

Naomi the Unknown Trickster

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Abstract

Little is known about Naomi's deception in the book of Ruth. Some have claimed that Ruth deceived Boaz. Others have argued that Naomi caused Ruth to deceive Boaz. Naomi's deception is so elaborately hidden in the narrative that it is difficult to detect. But several incidents in the narrative appear to provide evidence that she was continuing to deceive her victims. On the one hand, one fell for the trick. On the other hand, another was able to escape the trick and even meet the end of a good turnaround.

Keywords: Naomi; Deception; Trickster; Ruth; Boaz

Introduction

The book of Ruth has been interpreted by scholars based on a moral evaluation of a Moabite woman's life.¹ Of course, Ruth has been studied from various perspectives, but attempts to ethically evaluate the woman in the narrative have not differed much. Instead, I attempt to interpret the book by focusing on another important figure in the narrative. As we may suppose, the former is Ruth, and the latter is Naomi. I suggest that we focus on Naomi in Ruth because the book is filled with Naomi's words and actions that seem to be deceptive.² In effect, some scholars have pointed out the eccentricity of Naomi's words and actions in the narrative.³ But it appears that not much attention has been paid to finding the reason for such eccentricity. Therefore, I would like to look into the deception by Naomi in Ruth and consider the intentions behind the deception.

Naomi the trickster

Ruth begins, curiously enough, with the story of Naomi. Naomi and her husband Elimelech had two sons; their names were Mahlon and Chilion (Rt. 1:2). They lived in Bethlehem during the time of the Judges (Rt. 1:1). They left their homeland and moved to the land of Moab because there was a famine in the land of Bethlehem (Rt. 1:1). For

¹ For example, Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky (2011:92–93). See also Sasson (1979), Sakenfeld (1999), LaCocque (2004), Matthews (2004), and so on.

² Adelman does not take the position that Naomi deceived her daughters-in-law, but rather that Naomi caused Ruth to deceive Boaz or Ruth deceived Boaz on purpose (2017:90–125). She disputes that “the scene [in Rt. 3:4,7] is fraught with ambiguity as to who is really directing the script, Naomi or Ruth” (2017:115–116). A number of scholars who interpret Ruth 3 negatively take those positions.

³ See Fewell and Gunn (1988:99–108) and Davis (2013:495–513). Cf. Schipper (2016).

some unknown reason, after that, Elimelech died in Moab (Rt. 1:3). Naomi and her two sons were left behind. However, Naomi did not return to Bethlehem with her two sons. There, instead, her two sons each married Moabite women; one named Orpah and the other Ruth (Rt. 1:4). Then, about ten years later, both of Naomi’s sons died childless (Rt. 1:5).⁴ She was deprived of her two sons and her husband. When Naomi heard that there was a good harvest in Bethlehem, she decided to return to her homeland with her two daughters-in-law (Rt. 1:6). Oddly enough, on the way back from Moab to Bethlehem, she changed her mind:

וַתֵּצֵא מִן־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הָיְתָה־שָׁמָּה וּשְׁתֵּי בָתְּלוֹתֶיהָ עִמָּהּ וּמַלְכָּנָהּ בְּדָרָד לָשׁוּב אֶל־אֶרֶץ יְהוּדָה וְהָאָמֶר נָעַמְלִי לְשְׁתֵּי בָתְּלוֹתֶיהָ לָכֵּן שָׁבָנָה אִשָּׁה לְבֵית אִמָּהּ

And she set out from the place where she was and the two daughters-in-law with her. Then they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each to your mother’s house” (Rt. 1:7–8a).⁵

In Ruth 1:7, the text utilises different subjects to describe Naomi leaving Moab with her two daughters-in-law, and the three women heading toward Bethlehem. Although these are only two short clauses, each clause describes a different situation; one as they leave Moab, and the other as they head toward Bethlehem. So why did Naomi suddenly tell her two daughters-in-law to return to the land of Moab? If it had been her will to return from Moab to Bethlehem alone, she would certainly have had to leave Moab alone. In ancient societies, moving from one place to another may have been challenging.⁶ They may have had to prepare quite a few things before leaving. If it had really been Naomi’s original idea to leave alone, she would have told her daughters-in-law about her intentions before leaving. It may have been quite demanding for them to return to Moab after leaving for Bethlehem. But why? Wouldn’t it have been dangerous for an old woman to travel alone in the land of Moab? It was not even her homeland. Wasn’t that why she travelled in the land of Moab with her two Moabite daughters-in-law? If so, she chose a much safer way to travel in that land. But why did she suddenly tell them to return to Moab? Perhaps they approached the land of Judah via the land of Moab. Maybe it was just before or after crossing the Jordan River. Probably she thought that she could travel alone in the land of Judah. She may have thought that she would be able to reach her destination without their help now. She may only have wanted to accompany them as long as she needed to. Wasn’t she a truly shrewd woman? The interesting fact is that Naomi told her daughters-in-law to go back to their mother’s house. Why did she tell them to go back to their mother’s house and not their father’s house? As Block puts it, in “view of the common androcentric identification of a home or a family in the Bible as

⁴ Spitz argues that considering “the specific curses associated with violating the Mosaic Covenant, it becomes quite difficult not to attribute the death and childless of the first few verses to God’s righteous judgment” (2017:4). If so, only Naomi is exempt from God’s righteous judgment, since she neither died nor was barren. So, is it true that in the narrative she is portrayed as a more exemplary figure than Ruth? As Westermann (1980:38) criticised Gunkel, he may be betraying himself. See the title of his paper: “How a critical understanding of Naomi restores a right understanding of Ruth” (2017:0). Cf. Block (1999:624).

⁵ All translations from Hebrew to English in this paper, including the above, are my own. Most of the translations are literal rather than paraphrased. When we can interpret a text that we have translated literally – a translation that may appear awkward (although it is not) – I consider that to be the best interpretation.

⁶ Perhaps moving at that time may have been more demanding than it is now.

a *bêt 'ab*, ‘house of a father’ and the customary return of widows to the security of their ‘father’s house,’ the expression *bêt 'ēm*, ‘house of a mother,’ is striking” (1999:632). The reason she said the striking phrase to them may have been to criticise them sarcastically by reminding them that they were the descendants of Lot’s first daughter. Lot’s two daughters were the ones who made their father drink wine and slept with him while he was drunk, thus leaving behind descendants (Gn. 19:31–36). Then the first daughter became the ancestor of the Moabites, and the second daughter became the ancestor of the Ammonites (Gn. 19:37–38).

Another very unusual thing about Ruth 1:8b–9a is that when Naomi refers to her two daughters-in-law, the subject (the verbal suffix) and the object (the pronominal suffix) which are to be utilised in the feminine plural form are utilised in the masculine plural form:⁷

יְעֲשֶׂהָ [יַעֲשֶׂה] יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם חֵסֶד כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתֶם עִם־הַמֵּתִים וְעַמְדִי יְהוּ יְהוָה לָכֶם וּמִצְאֵן מְנוּחָה אֲשֶׁה
בְּיַת אִישׁוֹ

“May the Lord do kindness with you [m. pl.] as you [m. pl.] have done with the dead and with me. May the Lord give you [m. pl.] a resting place. Then find each a dwelling place of your husband” (Rt. 1:8b–9a).⁸

Davis says of these three verbal errors Naomi made that these “‘slips’ by a grieving Naomi may be read as clues to her inner life, a literary device by which the narrator can portray her emotional distress” (2013:501). That is, she may have made those slips because of the pain of losing not only her husband but also her two sons. And he also seems to point out that the slips may have been intentional because “the shift relieves her of responsibility for her daughters-in-law and effectively dissolves the relationship that had been the context for previous acts of *חֵסֶד*” (2013:502). Naomi was cutting off the affection she received from her daughters-in-law through what appears to be the slips.⁹ After all, Orpah returned to her homeland as Naomi told (Rt. 1:14). In this regard, Fewell and Gunn (1988:103–104) argue:

⁷ Schipper indicates that in “Ruth, there are eight examples in which a masculine plural independent pronoun (1:22), a pronominal suffix (1:8, 9, 11, 13, 19; 4:11), and a verbal suffix (1:8) have a feminine antecedent referring to two women. There are also two examples in 1:13 in which a feminine pronominal suffix refers to presumably two men” (2016:91). It is noteworthy that seven of the eight examples are made by Naomi. Some scholars point to the masculine plural as an example of archaic feminine dual forms, instead of gender inconsistency. Cf. Campbell (1975:24–25), Bush (1996:24), etc. But as Schipper (2016:92) puts it, even “if such dual forms existed in archaic Hebrew, it does not necessarily mean that the examples of gender discord in Ruth must reflect these archaic forms and not simply ‘gender-neutralized’ forms.”

⁸ Most books on ancient Hebrew grammar and syntax (in fact, all the books I have reviewed) do not address this exceptional passage in Ruth; this is likely because it would be difficult to explain grammatically or syntactically. See Waltke and O’Connor (1990), Beckman (2007), Joüon and Muraoka (2011), Fuller and Choi (2017), Pratico and van Pelt (2019), Hardy II and McAfee (2024), and so on. The question of whether this grammatical or syntactic exception should be considered a grammatical or syntactic matter seems to remain a separate one. In other words, rather than being perceived as a grammatical or syntactic problem of ancient Hebrew, this phenomenon is seen as a deliberate literary device by the narrator to raise doubts about the sincerity of Naomi’s words and actions.

⁹ Sakenfeld disputes that “an act of *hesed* takes place or is requested within the context of an existing, established, and positive relationship between the persons involved” (1999:24). But Naomi’s current words appear to be the opposite of Ruth’s words in Rt. 1:16–17. Ruth sincerely wanted to help Naomi, but Naomi did not seem to actually bless Ruth.

‘May Yahweh deal *hesed* with you...May Yahweh grant that you find a home’ (1.9) is two-edged: it may well convey her recognition that the women have treated her kindly; yet it is at the same time a way of distancing herself, as it wraps in piety her message to them to part from her. But even the piety is a little strained—for her perception is that these Moabite women have their own gods (cf. 1.15: ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods’).

Although Naomi initially appeared to bless her daughters-in-law by mentioning the God of Israel, she made it clear that Orpah was returning to her gods as she saw she returned to Moab. In other words, we can see that she did not truly want her daughters-in-law to receive God’s blessing; for Naomi also obviously recognised that Orpah obeyed her words and returned to the gods of Moab instead of the God of Israel. Instead, Ruth continued to go with Naomi to the land of Bethlehem (Rt. 1:14). And Naomi did not continue to urge Ruth to return to Moab (Rt. 1:18), which confirmed that Ruth’s heart was fixed (Rt. 1:18). Subsequently, the two women were able to reach Bethlehem (Rt. 1:19). What is remarkable is that when Naomi arrived in her homeland, the entire city of Bethlehem was in an uproar and the women asked if she was the real Naomi (Rt. 1:19). What kind of woman was Naomi? Why were so many women surprised by Naomi’s return from Moab to Bethlehem? At the same moment, “Naomi’s ambivalence toward Ruth is apparent when they arrive back in Bethlehem. Despite Ruth’s radical promise of solidarity to Naomi, she is ignored by the townswomen and by Naomi herself, who declares herself to be ‘empty’ when she returns to Bethlehem (1:21)” (Davis 2013:502). The women might have been able to ignore Ruth because they did not know her well. Nevertheless, the scene where Naomi, who knew Ruth’s thoughts well, ostracised Ruth in front of the women is problematic.¹⁰

What Naomi said to the women of Bethlehem is somewhat unexpected. She asked the women not to refer to her as her own name. Rather, she appealed to be called “a bitter.” The interesting part is that she was satirising the new title for herself and God’s acts toward her through a wordplay:

וַתֹּאמֶר אֶלֵיהֶן אֵל־תִּקְרָאנָהּ לִי נַעֲמִי קְרָאנָהּ לִי מָרָא כִּי־הִמָּר שָׂדֵי לִי מָאֵד

And she said to them [f. pl.], “Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has made me a bitter indeed” (Rt. 1:20).

Here she was saying that they [f. pl.] were them [f. pl.]. There is no confusion on her part about them [m. pl.] and them [f. pl.]. In other words, it may mean that we can get a glimpse of her intentions now and then. What is also interesting about what Naomi said is that she seems to have been blaming God:

אָנֹכִי מִלְאָה הֵלַכְתִּי וְרִיקָהם הִשִּׁיבֵנִי יְהוָה לָמָּה תִּקְרָאנָהּ לִי נַעֲמִי וַיְהוָה עָנָה בִּי וְשָׂדֵי תָרַע לִי

“I went out full, but the Lord has brought me empty. Why do you [f. pl.] call me Naomi? The Lord has answered against me, and the Almighty has done evil to me” (Rt. 1:21)?

¹⁰ As Fewell and Gunn (1988:100) put it, Naomi “speaks as though her loyal companion Ruth were invisible.” She may have been enjoying being the centre of attention, surrounded by so many women.

She left her homeland of Bethlehem with her husband and two sons and entered the land of Moab (Rt. 1:1). It is obvious that serving God in the land of Moab at that time was not possible, because there were no priests who served the Lord. It would certainly be wrong to think that it would have been possible to go to a remote area and lead a religious life alone with just a Bible, as it is now.¹¹ In other words, they did not simply leave the land of Bethlehem and enter the land of Moab to escape famine. That act was bound to have a strong impact on their religious life. But how could she confess that God was the cause of the unfortunate events she encountered after leaving Bethlehem? This story is reminiscent of one in Genesis:

וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה עִמָּדִי הִיא נָתַתָּה לִּי מִן־הָעֵץ וְאֶכֶל

And the man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate” (Gn. 3:12).

Explaining the reason for his disobedience to God, Adam blamed his wife, Eve. Moreover, his words made it seem as if he was blaming God as well.¹²

When Naomi and Ruth arrived in the land of Bethlehem, it was the time when farmers were harvesting barley (Rt. 1:22). What was unusual is that Ruth told Naomi that she wanted to go gleaning (Rt. 2:2). In other words, the question is why Ruth and not Naomi suggested that first. Bethlehem was Naomi’s homeland. Ruth was a young foreign woman who had just arrived in the land. Naomi was in a position to advise her fully as to where she should go if Ruth wanted to glean in a field. But Ruth did not know anything about the land. Even so, Ruth happened to glean in Boaz’s field, and was granted mercy by him, allowing her to continue gleaning in his field. When Ruth told Naomi about the news, she told her that he was one of their redeemers as well as one of their relatives. Here is another interesting line from her:

וַתֹּאמֶר נַעֲמִי אֶל־רִוּת כִּלְתָתָהּ טוֹב בְּתִי כִּי תֵצְאִי עִם־גֵּעְרוֹתַי וְלֹא יִפְגְּעוּ־בְךָ בְּשָׂדֵה אֲחֵר

And Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, “It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, lest they [m. pl.] meet with you in another field” (Rt. 2:22).¹³

Who were they that Naomi was talking about? Was she confusing them [f. pl.] with them

¹¹ Even if we read the book of Ruth from the standpoint of “the inclusivists” as De Villiers and Le Roux (2016:2–3) suggest, it seems difficult to argue that there were priests for the God of Israel in the land of Moab. As Adamczewski (2023:7) puts it, “although numerous scholars argue that the inclusive rhetoric of the book of Ruth strongly opposes the exclusivist rhetoric of the books of Ezra–Nehemiah in the issue of mixed marriages with foreign women, the main purpose of writing the book of Ruth seems to be different than answering the...problem.” In its place, the aim of the narrative appears to encourage that “Israelite identity should not be determined by descent only but mainly in terms of religion: that is, the ‘true Israel’ should consist of all who worship the God of Israel, YHWH” (De Villiers 2019:6). See also Fischer (2007:146–147).

¹² Lu rightly states that “most people wrongly attribute the suffering or losses to the punishment from the hand of God” (2016:64). We often praise ourselves for our good deeds and blame God for our mistakes. Cf. Job 4:1–21.

¹³ LaCocque (2004:79) disputes that “a young widow could constitute an even stronger temptation, since having intercourse with her was not punishable by any legal means.” But was that really the case? If so, for instance, why did Judah order Tamar to be killed when he found out she was pregnant (Gn. 38:24)? I cannot see what he is seeing.

[m. pl.] again, as in Ruth 1:8b–9a? Absolutely not, because it makes no sense. Why would Boaz’s maids meet Ruth in another field? As in 1:8b–9a, Naomi was saying that intentionally. That is, she was talking about some men. When Naomi told Ruth not to meet the men in another field, she probably meant that she was not to have sexual encounters with them.¹⁴ If so, then she was insulting her now, since Ruth never did such a thing before. She may have been criticising her ancestors the Moabites in a roundabout way over again. Then, by making this accusation, she was also sarcastically criticising her all over again.

Here is where things get weird. Naomi suddenly told Ruth that she would be given a place to rest:

ותאמר לה נעמי תמונה בתי הלא אבקשלה מנזם אשר ייטב לה ועמה הלא בעז מדעתנו אשר הית את נערוותיו הנה הוא זכה את גרן השערים הלילה ורתצתו נסכת ושמת (שמלתך) [שמלתך] עלך (ורדת) [ורדת] הגרן אל תודעי לאיש עד פלתו לאכל ולשתות ויהי בשכבו ונלעת את המקום אשר ישכב שם ונאת וגלית מרגלותיו (ושכבת) [ושכבת] והוא יגיד לך את אשר תעשין

And Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, shall I not seek a resting place for you, that it may be well with you? And now is not Boaz our kinsman, with whose maids you were? Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight.¹⁵ Then wash yourself and anoint yourself and put your garments on yourself and go down to the threshing floor; do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.¹⁶ And it shall be when he lies down, that you shall observe the place where he lies, and you shall go and uncover his feet and lie, then he shall tell you what to do¹⁷” (Rt. 3:1–4).

Isn’t it Naomi, who had not told Ruth, who had lived in Moab and had come to Bethlehem for the first time, anything about what to do, who suddenly started talking about providing her daughter-in-law with a new place to live? But what is even more astonishing is how to get it. Naomi was telling Ruth to secretly go to Boaz’s place and lie down next to him at night after he had finished the harvest and eaten and drunk. Why did Naomi tell Ruth to secretly go to Boaz? Why did she even tell her to secretly lie next to him? If it had been Naomi’s true will for Ruth to remarry Boaz, she could have asked him directly (or indirectly) what his will was. Furthermore, she would have been able to formally proceed with this matter. But why did she make Ruth do all this secretly to Boaz?¹⁸ As we have seen before, this is reminiscent of what Lot’s daughters did to their

¹⁴ Hubbard asks, “[W]as Naomi’s aim to divert Ruth from potential romances with workers until her relationship with Boaz could run its course? Did she want to guard Ruth’s chastity” (1988:191)? One of his answers is that it is possible.
¹⁵ Cf. Is. 41:14–16.
¹⁶ Sasson (1979:67) claims that we “have cuneiform evidence that in Mesopotamian society bathing, anointing, and donning one’s fineries were activities, possibly ritualistic if not ceremonial in nature, which engaged the bride as she prepared herself for marriage.” But the question that arises for us is why did she try to marry them in this illicit way?
¹⁷ It is noteworthy that the “verb *gh* in the Piel (‘to uncover, make visible’ something hidden) occurs primarily in expressions describing varieties of illicit sexual relations” (Hubbard 1988:203). Besides, “the term ‘feet’ could be used as a euphemism for sexual organs” (Hubbard 1988:203). See more examples in Ex. 4:25, Jdg. 3:24, 1 Sm. 24:4, Dt. 28:57, Ezk. 16:25.
¹⁸ Unfortunately, she could not answer them as they should be.

father (Gn. 19:31–38). Did Naomi think that Ruth should also behave like them? It appears most likely that she just wanted her to be like her ancestors.¹⁹ Ruth did as Naomi commanded her (Rt. 3:5–6). She observed where Boaz was eating and drinking and lying in good spirits (Rt. 3:7). Then she lay down beside him unnoticed (Rt. 3:7). Boaz woke up in the middle of the night and was startled (Rt. 3:8) because he noticed a woman lying next to him (Rt. 3:8). Ruth revealed to Boaz who she was, and that he was to be their redeemer (Rt. 3:9). What is interesting is that Ruth did not tell Boaz that all of this was what Naomi told her to do.²⁰ In its place, through Boaz, Ruth learned something that she did not know. That is, they had a closer relative than Boaz (Rt. 3:12). Boaz promised Ruth that he would inquire about his intentions (Rt. 3:13). Boaz also promised her that if he would not fulfil his obligation, he would fulfil it himself (Rt. 3:13). He made one important request to Ruth as well. That is, other people should not know that Ruth came to him that night (Rt. 3:14). In fact, what Naomi asked Ruth to do could be a problem not only for Ruth but also for Boaz. This is because, without going through any legal process, she came to him secretly at night and lay down next to him. In addition, because they had a closer relative than Boaz, what Naomi instructed Ruth to do was deceitful. Anyhow he allowed her to return safely (Rt. 3:15).

After hearing this affair from Ruth, Naomi appears to have given her her first proper advice:²¹

וְתֹאמַר שְׂבִי בְתִי עַד אֲשֶׁר תִּדְעִין אֵיךְ יִפֹּל דָּבָר כִּי לֹא יִשְׁקֹט הָאִישׁ כִּי־אִם־כָּלָה הַדְּבָר הַיּוֹם

And she said, “Sit still, my daughter, until you know how he falls a matter, for the man will not be quiet until he has finished the matter today” (Rt. 3:18).

Did Naomi want Boaz to handle the matter well? From Ruth’s perspective, it made sense for her to wait for Boaz to handle the matter well. But it is questionable whether Naomi wanted Boaz to handle the matter well as well. The Hebrew verb נָפַל is used a total of two times in the narrative. The first is when Ruth fell on her face in Ruth 2:10. Next, it is used when Naomi was speaking about Boaz. The reason Ruth dropped her face before Boaz was so that she could thank him. Here it describes how Boaz would drop a matter. It could mean to see how the matter would play out.²² So, what did Naomi really want from Boaz now? She may not have been rooting for him to do a good job, because what she said above could be interpreted as meaning that she simply wanted to see how he would do it, rather than that she earnestly hoped that he would do it well. Nonetheless, it is unexpected that she knew that he would finish that work “today.”

Chapter 4 describes in detail the scene in which Boaz was confirmed as the redeemer for Ruth. The anonymous redeemer abdicated his duties before ten elders and many

¹⁹ That this was wrong has become even clearer later through the words of Boaz’s instructions to Ruth. Moreover, Boaz will have solved this matter legally on his own. Adelman agrees that instead “of consummating relations of an illicit or deceptive nature, the two recognize each other, and Boaz then presents their case for public recognition by the gates of the law” (2017:119).

²⁰ I wonder how he would have handled it if he had known that what Ruth had done to Boaz had been something Naomi had told her to do.

²¹ We see that people usually have both good and bad qualities. But there still seems to have been a thorn in the side of what she was saying to her daughter-in-law at this stage.

²² Cf. the NASB translation of Rt. 3:18a: “Then she said, ‘Wait, my daughter, until you know how the matter turns out.’”

others, thereby officially declaring his rights to be transferred from himself to Boaz (Rt. 4:1–10). As Hubbard (1988:231) puts it, “this one is a formal, legal process told in the language of legal discourse.” This incident was in sharp contrast to the case that Naomi ordered Ruth to do in Chapter 3, which was not only legally unsanctioned but also morally problematic. Eventually, Boaz took Ruth as his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son (Rt. 4:13). The women who had given Naomi a boisterous welcome when she had returned from Moab to Bethlehem appeared once again and named the son of Ruth Obed (Rt. 4:14–17).²³ What is noteworthy is that they were praising Naomi, not Ruth (Rt. 4:14–15). Even more notable is the following scene:

וַתִּקַּח נָעֲמִי אֶת־הַלֵּל וַתִּשְׁתְּהוּ בְּסִיּוּמָהּ וַתְּהַיֵּי לּוֹ לְאִמָּנָה

And Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom and became a nurse for him (Rt. 4:16).²⁴

Naomi took Obed, and she held him to her bosom, then she got to raise him. All of this was weird enough. Naomi did not just hold Obed in her care for a moment. She became the caregiver for him. The impressive point is that she was holding him to her bosom. Ruth, who had just given birth, certainly had a bosom in which to raise him. Naomi, in contrast, probably did not. What is the characteristic idea shown in this scene? Perhaps it describes the jealousy and greed of a woman who was neither qualified nor capable of raising a child to take the place of another woman who was fully qualified to do so.

The genealogy at the end of the book of Ruth surprises us all; because Obed is recorded as the son of Boaz, not the son of Elimelech:

וְאַלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת פֶּרֶץ פֶּרֶץ הוֹלִיד אֶת־הַצֶּרוּן וְהַצֶּרוּן הוֹלִיד אֶת־רָם וְרָם הוֹלִיד אֶת־עֲמִינָדָב וְעֲמִינָדָב הוֹלִיד אֶת־נַחֲשׁוֹן וְנַחֲשׁוֹן הוֹלִיד אֶת־שַׁלְמֹה וְשַׁלְמֹה הוֹלִיד אֶת־בְּעֻזָּה וְבְעֻזָּה הוֹלִיד אֶת־בּוֹאֵז וְבּוֹאֵז הוֹלִיד אֶת־יֵשׁוּעַ וְיֵשׁוּעַ הוֹלִיד אֶת־דָּוִד

And these are the generations of Perez:²⁵ Perez begat Hezron, and Hezron begat Ram, and Ram begat Amminadab, and Amminadab begat Nahshon, and Nahshon begat Salmon, and Salmon begat Boaz, and Boaz begat Obed, and Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat Davd²⁶ (Rt. 4:18–22).

The alarming fact about the genealogy is not simply that Elimelech was replaced by Boaz. Due to the nature of the genealogy, it is not possible to change only the name of Elimelech to Boaz. This is because in order to change Elimelech to Boaz, the names of all their ancestors who lived before them had to be changed as well.²⁷ We can find a

²³ It seems remarkable that “this is the lone OT example of name giving by someone other than a parent” (Hubbard 1988:276). Cf. Gn. 35:17; 38:28, 1 Sm. 4:20, 2 Sm. 12:25.

²⁴ A nurse above means “someone who nurtures a dependent child either in the absence of or on behalf of its natural parents” (Hubbard 1988:265). See 2 Sm. 4:4, 2 Ki 10:1,5. Cf. Nm. 11:12, Es. 2:7, Is. 49:23.

²⁵ Sakenfeld rightly denotes that “the introductory phrase, ‘Now these are the descendants,’ joins this list to the genre of many such lists in Genesis” (1999:85).

²⁶ As LaCocque puts it, one “may be somewhat astonished that the genealogy is not that if Elimelech by Mahlon and Chilion, since it was their line that was at issue in the core of the book (the parable)” (2004:148–149). It is not clear how this result was achieved, but the important thing is that it was most likely the narrator’s intention to show the genealogy.

²⁷ “Eccles. 10:8 observes that he who breaks down a fence may be bitten by a snake.... The snake-bite was taken

story similar to this in Genesis. In Genesis 38, Judah's son Er married Tamar, but he died sonless (Gn. 38:6–7). His brother Onan went to Tamar to make a son for the dead, but he died without achieving the purpose (Gn. 38:8–10). Judah had another son named Shelah, but he kept him away from Tamar; because he was afraid that he too would die like his brothers (Gn. 38:11). Tamar tricked Judah into conceiving twins and giving birth to sons, whose names were Perez and Zerah (Gn. 38:27–30). What is notable is that Tamar's sons, Perez and Zerah, were recorded as the sons of Judah, not as the sons of Er:

וּבְנֵי יְהוּדָה עֵר וְאוֹנָן וְשֵׁלָה וְפֶרֶץ וְזֵרַח וַיָּמָת עֵר וְאוֹנָן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיִּהְיוּ בְנֵי־פֶרֶץ הַחַצְרוֹן וְחַמּוּל
And the sons of Judah: Er and Onan and Shelah and Perez and Zerah; but Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan. And the sons of Perez were Hezron and Hamul (Gn. 46:12).

As LaCocque puts it, “Ruth brings Tamar’s audacity to fruition while performing an act of similar audacity” (2004:149). Tamar gave birth to Perez, the son of Judah, and Ruth gave birth to Obed, the son of Boaz. And they all have another thing in common; they all form one genealogy. Therefore, the genealogy in Ruth 4:18–22 should be considered as “an integral part of the book” (LaCocque 2004:148).

Conclusion

We have examined and evaluated Naomi’s words and actions in the book of Ruth. In the beginning, she ordered her daughters-in-law to return to Moab while they were on their way from Moab to Bethlehem. If Naomi really wanted her daughters-in-law to receive God’s blessing, she would not have sent them back to Moab; they would never have been able to serve God in Moab. If Naomi actually wanted her daughters-in-law to receive God’s blessing, she must have taken them to Bethlehem. Therefore, it seems certain that she was deceiving her daughters-in-law when she blessed them in the name of God and told them to return to Moab. Of course, their lives would have been more comfortable in a social context if they had returned to their homeland. However, it appears certain that they could never have served God and lived in anticipation of the Lord’s blessing in Moab. Henceforth it can be interpreted differently that Naomi blessed Ruth and Orpah in a grammatically incorrect way at the time. She must not have sincerely wanted to bless them. That is why Naomi did not even introduce Ruth to the women who greeted her when she arrived in Bethlehem. For the same reason, Naomi did not tell Ruth in advance which field she would have been better off gleaning. Naomi even tried to cause a scandal for Ruth and Boaz by having Ruth approach Boaz in a morally and legally wrong way. Perhaps she also did not like the man who helped her daughter-in-law. But Boaz was able to resolve all the matters, and the beautiful couple was able to tie the knot on the record. Nevertheless, Naomi took Ruth’s son Obed and tried to make him her own. However, the narrator certainly states the reader that Obed’s father was Boaz, not Elimelech. In other words, the narrator obviously tells the reader that the true nurturer of Obed, that is, his true mother, was Ruth, not Naomi.²⁸ In the end, Naomi’s deception did

as a divine punishment...” (Jackson 2010:244). As he observes, all of these things can only be thought of as the work of the Almighty.

²⁸ It might be that the “first child born to Ruth and Boaz would own Elimelech’s family property and keep him

not bear fruit. Ruth, who was true to her mother-in-law and true to her God, was the one who was able to become the true mother of the great son:

וְאֵלֹהֵי אֲמִי אֱלֹהֵי

“Then your God shall be my God” (Rt. 1:16b).

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and his sons alive in association with it” (Hubbard 1988:256). However, the narrator is now changing the obvious into the not-so-obvious.

140–149.

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