though he was seeking to curse Israel. Significantly, this quest by the Midrash to connect the two women with Moabite royalty was for the benefit of Ruth rather than for Orpah. They also called Orpah as the "one who kissed" and Ruth "the one who clung." In these epithets, Orpah is figured to be less than perfect for a friend, and most importantly by her going back to her people, she refused to continue the lineage of her deceased husband, and thus robbing her of a part in the Davidic dynasty. In particular, Orpah is stereotyped as a character who symbolizes backsliding or apostasy. For example, Rabbi Salmon ben Yeroham said,

[Orpah] who, at the beginning of her days, used to worship God, at the time when she was with husband, and she loved to be with her mother-in-law at the time when she was enjoying good fortune, but when her hope perished with her husband she reverted to her igno-

³⁰ See Slotki, "Ruth," 40.

³¹ Even though Deuteronomy 23:4 banned forever a Moabite from entering the "congregation of Israel, the Talmudic rabbis have generally whitewashed Ruth, arguing lamely that she is a "Moabite" and not really a Moabite. On this discussion see Moshe Reiss, "Ruth and Naomi: Foremothers of David," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 35/3 (2007), 194-7.

³² Tamar Meir, "Ruth: Midrash and Aggadah," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* (2006), n.p. [cited 8 November 2008], Online: <http://www.shalvipublishing.com/2samples-rutmidrash.htm>.

rance and her unbelief. And this teaches that a man ought to remain in one path from his youth to the day of his death.³³

For Yeroham, even the reply of Orpah to go back with Naomi was not sincere because she was "speaking out of shame."³⁴ He also notes that Naomi uncovered the "machinations" of "Orpah's heart" by her statements that Orpah is going back to her gods.³⁵ Thus according to Yeroham, "Naomi said this with a hint of censure on Orpah, for Orpah was little esteemed in Naomi's eyes."³⁶ Consequently, as result of her turning back, Orpah came to be associated with sexual promiscuity, arch-enemies of ancient Israel and other forms of negative characterization in the Midrashim.³⁷

C FEMINIST INTERPRETERS

In the quest to subvert the androcentric and traditional readings of the book of Ruth, the character of Orpah has received a great attraction because feminist interpreters saw in the silence and brief appearance of Orpah, theological motifs for rendering a feminist perspective. In her work, "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through the Eyes of Natives," Laura Donaldson underscored that the act of returning to Moab is also courageous as Ruth's act of going into the land of Judah.³⁸ As a model for Cherokee women, Orpah, according to Donaldson, refused the lure of a foreign culture in order to return to "her clan and spiritual mother."³⁹ Significantly, Donaldson added,

[f]or 'Ruth the Moabite', the translation from savagery to civilization (or from Asherah to Yahweh) similarly involves the relinquishing of her ethnic and cultural identity. For Orpah, it necessitates a courageous act of self and communal affirmation: the choosing of the indigenous mother's house over that of the alien Israelite Father.⁴⁰

Consequently Donaldson noted, "[i]n this interpretation, my responsibility as a person of Cherokee descent and as an informed biblical reader transforms Ruth's positive value into a negative and Orpah's negative value into a positive one."⁴¹ In fact, for Donaldson, Orpah "exists as the story's

³³ Derek R. G. Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth* (JSOTSup 2, Sheffield: JSOT, 1977), 48.

³⁴ Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth*, 55.

³⁵ Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth*, 57.

³⁶ Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth*, 58.

³⁷ Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth*, 192.

³⁸ Laura Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth Through the Eyes of Natives," in *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 130-144.

³⁹ Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah," 143.

⁴⁰ Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah," 144.

⁴¹ Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah," 144

central character."⁴² In the same perspective, Isabel Apawo Phiri saw the nobility of Orpah's deed, and noted, "Orpah accepted Naomi's instructions and returned to her mother's home...Her choice should be respected. In a patriarchal society, choices are made for women, but in this story, the women made bold choices for themselves that shaped the rest of their lives."⁴³

Similarly, using the framework of some imaginative letters from Orpah to Ruth, Musa Dube, in her work, "The Unpublished Letters from Orpah to Ruth," describes both Orpah and Ruth as members of the royal family in Moab.⁴⁴ For Dube, Orpah returned back to Moab in order to take care of her aged and widowed mother. Furthermore, Dube depicted Orpah as "regent queen and priestess."⁴⁵ In this fictional representation, Dube also extols the nobility of Orpah by her choice to go back home to take care of her mother.⁴⁶ For example, in one of the letter, Orpah said,

But I had to return to my old widowed mother who, like Naomi, did not have any son or husband left. It was also right that I should return to my people and religion, for Naomi herself was returning to her people and religion. I have continued in this court, serving my mother and my country as the regent queen and priestess.⁴⁷

The imaginative description by Dube has some positive contributions. First, its imaginative construction explores the possibility that Orpah might have contributed silently to the domestic life of their family in Moab, which Ruth abandoned in her wild chase of friendship. One could also extend such concern further. For example, if one has a sister who went on a wild goose chase of friendship instead of staying back home and taking care of the domestic responsibilities, one would not have seen the virtues in such a wild goose chase. In the same way, one would doubt that Ruth's Moabite family will seriously consider Ruth as a model of virtue rather they would praise Orpah because from the point of view of the ancient community allegiance or loyalty to one's family and people is greatly cherished over other forms of outside

⁴² Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah," 142.

⁴³ Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Ruth," in *African Bible Commentary* (ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo; Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 320.

⁴⁴ Musa Dube, "The Unpublished Letters from Orpah to Ruth," in *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 145-150.

⁴⁵ Dube, "The Unpublished Letters from Orpah to Ruth," 150.

⁴⁶ On the critique of methodology and issues in both Donaldson and Dube see Roland Boer, "Culture, Ethics and Identity in Reading Ruth: A Response to Donaldson, Dube, MicKinlay and Brenner," in *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 163-170.

⁴⁷ Dube, "The Unpublished Letters from Orpah to Ruth," 150.

commitments.⁴⁸ However, the work by Dube could be faulted on the area of methodology since such reconstruction could also be carried out in varieties of ways. One could assumed as largely supported by the midrashic rendering that Orpah went back into prostitution or bestiality, and hence making subjective every kind of reconstruction, which even though is a creative effort to say the least, but lacks footing in historical reality or within the biblical text. One may just ask since the Bible is silent at this point, what is the justification for such imaginative re-creation of letters from Orpah by Dube?

Consequently, such reconstruction while throwing light to historical possibilities, however, remains in the realms of one's imagination and as such is disservice to the character on the long run since Orpah could also be represented in different varieties of ways. On the other hand, the search for a "historical Orpah" is also needless since there is no chance of ever recovering her, however, even within the ambiguity of the present narrative, as we are going to see, one could still stressed the positive role of Orpah within the development of the plot of the storyline, particularly, in her subservient role in the opening narrative without resulting to the kind of imaginative reconstruction by Dube.

D CONSERVATIVE INTERPRETERS

In traditional settings, Oprah is often conceived as faithless and idolaters who in accordance with the wordings of Naomi in v. 15 went back to worship her Moabite gods. The justification for such view is largely based on Naomi's speech, which reads: "'Look,' said Naomi, 'your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.'"⁴⁹ In this traditional reading, her going to Moab is a sign of backsliding, faithlessness in Yahweh and outright apostasy.⁵⁰ Underscoring this same motif for example, Matthew Henry in his

⁴⁸ See Rebecca Lauren, "Why Orpah Returned Home and Ruth Stayed," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24/2 (2008): 141-41.

⁴⁹ Waard and Nida observed that "[t]hough a few translations have 'gods,' there is no firm basis for using the plural." See Waard and Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Ruth*, 17.

⁵⁰ To this end, Warren A. Gage observed, "It is noteworthy that Naomi had two widowed daughters-in-law and two near kinsmen. The Gentile Orpah 'had opportunity to return,' and her lack of faith led her back into idolatry (Ruth 1:15), while Ruth identified with the Lord (Ruth 1:16). The Israelite nearest kinsman faithlessly refused to obey the levirate law out of fear for his own inheritance. While Boaz is given a great name (Ruth 4:11), the nearest kinsman's name perishes in Israel." See Warren A. Gage, "Ruth Upon the Threshing Floor and the Sin of Gibeah: A Biblical-Theological Study," *Westminster Theological Journal* 51/2 (1989), 373. Contrary to this understanding, Joyce G. Baldwin has noted, "Orpah found the argument" of Naomi "persuasive and returned home... Naomi did not blame her; in fact she urged Ruth to do the same, to go back to her own people and to Chemosh, the national god of Moab." See Joyce G. Baldwin, "Ruth," in *The New Bible Commentary* (eds. Donald Guthrie et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 280.

usual allegorical manner has no friendly words for Orpah, he observed, "Orpah was easily persuaded to yield to her own corrupt inclination, and to go back to her country, her kindred, and her father's house, now when she was in a favourable position for an effective call from it."⁵¹ Furthermore, comparing Orpah to the young ruler in Matthew 19: 22, Henry again noted,

Orpah's kiss showed she had an affection for Naomi and was reluctant to part from her; yet she did not love her enough to leave her country for her sake. Thus many have esteem and affection for Christ, and yet come short of salvation through him, because they cannot find it in their hearts to forsake other things for him. They love him and yet leave him, because they do not love him enough, but love other things more. Thus the young man who went away from Christ went away sorrowful, Matt. 19:22.⁵²

In the allegorical interpretation of Henry, Orpah becomes a type of the unbeliever who loves Christ, but he or she cannot make lasting commitment to Christ because of his other commitments to the world. In this allegorical scheme, though implied but not stated, Naomi becomes a type of Christ, and Ruth naturally becomes the faithful Christian who is fully committed to follow Jesus against all odds. Consequently, Henry praised Ruth's resolution to continue with Naomi and directly disparaged Orpah's going back home. In almost similar fashion, A. Boyd Luter titled verse 14a, "Bailing out before the Bitter End." In his expository and imaginative background, Luter explained,

When it looks like an airplane is going to crash soon, the smart thing to do is obviously to don your parachute, then get out while the getting's good. Unfortunately, this 'bail out when things look bad' mentality has been frequently transferred to human relationships. Going your separate way when things are going bad is not only the natural thing to do, it is today often viewed as the only logical thing to do. There may, of course, be incredibly painful even dangerous, legitimate reasons in some cases. However, the decision too frequently boils down to taking the easy way out.⁵³

For Luter, Orpah took "the easy way out" by bailing out on Naomi. Flatly, Luter opined that "Orpah bails out" despite her emotional attachment and "short-term" commitment to follow Naomi.⁵⁴ In conclusion, Luter noted that "Orpah, for all her tears (1:9, 14), still was disengaging from both her existing relationship with Naomi," and "whatever level of realization and loyalty she might have developed (i.e., through marrying into the family) to

⁵¹ Matthew Henry, *Zondervan Matthew Henry Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 289.

⁵² Henry, *Zondervan Matthew Henry Commentary*, 289.

⁵³ A. Boyd Luter and Barry C. Davis, *God Behind the Seen: Expositions of the Books of Ruth & Esther* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1995), 38.

⁵⁴ Luter and Davis, *God Behind the Seen*, 39.

Israel's God (1:15)."⁵⁵ Consequently, Orpah is traditionally seen here as recanting her vow to follow Yahweh because by refusing to go on with Naomi she had indirectly severed her relationships with Naomi's God. This same assumption is often articulated in popular homiletic presentations and sermons whereby the virtue of Ruth is celebrated, and the character of Orpah as a villain, is stressed.⁵⁶ Often, the speech of Naomi in verse 15 is seen as an authoritative gauge to understand the motifs behind the going back of Orpah.⁵⁷ In biblical narrative, while sometime it is possible for the narrator to speak through or to assume the point of view of the character within the narrative, however, in this incident such might not be the case since the narrator avoided and refused to confirm the interpretation made by Naomi. Similarly, we cannot rely on the interpretation of Naomi since her interpretation of the events surrounding her life has been faulty. For example, she asked the inhabitants of Bethlehem to call her "Marah" in verse 20 instead of "Naomi" because according to her, the Lord had dealt bitterly with her. In this speech here, as her interpretation of situations, the narrator refused to confirm, but through the narrative, the narrator went to prove that Naomi was wrong in the interpretation of her problem since ultimately God is working out his purpose towards the establishment of the Davidic dynasty, thus creating a glorious prestige for her as the ancestress of David.

On the other hand, often the reason given for such conclusions that Orpah was faithless or selfish come from the unfair comparison of Orpah and Ruth. We see Ruth going through different kinds of rigorous work in order to take care of her mother-in-law and ultimately also to found a continuous lineage for the family of her deceased husband.⁵⁸ However, for Orpah we are

⁵⁵ Luter and Davis, *God Behind the Seen*, 39.

⁵⁶ This presupposition is expressed by John P. Lange, who considering the nature of Ruth's commitment in contrast to Orpah observed, "The discovery instantly manifests itself in different effects on Orpah and Ruth. Orpah is repelled, because she thinks only of the bridal she might lose. Ruth is attracted, for if that which distinguishes this people which she already loves be its God, then she loves that God also." See John P. Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical* (trans. Philip Schaff; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1871), 20.

⁵⁷ According to Robert Hubbard, "Orpah did the sensible, expected thing," even though Ruth did "the extraordinary and unexpected," thus it is not right to see her deeds as primarily negative. See Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 115-116.

⁵⁸ In Christian bioethics, using the virtues of Ruth to encourage the care of the sick and elderly, Amy Laura Hall has observed the resolution of Ruth to care for her aging mother-in-law and the undesired action of Orpah in "opting to turn away" and putting "her trust elsewhere." Hall unequivocally noted, "When illness, loss, age, grief, or anger form that beloved person into someone not known, it is all the more tempting to turn back to the safely familiar, as Orpah turned back to Moab." See Amy Laura Hall,

denied any picture at all, indeed, after leaving her mother-in-law, she went into oblivion. Consequently, it is unfair to make such a comparison between these two characters because the narrative material is unequally divided among them. However, despite the unequalness of narrative materials interpreters in this traditional reading had compared Orpah's faithlessness to the kinsman redeemer who avoided taking responsibility for Naomi in chapter 4. Contrary to this pre-supposition, Phyllis Tribble had observed,

But substitution means dissimilarity. Orpah had both name and speech (1:10). She decided to die to the story by returning to her own people, and the judgment upon her is favorable (1:15). The unnamed redeemer chooses to die to the story by returning to his own inheritance, and the judgment upon him is adverse. After all, he is not a foreign woman but the nearest male kin. Thus he passes away with the infamy of anonymity.⁵⁹

Responding to this kind of traditional reading, Campbell has also emphasized that there is no reason to assume a negative understanding of Orpah's returning back to Moab since she had merely obeyed the demands made by Naomi and thus reducing her pain.⁶⁰ She also acted in accordance to the traditionally laid down customs which expected her to go back to her people and do not expect her to make other commitments to Naomi.⁶¹ In the same perspectives, following the preceding writers, Federic W. Bush had also described the return of Orpah as indeed appropriate; however, he observed that Ruth's going to Bethlehem went "beyond a call to duty." Thus he noted,

Indeed, Orpah's previous course of action in relation to her dead husband and her mother-in-law are designated by Naomi as *hesed* (1:8). The narrator implies no judgment whatsoever upon her decision to accede to Naomi's importuning and return home. Her decision is the sound and reasonable one: she opts for the possibility of home and husband (1:9a) and for her own community and faith (1:15). But her decision to accede to the dictates of community and custom merely demonstrates that Ruth's remarkable action is indeed one of gracious and loving kindness that goes beyond the call of duty.⁶²

"Ruth's Resolve: What Jesus' Great-Grandmother May Teach about Bioethics and Care," *Christian Bioethics* 11 (2005), 42.

⁵⁹ Phyllis Tribble, "A Human Comedy," in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 191.

⁶⁰ E. Campbell, "The Hebrew Short Story: A Study of Ruth," in *A Light unto My Path. Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers* (ed. Howard Bream, Ralph Heim, and Carey Moore; Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), 83.

⁶¹ Tribble, "A Human Comedy," 191.

⁶² Federic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (Word Biblical Commentary 9, Texas: Word Publishers, 1996), 54.

Even though such a "going beyond the call of duty" reveals virtue and nobility, however, so also is the call to do the appropriate and the expected deeds at the moment of crisis. Orpah did not do wrong by acquiescing or complying with the demands of Naomi, which possibly come from their mutual understanding of the expected norms of the ancient societies.⁶³ Consequently, the treatment of Orpah as a villain in traditional readings lacks legitimacy because it refuses largely to explore the positive elements in the characterization of Orpah within the biblical text.

E REREADING AND REDEEMING ORPAH

The reading and interpretation of Orpah as an immoral, apostate, and a coward, who bails out on Naomi, has largely been entrenched by different interpreters. In close analyses, these various interpreters have primarily refused to explore or even take notice of the statement within the text that sheds light to the enigmatic character of Orpah. Looking at the text, there are indications that Orpah's image could be redeemed by the few references to her within the text.

First, in v. 7, the text reads, "So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah." The word translated, "departed," "set out," and "went out" is the verb **צָא** which in its various verbal forms is repeatedly used to describe the exodus (Gen 15:7, 14; Exod 12:17, 39, 41, 42, 51; 13:3, 8-9, 14, 16; Lev 25:38, 42, 55; Num 15:41; Deut 4:45; 5:6; 6:21). In this understanding it appears Orpah actually exits Moab and had also embarked on the journey back to Bethlehem, however, the exodus experience is hereby cut short by a complaining Naomi who ironically persuaded Orpah to go back to Moab. Using the exodus metaphor for a while, it is like Moses and the Israelites in the exodus narrative, however, in this case, the Israelites are willing to go to the Promised Land, but "Moses" was busy complaining and advising them to go back to Egypt. In fact, Orpah did depart from Moab with the intention to go to Bethlehem, but a complaining Naomi did not allow her to partake in the blessing of entering the Promised Land. Interestingly, this verse is written from the point of view of Naomi because Moab is merely described as "the place where she was" (**מִן־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הָיְתָה־שָׁמָּה**). The narrator refuses to call Moab by name since from the point of view of Naomi, this nation of Moab, has now becomes a place of less attraction or fascination. It is merely called, "the place where she was." The same feeling possibly also characterized the thought of Orpah and

⁶³ Describing this ancient norm, Jon Berquist observed, "Orpah accepts her role as bereaved daughter-in-law and obeys her mother-in-law, in accord with the norms of her stratified society. By returning to her previous family, Orpah fulfills her role expectations. Ruth, however, deviates from her mother-in-law's command and from standard expectations for young widows: she clings (**דָּבְקָה**) to Naomi (1.14)." See Jon L. Berquist, "Role Dedifferentiation in the Book of Ruth," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 57 (1993), 26.

Ruth since both of them were willing to turn back on the country of their birth. It appears they also considered their country of birth as a mere geographical location which force of attraction has little or no hold on them. Significantly, while the narrator called Moab, "the place" he called the country of Naomi's birth by name, that is, "the land of Judah." It is possible that the land of Judah with the stories of plentiful bread (v.6) might have served as an attraction for these three women especially for Orpah and Ruth who broke the ties of friendship with their country of birth in order to go to the happening place namely the land of Judah. We know that such a breaking of ties is difficult particularly leaving to a foreign land whereby your future is not assured or protected by the person who originally initiates the journey. Orpah and Ruth have possibly said goodbyes to friends and neighbours and pick up their packs and bags to go to Bethlehem. The "departure" of Orpah from Moab indicates her willingness to part with the country of her birth and clearly shows her resolve to go with Naomi in the first place.

Complementing this effort, in v. 8, Naomi herself praised the commitment, goodness and loyalty of these two daughter-in-laws. The text reads, "Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me." The lives of these two daughters-in-laws were truly commendable since they both were praised for showing loving kindness towards their departed husbands and to Naomi. It is interesting to note that these non-Israelites were described as showing loving kindness. The word חֶסֶד used to describe the relationship of the two daughter-in-laws to Naomi and her deceased sons is one of the most important word in the Old Testament which describes the moral and covenantal integrity of God's people.⁶⁴ To apply this word חֶסֶד to two non-Israelites is in itself profound and significant because it is a moral characteristic which Israel as a nation is said to have lacked especially in the prophetic books (Hos 4:1; 6:6; 10:12; 12:6; Mic 6:8). These two women and Orpah in particular have exercised loving kindness to the dead and to Naomi and thus have shown their faithfulness and moral integrity. This association of Orpah with loving kindness elevated her and hence counteracts the stereotyped description or portrayal of Orpah as a type of apostasy and unfaithfulness. In fact, חֶסֶד is the opposite of unfaithfulness because the word semantic domain include faithfulness, loyalty, moral obligation and integrity.

In v. 9, Naomi prayed that the "May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." This prayer implies that the life of Orpah and Ruth to this point is devoid of rest, peace and fulfilment. Often prayer is said to bring about the desired state and Naomi underscores the view

⁶⁴ According to David A. Baer and Robert P. Gordon, חֶסֶד "occupies a prominent role in the inner and communal life of God's people" (See David A. Baer and Robert P. Gordon, "חֶסֶד," *NIDOTTE* 2: 216, 211-218 and KBL: 336.

that Orpah and Ruth has been restless and possibly emotionally frustrated by the sad events of their lives. It is only fair that Orpah having suffered this long for the family of her dead husband should also have a moment of peace and rest. It also necessary that she did not become an added trouble to an already grieving Naomi, hence by going back, Orpah helps to curtail the many inconveniences that her presence would be to Naomi's life.

In v. 9b, Naomi kissed them and both of them wept aloud. Looking at the weeping for a moment, it is important to note that weeping has characterized the life of Orpah and Ruth to this point of the story. The life of widowhood is a life of weeping and mourning and even here the two daughters-in-laws mourned the pain of losing a mother-in-law whose presence reminds them of the loving memories of their husbands. In tears, Orpah in particular also lift up her voice to weep the terrifying future of the widowed life, but most importantly to also weep the quest by Naomi to break the bond of friendship which has developed between Orpah, Ruth and Naomi. Orpah has seen and wept the dead of her father-in-law, her own husband, her brother-in-law and now the separation of the friendship of her mother-in-law. Consequently, in the text riddled with images of bereavement and death notices, the image of a weeping Orpah partly characterizes her and shows briefly her pain, but also her loyalty and identification to the family of Elimelech.

In v. 10, Orpah together with Ruth in tears, said to Naomi, "we will go back with you to your people." This statement, particularly in the phrase, "your people" suggests that Orpah actually wants to make Naomi's people her own people especially in terms of the high sounding words of Ruth in v. 16.

In v. 11, the text reads, "But Naomi said, 'Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me?'" The word שׁוּב is an interesting word here.⁶⁵ One may ask which direction should one return? Where really is home? In verse 6a, it said that "Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might 'return' from the land of Moab..." and v. 7b said, "and they went on the way to 'return' to the land of Judah." The direction of the verb שׁוּב in these two instances is towards Judah, but in v. 11, the direction of the verb is Moab. Naomi in these two occurrences seeks to return home to Judah, but in v. 11 she was asking them to return to Moab, that is, back to their homes. One faces here the ambiguity in telling the direction of home. In the first occurrences it was good to go home to Judah, but along the road, Naomi is demanding a volte-face or U-turn from her daughters-in-laws. What stops Naomi from telling them this information while they were in Moab? Why wait until here at the crossroads? In this middle of nowhere where is the direction of home? Interestingly, it is a "nowhere" because the text refuses to name this place of intense emotions of parting. Does home lies in moving forward into the future that is painted bleak

⁶⁵ See John A. Thompson and Elmer A. Martens, "שׁוּב," *NIDOTTE* 4: 55-59; KBL: 1427-1434.

by Naomi or going back to the place left by Orpah and Ruth? Orpah has already moved from the "home" in Moab in order to move to the "home" of Naomi in Bethlehem. The "home" that Naomi describes as "your mother's home" in v. 8b possibly has no more a father to return to, and certainly there is no husband or children to return to. In what sense, is this really a home? There is nothing actually to return to because everything has been lost by becoming a part of the family of Elimelech, and it is wise only to think twice in the midst of the persuasion by Naomi for them to return back home while on the road to Bethlehem.

In vv. 11-13, Naomi described a hopeless condition which also complicated further the plight of these two young widows. Naomi went on to describe a future whereby the possibility of children and husbands are out of the equation. To avert this bleak future, Naomi points them back to an empty home without the things that actually make a happy home. Naomi refused to shoulder the responsibility of assisting these young widows, to find their bearings in a world of hostility and pain, but merely pointed them to the same place she herself is running away from. If home is actually to be found in Moab and returning there is the best option, why is Naomi going back to Bethlehem? Why seeking to return to the house of bread (literally the meaning of "Bethlehem") when the fields of Moab become empty? From the text, the motivation for Naomi's journey is that God has visited the land of Israel by giving to them bread (v. 6), however, why is this important information missing in her portrayal of the future before these two widows? Is Naomi actually sincere in her portrayal of the future particularly in the knowledge that God has already provided enough bread for his people at Bethlehem? This window of a brighter future is also in the text by the reference to the barley harvest (v. 22) at the time of their arrival in Bethlehem. This is also a picture of hope because it indicates a time of plenty especially in the light of the mosaic injunctions that the less privileged members of Israelite community should be allowed to feed in the fields of the rich during the time of harvest. Repeatedly, the mosaic legislation reads,

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigners. I am the Lord your God (Lev 19:9-10.cf. Lev 23:22; 25:5-6; Deut 24:19-22; Exod 22:21-24).

Precisely, it was this same mosaic provisions that Ruth herself enjoyed at the field of Boaz in chapter 2. For the modern reader, is it not morally questionable for Naomi to speak only of the problems and never talk to them about the many opportunities for happiness and possibly marriage in the land of her birth? Did she not envisage the possibility that the popularized divine visitation while in the land of Moab should be able to take care of the needs of these two

widows also when finally in the land of Judah? Naomi appears selfish here, even though her statements call for our sympathy, however, her long speeches aimed at evading the responsibility of helping these widows like herself to find a future home. It was only in chapter 3 that she finally began to think of finding a future home for Ruth that had followed her. In fact, the text reads, "One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for?'" (v. 1). Naomi is a bitter, angry and self-centred person, and her speeches show a ploy to send these widows away so that their continuous existence is no longer hanged on her and her family. She wanted to physically cut off these widows from her family tree and in the process she also forgot that in cutting them away from her family tree, she also cut them away from their possible faith in Yahweh.

Understanding Orpah's return in the context of the selfishness of Naomi normally helps to see the importance of Orpah walking back to her empty home. It is not going back to a home as she once knew it but going back to a home where there is no longer a husband, no children, possibly no father, no father-in-law, no brother-in-law, no sister-in-law, no mother-in-law, no fulfilment and no security. Orpah refused to chase after another story of bread (v. 6), but went back to pick the broken pieces of her life together again. It is easier to fly in search of the greener pastures or to look for the golden fleeces around the world rather than to stay and face once and for all the embarrassing frustrations of one's life. From experience, it takes more faith to stay at home and to confront the various challenges of one's life than seeking escapist door into places which we heard have great visitations of breads or better opportunities. Ruth and Naomi took a flight to chase after bread, but Orpah returns home to face the realities of her life on her own terms. In doing this, Orpah shows a maturity that "man should not live by bread alone" and possibly sustained herself by the knowledge that the fields of Moab will produce once again bread for her and her people. Even though the Davidic royal history takes her out of the story, the resilient bravery to face home again by Orpah is a lesson that minorities, immigrants and the underdogs of the world truly know too well and it is in this perspective that the character of Orpah is indeed liberating. In fact, the motif of returning to face home is a challenge that confronts every prodigal son, runaway father, absentee mother and a rebellious son or a troubled daughter. Significantly, it is in returning home that Orpah and Naomi becomes alike because each one of them chooses to come back home rather than stay in a foreign land and each one of them chooses to fulfil their destiny within their place of birth. In doing this, Orpah merely did what Naomi is on her way to do, that is, she wants to return to her people. Consequently, what makes the choice of Naomi right and the one of Orpah wrong? What makes the choice of Naomi much hazardous and the one of Orpah more of comfort? With all the problems already described, at least Naomi has a bread-looking or friendly future to return to, but the future of Orpah is entirely bleak? Moving towards this bleak future demands more faith than going back to the house of bread, and it is in

going this way that Orpah shows a resolve to chart her own path and to take control of her destiny rather than living at the mercy of a kinsman redeemer or even any rich bourgeoisie in Bethlehem.

F CONCLUSION

Interpreters have largely been unfair to the character of Orpah. The reasons for such misinterpretations come from three factors. First, many interpreters saw the speech of Naomi in v. 15 as a valid statement which speaks of Orpah going back to her gods. Hence, it is assumed that Orpah rejects making commitment to Yahweh and went back to the idolatry of her Moabite background. Secondly, some interpreters naturally compare the virtue of Ruth in contrast with Orpah, and thus finding her always wanting. In such dialectics, Ruth normally wins their commendations and Orpah their disapprovals. Lastly, some interpreters often assumed that apart from the mentioning of Orpah at the beginning of the story, the narrative develops and ends without a reference to her, hence showing her insignificant status within the entire narrative. For this way of thinking, the character Orpah did not further in any significant way the development of the plot or storyline of the book of Ruth.

There is no gainsaying that Orpah is a minor character from these stand-points. However, looking at the story closely from the point of view of this minor character, her significance in the story becomes obvious. Significantly, she played a leading role in the characterization of Ruth. In a particular sense, without Orpah, the story of Ruth would be incomplete because Ruth's going to Bethlehem makes only an enduring meaning when viewed from the context of Orpah's returning back to Moab. Thus Orpah going back to Moab directly helped to underscore the commitment of Ruth to go to Bethlehem. Without Orpah's return to Moab, Ruth's going to Bethlehem which serves as the underlying plot for the entire narrative become less powerfully expressed or even unpersuasive at all.⁶⁶ To this end, the minor character of Orpah literarily defined the place and the significance of Ruth within the narrative. From this point of view, Orpah becomes an indispensable character in order to understand the characterization of Ruth, and the role of such characterization in the plotting of the entire narrative. In this perspective, Orpah complements Ruth and the literary representation or identity of Ruth hanged on the pivoted characterization of Orpah within the narrative.

Beyond this literary importance, and even though standing in the imposing shadow of her sister-in-law, Orpah is a character whose sense of duty to her people and community was clearly defined by the return to her people. She also was considerate to the plight of Naomi and thus refused to be an extra

⁶⁶ In a particular sense, as the character of the next kinsman redeemer helped to bring out the commitment of Boaz, thus also Orpah the commitment of Ruth. See Campbell, Jr. *Ruth*, 30.

burden to the already frustrated Naomi. However, by her choice to stay with her own people and by her sensitivity towards the plight of Naomi, Orpah removed herself from the page of history. As all minorities everywhere know, the mainstream stories are always about the Ruths and Boazs because they had relationship with royalty and the structures of power. The narrator told the story from the royal ideology of Judah where Ruth was now an ancestress of the throne. From this angle, Ruth becomes the ideal wife and the model for all other women. Within this royal picture, Orpah disappeared and merely becomes a footnote in the story which began with the common pain of their widowhood and suffering in the field of Moab. In this sense, she is thrown out of the royal picture. Consequently, even the quest to assign to her fictional royalty by Dube or the Midrash fails because these imaginative claims are not supported by our main text of Ruth. Orpah went to historical and religious oblivion because she has no relationship with the subsequent Davidic royalty. For us, living in the third world, robbed of royalty and a place in history, the story of Orpah is our story and in this sense we are all her children.

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