

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON NAOMI'S SHREWDNESS¹

Robert L. Hubbard, Jr.

Long ago, Hermann Gunkel, father of the modern study of Ruth, disparaged the any attempts to find a central teaching in the book: 'To anyone who still wants to take away a "teaching" ... we might command this one: that men would do well to be on guard before beautiful and clever women who want to get their way.'² Though facetious, the remark correctly perceived the cleverness of Naomi's plan in chapter 3. How shrewd of that aged widow to dispatch young Ruth to propose marriage to Boaz in the dead of night, alone, at a distant threshing floor (3:1-13). At the same time, the episode raises a profound theological question. Scholars have long recognized the role which divine providence plays in the book.³ In short, unlike other texts, Ruth portrays Yahweh's guidance as behind the scenes—immanent in events, in the decisions of the human heart—not in dramatic divine intervention at centre stage. Consequently, the book elevates the actions of its characters to a place of unusual importance. It pictures human initiative as the means through which Yahweh acts.⁴

The question is, how did the story-teller view the interrelationship between Yahweh's sovereign guidance and

¹ A paper dedicated to the memory of Colin Hemer. My family still remembers his hospitality the first night we arrived at Tyndale House in March, 1987.

² H. Gunkel, 'Ruth', in *Reden und Aufsätze* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 1913) 89.

³ R.M. Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth* (Philadelphia, Fortress 1969) 16, 19, described it as Yahweh's hidden, continuous all-causality; cf. G. Gerleman, *Ruth. Das Hohelied* (BK XVIII; Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener 21981) 9; E.F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth* (AB 7; Garden City, Doubleday 1975) 29-30; H.W. Hertzberg, *Die Bücher Josua, Richter, Ruth* (ATD 9; Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht 1969) 259-60; et al. Among recent interpreters, only Sasson openly resist theological interpretation of Ruth; cf. J.M. Sasson, 'Divine Providence or Human Plan?', *Interp* 30 (1976) 417-18.

⁴ W.S. Prinsloo, 'The Theology of the Book of Ruth', *VT* 30 (1980) 338-41; cf. Campbell (1975) 29 S.B. Gurewicz, 'Some Reflections on the Book of Ruth', *AusBR* 5 (1956) 49.

human initiative? Are the human characters active participants or passive pawns in a large, divine manoeuvre? What unique roles, if any, do each—God and humans—play in the operation of divine providence in the story? What understanding of faith influenced the narration? This paper probes these questions through reflection on Naomi's plan as seen in the context of Yahweh's actions in the book.⁵

I. The Role of Yahweh in the Book

As is well-known, the book reports Yahweh's direct action on only two occasions. Hence, it tells how he 'visited' (*pqd*) Israel by giving her food after famine (1:6b) and 'gave' (*ntn*) Ruth conception after marriage to Boaz (4:13). What is significant, however, is the shadow which these two events cast over what follows. The gift of food steers the story away from tragedy toward a more hopeful horizon. By ending the famine in Israel (cf. 1:1), the food-gift leads Naomi back to Bethlehem from her Moabite exile (1:6a). Her arrival 'at the beginning of the barley harvest' (1:22b) facilitates the meeting of Ruth and Boaz in chapter 2. As for the gift of conception (4:13), it culminates the quest for an heir for Elimelech. This removes the major potential catastrophe which had hung heavily over the story from the beginning (1:5, 11-13, 20-21).

For the most part, however, only comments by the characters, not the author, keep alive an awareness of Yahweh's possible involvement in events. In chapter 1, Naomi's two bitter outbursts probably serve this end (vv. 11-13, 20-21). For example, in 1:21 she bitterly complains, 'I went out full, but Yahweh brought me back empty.' She lays the blame for her miserable fate directly at Yahweh's door. The accusation stirs the reader to ask, 'Does Yahweh have some hand in this tragedy?' In the remaining chapters, wishes, blessings, and oaths subtly hint at the possibility of divine activity. For example, blessings between Boaz and his workers (2:4) and by Naomi and Boaz (2:19, 20; 3:10) invoke God's participation in

⁵ Consideration of the actions of either Ruth or Boaz might serve this purpose just as well (see 3:9; cf. 3:1-4; 4:1-10). Since Naomi is the story's main human character, and since it is her scheme which resolves the plot (3:1-4, 6-13), it is appropriate to focus upon her role.

events. The climactic praise of Naomi's neighbours (4:14) sums up the import of these indirect references to God: Yahweh alone has prevented Naomi from enduring her later years without a redeemer.

Finally, one observes the importance which Yahweh's role as rewarder of human deeds plays in the story. Hence, in 1:8-9, Naomi asks Yahweh to reward Ruth and Orpah for their *hesed* toward the dead and toward herself, specifically, *menûhâ* ('a place of settled security') in the home of a new husband.⁷ In 2:12, Boaz draws language from Israel's commercial life to wish: 'May Yahweh repay (*yesallem*) your deed; and may your age (*maskoret*) be paid in full (*selemâ*)'.⁸ In both cases, the appeal is to Yahweh as rewarder of those, like Ruth, who practise such remarkable devotion. Both base their appeal on commendable human actions. Taken together, one suspects that pay-day will bring Ruth a new husband, and that, in fact, is what happens (4:13).⁹ This is important theologically: the portrayal of Yahweh as rewarder creates reader expectancy that the wishes may come true and, if so, that Yahweh has answered them.

Several implications flow from these observations. First, Yahweh's initiative is crucial to subsequent events. His gift of food heads Naomi home and permits Ruth and Boaz to meet, thus creating hope for a happy ending. His gift of conception guarantees the realization of that hope. Second, his direct intervention provides what only Yahweh can provide—the sustenance of life, both 'seed' for food (chap. 2) and 'seed' for family (chaps. 3-4). This implies, further, that while human acts dominate the story, they have their limitations.¹⁰ However capable or creative otherwise, human effort cannot

⁷ For additional wishes, see 4:11-2. The single oath appears in 3:13. On the entire subject, see Hals (1969) 11-9.

⁸ For the commerce language, see R.L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1988) 165-7. According to verse 12, the 'deed' which earned Ruth that future divine 'paycheck' was her abandonment of Moab and voluntary migration to Israel after her husband's death.

⁹ As the thematic follow-up to 1:8-9 and 2:11-2, Boaz's remark that Ruth's later *hesed* has outdone her earlier one (3:10) also hints at further rewards for Ruth.

¹⁰ Prinsloo (1980) 339, 341.

penetrate the border of Yahweh's exclusive province. To paraphrase a later writer, 'Some plant, some water, but God gives the increase' (1 Cor. 3:6). Third, between his direct actions, Yahweh relates to the story as an immanent presence which grants human efforts success. That also creates expectancy in the reader who, when wishes come true—even through human agency—presumes that Yahweh has acted.

Lastly, this underlying theology creates a hermeneutic of how to perceive God's activity in the absence of a divine word of explanation. That is, one is to suspect Yahweh's activity in 'accidents' or strange coincidences. For example, that Ruth 'just happens' to land on Boaz's field when seeking a spot to glean—and on the very occasion that Boaz himself inspects the harvest (2:3-4)—suggests the presence of Yahweh's guiding hand. The same may be said of other 'coincidences'—the widows' arrival precisely at the beginning of harvest (1:22) and the meeting of Boaz and the other kinsman at the city gate (4:1). Further, one is to see Yahweh's work behind unexpected opportunities to realize one's own earlier wishes. Hence, as I will suggest below, in Boaz's extraordinary generosity (chap. 2) Naomi senses a divinely-given answer to her wish for Ruth's marriage (1:9). As a person of faith, she presumes that such incidents derive from Yahweh because of the latter's role as rewarder.

In sum, Yahweh plays a double role in the story. As transcendent initiator, he provides what only he can—fertility of field and family, and rewards for well-doing—and arranges circumstances favourable for subsequent events. At the same time, as immanent facilitator, his unseen presence causes human actions to succeed.¹¹

II. The Role of Naomi's Shrewdness

Consider the plan of Naomi in chapter 3. She lays out the two premises which underlie it. First, she asks (v. 1), 'Is not Boaz,

¹¹ Gerleman (1981) 9-10 describes the arena of Yahweh's activity as the human heart. That is, he directly guides the decisions of the story's human characters. This is doubtful. Strikingly, the author of Ruth eschewed the interpretive theological comment concerning divine guidance of human choice found elsewhere; cf. Judges 14:4; Joshua 11:20; 2 Samuel 17:14.

the one with whose girls you have been, our relative (*moda 'tanû*)?' Literarily, the line recalls two earlier texts--2:1 where the narrator first introduces Boaz as Naomi's 'friend' (reading Ketib *meyudda'*), and 2:20b where Naomi identifies him as a 'kin-man-redeemer' (*go'el*).¹² Her point is that his kinship—and presumably the duties which go with it—makes Boaz a likely person to approach concerning marriage to a woman in Ruth's circumstances. Secondly, she notes (v. 2), 'Behold, he is winnowing barley tonight.'¹³ Here Naomi stresses the place to contact Boaz about the matter at hand—a secluded spot suitable for a private chat.

As for the plan itself, Ruth must first prepare herself to meet Boaz. She is to bathe, anoint herself, and dress up (v. 3). Extra-biblical parallels using 'bathe, anoint, dress up' together suggest that Naomi may have instructed Ruth to dress as a bride.¹⁴ Obviously, she is to look (and smell!) her alluring best. After Boaz has dined and fallen asleep, she is secretly to approach him, uncover his *margelôt*, and lie down. The much-discussed *margelôt* requires a comment. Elsewhere it occurs only in Dan. 10:6 where it means 'legs', a meaning which Campbell accepts in Ruth 3.¹⁵ While possible, several arguments support the rendering 'place of feet'. First, since the context of Ruth 3 and Daniel 10 differ considerably, it is possible that the word has a different meaning in Ruth 3. Secondly, the fact that *margelôt* is cognate to the word *regel* ('foot') points toward a meaning closer to 'foot' than 'legs'. Thirdly, the *-ôt* ending suggests a 'plural of local extension' referring to a place or area.¹⁶ Verses 7, 8, 14 definitely call for a local sense. Thus, the word probably means 'place of feet' and is the antonym of *mera'asôt*, 'place of head' (Gen. 28:11, 18; 1 Sam. 19:13, 16; 1 K.

¹² For a defence of the Ketib at 2:1, see Hubbard, *Book of Ruth* 132-3.

¹³ Heb. *zoreh 'et goren hasse'orîm*, lit. 'winnowing the threshing floor of barley'. For this unusual expression, see Hubbard, *Book of Ruth* 199-200.

¹⁴ For the evidence see J.M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins 197 67; cf. Hertzberg, *Josua, Richter, Ruth* 274; P. Humbert, 'Art et leçon de l'histoire de Ruth', *RTP* 26 (1938) 274; 2 Samuel 12:20; Ezekiel 16:8—10; Esther 2:12; Judith 10:3.

¹⁵ Campbell (1975) 121.

¹⁶ GKC, §§ 124a-b.

19 6).¹⁷ If so, Naomi intended Ruth to lay back the part of Boaz's garment which covered his feet. In my view, the action is a symbolic gesture, not a vague reference to sexual relations between the two. Then, adds Naomi, Boaz will tell Ruth what she should do.

Whatever its background, Naomi's scheme apparently is a bold, risky one. If Hosea 9:1 is any clue, Israel regarded threshing floors as the place where prostitutes did business.¹⁸ The author intensifies the scene's sensuality by lacing his description with several sexual double entendres.¹⁹ Thus, the possibility that Boaz and other citizens might misinterpret Ruth's visit as that of a prostitute to a customer threatens Naomi's plan. Further, neither Naomi nor Ruth can anticipate how Boaz will react to the visit. Would such feminine forwardness flatter, embarrass, or anger him? Finally, in 3:14 Boaz betrays an awareness that, were their meeting to become popular knowledge, unspecified but certainly unpleasant consequences might follow. In my view, the same concern for secrecy—for reasons which must not detain us here—underlies Naomi's overall scenario (note that the two only actually talk in the middle of the night, v. 8).

For our purposes, however, three things are significant about this scheme. First, it follows up the kindness of Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer, toward Ruth in chapter 2. Apparently, in his kinship and kindness Naomi hears the knock of golden opportunity. In her ears, his plan to winnow grain that night amplifies that knock all the louder! Second, through the plan Naomi herself attempts to answer her earlier prayer that Yahweh grant Ruth a husband (1:8-9). The author signals this connection by a clever stylistic device, the use of two semantically synonymous but gender-opposite words from the same root. Derived from *nwh*, in the book of Ruth both *manôah* (masc., 3:1) and *menûhâ*, (fern., 1:9) mean 'permanent home' and refer

¹⁷ P. Joüon, *Ruth. Commentaire philologique et exégétique* (Rome, Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1953) 69; Sasson (1979) 69-70.

¹⁸ E. Robertson, 'The Plot of the Book of Ruth', *BJRL* 32 (1950) 216; B. Green, *A Study of Field and Seed Symbolism in the Biblical Story of Ruth* (unpubl. Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union 1980) 66.

¹⁹ E.g. the verbs *skb*, *bw'*, *yd'*. For others, see Campbell, *Ruth* 131-2.

specifically to remarriage.²⁰ Both words fall from the lips of Naomi in addresses to Ruth (with Orpah in 1:9). Ratner has shown that the use of paired cognates of different genders was a common literary device in the Hebrew Bible.²¹ In effect, the device achieved both semantic parallelism and stylistic variation. Thus though different words, the synonymity and etymology of *manôah/menûhâ*, make it likely that the ancient audience heard them as virtually the same word, at least in this book. The word-pair amounts to a form of word repetition. If so, when Naomi says *manôah*, we are to recall Naomi's earlier use of *menûhâ*.²² We are to conclude that, rather than wait for Yahweh to act (cf. 1:9), Naomi herself takes the initiative (3:1).

Thirdly, Naomi leaves nothing to chance. On the contrary, she attempts to line up as many odds as possible in her favour. The right approach seems all-important. The delicate situation excludes both casualness and directness. Ruth, the 'visitor', must discard sloppy, sweaty work-clothes for her most attractive outfit. Further, Naomi apparently wants to enlist the attitude of Boaz, the 'visitee', on her side. Hence, Ruth must wait until presumably good food and drink leave Boaz contented (see verse 3, 6). Finally, Naomi apparently delays the timing of their talk until well into the night. In my view, besides symbolizing Ruth's marriage proposal, the uncovering of his place-of feet (verse 9) aims to ensure a midnight conversation when the two were either alone or the only ones awake. That is, Boaz would awaken only when the increasing chill on his exposed feet had finally discomfited his sound sleep.²³

The important question, however, is how the author viewed this scheme theologically. Is Naomi portrayed with approval, disapproval, or indifference? Does her plan reflect admirable faith, deplorable unbelief, or nothing significant at

²⁰ Cf. S. Schwertner, *nûah*', *THAT* 1:43, 45.

²¹ R.J. Ratner, *Gender Problems in Biblical Hebrew* (unpubl. Ph.D. diss., Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion 1983) 105-9.

²² So Campbell, *Ruth* 116; Hertzberg, *Josua, Richter, Ruth* 273; Prinsloo, 'Theology of the Book of Ruth' 337.

²³ Joüon, *Ruth* 69-70 E. Cundall and L. Morris, *Judges. Ruth* (TOTC, Downers Grove InterVarsity 1968) 286.

all? Further, did the author assume any relationship of the plan to Yahweh's activity? At first glance, the questions seem unanswerable for the book contains no authorial commentary on the matter. On the other hand, there are slight indications that the author at least sympathized with Naomi's ploy. The story-teller apparently tells the tale with great pleasure. Witness the playful use of sexually suggestive language, the impersonal description of the characters ('the man', 'the woman'), and the sudden emergence of the other kinsman as a complication (v. 12). Further, the later praise of the neighbours (4:14) implies divine approval of the scheme and undoubtedly voices the author's own interpretation of the events leading to Obed's birth. In sum, the writer apparently viewed the approach to Boaz as at least appropriate if not necessary.²⁴

As for Yahweh's involvement, the author creates the impression that Yahweh is absent. The report of Naomi's plan lacks any reference to Yahweh, oath in his name, or invocation of his blessing. Unlike earlier chapters, references to God are infrequent and terse (see vv. 10, 13; cf. 1:8-9, 13, 16-17, 20-21; 2:4, 12, 19, 20; 4:11-12, 14). Dark night, secrecy and intrigue shroud the scene (vv. 6-15). The characters talk alone at an isolated threshing floor. The humans appear to operate autonomously, independent even of divine providence.²⁵ In sum, whatever role Yahweh plays elsewhere in the book, this scene apparently belongs to the human actors.

On the other hand, two lines of evidence suggest that the writer viewed Naomi's initiative as an appropriate response to God-given opportunity. First, the word repetition *menûhâ/manoah* (1:9; 3:1) noted above indicates this. It suggests that Naomi wants to answer her own prayer. Now the writer conceivably might have seen Naomi's prayer for Ruth (1:9) and Boaz's generosity toward her (2:8-16) simply as coincidental. Given the book's sense of providence, however, it seems more likely that he or she understand the coincidence as

²⁴ For the moment, we must set aside the oft-debated questions as to why Naomi approached Boaz, not the other kinsman, and why she resorted to such indirect means. For a discussion, see W. Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth. Das Hohe Lied. Die Klagelieder* (KAT 17/2; Gütersloh, Mohn 1962) 53.

²⁵ Campbell (1975) 130.

Yahweh's answer to Naomi's earlier petition. If so, the narrator also assumes that the opportunity which Naomi's strategy seizes is a God-given one.²⁶

Secondly the interpretative slant which Boaz's wish for Ruth (2:12) gives this scene confirms this. As a key thematic signal, it alerts the reader to watch for the appearance of Ruth's 'full wages' from Yahweh. Any benefits which accrue to Ruth—in this case, the winning of a husband—are to be read as Yahweh's payment, whatever the means used to obtain them. In sum, the story-teller portrays the opportunity for marriage which Boaz provides as Yahweh's action.

If so, something theologically significant emerges here. If 4:13 and 14 are any guide, the marriage of Ruth and Boaz and the birth of Obed are a work of Yahweh's intervention. He is the one who has not left Naomi without a kinsman-redeemer. Presumably, he has thereby paid Ruth off in full as Boaz had prayed. Those considerations put Naomi's clever scheme in a new light. The author apparently viewed it as continuing and advancing Yahweh's work. That is, from scattered places Yahweh had brought together the right people—a widow from Moab and an Israelite nobleman (chapter 2). He now lays a surprising opportunity before Naomi, the chance for Ruth to marry in answer to Naomi's prayer. Now it is Naomi's move. It is her responsibility to apply human ability to achieve what is, in the mind of the narrator, the divine purpose.

In sum, Naomi's role is both as responder to divine initiative and as advancer of its plans. Along with the actions of Ruth and Boaz (2:2-17; 3:9; 4:1-6), her shrewdness is the link which connects Yahweh's earlier direct intervention, the gift of food (1:6), with its sequel, the gift of conception (4:13).

²⁶ This assumption would be absolutely certain if the *'aser* clause in 2:20 refers to Yahweh, not Boaz, as the scholarly consensus avers. But Rebera has made a strong case that the reference is to Boaz; cf. B. Rebera, 'Yahweh or Boaz? Ruth 2:20 Reconsidered', *The Bible Translator* 36 (1985) 317-27; cf. N. Glueck, *Hesed in the Hebrew Bible*, tr A. Gottschalk (repr.; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1967) 41-2; Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation* 60 (tentative concurrence).

III. The Relationship Between Divine and Human Activity

In Naomi's scheme, how do divine and human activity interrelate? The narrator has two theological premises: first, that something of concern to Yahweh beckons for attention—here, an old widow needing an heir and a young one worthy of divine reward; second, that Yahweh rewards human good deeds.

Yahweh does what only he can do: as sovereign initiator, he sets events in motion by arranging the meeting of key characters in the right situation; as immanent presence, he then facilitates the success of his chosen human instruments. On the other hand, they respond to God-given opportunity by actively applying human ability to take full advantage of it. Yahweh acts in their actions; their acts are Yahweh's acts. By implication, one glimpses the author's view of faith: in cases like this, faith is the seizure of opportunities as God-given, the application of human ingenuity to reach divinely-honoured goals.

IV. Conclusion

In 1913, Gunkel chided those who sought a central teaching in Ruth by suggesting a facetious one: 'men would do well to be on guard before beautiful and clever women who want to get their way.' What he missed, however, is the key role in which the narrator casts those women. They are not passive pawns in some divine scheme. Rather, along with Yahweh himself, they are co-conspirators in solving several painful human crises. More importantly, they model for all later readers an active, expectant, responsible approach to the life of faith.