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A Study of Settings in Ruth

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Abstract (English)

This thesis sets the stage by exploring previous research on the book of Ruth, with particular emphasis on identifying lacunae in the fields of narrative criticism and studies that delve into various settings within the text. Through a nuanced exploration of both spatial and social setting, it not only defines the concept of 'setting' but also illuminates its pivotal role in sculpting the overall narrative structure and thematic depth. The employed methodology serves as a robust scaffold, laying the groundwork for the subsequent meticulous analysis presented in the body of the work.

Chapter 1 offers a fresh understanding of spatial settings in the Book of Ruth, employing an intertextual analysis to challenge and reevaluate conventional scholarly perspectives. This innovative approach yields a new interpretation of 'the field of Moab,' deconstructing its historical and literary assumptions. Moreover, it critically re-examines the field scene in Ruth 2, breaking new ground in the discourse about its social and cultural implications. This methodology is further applied to other major spatial settings in the text—specifically, the threshing floor and the city gate. These spaces are not merely geographical locales but are revealed to be dynamic, multi-layered settings with far-reaching social, cultural, and literary implications.

Chapter 2 focuses on social settings, initially situating the Book of Ruth within the context of the time of the Judges. Comparative studies between social conditions in Ruth and Judges address debated topics such as exogamy and the problematic understanding and adapted application of Levirate marriage. The chapter further investigates the application of gleaning customs in the fields, assesses the risks of potential sexual violence, and delves into other social traits that illuminate the unique social setting of Ruth. The chapter argues that the social milieu serves not merely as a backdrop but as a dynamic element that actively shapes character interactions and narrative progressions.

The third chapter synthesizes spatial and social settings with temporal setting, demonstrating the settings are intertwined to yield a richer understanding of the book of Ruth. Through analysis, it is argued that all settings act symbiotically to create a nuanced sociocultural landscape, guiding character development and informing narrative flow. For example, the

intricate setting confluence at the threshing floor in Ruth 3—where spatial, temporal, and social elements combine—serves as a microcosm of the complex interactions that shape the narrative.

In sum, this thesis concludes by emphasizing that settings in the Book of Ruth function as more than just passive backdrops; they are active participants shaping the narrative. This research is groundbreaking as it incorporates both spatial and social dimensions into a cohesive interpretive framework for understanding the Book of Ruth. It calls for a re-evaluation of conventional methods in biblical studies, proposing that this multidimensional approach not only enriches our understanding of biblical narratives but also broadens the scope of biblical criticism as an academic discipline.

Introduction

Research In Related Fields

General Overview of Ruth Research

One of the earliest interpretations of the book of Ruth can be found in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*. Within this work, Josephus enhances the narrative by adding numerous details, aiming to rectify potential ethical ambiguities present in the original story of Ruth (*Ant.* 5.318-337). The *Targum* to Ruth also adds background information, addresses interpretational issues, and clarifies the meaning of the Hebrew text in order to stress the central theme of this version of Ruth, namely the importance of observing the Torah. Accordingly, the Midrash *Ruth Rabbah* provides a wide range of rabbinic teaching structured around Ruth. Following this principle, the exegesis of medieval Jewish texts often builds upon previous interest and content. For instance, Rashi, following in the footsteps of his predecessors, frequently uses certain details of the text to pose a question that in turn introduces a teaching.¹

In the late nineteenth century, several novel topics of interest have moved discussions beyond and perhaps even separate from the rabbinic viewpoint; such topics include a growing awareness of Ruth's place within the Writings, the alleged presence of Aramaisms, and the need to explain the rites. The modern research on Ruth covers various other subjects, such as its authorship, canonical placement, theology, and feminist reading. This introduction only covers the subjects that are the most relevant (i.e., legal custom) to this research and the most discussed (i.e., genre and dating).

¹ For a detailed traditional exegesis, please see D. R. G. Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth* (Sheffield: Department of Biblical Studies, the University of Sheffield, 1977); Nosson Scherman and Zlotowitz Meir, *The Book of Ruth-Megillas Ruth: A New Translation, with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1976); Yitzhak I. Broch, *Ruth: The Book of Ruth in Hebrew and English with a Talmudic Midrashic Commentary* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1983).

Genre

As noted by Jeremy Schipper in his statement that “instead of discussing the single genre of the book of Ruth, one could analyze its use in multiple genres,”² scholars have the tendency to place Ruth within a number of genre categories. The earliest attempts to determine Ruth’s genre are likely to have been made by Hermann Gunkel, who identifies the story as a “novella” and accordingly divides it into eleven major scenes;³ according to him, Ruth is a pastoral story without evil characters and has no historical significance. However, E. Robertson argues that Ruth has historical value and thus defines it as a historical novel.⁴ Louise Pettibone Smith and T. Cleland James state that the structure of the book and “the consummate art” all suggest Ruth to be a “folk tale polished by generations of retelling.”⁵ Along a similar line, Jacob M. Myers notes that Ruth is a book of ancient nursery tales with many parallelisms, and for this reason he describes it as a poetic book.⁶ Based on Vladimir Propp’s theory of Russian folk stories, Jack M. Sasson identifies Ruth as a folktale with no historical basis.⁷ For Jr. Edward F. Campbell, Ruth’s genre is akin to a “short story”, a new literary form with “an artistic and elevated prose containing rhythmic elements” and an interest in both entertaining and instructing.⁸ In accordance with Campbell, Robert L. Hubbard agrees that Ruth belongs to the category of short stories, but he also emphasizes that “the heart of the story is historical,” which is a view that

² Jeremy Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2016), 18.

³ Hermann Gunkel, “Ruth.” In *Reden Und Aufsätze* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1913), 85.

⁴ E. Robertson, “The Plot of the Book of Ruth.” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 32, no. 1 (September 1949): 225-226.

⁵ Louise Pettibone Smith and T. Cleland James, “The Book of Ruth.” In *The New Interpreter’s Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible Including the Apocryphal/Deuterca*:1. Vol. 2. 1st Edition, 2nd Printing (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), 831.

⁶ Jacob M. Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1955), 33-42.

⁷ Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 214-215.

⁸ Jr. Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*. *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday: Yale University Press, 1975), 5.

differs from Sasson's stance.⁹ Along another line, Phyllis Trible describes the book as a human comedy, specifically "a story beginning in deepest despair has worked its way to wholeness and well-being."¹⁰ Following Trible, Nehama Aschkenasy also considers Ruth a comedy, namely for its predominance of dialogue and the clear division of the dramatic structure.¹¹ Similarly but from a different angle, Judy Fentress-Williams emphasizes Ruth's dramatic dialogues and refers to Ruth as a dialogic comedy.¹² Still, it has been suggested by other scholars, such as Kirsten Nielsen, that Ruth is a patriarchal narrative because, as in many patriarchal stories, Ruth concludes with a genealogy.¹³

Dating

Scholars also pay close attention to the dating of Ruth, that is, the context of the first addressees of the text. It is noted that a biblical text may have originated in a particular historical period but could have been later re-edited to respond to the new challenges. This way, the final text is likely not the production of one author but is recomposed by different authors/editors throughout time. This process of recomposition is popularly applied to studies on other biblical accounts, yet scholars generally accept that Ruth is of a unified text.¹⁴ Campbell was cited as a significant contributor on this issue; his work highlights analyses regarding both the reconstruction of Ruth's oral and literary history, as well as the criteria employed to establish the book's composition to a postexilic dating.¹⁵

⁹ Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1988), 48.

¹⁰ Phyllis Trible, *God and Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 195.

¹¹ Nehama Aschkenasy, "The Book of Ruth as Comedy: Classical and Modern Perspectives." In *Scrolls of Love* (Fordham University Press, 2006), xix-xx.

¹² Judy Fentress-Williams, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries: Ruth*. 3rd ed (Abingdon Press, 2012), 18.

¹³ Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary* (Louisville, Ky: SCM Press, 1997), 7

¹⁴ Exceptions include Brenner, who claims Ruth is based on two folktales, Naomi and Ruth. Athalya Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1985), 385.

¹⁵ Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 23-27.

As for the language of the story, Robert Gordis claims that the adoption of Aramaisms indicates Ruth's postexilic nature.¹⁶ However, Sasson points out that the usage of possible Aramaisms is very limited in Ruth,¹⁷ and thus this low frequency does not suffice in determining its dating. Frederic Bush conducts a comparison between the features of Standard Biblical Hebrew and Late Biblical Hebrew and draws the conclusion that Ruth was likely written at the beginning of the postexilic period. Nevertheless, Bush himself concurs that Ruth exhibits many characteristics of early biblical Hebrew.¹⁸

The ideology of Ruth is also considered an indication of Ruth's dating. As seen in the work by André Lacocque¹⁹ and also Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky,²⁰ there are scholars who support the notion of postexilic dating and believe that Ruth was written by the group of Israelites who opposed the exclusivist view of Ezra and Nehemiah. As David's ancestress, Ruth the Moabite was converted and accepted by the Israelite community, and thus it is argued that an Israelite's identity is not only defined by descent but also by religion. For some scholars, this openness to foreigners is evidence of pre-exilic dating, with Hubbard asserting that "it seems unlikely that such a placid book would emerge from the struggling, poverty-stricken postexilic community."²¹ According to Jonathan Grossman, the issue of dating should be examined in light of Ruth's purpose; he offers the viewpoint that "the book of Ruth's objective is

¹⁶ Robert Gordis, "Love, Marriage and Business in the Book of Ruth: A Chapter in Hebrew Customary Law." In *A Light unto My Path: Old Testament Studies*, edited by Howard N. Bream, Ralph D. Heim, and Carey A. Moore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), 244–46.

¹⁷ Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 244.

¹⁸ Frederic Bush, *Ruth-Esther, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 9* (Dallas, Texas: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1996), 32-43.

¹⁹ André Lacocque, *Ruth: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 25.

²⁰ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), xli.

²¹ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 28.

to sketch out a fitting model of behavior towards the weak and underprivileged member of society ... Ruth is especially fitting for the time of the Second Temple.”²²

In addition, legal customs such as Levirate marriages and shoe customs function as a reference point for dating. Scholars such as Georg Braulik²³ argue that the Levirate law in Deuteronomy 25 has been misinterpreted after centuries in Ruth’s context, leading to the book being assumed as a postexilic narrative. However, others see Ruth as representing a custom earlier than Deuteronomy.²⁴ Thus, according to Katrina J. Larkin, the disavowal of dating from legal customs demonstrates that “arguments from comparative law are almost as misdirected as those from linguistic evidence.”²⁵

In the recent discussion on the dating of Ruth, it can be seen that, while Schipper continues to support the postexilic view in the *Yale Anchor Bible* series, his discussion has evolved from an effort in substantiating dating considerations in the text to one that allows for a more open discussion for a broader and more theologically complex perspective.²⁶

Legal Customs

As briefly mentioned in the previous section, the legal customs in Ruth have received considerable attention; some such examples include the gleaning right, Geullah redemption for the field, the court scene at the city gate, and the custom of giving shoes. Even though some of them are presented differently, they all echo the Pentateuchal tradition and draw different opinions from scholars. One legal custom that has become the most frequently discussed topic is whether Levirate marriage is performed in Ruth.

²² Jonathan Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries (Das Alte Testament Im Dialog / An Outline of an Old Testament Dialogue)*. New edition. (Bern: Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2015), 21-22.

²³ Georg Braulik, “The Book of Ruth as Intra-Biblical Critique on the Deuteronomic Law.” *Acta Theologica* 19, no. 1 (1999): 1–20.

²⁴ For example, Julius A. Bewer, “The Ge’ullah in the Book of Ruth.” *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* XIX (1902): 143–148.

²⁵ Katrina J. Larkin, *Ruth and Esther, Old Testament Guides*. 1st ed (Sheffield: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1996), 21.

²⁶ Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 20-22.

Although rabbis have considered Ruth's marriage to be a Levirate marriage since the Talmud period, their interpretation of the text is based on exegetical assumptions. As a result, most modern scholars maintain very different views. For instance, Julius A. Bewer claims that the Levirate practice contained in Ruth is an interpolation inserted by the partisans of Nehemiah and Ezra to neutralize the effect of the book by suggesting that Boaz is only obligated to marry Ruth by law.²⁷ According to L. M. Epstein, the Levirate marriage and the Geullah marriage are clearly distinguished, and the latter is where Ruth's marriage is identified, as Boaz is not Malhon's brother.²⁸ A number of scholars follow this line of argument, including Ephraim Neufeld,²⁹ Sasson,³⁰ Beattie,³¹ Hubbard,³² and Nielsen,³³ claiming that the goel (or kinsman-redeemer) has the obligation to fulfill the Geullah marriage. Moreover, Bush points out another reason for objecting to the notion of a Levirate marriage in Ruth: "First and most importantly, the custom (Levirate Marriage) in Ruth does not possess any binding legal effect,"³⁴ as no candidates for Levirate marriage are commanded to fulfill the duties by either Naomi or Ruth and the society. Some scholars have found that Levirate marriage appears throughout Ruth in some form. By way of example, Grossman outlines how the concept of a Levirate marriage is interwoven in Ruth, though he maintains that these indications do not suffice to establish its existence.

Although a few scholars, such as H. H. Rowley, assert that a Levirate marriage in early Israelite society was not restricted to the sibling of the deceased husband, Boaz and Ruth's

²⁷ Bewer, "The Ge'ullah in the Book of Ruth," 143.

²⁸ L. M. Epstein, *Marriage Laws in the Bible and the Talmud* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: BRILL, 1942), 84-88.

²⁹ Ephraim Neufeld, *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws: With Special References to General Semitic Laws and Customs* (London: Longmans, Green and co, 1944), 42.

³⁰ Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 103, 119-36.

³¹ D. R. G. Beattie, "Ruth III." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 5 (1978): 39-48.

³² Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 56-57.

³³ Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 84-89.

³⁴ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 261.

marriage could be considered Levirate in nature.³⁵ A majority of modern scholars believe that Levirate customs do not exist, and other legal practices depart greatly from the original ones in Ruth. However, a noteworthy observation is made by Larkin, who points out that certain practices such as the adoption of the legal custom in Ruth may be “used simply as narrative devices”³⁶ by the author. As a development of Larkin’s argument, this study attempts to prove that the presentation of legal customs in Ruth could be a deliberate literary deployment of the author.

Narrative Criticism on Ruth

In analyzing biblical narratives, a definition on narrative criticism is firstly needed here, and one such is given by Mark Allan Powell as follows: “Narrative criticism focuses on stories in biblical literature and attempts to read these stories with insights drawn from the secular field of modern literary criticism.”³⁷ Narrative criticism treats the biblical narrative as an independent literary work of art, that is to be read “sequentially and completely with all its parts being related to the work as a whole,”³⁸ regardless of its author, its historical context, and the composition process. Using the same analytical tools as modern literary critics, biblical scholars analyze literary devices such as structure, plot, characterization, narrative progression, point of view, symbolism, intertextuality, and settings. Some of these devices are discussed in this section in detail, following a brief survey of key research regarding narrative criticism.

An early pioneer in the field of narrative criticism was Erich Auerbach, who views the Bible itself is a literary work and can be analyzed according to some ordinary literary critical techniques.³⁹ Since then, biblical narrative criticism has developed gradually, and many biblical scholars have contributed to this field. Among all the monographs, Robert Alter’s *Art of Biblical*

³⁵ H. H. Rowley, “The Marriage of Ruth.” *The Harvard theological review* 40, no. 2 (April 1947): 97.

³⁶ Larkin, *Ruth and Esther, Old Testament Guides*, 29.

³⁷ Mark Allan. Powell, “Narrative Criticism.” In *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, edited by Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans-Lightning Source, 1995), 239.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.

³⁹ Erich Auerbach and Raffel Burton, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2003), 11-20.

Narrative and Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* are deemed noteworthy, with the former being lauded by other scholars as having "revolutionized the way in which scholars read *the Bible*."⁴⁰ In particular, Alter demonstrates narrative techniques, including type-scenes, repetition, and characterization, and asserts the wholeness and inner connection of the Bible. Sternberg in his book emphasizes the importance of ideological factors in biblical narratives. By means of a narrative analysis, he introduces three principles: the ideological principle, the historiographic principle, and the aesthetic principle, along with other important narrative techniques for the study of the Bible.

Although Campbell, Sasson, and others have all been sensitive to the literary approach in their treatments of Ruth, research on Ruth based on narrative criticism is likely to have started in the 1970s. In 1978, Tribble provided an in-depth analysis of Ruth's plot, characters, and construction of the novel.⁴¹ In *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, Adele Berlin presents an analysis of Ruth's construction and shows how the literary work is constructed using multiple artistic techniques.⁴² Alter also analyzes some segments of Ruth and gives testimony to the superb narrative art of the Bible and to the inner relation between Ruth and the Bible in general.⁴³ In a similar manner, Athalya Brenner-Idan theoretically describes the social character of ancient Israelite women, including Ruth.⁴⁴

In the context of the aforementioned research, the structure of Ruth has been studied in great detail. Hubbard divides the text into two main parts: the report (1:1-4:17) and the genealogy (4:18-22). In a content analysis, the first section is further divided into four subunits.⁴⁵ In his study, M. D. Gow attempts to find the relations between keywords and parallelism, which

⁴⁰ Anthony Weiss, "An Alter-Ed Perspective on the Bible." *The Forward* (November 27, 2011).

⁴¹ Tribble, *God and Rhetoric of Sexuality (Overtures to Biblical Theology)*.

⁴² Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983), 83-107.

⁴³ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 58-60.

⁴⁴ Athalya Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1985), 115-122.

⁴⁵ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 74-75.

form the basis of his division.⁴⁶ In part following Gow, Nielsen divides Ruth into twelve units and discusses each in detail.⁴⁷ A useful summary of the research history on the structure of Ruth is provided by M. C. A. Korpel in his book *The Structure of Ruth*.⁴⁸

Several studies have been conducted on the narrative progression in Ruth. Moshe Garsiel examines how Ruth's relationship with Boaz contributes to the story and its structure.⁴⁹ Tod Linafelt and K. Beal Timothy attempt to resolve the unresolved issues, and they maintain that these issues are integral to the narrative's development.⁵⁰ In addition, Grossman analyzes Ruth in extensive detail, tracing its narrative sequence via three interwoven paradigms: the theological understanding that human actions can shape reality, the moral-legal perspective favoring the spirit of the law over its letter and social conventions, and the conviction that monarchy must be rooted in human compassion.⁵¹

Scholars have also emphasized the importance of Ruth's literary symbols. F. D. Rauber was likely the first to suggest that the narrative is about Naomi's transformation from empty bitterness (heirless) to restored fullness (obtaining Obed). This profound transformation is symbolically interwoven with the fecundity of the field and the processes of agricultural production.⁵² Based on this, Timothy J. Stone further explores the symbolic meaning of food in the narrative, proposing that food (mostly agricultural seeds) symbolizes the heir through the

⁴⁶ M. D. Gow, *The Book of Ruth: Its Structure, Theme and Purpose*. First Edition (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 21-96.

⁴⁷ Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 2-5.

⁴⁸ M. C. A. Korpel, *The Structure of the Book of Ruth* (the Netherlands, Assen: Brill, 2001).

⁴⁹ Moshe Garsiel, "The Literary Structure, Art of the Storyteller and Development of Plot in the Book of Ruth (Hebrew)." *Hagut Ba-Mikra* 3 (1979): 66-83.

⁵⁰ Tod Linafelt and K. Beal Timothy, *Ruth & Esther*. Edited by David W. Cotter, Jerome T. Walsh, Chris Franke, and Associate (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1999).

⁵¹ Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*.

⁵² F. D. Rauber, "Literary Values in the Bible: The Book of Ruth." *JBL* 89 (1970): 27-37.

marriage of Boaz and Ruth.⁵³ In her article, Talia Sutskovver presents an innovative approach in examining symbols on a lexical level with respect to land and birth.⁵⁴

It is also important to highlight research on intertextuality. Harold Fisch connects Ruth to the narrative of Abraham and Lot and argues that it should be read in light of Israel's greater salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*).⁵⁵ Intertextual relationships between Ruth and Tamar are presented by Nielsen, Wolde, and Grossman. In particular, Nielsen considers Ruth to be the product of a better narrative derived from Tamar's text. Wolde, in a more feminist view, discerns a transformation of a foreign woman losing her own identity and becoming the Judahite insider in both narratives, where both women in their respective narratives are "semantically marked in both texts by one and the same word."⁵⁶ For Grossman, the similarities are not only presented in the plot but can also be found with the use of Hebrew language; moreover, his commentary often links Ruth's text to other biblical accounts. Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky's new commentary also examines several important intertextual connections of Ruth with the rest of the Hebrew Bible—in fact, a number of scholars have compared Ruth with the book of Judges. Given that their work is considered relevant to the study of setting in this paper, their research is presented in the next section of the paper.

Research on the Setting of Ruth

According to Yaira Amit's observation, the use of spatial concepts in biblical literature has attracted little attention; in particular, she points out that Gunkel and Shimeon Bar-Efrat considers space/location to be insignificant from their narrative approach.⁵⁷ P. G. R. de Villiers also recognizes that some scholars propose leaving the setting out of consideration in the

⁵³ Timothy J. Stone, "Six Measures of Barley: Seed Symbolism in Ruth." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38, no. 2 (December 2013): 189–199.

⁵⁴ Talia Sutskovver, "The Themes of Land and Fertility in the Book of Ruth." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34, no. 3 (March 2010): 283–294.

⁵⁵ Harold Fisch, "Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History." *Vetus Testamentum* 32, no. 4 (October 1982): 425–37.

⁵⁶ Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 448.

⁵⁷ Yaira Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*. Illustrated (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 115-6.

interpretation of text.⁵⁸ It is thus noteworthy that although the book of Ruth has been extensively studied from various perspectives of narrative criticism, the importance of its setting is often overlooked or even neglected.

The setting in Ruth is generally regarded as a separate macrounit within the text that provides the main characters, the location, and other relevant background information needed for backgrounding the story. According to this view, once the story is set to a location/time and a particular interpretation is given to the text or a part of it, the reader retains it until further shifts in space and time. Based on this point, Ruth's setting is normally viewed as a backdrop that has almost no impact on the characters, plot, or theme of the story. Therefore, most monographies on Ruth only briefly discuss the setting, usually from a few paragraphs to a few pages,⁵⁹ while the interpretation of the text is generally separate from the setting.

It also appears that scholars have different parameters in viewing the setting in Ruth. Hubbard describes it as a dimension outside the text that may influence the interpretation of the text. He focuses exclusively on the author's identity and intent, suggesting that the book might have been written during the reign of David and Solomon, or even of Hezekiah or of Josiah, based on the presence and prominence of non-Israelites in the text.⁶⁰ It is evident that Hubbard's approach overlaps with the research on Ruth's dating. According to Bush, the setting of Ruth is found exclusively with the first verse of the book; he states that the author of Ruth dates the story using the "most general terms" and does not put stress/implication on the expression of "Judges' time."⁶¹ Grossman views the setting as an important textual component of the narrative, as "it is practically impossible to develop a plot without situating it in time and space."⁶² Accordingly, he expands the concept of spatial/temporal settings to the whole narrative and suggests that the

⁵⁸ P. G. R. de Villiers, "The Interpretation of a Text in the Light of Its Socio-Cultural Setting," *Neotestamentica* 18 (1984): 72.

⁵⁹ Monographies on Ruth do not typically include a section on "Setting", with a few exceptions: Hubbard's *The Book of Ruth* contains a sub-section entitled "Setting;" Bush's *World Biblical Commentary* on Ruth, Esther allocates a sub-section of "Form/Structure/Setting;"; and Grossman's *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries* offers a sub-section entitled "Time and Space in Ruth".

⁶⁰ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 42-46.

⁶¹ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 60-61.

⁶² Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 53.

element of time serves as the chronological transitions in the story, and the locations might “carry further significance, profound symbolic weight.”⁶³ To demonstrate this, he claims that the concept of space in Ruth is related to the verb-pair שׁוּב – יָשַׁב (return–settle). In her article titled “Space for Moral Agency in the book of Ruth,” Danna Nolan Fewell adopts Michel de Certeau’s notion of spatial syntax and investigates how it interacts with perceptions of moral agency for the characterization of the protagonists. In her conclusion, Ruth and Boaz are both considered tricksters who are involved in the manipulation of officially structured space.⁶⁴

Since the social setting in the present research is related to the intertextuality between Ruth and Judges, it is necessary to review previous research on the relationship between the two books. The idea of taking Judges into consideration extensively when interpreting Ruth first appeared in J. Gordon Harris, Anne Brown Cheryl, and S. Moore Michael’s *New International Biblical Commentary*.⁶⁵ They suggest that Ruth is the bright contrast to the dark records in Judges: for instance, the harlot concubine (Judge 19) represents the opposite of faithful Ruth.⁶⁶ Following this idea is Michael Moore, who thinks that reading Ruth in the context of Judges not only reconnects readers with some of the book’s earliest interpreters but also generates new literary and sociological insights, in turn concluding that “Ruth is a bright light in a dark world.”⁶⁷ The most recent study in this regard is David J. Shepherd’s article “Ruth in the Days of the Judges: Women, Foreignness and Violence,” in which he argues for the similarity of sexual violence against foreigners in Judge 19 and Ruth 2.⁶⁸

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶⁴ Danna Nolan Fewell, “Space for Moral Agency in the Book of Ruth.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 40, no. 1 (September 2015), 94.

⁶⁵ J. Gordon Harris, Anne Brown Cheryl, and S. Moore Michael, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*. New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers; Carlisle, Cumbria, 2000).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 322, 355.

⁶⁷ Michael Moore, “To King or Not to King: A Canonical-Historical Approach to Ruth.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 11, no. 1 (2001): 40.

⁶⁸ David J. Shepherd, “Ruth in the Days of the Judges: Women, Foreignness and Violence.” *Biblical Interpretation* 26, no. 4–5 (October 22, 2018): 528–543.

Conceptual Framework

Definition of a Setting

In the present work, the term *setting* defines the situations, surroundings, and the relevant appearance and action within them, in relation to the intertextually encyclopedic knowledge in different levels that foreshadow and/or integrally influence the development of the narrative. As I noted earlier, some biblical scholars, such as Gunkel and Bar-Efrat, view the setting as marginal to the biblical narrative, while others perceive it as having an ambiguous definition and unclear limitations. A number of literary theorists and linguists, including Teun A. Van Dijk, consider the setting to be a text-initial, primarily text-structural macrounit that describes the beginning and surroundings of a story by providing spatial and temporal data to the main characters as well as other necessary background information for later episodes.⁶⁹ In this view, once a setting is assigned to the story and a particular interpretation is given to the text or a part of it, the reader maintains that interpretation until further notice. However, I claim that settings vary more than previously believed.

According to Seymour Chatman, there is no simple line that cleanly separates the settings from characters (and events), but rather the setting is unveiled as a continuum.⁷⁰ Most often, the setting is constructed gradually as part of the narrative and provides contextual/intertextual information in addition to what is explicitly described. Given that the setting is an imperative part of the world that the text portrays and can influence the values, speech, and actions of the characters, the plot's movement, and the presentation of themes and moods, it simply cannot be omitted from a narrative. Rather, as Francois Tolmie points out, it is essential to conduct detailed research concerning the setting and its impact on the narrative.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Teun A. Van Dijk, *Macrostructures: An Interdisciplinary Study of Global Structures in Disclosure, Interaction, And Cognition*. 1st ed (Hillsdale, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1980), 113.

⁷⁰ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. New edition (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 139-41.

⁷¹ Francois Tolmie, *Narratology and Biblical Narratives* (Bethesda: International Scholars Publications, 1998), 106.

Three Categories of Settings

Broadly speaking, settings are classified into three categories by Powell: temporal, spatial, and social.⁷² Because this research uses these three categories as a part of the discussion to come, a brief presentation is given for each category.

The Spatial Setting

The concept of spatial setting encompasses the physical space, the environment, and the specific appearance and actions of characters and objects within a given area. According to V. H. Matthews and J. C. Moyer, when studying the spatial setting, students of the Bible must gain a deeper understanding of the Biblical world rather than merely acquiring a few historical and geographical “facts” as reflected in current Bible atlases.⁷³ It is important to consider how the use of space and the world are internal factors in the biblical narrative and not external ones. There can be no story without events taking place somewhere,⁷⁴ and the choice of a location is rarely random in literary works. It can be readily seen that biblical narratives refer frequently to cities, villages, wells, fields, and routes. This usage of a location reference may be considered a deliberate strategy: authors of biblical narratives tend to emphasize the historically authoritative nature of their works, and in this regard, the spatial setting is an important literary device that enhances the authenticity and reliability of the narrative by providing precise geographical details. Scholars have also noted that the names of places and spatial objects are associated with certain ideologies.⁷⁵ In addition, as the present study suggests, it is fundamentally important to understand the spatial setting of the events in the text in order to interpret them correctly.

⁷² Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 70.

⁷³ V. H. Matthews and J. C. Moyer, “Bible Atlases: Which Ones Are Best?” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 54, no. 4 (1990): 220.

⁷⁴ Amit points out a valid point that parables tend to be detached from space, as the locations are often not specified. Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, 118.

⁷⁵ For example, Robert L. Cohn suggests that mountains in the Hebrew bible have three major foci: security; height (associated with authority); and fertility. Robert L. Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space: Four Biblical Studies* (Chico: Scholars Pr., 1981), 29-38.

It is within this broader discourse on the spatial setting that this research delineates its unique stance. Unlike many previous studies that might take the spatial setting into account as a peripheral element or fail to consider it altogether, this research centers its focus on the significance of the spatial setting within the narrative of Ruth. The analysis pivots on the premise that the spatial setting in biblical narratives is far from being merely incidental and should be considered a deliberate narrative strategy that conveys subtle yet powerful messages. Based on this point, this study posits that a more profound understanding of the book of Ruth can be attained by meticulously examining these spatial elements and their contribution to the storyline, character development, and thematic representation. By doing so, this research aims to unlock new dimensions of interpretation that can ultimately deepen our understanding of the text. This approach foregrounds the spatial setting as an integral part of the narrative and recognizes its potential to shape and enrich the reader's interpretation of the narrative.

The Social Setting

The social setting includes political institutions, class structures, social behavior, and the performance of legality, as well as other cultural contexts. It is important to note that the social setting in the present study is not the social condition during the author's time but the particular social situation in which the author refers to in the text. Although these two social contexts are often overlapping in general literature, the biblical narrative often refers to a social context that is considerably earlier than that of the author. Therefore, it sometimes becomes necessary for the author to provide explanations/comments to close the gap between the text and the real world of the author/implied reader. For example, to explain the custom of giving sandals to the other party in a commercial transaction, the author writes, "Now this was formerly done in Israel..." (4:7).

Narrative criticism emphasizes social settings in order to interpret the text appropriately. Without an understanding of the given social context, readers tend to relate the narrative to their own social setting and can thus miss the intended message of the author. Therefore, the identification of social settings is of particular importance in understanding ancient literature. However, biblical narratives often present social settings in a more indirect manner. In contrast to modern literature, the biblical author/narrator rarely devotes a separate text to describing the social condition and their attitude toward it. Thus, in order to understand the social context of a narrative, it is necessary to examine different aspects of the text.

One of the primary objectives of this research is to explore the social setting explicitly embedded within the narrative of the book of Ruth. This focus diverges from the traditional approaches in biblical scholarship that have often neglected this integral aspect of the text. In recognizing that biblical narratives often communicate social realities indirectly, this research engages with the text to decode and understand these nuances. The complexities of political institutions, class structures, social behavior, and performance of legality within the narrative are keenly analyzed in this work, with the intention of discerning a unique pattern of social traits. This approach emphasizes the necessity of understanding the narrative's social context to fully appreciate its intended message and to avoid potential misinterpretations caused by superimposing anachronistic societal norms onto the text. By focusing on the social setting in the book of Ruth, this research opens a pathway for an innovative and enriched understanding of this book.

The Temporal Setting

The temporal setting describes the time that the events take place in, and the particular appearance and action of the characters and objects relevant to the context of time. As Bar-Efrat puts it, "The shaping of time within the narrative is functional and not random or arbitrary but, making a genuine contribution, in coordination and cooperation with the other elements, to the character, meaning and values of the entire narrative."⁷⁶ In other words, the temporal setting is crucial to the understanding of the biblical story and serves an integral function in shaping the reader's understanding of the story elements. According to Powell, the temporal setting could be further categorized to at least two types: chronological and typological. The first refers to the particular point of time or a duration in history in which the action appears, and the latter refers to "the kind of time within which an action transpires"⁷⁷ for example, at night, in the morning (Ruth 3).

While there are multiple temporal settings found in Ruth, it should be noted, however, that only the spatial and social settings are the focus in this research, and the temporal setting is

⁷⁶ Shimeon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in The Bible* (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1989), 142.

⁷⁷ Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* 73.

only discussed within the context of the two settings. As seen in the discussions to come, the temporal setting functions primarily as a complement to the other two settings. Given that the temporal setting does not significantly contribute to a novel understanding of the text on its own, an in-depth analysis is therefore not included in this research.

Intertextual Triggers in Settings

In some modern literary approaches such as that of Jacob L. Mey, the reader is seen as “an active part of the context; and the context presupposes a reader in order to be a true context.” Regarding the role of context in a narrative, Mey posits that readers “do not just get their cues from the context” but rather “actively construct them into the pattern of what they are reading,” where the readers’ own expectations help them to “construct the following context in a special way,” allowing them to create “that context along with the author.”⁷⁸ Ellen Van Wolde also points out that “[a biblical text] might also be read as a piece of work that is causally influenced by other works, or as work in dialogue with other texts.”⁷⁹ Myers notes that the similarity of style and structure between Ruth and other biblical narratives is striking, in particular with Ruth having “short but telling phrases and sentences employed as its vehicle,” by which “the general impression created in the mind of the reader compel its classification with the early literature of Israel.”⁸⁰

As particular impressions are elicited through the constructed context, readers may share certain associations and the various additional interpretations that the word or a phrase may have as well as the knowledge where the exceptional meanings are possible. According to this approach, the author of the biblical narrative makes reference to the different biblical stories/traditions that the implied readers are familiar with⁸¹ and constructs a world that is

⁷⁸ Jacob L. Mey, *When Voices Clash*. 1st ed (De Gruyter, 2010), 37-9.

⁷⁹ Ellen Van Wolde, “Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar.” In *Feminist Companion to Ruth*, edited by Athalya Brenner-Idan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 426.

⁸⁰ Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth*, 4.

⁸¹ This study does not focus on the dating of composition, as it may be argued that the implied reader of Ruth would be unfamiliar with biblical accounts written after Ruth. The Torah is regarded as a “safe” source to obtain encyclopedic knowledge, since it is generally held that the Torah was completed prior to Ruth’s time. Even

“hypothesized to have properties analogous to those of the known world.”⁸² This way of reading can “enable us to look at the text from different angles or perspectives ... we might discover over and over again in the familiar textual forms new aspects of meaning.”⁸³ Although the application of this approach should not be limited to the study of settings, the intertextual indications are indeed more critical and condensed in the settings than other parts of the narrative, as they are usually short in length and yet carry the mission of setting the intertextual context in which events will unfold.

To further delve into this idea of the author employing intertextual contexts within the narrative, this research introduces the concept of an *intertextual trigger* to explore how the author engages the reader’s awareness of intertextual contexts within the book of Ruth. An intertextual trigger, as proposed in this research, is a narrative tool or literary device that signals or stimulates the reader’s association with texts in other biblical accounts. In other words, certain words or phrases may be deliberately used by the author to elicit or “trigger” a certain association to another text, the understanding of which could only be obtained by readers familiar with the texts. Broadly speaking, this research posits that the triggers found in the narratives operate at two levels: firstly, the thematic level, and secondly, the level of lexical markers.

First, intertextual triggers can be found directly in the setting of the thematic level, such as the structure, co-text, phrases, or particular names. The mention in Ruth of the story occurring during the judges’ rule (Ruth 1:1) may elicit within implied readers an understanding of the social condition of the Judges’ time. Alternatively, by mentioning specific objects, actions, or conditions,⁸⁴ such as “the famine” (1:1), the implied readers may be able to relate it with their previous knowledge of the famines in the Torah, such as stories of how the patriarchs behaved during the times of famine. With their encyclopedic knowledge gained through intertextual association, the implied readers may automatically compare other cases of famine with the text

those biblical accounts that were written later than Ruth, however, can nonetheless provide useful context for understanding Ruth.

⁸² Erwin M. Segal, “Narrative Comprehension and the Role of Deictic Shift Theory.” In *Deixis in Narrative: A Cognitive Science Perspective*, edited by Judith F. Duchan, Gail A. Bruder, and Lynne E. Hewitt (Hillsdale, NJ: Psychology Press, 1995), 64.

⁸³ Wolde, “Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar,” 426.

⁸⁴ Tolmie, *Narratology and Biblical Narratives*, 106.

in front of them and interpret it accordingly. Thus, when a term or expression that is familiar from another context appears, it becomes part of a cohesive chain, and the implied readers can then match this cohesive chain with other biblical contexts in order to create coherence in the interpretation of the text. It should be noted, however, that terms associated with a spatial reference do not necessarily need to be spatial in another narrative; various plants, objects, and actions may be associated with very specific contexts as well. In this present study, an in-depth textual analysis will be carried out to examine this level of intertextual trigger as well as how its association influences the understanding of the rest of the text.

Intertextual triggers can also be identified at the level of lexicon markers. Linguist Zdenek Salzman claims that “those aspects of culture that are important for the members of a society are correspondingly highlighted in the vocabulary.”⁸⁵ This approach emphasizes the author’s use of Hebrew lexemes and phrases in depth and requires close reading of the original text. Language encompasses a wide variety of relationships. Depending on their roots, gender, number, person, tense, and mood, Hebrew words (especially verbs) may have different meanings in different contexts. The relation can be polysemic, synonymic, antonymic, hyponymic, or part-whole.⁸⁶ For example, Ruth 1:6 describes how God visited his people by giving them food. The word *בָּרַךְ* (visit) with God as the subject is used in Psalm 65:10 to indicate that God waters the land to make it fertile, which makes sense as an appropriate interpretation for the case in Ruth 1:6. Nevertheless, this word with God as the subject is also found in Genesis 21:1 and 1 Samuel 2:21, where God’s visit is to cause the barren women to be fertile and bear children. Hence, the polysemic meaning of this word could carry a profound significance in Ruth, foreshadowing the eventual outcome of the story—the childless Ruth eventually begets a son. Analyzing lexical markers of intertextuality is akin to decoding the author’s “wordplay.” However, skilled authors tend to use lexical collocations in a particular way for implied readers to understand the message.

The two levels of intertextual triggers can coexist in the same small unit (i.e., word/phrase). In a unit of a setting, an author can use different intertextual triggers, and each can refer to a different intertextual knowledge. Sternberg argues that the biblical author sometimes

⁸⁵ Zdenek Salzman, *Language, Culture, And Society: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1998), 47.

⁸⁶ John Lyons, *Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 250-335.

deliberately creates a work that “[results in the] coexistence of two (or more) mutually exclusive hypotheses—concerning action, motive, character—[which] always enables the author to kill two birds with one stone, using same materials for different ends.”⁸⁷ Despite this, I do not view this difference as either skepticism or conflict but rather as something complementary to each other as part of the author’s overall message.

Method of Investigation

In this research, the text is examined as a coherent unit in its current form. Other types of analyses such as source criticism and form criticism are not the focus of this study. Attention is given to the final Masoretic text and its meaning while adhering to the principles of biblical narrative criticism and modern literary theories. By employing a close reading of the text, I aim to demonstrate how the author of Ruth employed particular literary strategies using the setting as a device, and in doing so I attempt to answer the following questions:

- Is the setting relevant to the rest of the story?
- What messages are deliberately aimed at the implied reader in the setting and in what ways is this being done?
- Do certain settings evoke certain feelings, and if so, are they positive or negative?
- Would a new understanding of a narrative’s setting provide different interpretations of Ruth and shed new light on some unresolved issues?

First, in contrast to Gunkel’s claim that setting descriptions were often left out or referred to very briefly in biblical narratives due to them being static and slowing the pace of the narrative,⁸⁸ I argue that the intention of using short biblical narrative settings is to have maximum impact with the least amount of linguistic information about the surroundings. In minimizing the setting description, it allows the writer to focus on the characters and action while at the same time creating a sense of sharedness and naturalness among the background

⁸⁷ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Pr., 1985), 228.

⁸⁸ Referred by Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, 116.

surroundings. This sense is conveyed through an encyclopedic knowledge transmitted from the author to the implied reader.

At the heart of this study, I will examine the spatial and social settings in Ruth while taking into account the temporal element within each of these two settings.⁸⁹ As it pertains to the book of Ruth, I assert that these two settings are more significant and more indicated than the temporal setting. Moreover, while agreeing with Powell's categorization, I argue that these three types do not occur equally in frequency and/or importance among biblical narratives. For instance, in most narratives, the temporal setting is combined with space and/or action rather than being the primary focus of the setting. The temporal setting can function, for instance, as a reminiscence of a specific era, with spatial information and space-related descriptions serving as the major points. Additionally, narratives can also have completely unknown chronotypes, such as those in which an event is only related to the spatial and social contexts. Although I argue that the temporal setting may be less prominent, it should be noted that the temporal setting plays an important role in modifying the other two types of settings. By giving prominence to these two settings in particular, I demonstrate how both are integral to the effectiveness of a narrative.

One of the objectives of this study is to propose different structures of Ruth according to changes in spatial settings. In general, the role and importance of the spatial setting can be seen in how biblical narratives usually begin with a description of the historical period and the geographical location of the events to follow. By providing information about the location, not only are readers able to locate the story within the world—regardless of whether or not they are familiar with the location described—but they can also develop a sense of the place in terms of terrain and dimensions. During the course of a narrative, the general strategy is to narrow the setting from a broad spatial category (e.g., kingdom, country territory, mountain, city) to a smaller one (e.g., field, house, court). It can be composed of the narrator's description combined with a glimpse of how the characters observe, sense, or interpret the surroundings, all of which in turn also contribute to the characterization. The spatial setting is also often dynamic in the biblical narrative; the relevant information includes characters who move and observe the motion,

⁸⁹ Gabriel Zoran also states, "It makes no difference whether one holds to a separative theory which considers the aspects of space and time to be parallel yet independent. Independent or interdependent, space and time are perceived as complementary aspects of equal status." Gabriel Zoran, "Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative." *Poetics Today* 5, no. 2 (1984): 309.

for example, Israelites traveling from station to station in Exodus. With the different natures of the spatial environments as the story moves from one location to another (e.g., from the rich resourceful Egypt to a barren wilderness), the atmosphere and the characters' behavior often change, leading to a dramatic turn in the story. From this perspective, the change of spatial setting serves to separate the narrative structure.

It must also be noted that the spatial setting (such as natural, geographical borders) often functions as an indication of social value in biblical narratives. Sociocultural-specified spaces include political, linguistic, and cultural areas and borders, sometimes overlapping classes and encompassing professional surroundings, various functional areas, and, most importantly, living surroundings and interior spaces. Most of these consist of names for cities, villages, countries, and other culturally defined areas. The sociocultural space is important because identity and in-group areas are identified on the basis of classifications that people have for their surroundings (i.e., village, nearest town, county, country, continent); a location belonging to another group is often considered foreign and has a different social condition.

The social setting in narratives is often represented through the interactions between characters rather than directly from their surroundings. In other words, the speech and actions expressed by characters tend to convey more information about the social condition than that which can be observed in terms of space and time, and social issues are ultimately determined by the relationship that individuals have with the society as a whole. Despite this, there is the need to distinguish the social preferences of the characters from the general social setting of the text, and therefore it is necessary to identify within the text certain distinguishable or salient patterns pertaining to the expressions, experiences, and social environment of multiple characters. Based on this process, the dominant theme can be identified, with which it can then be used to demonstrate the nature of a social and cultural setting. I adopt this approach in analyzing the social setting of Ruth in the present work.

While intertextual triggers contribute to the study of both categories of settings in this research, examining the social setting of the biblical narrative requires more strategy. On the one hand, intertextual knowledge drawn from the spatial setting allows implied readers to gain a sense of the social condition. Alternatively, the scope and impression of the social condition is often repeatedly manifested in the experiences and milieu of the characters, reinforcing what the implied readers had previously assumed by the intertextual information derived from the spatial

setting. This can be demonstrated by analyzing the text intensively and systematically to identify salient patterns of social traits and thematic generalizations. In a close reading of several scenes, the repeated social traits can be identified as significant patterns that provide a consistent image of how characters coordinate and organize their society. With this in mind, I will present a list of textual evidence that “seem[s] to have a more or less *conventional* nature, and thus should specify what in a certain culture is ‘characteristic’ or ‘typical’”⁹⁰ as the social setting in Ruth.

Furthermore, this study is not only concerned with identifying the settings and their intertextual knowledge, but also with interpreting the rest of Ruth’s texts based on these new understandings. Textual meaning needs to be interpreted in relation to what implied readers know from the setting and the various potential extensions or modifications of the intertextual knowledge triggered in the setting. In addition, textual meaning should also be interpreted in relation to a coherent semantic whole rather than in relation to textual cohesion, since it is the total intertextual knowledge that is activated while processing the whole text. Thus, following the analysis of the narrative setting, I also demonstrate how the settings influence the understanding of the rest of the text.

The structure of this thesis comprises three chapters: the spatial setting, the social setting, and the integration of these settings. Chapter 1 explores the significance of spatial concepts within the book of Ruth, elaborating on the narrative’s structuring relative to its spatial environment. Further, it delves into the discussion of specific major spatial settings within the text and elucidates their contribution to narrative interpretation. Chapter 2 presents an analysis of the textual evidence that portrays distinct patterns reflective of a unique social setting. It illustrates how this social setting plays a pivotal role in the development of the plot and characterization within the narrative. Chapter 3 reviews the interaction among the different settings and scrutinizes their interconnections and complementary relationships within the book of Ruth. Through the discussions in these chapters, the present thesis seeks to deliver a comprehensive understanding of the different settings and their respective roles in the narrative. While studying Ruth from the perspective of settings is an innovative approach, a part of the

⁹⁰ Teun A. Dijk, *Studies in the Pragmatics of Discourse* (De Gruyter Mouton, 1981), 219.

analysis is drawn from previous studies that were applied with other approaches, and at the same time, these can also confirm the value of the present approach.

Chapter 1: Spatial Settings

A number of scholars, such as Zoran, have pointed out that spatial settings have often been neglected in the study of literary narratives. For example, although Bar-Efrat emphasizes the importance of time in biblical studies, he asserts, “It is often difficult to comprehend fully what part is played by the places cited in biblical narrative ... [as places] are not depicted clearly and vividly.”⁹¹ In his work, the spatial setting is simply described as the location in which the story takes place. It is therefore understandable why Zoran concludes that the general study of space in the narrative “is pushed into a corner not altogether discarded, but neither does it have a clear-cut status within the text,” and that furthermore “... [i]t can be understood in various ways. But none is as clear and unambiguous.”⁹²

The underlying argument in this chapter is that spatial settings in the biblical narrative do not function as an objective, meaningless backdrop, but rather as a means of interacting with implied readers at various levels of engagement. Nadav Na’aman suggests that indications of place may serve as one of the central elements of a narrative (for example, the story of Naboth’s vineyard in 1 Kings 21), or even serve as the sole central element of a narrative (such as the story of Gibeah in Judges 19).⁹³ In addition, the implied readers can interact with the spatial settings in more than a tangible way. Often, the author’s input is delivered in a metaphorical or symbolic manner, derived from shared knowledge. Even Bar-Efrat acknowledges that “places in the narratives are not merely geographical facts but are to be regarded as literary elements in which fundamental significance is embodied.”⁹⁴ It can therefore be posited that the spatial setting is an integral component of the biblical narrative that the authors employ with sophistication and subtlety.

⁹¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in The Bible*, 187, 195.

⁹² Zoran, “Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative,” 310.

⁹³ Nadav Na’aman, “Roads That Configure the Space in Biblical Narratives.” In *Words, Ideas, Worlds: Biblical Essays in Honour of Yairah Amit*, edited by Athalya Brenner-Idan and Frank Polak (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press Ltd, 2012), 151.

⁹⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in The Bible*, 194.

The Spatial Concept in Ruth

The function of space in a narrative is succinctly described in a remark by Certeau: “Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice.”⁹⁵ In other words, a spatial setting serves not only as a bridge between different locations where events occur but also as a crucial component of narrative development. In this section, I present the ways in which this concept is demonstrated in the book of Ruth.

Ruth’s story begins with a migration from one place to another—from Bethlehem in Judah to the field of Moab. Despite the death of Elimelech, the family continues to live in the foreign place (i.e., Moab) for another ten years until two sons passed away. Ruth’s mother-in-law then decides to return to her original place. She asks her two daughters-in-law for a spatial separation from her and encourages them to return to their own mother’s house and find “the house of husbands.” Ruth, however, insists on following Naomi, and interestingly her declaration to Naomi is filled with spatial concepts: “For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge ... Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried” (Ruth 1:16-17). As a result, Ruth as a foreigner arrives in Bethlehem with Naomi.

The next portion of the story showcases the field as the primary location of action. Chapter 2 begins with the mention that Naomi has a relative whom she was indirectly related to, namely a relative of her husband by the name of Boaz. Ruth takes the initiative to go to the field to glean grain, and she happens to be on Boaz’s field. It is during this first encounter between Boaz and Ruth that Boaz advises her not to leave his property for other fields, a sentiment that is later echoed and affirmed by Naomi at the end of this chapter when Ruth recounts to her what Boaz says. This simple request shows the significance of gleaning at the appropriate place for a woman. In chapter 3, Naomi presents a spatial concept of a home/resting place (בֵּיתָא in Ruth 3:1) and encourages Ruth to approach Boaz on the threshing floor for this reason. The plan that Naomi outlined is accepted by Ruth, who breaks social boundaries by entering a private space—specifically by lying at Boaz’s feet.

A negotiation between Boaz and another kinsman is conducted at the gate of the city, which is regarded as a place for practicing legal customs (Ruth 4:1-12). The central subject of

⁹⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 2002), 115.

the negotiation is who would redeem Naomi's land—another important spatial element—from which Boaz continues to declare his obligation to redeem Ruth. At the end of the book, Ruth is described by the people of Bethlehem as *הַאִשָּׁה הַבָּאָה אֶל-בֹּאֵז* (“the woman [who] enters your [Boaz's] home”).

In the above examples, it can be seen that the spatial element plays a central role in the story of Ruth in situating the action. Besides providing the basis for the events to occur, it plays a vital role in integrating with the plot and in contributing significantly to the characters' characterization and even identity.

Structure of Ruth According to Spatial Settings

The structure of Ruth has been discussed by scholars from a variety of perspectives and with different methods. Myers, for instance, suggests a poetic characteristic present in the book, highlighting its potential oral history before being penned down; in his work, he presents specific words and abundant parallelisms as evidence to support his view.⁹⁶ Sasson, on the other hand, opts for a formalist approach, categorizing the book of Ruth as a folktale, with standard roles assigned to different characters; in particular, he prioritizes the narrative plot development in the delimitation of the text.⁹⁷ Bar-Efrat also contributes to the discussion by proposing a chiasmic structure based on the principal characters or actants.⁹⁸ This is further complemented by Hubbard, who divides the book into two main parts using content analysis.⁹⁹

Taking a more multifaceted approach, Gow combines structure investigation with thematic and motif analysis, employing various stylistic features such as chiasmus, anaphora, refrains, and repetition of keywords.¹⁰⁰ Bush similarly underscores the book's literary unity and

⁹⁶ Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth*, 44-63.

⁹⁷ Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 191-222.

⁹⁸ Shimeon Bar-Efrat, “Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative.” *Vetus Testamentum* 30, no. 2 (April 1980): 154-73.

⁹⁹ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 74-5.

¹⁰⁰ Gow, *The Book of Ruth: Its Structure, Theme and Purpose*, 21-91.

points out chiasmic balances and intricate structural schemes, using content and distant parallelism.¹⁰¹ Nielsen¹⁰² and Linafelt¹⁰³ both advocate for a symmetrical and chiasmic structure across the book's chapters. Nielsen draws a parallel with the patriarchal narratives, while Linafelt argues that the book of Ruth was written to bridge the gap between the books of Judges and 1 Samuel. Finally, Grossman highlights the narrative structure's significance in emphasizing the themes and motifs of reversal, renewal, and the transition from tragedy to redemption.¹⁰⁴

Overall, although scholars interpret the book of Ruth differently—from viewing it as poetic or a folktale, to perceiving it as a narrative with chiasmic structure—they do contribute rich insights to the study of this book. This diversity in perspectives and conclusions reflects the complexity and profound significance of the book of Ruth, notwithstanding the lack of a consensus on its exact structural characteristics. In a rather novel departure from these existing views, this study proposes two different narrative structures based on the spatial settings of the story: the first structure is based on Ruth's crossing of physical boundaries and her move from being outside the boundaries of Israeli society to becoming a member of the community, while the second one is based on the relationship between the spatial setting and the reoccurring change in state from emptiness to fertility.

First Structure: Transformation of Ruth's Social Identity

The first structure is based on Ruth progressively crossing physical boundaries as she moves from being a despised outsider to being an exalted member of Israeli society. The previous research in this area has focused on Ruth's transformation in terms of her social identity from a broader perspective. For example, Peter H. W. Lau highlights in his book *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach* that Ruth's original identity undergoes a transformation through different levels of acceptance, and the final acceptance into Israelite

¹⁰¹ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 18-24, 50-4.

¹⁰² Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 2-5.

¹⁰³ Linafelt, *Ruth*, xxi-xxiv.

¹⁰⁴ Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 26-30.

society is based on evidence of continued descent.¹⁰⁵ Some scholars, such as Grossman, discuss the crossing of boundaries from a legal perspective and examine Ruth's adoption into Israeli society through legal means. Nevertheless, there has been hardly any attention paid to the relationship between the transformation of Ruth's social identity and the changes in the spatial settings, specifically a change in space from the periphery to the heart of Israeli society and a change in nature from a foreign and distant place to one that is more intimate.

This first structure based on spatial settings is divided into four units showing four transitions: (1) from Moab to Bethlehem, (2) from Bethlehem to the field of Boaz, (3) from the field to the threshing floor, and (4) from the threshing floor to Boaz's house. Each of the locations act as a checkpoint from which and to which a transition takes place. These four units are elaborated further below:

1. From Moab to Bethlehem (chapter 1): Following a brief introduction, this unit demonstrates that through a firm declaration, the foreign woman chooses to migrate from the unfavored Gentile world to the blessed Israelite land.

2. From Bethlehem to the field of Boaz (chapter 2): Her movement from a general land to a specific field and her initial contact with the landowner constitutes Ruth's second boundary crossing.¹⁰⁶

3. From the field to the threshing floor (chapter 3): Ruth's audacious behavior on the threshing floor indicates her boundary crossing from the public to the private space, specifically the place where the man lies down (3:4).

4. From the threshing floor to Boaz's house (chapter 4): Even though Ruth does not subjectively take action in this process (i.e., Boaz is the sole actor), Ruth entering Boaz's house (4:11) is the result of her petition at the threshing floor, and in doing so she thus completes the final and most intimate boundary crossing. Following Boaz's successful negotiation with another kinsman, the elders and people bless Ruth as the woman who will be entering Boaz's house

¹⁰⁵ Peter H. W. Lau, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010).

¹⁰⁶ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky observe that by having Ruth join his "girls" in the field, Boaz moves Ruth closer into the Judean circle and his household. Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 34.

(Ruth 4:11), an act that has both physical and social implications. Specifically, this represents the formal procession of the bride entering the home of the groom during the marriage ceremony. The house here can also be interpreted in biblical Hebrew as a family: Ruth entering Boaz's house also represents her becoming a member of his family. Additionally, in verse 4:13 ("Boaz took Ruth"), Bush argues that the cognate verb "to take" carries the connotation "to take home,"¹⁰⁷ and Hubbard views it as a legal conclusion, namely that "Boaz led Ruth from Naomi's house to his."¹⁰⁸ Hubbard also points out that entering the house here could be understood in a broader sense as a confirmation of Ruth's full status as an Israelite.

Because each unit consists of different transitory subunits, the detailed division of these four units could also be of other opinions. Nevertheless, this proposed structure clearly presents the close relation between a narrowing down of the spatial setting and Ruth's social status from a public to private sphere, a general to specific state, and a foreign stranger to a close insider (or community member).¹⁰⁹

Second Structure: Change of State from Emptiness to Fertility

The second proposed structure is based on the relationship between the spatial settings and the repeated symbolic pattern from a state of emptiness to one of fertility. As described by Rauber, chapter 1 depicts the loneliness and barrenness of the widows as symbolized by the famine of the land in that chapter, whereas the harvest is "a preview of the solution ... pre-eminently the symbol of plenty"¹¹⁰ and the produce of the field is "a celebration of the fertility of the earth."¹¹¹ These symbols, which are presented at such an initial stage, already point to the conclusion of the story: "The fertility of Ruth and the fruit of her womb are triumphant

¹⁰⁷ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 291.

¹⁰⁸ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 267.

¹⁰⁹ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 258.

¹¹⁰ Rauber, "Literary Values in the Bible: The Book of Ruth," 29-30, 35.

¹¹¹ F. D. Rauber, "The Book of Ruth." In *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, edited by Kenneth R. R. (Gros Louis, Abingdon Pr, 1982), 167.

rejoinders to the barrenness which darkened the first chapter.”¹¹² Stone further points out that food plays a significant role in Boaz’s generosity towards Ruth and his acceptance of her, and he believes that agricultural seeds in particular “may be full of symbolic meaning.”¹¹³ This point is explored by Sutscover in his examination of the lexical connection between the land and the concept of fertility in Ruth: “Seed זרע (4:12) is polysemic, denoting both ‘seed of the field’ and ‘seed of man and beast’, that is, ‘offspring’, ‘descendants.’”¹¹⁴ This word for seed also implies a metaphorical significance with a variety of expressions involving the notion of seeds, such as שבליים (ears of grain), עמררים (sheaves), and ערמה (a heap of grain).¹¹⁵ From this perspective, the present work suggests there are more symbolic relations between Ruth’s spatial movement and simultaneously explores how this movement functions to create a parallel narrative structure.

Four units of division

This second proposed structure is also divided into four units: (1) from Moab to Bethlehem (chapter 1); (2) from the widows’ home to the field (2:1-2:23a); (3) from the widows’ home to the threshing floor (2:23b-3:17); (4) from the widows’ home to Boaz’s home (3:18-4:17). These units are described in detail in the subsections below.

First unit: From Moab to Bethlehem (chapter 1). Nielsen contends that the transition “from the infertility of Moab to the fertility of Judah” carries symbolic significance within a spatial setting,¹¹⁶ a perspective that is widely endorsed by scholars. For instance, Stone argues that the barrenness of Moab’s landscape parallels the childlessness experienced by the family, while the fertile harvesting fields of Bethlehem serve as a metaphor for the eventual fertility of the womb.¹¹⁷

¹¹² Rauber, “Literary Values in the Bible: The Book of Ruth,” 34.

¹¹³ Stone, “Six Measures of Barley: Seed Symbolism in Ruth,” 196.

¹¹⁴ Sutscover, “The Themes of Land and Fertility in the Book of Ruth,” 289.

¹¹⁵ See also Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 226.

¹¹⁶ Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 45.

¹¹⁷ Stone, “Six Measures of Barley: Seed Symbolism in Ruth,” 192.

Second unit: From the widows' home to the field (2:1-2:23a). Grossman posits that Naomi and Ruth's residence in Bethlehem is Naomi's house. He further suggests that Ruth's spatial movement, characterized by her departure from the house and venture into the field, as well as her subsequent return, holds significance in terms of the literary design and structure of the unit.¹¹⁸

The theatrical style of Danna Nolan Fewell and M. Gunn David's interpretation indicates that the two widows (i.e., Naomi and Ruth) reside at Naomi's old house, namely Elimelech's house in Bethlehem,¹¹⁹ while Wolde envisions that Naomi resides in a small, single-story house,¹²⁰ even though the text does not specify their residence.¹²¹ However, it is correct to assume that (1) the two live together (2:23b); (2) no other people are staying with them, based on the private nature of their conversation and the fact that they only share food with each other; and (3) the widows' territory might have been a border-sensitive issue in ancient Israelite society.¹²² In this work, the term "widows' home" is suggested as a fitting description of the two widows living together. While Rauber claims that the barren land represents loneliness and barrenness, the home of the widows presents a much more vivid and direct representation of Naomi and Ruth's pitiful situation. Additionally, Ruth's request to glean grain indicates that they are in need of food in their present state, which implies their barrenness.

Reaping and gleaning in the agricultural field are expressions of harvesting. As with Bethlehem's field in the first chapter, Boaz's harvesting field in this section is a symbol of fertility. After a day's work in the field, Ruth returns with an ephah (הָאֵפָה) of barley (Ruth 2:17),

¹¹⁸ Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 190.

¹¹⁹ Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth*. 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Pr, 1991), 34.

¹²⁰ While Boaz inhabits a more spacious four-room dwelling, E. J. Van Wolde, *Ruth and Naomi* (Macon, Ga: UNKNO, 1997), 94.

¹²¹ In Grossman's interpretation of 2:18, Ruth having "arrived at the town" rather than at Naomi's or Ruth's house is the author's deliberation, as Ruth will only be granted a "house" in the final chapter (4:11). Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 174.

¹²² Ref. Proverbs 15:25, "The LORD will tear down the house of the proud, But He will establish the homestead of the widow."

a very large amount.¹²³ This description has a profound symbolic meaning: it is no coincidence that chapters 2 and 3 conclude with the receipt of agricultural seeds, which are most likely used as a symbol by the author to illustrate the fertility of a child, and hence Ruth gathering from the field of Boaz signifies the gaining of offspring from Boaz. Grossman relates the intertextuality of the ephah of barley to Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:

Hannah is giving an ephah of flour to God to thank Him for the birth of her son. Ruth is returning to her mother-in-law with that same amount of barley... she has gathered the fruits of the earth, but she is still waiting to be blessed with the fruit of the womb.¹²⁴

However, Ruth sharing them with Naomi (together with the food from dining with Boaz) can be viewed as a symbolic pattern that repeats at the end of chapter 3, where Ruth recounts to Naomi that Boaz has given her the barley (3:17). Ultimately, this act of sharing is realized with the birth of Obed—as borne by Ruth and begotten from Boaz—where Ruth shares her son Obed with Naomi (4:14-17).¹²⁵ Obed’s birth was seen by the women neighbors as God’s blessing towards Naomi, and in their remark that “a son has been born to Naomi” (4:17), it is clear that Ruth’s son is regarded as Naomi’s own son.

The question is whether this unit should include the description of Ruth and Naomi’s conversation in the widow’s house (2:18-23), as Ruth is no longer physically located in the field. The present work suggests including this as a part of the complete unit, as it is a summary of and a supplement to the scene in the field, given that the conversation continues to deal with the incident that happened in the field and concludes with it: “So she stayed close to the maidservants of Boaz and gleaned until the barley harvest and the wheat harvest were finished” (Ruth 2:23a).

¹²³ Sasson estimates that an ephah weighs between 29 and 50 pounds, and that a male worker in the Old Babylonian period consumed only one to two pounds of grain each day. See Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 57. Bush also notes that “an ephah was a dry measure equivalent to one tenth of a homer, the homer being the amount that one donkey could carry ... the amount is clearly intended to be extremely large.” See Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 157.

¹²⁴ Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 174.

¹²⁵ See Stone, “Six Measures of Barley: Seed Symbolism in Ruth,” 193.

Third unit: From the widows' home to the threshing floor (2:23b-3:17). The Vulgate places 2:23b as the opening of chapter 3.¹²⁶ Although the text strongly indicates that Boaz will play an important role in the following sections, Bush observes that the expectation seems to have ceased before 2:23b, which presents the same situation when chapter 2 begins.¹²⁷ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky also suggest that 2:23b is “the introduction or setting of the dialogue that follows in the next chapter.”¹²⁸ Accordingly, the present study indicates that this clause represents the beginning of the third parallel unit in the analysis of spatial structure. A promising situation is described at the end of chapter 2, but the author reminds the implied readers that the infertile reality of the widows' house is not yet resolved, and the author does this by pointing out that Ruth still “dwelt with her mother-in-law” (2:23b).

Given this premise, the notion in 3:1 is very similar to the opening of chapter 2, but Naomi is the character who takes the initiative. Her utterance of “finding a home that is good for you [Ruth]” (3:1) is in keeping with Ruth's suggestion to go out in search of agricultural seeds in chapter 2. However, Naomi's remarks are not symbolic in nature but are rather straightforward. Furthermore, the fact that one is seeking a resting place indicates that their current residence possesses the opposite characteristics, as Schipper states that the clause here “carries an implicit comparison to Ruth's present circumstances, in which she does not have an ideal place of rest.”¹²⁹

Threshing floors are used for processing harvested crops; the outer hard shells of the produce are “threshed”, and the seeds are collected here. As pointed out by Nielsen, the threshing floor was also used for festivities and fertility rites during the harvest celebration.¹³⁰ It can therefore be said that the threshing floor serves as an ultimate demonstration of the fertility of the earth, which also has a symbolic significance in Ruth's narrative. Along with the symbolic meaning of the seeds of agriculture, Boaz lying at the end of the pile of grain could be

¹²⁶ Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 108.

¹²⁷ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 166.

¹²⁸ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 47.

¹²⁹ Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 141.

¹³⁰ Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 67.

interpreted as an implication of his rich fertility. Giving Ruth six measures of barley foreshadows that he will give her offspring, which as suggested by Yael Ziegler represents “his intangible promise of marriage, pregnancy, and redemption.”¹³¹ In Stone’s interpretation, Boaz’s action of מָצָא in 3:15 (where he gives the barley) is to let Ruth hold out the garment¹³² and grip it. As a result, “Ruth departs, [and] the image is one of her with a full cloak, struggling, like a very pregnant woman.”¹³³ Further, as mentioned previously, the pattern of Ruth receiving seeds from Boaz and sharing them with Naomi (3:17) is again portrayed here and echoes the ending of the story, and Boaz’s claim (“Go not empty unto thy mother-in-law”) is the author’s perfect echo of Naomi’s emptiness in 1:21.

Fourth unit: From the widows’ home to Boaz’s home (3:18-4:17). With regard to this division, the first question is why 3:18 is included. Unlike the ending of chapter 2, 3:18 does not conclude or complement the prior scene on the threshing floor. Secondly, as in 2:2 and 2:13b-3:5, verse 3:18 has the clear sense of a character “going out” to accomplish something, and in doing so the verse foretells the forthcoming scene. As Hubbard points out, this verse is not “a concluding authorial comment,” but “... instead, events moved ahead apace.”¹³⁴ Thirdly, the verb יָשָׁב can mean “sit; stay; remain at home.”¹³⁵ In keeping with the opening of the previous unit in 2:23b (“she dwelt וַתֵּשֶׁב with her mother-in-law”), Naomi in 3:18 asks Ruth to dwell with her for a while longer,¹³⁶ or in other words, to remain with her at home for a longer period of time. In this request, it is evident that a spatial concept of their home exists in 3:18.

By the end of the story, Ruth experiences the ultimate spatial transfer, that is, to Boaz’s house. Following this action, their son Obed is born immediately, and therefore the house of Boaz here has a strong symbolic significance related to fertility. The notion of “his house”

¹³¹ Yael Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy* (Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2015), 348.

¹³² Bush also points out that “it [the garment] was a piece of outer clothing, yet large enough and strong enough to hold a considerable amount.” Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 209.

¹³³ Stone, “Six Measures of Barley: Seed Symbolism in Ruth,” 198.

¹³⁴ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 228.

¹³⁵ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 216.

¹³⁶ See Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 247.

echoes and fulfills the symbolic significance of the fields of Bethlehem, the field of Boaz, and the threshing floor in the previous spatial units. Agricultural harvests become offspring, and the seeds of crops become the man's heirs. As well as sharing the produce with Naomi, this pattern also represents the ultimate realization of that initial act of food sharing (4:14-17).

Fertility and spatial change in the cases of Ruth and Hannah

It is unique among the biblical accounts to demonstrate the relationship between spatial change and fertility in Ruth, as is done in this analysis. Hannah's case might be relevant in this regard, although it differs from Ruth's spatial movement from barrenness to fertility. Specifically, Hannah's state of barrenness becomes a state of being fertile at Shiloh's sanctuary; it is through her vow and Eli's blessing that the incident in the sanctuary becomes the turning point in her life. Although Samuel is eventually born at Ramah, Hannah is already confident that her vow has been fulfilled at the sanctuary, as her "countenance was no longer sad" (1 Sam. 1:18). In other words, from Hannah's point of view, her offspring is already born spiritually at the sanctuary. Nielsen also suggests that the scene of the threshing floor in Ruth recalls Hannah's visit to the sanctuary and "reminds us that a childless woman's visit to a holy place can have a happy outcome."¹³⁷ Even though the presumption that threshing floors constitute holy places is doubtful, the importance of a spatial change in reversing barrenness to fertility is clear in both cases.

It is worthwhile to mention here that some aspects of Hannah's story correspond with those of Ruth's. In Ziegler's analysis, after Hannah receives Eli's blessing, her response in 1 Samuel 1:18 ("May your maidservant find favor in your eyes") echoes what Ruth says in Ruth 2:13 in response to Boaz's blessing ("I will find favor in your eyes ... [you] have spoken to the heart of your maidservant").¹³⁸ In Grossman's opinion, the blessing received by Boaz from the elders in 4:11 ("May the Lord grant...") echoes Eli's blessing of fertility upon Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:19 ("May the God of Israel grant your request that you have asked of him").¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 67.

¹³⁸ Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 235, see also Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 324.

¹³⁹ Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 324-5.

Moreover, some scholars have drawn a parallel between the women's words to Naomi in Ruth 4:15 (“[Ruth,] who is better to thee than seven sons”) and both Elkanah's words to Hannah (“Aren't I better to you than ten sons?” in 1 Sam. 1:8) and Hannah's prayer (“While the barren woman bears seven...” in 1 Sam. 2:5).¹⁴⁰

Aside from highlighting the similarities in Ruth's and Hannah's stories, this present work attempts to present several more lexical triggers that connect Ruth with Hannah's story. Firstly, the term bitterness, which is used to describe Naomi's emotional state in Ruth 1:13 (מַר) and 1:20 (אֲרִיזָה), is also the term referring to Hannah's mental state (מַרָּת) in 1 Samuel 1:10.¹⁴¹ The second lexical trigger is more distinctive: in Ruth 2:13, Ruth addresses herself as *shifhah* (שִׁפְחָה) when talking to Boaz for the first time, while in 3:9 on the threshing floor with Boaz, she refers to herself this time as *amah* (אִמָּה). Many English translations regard these two terms as the same word, and the word commonly used is either “handmaid” or “manservant”. It has nonetheless been argued by scholars that there are different social ladders between the two Hebrew words. According to Campbell, when comparing Ruth's case with Abigail's petition to David in 1 Samuel 25:41 where both Hebrew words occur and also in citing the archaeological inscription, *amah* should be translated as “slave-wife”, since it matches the proposal for marriage that was given to Ruth and to Abigail.¹⁴² In his interpretation of the meaning of these two words, Sasson asserts that they are not synonymous, since *shifhah* implies a lesser status than *amah*.¹⁴³ However, the significance of the different social concepts behind each word is not the focus of the present study; the point here is to highlight how both words are used by the authors in how Ruth and Hannah referred to themselves. In Hannah's case, when praying to God in 1 Samuel 1:11 she refers to herself as *amah*; interestingly, in her conversation with Eli in 1:16, she first refers to herself as *amah*, but right after Eli's response in 1:17 (“Go in peace, and may the God of Israel

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 325; Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 93-94; Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 295; Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 235; Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 164.

¹⁴¹ According to some scholars, אֲרִיזָה is lexical evidence of Aramaism; see Bush 109. This paper is not concerned with the study of Aramaism.

¹⁴² Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 101.

¹⁴³ Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 53-4; see also Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, 40; Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 147, 193; Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 169-70, 267.

grant your request...”), she then refers to herself as *shifhah* in 1:18 in her reply to Eli.¹⁴⁴ Even though the two words appear in different biblical accounts, it is rare to encounter them both in one’s own self-addressing; the only cases are those of Ruth, Abigail, and Hannah.

In short, the change in spatial setting, which runs in parallel to the change from barrenness to fertility, is seen not only in Ruth’s story but also in Hannah’s. As discussed, Ruth’s turning point occurs at the setting of the threshing floor, and Hannah’s was at the sanctuary. The similarities in both accounts are seen both at the top level in the motifs used by the authors and at the lexical level in the phrases and word choice.

Major Spatial Settings in Ruth

This section explores the primary spatial settings in the book of Ruth, some of which were already briefly mentioned in the previous section. By analyzing these settings through intertextual triggers at both thematic and lexical levels, the present study aims to obtain encyclopedic knowledge through the intertextuality of other biblical accounts. This approach emphasizes the importance of the setting in the book of Ruth, and furthermore, it invites a reevaluation of the interpretation of both the settings and the overall narrative. By examining the interconnectedness of spatial settings and narrative elements, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the book of Ruth in its broader biblical context.

The Field of Moab

Previous research and existing views

The migration by Elimelech from Bethlehem in Judah to Moab as a result of famine (Ruth 1:1) is generally viewed as a negative event. This is considered by the Jewish sages to be the “enormity of his sin in deserting his people” and the reason for Elimelech’s death.¹⁴⁵ Although modern scholars pay more attention to the text and literary analyses, this negative view

¹⁴⁴ These texts prove that Campbell is incorrect in his interpretation of *amah* to mean “slave-wife”, since Hannah’s speech to God and Elie has nothing to do with marriage proposal.

¹⁴⁵ Nosson Scherman and Zlotowitz Meir, *The Book of Ruth-Megillas Ruth*, xlviii, 11.

seems to persist. For example, Sasson interprets the word לָגַר (reside/sojourn) as follows: “For a Near Eastern man, the prospect of living in another land was not to be welcomed.... living in a foreign land, the ger גַּר ‘stranger, foreigner, immigrant’, was cut off from clan and family and other ties.”¹⁴⁶ In other words, Elimelech’s resettlement is likely seen by him as a very pessimistic movement.

However, as a literary motif, the famine “serves to remind the reader of similar accounts elsewhere.”¹⁴⁷ In the same motif, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’s families all migrated to Egypt (Gen. 12, 26, 41-47, with Isaac eventually settling in Gerar). Schipper also points out that the same term “sojourn” (לָגַר) used in Ruth—which Sasson interprets as a term that carries a negative tone—is used in all three cases. In Genesis 12:10, Abram resides (לָגַר) in Egypt; in Genesis 26:3, God instructs Isaac to reside (גָּר) in Gerar; and in Genesis 47:4, it is recorded that Jacob’s sons “come to sojourn [לָגַר] in the land.”¹⁴⁸ Jewish sages maintain that Elimelech’s migration differs from that of the forefathers, and the famine was conceived to help the forefathers spread the faith of monotheism abroad.¹⁴⁹ The text, however, indicates that the patriarchs’ migrations to foreign lands were not condemned but that their acts were rather understood as an attempt to survive in times of famine; thus, Elimelech’s departure from Judah during this same crisis is not explicitly condemned by the author and is likely not viewed negatively by the implied readers either.¹⁵⁰

The negative connotation may stem from Elimelech’s migration destination—Moab. According to Grossman, it is more acceptable to go down to Egypt, since it is part of the “literary convention” of the patriarchs’ narratives, which Elimelech breaks by going to Moab instead.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 16.

¹⁴⁷ Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 41.

¹⁴⁸ Several other examples of Israelites sojourning in foreign lands without divine sanction can be found in Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 87.

¹⁴⁹ Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 97.

¹⁵⁰ However, Anne-Mareike Wetter argues that this pattern of migration found in the stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Elimelech all carry negative connotations, resulting in trouble and disaster. Anne-Mareike Wetter, “*On Her Account*”: *Reconfiguring Israel in Ruth, Esther, and Judith* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 63-4.

¹⁵¹ Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 74.

This view, however, may be contested, since in Isaac's case, God is the one who breaks this literary convention and instructs him to settle in Gerar, the land of the Philistines, which is considered much more hostile than the land of the Moabites.

Intertextual analysis

To determine whether שְׂדֵי מוֹאָב ("the field of Moab") in Ruth 1:1 carries a negative connotation, it is critical to examine its meaning and the attitude of the relevant biblical texts towards it. This attitude in the book of Judges is particularly important to the book of Ruth, since the narrative takes place at a time when judges ruled (Ruth 1:1). Before analyzing the relevant text in Judges, it is worthwhile to take a close look at Numbers 21:21-32 (cf. Deut. 2:26-37). According to this biblical account, Israel fought against Sihon, king of the Amorites. As a result of the victory over the Amorites, the Israelites took possession of their land from the river of Arnon (the border of Moab) to the river of Jabbok (the border of the Ammonites, shown in fig. 1), as far as Az of the Ammonites (Num. 21:24). However, the author deliberately inserts the following phrase after the scene of victory: "... Sihon, the king of the Amorites, who had fought against a former king of Moab and taken all his land [וַיִּקַּח אֶת-כָּל-אֶרֶץ מוֹאָב] from him as far as the Arnon" (21:26). This account suggests that Israel conquered the land of Amorites, which had previously been the territory of the Moabites. David Jobling explains that the purpose of this insertion is to explain the "right of conquest."¹⁵² To see this, it is necessary to trace back to Deuteronomy 2:9 where Moses recounts God's command to the Israelites: "I will not give you any of their [Moabites'] land; I have assigned Ar to the descendants of Lot." Given this premise, the reasonable justification is therefore inserted after the battle with the Amorites to reinforce the message: the Israelites did not acquire the land from the Moabites but from the Amorites. In other words, God's command was not violated. In the end, this conquered Transjordanian land was assigned to the Gadites, the Reubenites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh (Num. 32:33).

Interestingly, this area as a once-Moabite territory that was seized by the Amorites and ultimately allotted to Reuben and Gad (Num. 32:34-39; Joshua 13:15-16, 24-28) is referenced in

¹⁵² David Jobling, "'The Jordan A Boundary': Transjordan in Israel's Ideological Geography." In *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Structural Analyses in the Hebrew Bible* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 39, 1987), 112-3.

the Bible as מַדְבַּר מוֹאָב (field of Moabites): “And from Bamoth to the valley that is in the field of Moab, by the top of Pisgah, which looketh down upon the desert (Num 21:20).”¹⁵³ This phrase, apart from its use in Ruth 1:1, appears only here in the Bible. Its usage is noteworthy because it appears before the Israelites’ conflict with the Amorites when the piece of land, formerly Moabite but already taken by the Amorites, was still referred to as the “field of Moab”. Therefore, the term likely signifies a geographical area once under Moabite control, visible from Mount Pisgah, rather than an area under the Moabite nation’s current jurisdiction.

In the book of Judges, notably Judges 11, Jephthah’s messenger reiterates the account from Numbers 21 without specifying the land taken from the Amorites was once Moabite territory. His narrative remains consistent with Numbers 21, referring to the same land occupied by the Israelites following their conflict with the Amorites over three centuries prior. Moreover, Jephthah invokes a divine right to this land: “We will hold on to everything that the LORD our God has given us to possess” (Judg. 11:24). It is thus indisputable that the Israelites had a rightful claim to this Transjordan territory during the Judges era, irrespective of divine allocation or settlement history (see fig. 1).

¹⁵³ In Ruth, two forms of the word “field” are used, namely מַדְבַּר (1:1, 6a) and הַמְדְבָר (1:6b; 2:6; 4:3); both words convey the same meaning. The term in Numbers 21:20 is the same as the latter. See Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 80; Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 16.

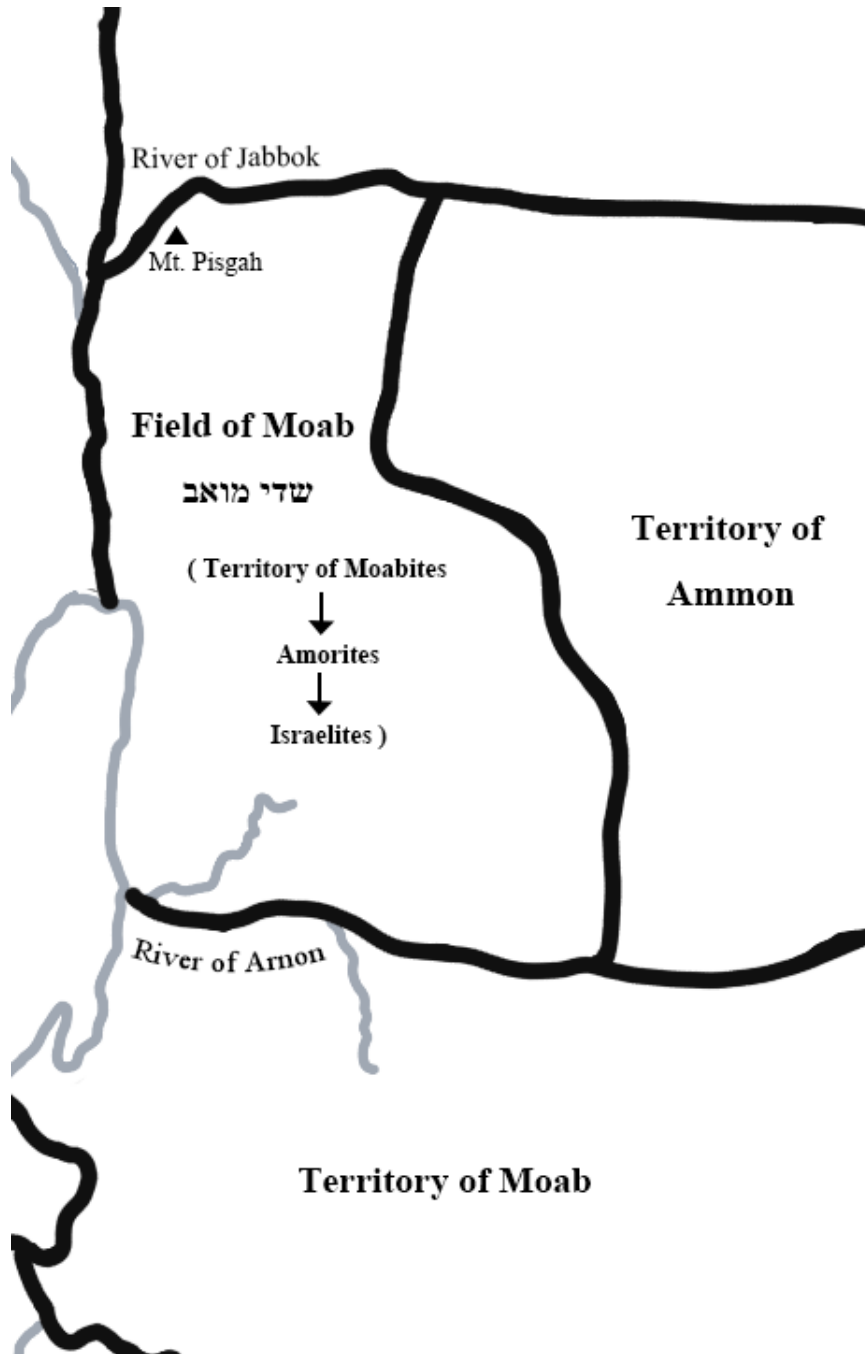


Figure 1. Map illustrating territorial delineations based on Numbers 21 and Judges 11.

Given this context, the translation of שְׂדֵי מוֹאָב in Ruth 1:1 as “the country of Moab” in some English Bible versions seems incorrect. Campbell acknowledges the complexity of

determining which parts of Moab the storyteller might have intended to include in the narrative, suggesting a likely location north of the Arnon river.¹⁵⁴ However, other scholars, such as Sasson, Bush, Schipper, and Grossman, propose an alternative interpretation: they suggest that the term should be understood as “the territory of Moab distinct from the Israelite territory.”¹⁵⁵ Despite their views, this interpretation does not appear convincing when examined in light of the above analysis. By examining the textual evidence in Judges, it can be concluded that during the time of the judges, the Israelites legitimately held and controlled the “field of Moab” as a geographical area.

Being part of the Israelite Transjordan, it would not have been challenging for Israelites to travel or settle here. A relevant custom mentioned is the lamentation of Jephthah’s daughter (Judg. 11:40-41). To honor her father’s vow, she agreed to her sacrifice. Her faithfulness and virginity are remembered through the practice of lamentation.¹⁵⁶ Importantly, the account mentions that “the daughters of Israel [who] went annually to lament the daughter of Jephthah” (Judg. 11:40). Jobling suggests this text “implies that women from all Israel annually went to Transjordan to celebrate this cult.”¹⁵⁷ Although the text does not specify the location, it implies that during the judges era, the field of Moab in Transjordan was legitimate Israeli territory, with the Israelites free to travel between Cisjordan and Transjordan. Hence, Elimelech’s family’s migration from Bethlehem to Transjordan during the judges era does not appear unusual given this context. Consequently, the claim that Elimelech and his two sons were punished for migrating to the field of Moab becomes untenable.

It may be argued that, although there is no direct negative evaluation of Moab at the beginning of the book, it is implied in the chapters to follow. For instance, Ruth is identified as a Moabite woman seven times in the book (Ruth 1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10), even though in the narrative, Ruth never explicitly mentions this origin on her own. Despite the fact that these texts

¹⁵⁴ Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 50-2.

¹⁵⁵ Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 81. See also Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 16; Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 75; Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 74.

¹⁵⁶ Robert G. Boling, *Judges*. 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday & Co., 1974), 209.

¹⁵⁷ Jobling, “‘The Jordan A Boundary’: Transjordan in Israel’s Ideological Geography,” 131.

do not directly address the negativity associated with this identification, some scholars believe that the negativity is indeed attached in some instances based on their context. As an example, Garsiel claims that the young overseer of the field referred to Ruth as a “Moabite girl” in Ruth 2:6 to indicate his contempt for Ruth’s foreign origin.¹⁵⁸ Similarly, Linafelt suggests that the way in which Ruth is addressed by the overseer might lead to a crude stereotypical view of Moabite women as sexually available and aggressive.¹⁵⁹

The unfavorable sentiment toward Moabites can be attributed to Moses’ command in Deuteronomy 23:3: “A Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation shall none of them enter into the assembly of the LORD for ever....” By citing the evil deeds of the Moabites in Deuteronomy 2 and in Numbers 22-24, Moses explains the reason for this command in Deuteronomy 23:5-6. Negativity may also be attributed to the origin of the Moabites: according to Genesis 19, Moabites are related to Lot’s elder daughter and his incestuous relationship with her, and consequently a negative image of the Moabites is consistent throughout all biblical accounts.

A negative portrayal of the Moabite identity in Ruth is not objectionable, but drawing a sharp distinction between the field of Moab and the Moabite people is more significant in the present study. The possible negative implications of the example are in fact directed towards Ruth’s Moabite identity, rather than the field of Moab, which as discussed above is simply a geographical description. Does this view shift the blame for the tragedy of Elimelech’s family from both his migration to Moab and his sons’ marriage to Moabite wives to exclusively the problem of exogamy, or at least as the Targum stated, for the death of the two sons?¹⁶⁰ According to Grossman, the two sons’ deaths are likely linked to their assimilation to the Moabite culture, and the Hebrew wording of their deaths (“וַיָּמָוּתוּ גַם שְׁנֵי יְהִיָּם” translated as “and the two of them also died”), resembles the punishment for adultery in Deuteronomy 22:22.¹⁶¹ The text itself does not provide an evaluation of the marriage; it simply states it as a fact, leaving the

¹⁵⁸ Moshe Garsiel, “The Literary Structure, Art of the Storyteller and Development of Plot in the Book of Ruth (Hebrew),” 71; see also Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 153-155.

¹⁵⁹ Linafelt, *Ruth*, 31.

¹⁶⁰ Scherman and Meir, *The Book of Ruth-Megillas Ruth: A New Translation*, 66.

¹⁶¹ Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 83.

reader to speculate whether the following events are related to the marriage.¹⁶² Nonetheless, certain textual evidence might suggest that exogamy poses a challenge for the constructed society in Ruth. This issue will be thoroughly examined in the subsequent chapter, which delves into the social setting of the book of Ruth, providing a comprehensive analysis of the implications and complexities associated with exogamy within the narrative.

The Field and the Well

Betrothal type-scenes in the Bible

When it comes to the act of betrothal in the Bible, one setting where this is commonly initiated is at a well. In biblical narratives, public wells served as natural gathering points for people to meet as they drew water for daily use. These trips to the well provided a socially acceptable opportunity for women to be out in public, allowing them to socialize with other women and be seen by men within an appropriate context. Consequently, wells became significant “matching venues” in the biblical world.¹⁶³ This motif of couples meeting near wells was initially recognized by some Rabbinic interpreters, who noted that such encounters often resulted in betrothals: “‘And he sat next to the well’ (Ex. 2:15): [Moses] adopted the ways of the forefathers. Three individuals found their partners [by] a well: Isaac, Jacob, and Moses” (Exodus Rabba 1:33).¹⁶⁴

In his work, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Alter explores the interconnectedness and coherence of biblical stories by examining various narrative techniques such as type-scenes, repetition, and characterization. Within this context, Alter delves further into the well scene,

¹⁶² Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 44.

¹⁶³ Ghantous Hadi and Edelman Diana, “Cisterns and Wells in Biblical Memory.” In *Memory and the City in Ancient Israel* (Penn State University Press, 2014), 185.

¹⁶⁴ Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 271.

classifying it as a betrothal type-scene.¹⁶⁵ This type-scene is usually played out in the following manner:

1. The scene begins with a man travelling to a distant land.
2. After arriving at the destination, he would encounter a young woman (נערה) by a well. After water is drawn from the well, the young woman would rush home to inform her family about the man's arrival.
3. At the end of the scene, a meal would be set up for hosting the man.
4. A betrothal is later conducted between the man and the young woman who was met at a well.

This type-scene is found in the cases of Isaac and Rebekah (through the surrogate of Abraham's servant), Jacob and Rachel, and Moses and Zipporah (i.e., one of Reuel's seven daughters whom Moses meets by the well). Although each case differs in detail, the structure of the type-scene is maintained.

In Ruth, almost all the general components of the betrothal type-scene can also be found (Ruth 2:3-16):

1. The protagonist travels to a distant land (1:22).
2. In the distant land, she encounters a man, who tells her to drink from the jars the young men have filled if she is thirsty (2:9), which implies that a water well is likely situated nearby.
3. The man invites the young woman to a meal (2:14).
4. At the end of the story, the two characters are betrothed, although this development is only revealed two scenes later (further analysis will follow).

The uniqueness of this scene in Ruth is that "the author has rotated the betrothal type-scene 180 degrees on the axes of gender and geography"¹⁶⁶ because the protagonist is a female, and the

¹⁶⁵ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 47-62. However, Ziegler claims that Alter's identifying of the betrothal type scene is "another example in which early rabbinic source took note of a phenomenon often attributed to modern scholarly technique." Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 272.

¹⁶⁶ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 58.

land is in Judea (not foreign land in the eyes of Israelites). This change in gender and geographical setting may indicate that the author of Ruth is not simply following the general betrothal type-scene but is creating a new and unique scene based on something already familiar.

Discussion of the field scene: Betrothal type-scene and more?

The spatial setting is crucial in the betrothal type-scene. When referring to the well in the narratives with a betrothal type-scene, Alter names it “the well of betrothal scene”¹⁶⁷ to denote the fact that this is an event which only occurs by a well. Other spatial items such as foreign land and a house (or rather a meal in the house) are also important for identifying this type-scene. These items form the intrinsic part of this type-scene and serve as the intertextual triggers at the thematic level in the spatial setting; despite the fact that the word for “well” was not explicitly written into the text, its presence is still nonetheless implied in 2:9, and the aforementioned spatial elements can all be found in the narrative. Thus, it can be said that the author of Ruth simply adopts the betrothal type-scene from the Pentateuch and uses it to allude to the Patriarch stories, as described by Alter: “Counting on the audience’s familiarity with the features and function of the type-scene, [readers] could merely allude to the type-scene or present a transfigured version of it.”¹⁶⁸

Conversely, Grossman argues whether the betrothal scene is adopted in Ruth. As observed in other cases, the scenes all end up with marriage, yet the scene in Ruth 2 solves only the problem of Ruth lacking food, and the marriage is only realized two scenes later with Naomi’s intervention.¹⁶⁹ However, this argument could be untenable. Jacob’s marriage with Rachel does not follow the betrothal scene immediately either: between the type-scene and the marriage, the author inserts the sections of Laban exploiting Jacob for seven years and Jacob’s wedding with Leah. Moreover, this type-scene is depicted in various way when being applied in different narratives: to verify whether the scene is present in the narrative, it is necessary to identify what the spatial items are and whether there is a similar motive and result. From the

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 55.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 58.

¹⁶⁹ Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 129-30.

perspective of narrative criticism, given that this type-scene functions as an allusion to patriarch narrative, an incomplete betrothal scene could be an allusion in the present text as a literary device to foreshadow the marriage at the end. In other words, the immediate result is not mandatory within the type-scene.

Still, it is indeed challenging to assert that the field scene in Ruth 2 is solely a betrothal scene. Alter posits that “the entire story [of Ruth] is a betrothal narrative,”¹⁷⁰ and therefore the scene in chapter 2 serves as a symbolic centerpiece and summary of the whole narrative. This perspective, however, is debatable. A story with marriage as the ultimate objective does not necessarily address the issue of infertility. As Bush points out, the barrenness of Naomi and Ruth is the central problem of the story.¹⁷¹ The typical betrothal scene can only lead to the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, as this scene is unrelated to barrenness in all other narratives. Consequently, if the field scene encapsulates the narrative and foreshadows its conclusion, the element of producing an heir should also be incorporated, but this is evidently beyond what the betrothal scene can imply.

In his suggestion of various common type-scenes, Alter also mentions another type-scene, namely “the birth of the hero to his barren mother.”¹⁷² Although he does not delve into this type-scene, the nature of the characters and the conclusion of the Ruth narrative appear to align with this scene. Upon closer examination of the text, one could deduce that the “birth of a barren woman” type-scene consists of several shared features:

1. The barren woman often has a more fertile rival wife sharing her husband (e.g., Sarai with Hagar, Rachel with Leah, Hannah with Peninnah).

2. The barren woman might employ her handmaid to bear children for her as a form of surrogacy (e.g., Sarai uses Hagar, Rachel uses Leah, Leah uses Zilpah).

¹⁷⁰ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 58.

¹⁷¹ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 20.

¹⁷² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 51.

3. Strategies to address barrenness include the use of transactions, such as the use of mandrakes by Leah or intercessory prayer (e.g., Isaac prays for Rebekah, Abraham prays for the women in Abimelech's family, and Hannah prays for herself).

4. The barren woman is often promised a child by an angel of God or an emissary (as in the cases of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, the wife of Manoah, and Hannah).

When comparing these features to the case of Ruth, it becomes evident that the narrative of Ruth does not include any common features of the "birth of a barren woman" type-scene.¹⁷³

As the betrothal scene alludes to the three occurrences in the Pentateuch,¹⁷⁴ other details in the field scene of Ruth 2 can also trigger a reader's reminiscence to other narrative accounts in the Pentateuch. For example, Boaz's description of Ruth in 2:11 ("how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before") is commonly accepted as an allusion to God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12:1 ("Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you"). In addition, there is other text in this scene that triggers the intertextuality with the narrative of Abraham. In Ruth 2:12, Boaz states, "The LORD recompense thy work, and be thy reward complete from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to take refuge." According to Rauber, the phrase "thy reward complete" (מְשֻׁכָּרְתָּהּ שְׂלֵמָה) refers, on the one hand, to Ruth's dining with Boaz (2:14), and on the other hand, to the fulfillment of "under whose wings thou art come to take refuge" in Ruth 3, where Boaz covers Ruth with his skirt (3:7, 9). However, the meaning of these lexical terms could potentially extend beyond this surface-level interpretation.

Another similarity is found in verse 11, where the author presents Ruth as having an experience similar to that of Abraham. In this context, the term מְשֻׁכָּרְתָּהּ in verse 12 may function as an intertextual trigger at the lexical level, linking the narrative to another account involving Abraham in Genesis 15:1, where God promises him, "Your reward [שְׂכָרְךָ] shall be very great." The word "reward" in Genesis 15:1 shares the same root noun as the "reward" used in Ruth 2:12.

¹⁷³ Although Janice P. De-Whyte states that Ruth stands in for Naomi as a surrogate wife, this view is arguable because the relationship between Naomi and Ruth is not one of mistress and handmaid, as the other "birth of a barren woman" type-scene possesses. See Janice P. De-Whyte, "Tamar and Naomi-Ruth: Widows." In *Wom(b)an: A Cultural-Narrative Reading of the Hebrew Bible Barrenness Narratives* (BRILL, 2018), 264-8.

¹⁷⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 58.

Given the subsequent context, the “reward” that God promises to Abraham pertains to his descendants (Gen. 15:5). In a similar vein, Ruth 2:12 may adopt this blessing to foreshadow the production of her offspring.¹⁷⁵ The closing phrase of Ruth 2:12 (“under whose wings you have sought refuge”) also bears resemblance to Genesis 15:1, where God tells Abraham, “I am your shield [מגן].” Both passages employ metaphors of protection, emphasizing the divine care and reward bestowed upon the faithful. By drawing on these intertextual connections, the narrative of Ruth may be understood in a more profound and nuanced way where the significance of divine providence and the lineage of the faithful is highlighted.

Besides God’s blessing to Abram, there is another piece of textual evidence in Genesis showing that the term “thy reward [משכרתי]” refers to the barren woman’s offspring. After Leah “has stopped bearing” (Gen. 30:9), she changes the mandrakes with Rachel for the right to lie with Jacob. In Genesis 30:16, Jacob and Leah meet in the field (as Boaz and Ruth encounter in the field). Leah tells Jacob: “I have surely hired thee [שָׂכַר שְׂכַרְתִּי] with my son’s mandrakes.” This event results in God granting her a birth: Leah considers the newborn son as her reward (שְׂכָרִי) from God and even name him Issachar (יששכר), which literally means “there is a reward” (Gen. 30:18). Thus, the root of the Hebrew word שכר in this case is clearly connected to the birth of offspring.

According to this view, the author is using Boaz to indicate the blessing for Ruth’s offspring in Ruth 2:12. This verse then also presents a common feature of “the birth of a barren woman” scene, that is, an emissary to speak for God for blessing the woman’s fertility. Although this type-scene occurs throughout whole Bible, yet as the lexical trigger “reward” indicates, the blessing of Boaz is likely drawn from the Pentateuch, particularly from the narratives in Genesis.

The allusions to the Genesis narratives within the book of Ruth are evident and significant. For instance, the Hebrew phrase “וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ” (“And there was a famine in the land”) appears in both Ruth 1:1 and Genesis 12:10, and in using this phrase in the book of Ruth, the author thus establishes a lexical connection between the two narratives. In both cases, the protagonists depart from their homelands, venturing into foreign territories in pursuit of sustenance and survival. Furthermore, Ruth 1:16 and Genesis 24:58 share the phrase “אֲלֵךְ” (“I

¹⁷⁵ Nielsen also acknowledges the connection between Ruth 2:12 and Genesis 15:1; however, her brief analysis does not delve into the nuances of the Hebrew lexicon. Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 59.

will go”), as uttered by both Ruth and Rebekah respectively. This commonality highlights their unwavering commitment and willingness to leave their homes and families, and it connects the passages thematically. Moreover, in the genealogies presented in Ruth 4:18-22 and the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38, the theme of a Levirate marriage emerges, wherein a family member assumes responsibility for marrying a widow to perpetuate the deceased husband’s lineage. Boaz fulfills this duty for Ruth, while Judah’s son Perez is born through his union with Tamar in Genesis 38. Additionally, the city gate functions as a crucial setting for pivotal events in both Ruth 4 and Genesis 19:1, shaping the destinies of the families involved. In that scene, the townspeople bestow upon Boaz and Ruth the blessing of fertility akin to that of Rachel and Leah, who “built the house of Israel.” This blessing explicitly refers to the narratives of Rachel and Leah in Genesis 29-30, thus linking Ruth to the matriarchs and evoking the common theme of fertility. Although numerous other examples can be cited, a comprehensive list is beyond the scope of this work. These instances above, however, illustrate the profound connections between the book of Ruth and the narratives of Genesis, both at the lexical and thematic levels.

In conclusion, the field scene in Ruth 2 is not simply a betrothal type-scene but a more complex combination of elements drawn mainly from different narratives in Genesis. While the betrothal type-scene is indeed present, other elements such as allusions to Abraham’s story, God’s blessings for offspring, and the theme of overcoming barrenness are also integrated in this scene. This rich combination of elements in the field scene serves multiple purposes, such as foreshadowing the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, highlighting Ruth’s connection to the patriarchs, and emphasizing the importance of God’s blessings for offspring. With these points in mind, it would be an oversimplification to consider the field scene in Ruth 2 merely as a betrothal type-scene. Instead, the field scene should be recognized as a multifaceted and intricate scene that skillfully interweaves various themes and allusions from the Genesis narratives. This not only demonstrates the author’s literary prowess but also serves to enrich the reader’s understanding of the story of Ruth.

The Threshing Floor

Significance of the location

The threshing floor is a crucial concept in biblical narratives, serving both practical and symbolic purposes. Threshing floors were flat, open areas, often located on elevated ground, where farmers would separate the edible grain from the inedible chaff. The threshing process involved beating or trampling the harvested crop, followed by winnowing, where the lighter chaff would be blown away by the wind, leaving the heavier grain behind.

In biblical narratives, threshing floors carry significant importance as they often function as spaces where key events and interactions occur. According to Victor H. Matthews, threshing floors evolved from being the only open space in villages to becoming symbolic and metaphorical spaces.¹⁷⁶ They symbolize sustenance, as grain was a staple food in the ancient Near East, and they also represent fertility and abundance. Threshing floors were places of communal activity, where people would gather to work, trade, and socialize. As a result, threshing floors held social and economic importance in ancient societies.

In his article, “Where Doom is Spoken: Threshing Floors as Places of Decision and Communication in Biblical Literature,” Andrew Tobolowsky examines the various roles of threshing floors in biblical narratives.¹⁷⁷ In the story of Gideon in Judges 6, the threshing floor functions as a location of divine revelation, where an angel appears to Gideon, an event that ultimately leads to his commissioning as a judge to deliver Israel from the Midianites. In Judges 15, Samson enacts revenge on the Philistines by setting fire to their crops, using the threshing floor as a site of conflict and retribution. David purchases a threshing floor from Araunah (Ornan) the Jebusite (2 Sam. 24 and 1 Chron. 21) to build an altar and to offer sacrifices, with divine communication revealing the location as the future site of the Temple in Jerusalem. In Micah 4:12-13, the prophet employs imagery of threshing and the threshing floor to symbolize Israel’s triumph over their enemies, serving at the same time as a metaphor for God’s judgment and

¹⁷⁶ Victor Harold Matthews, “Entrance Ways and Threshing Floors: Legally Significant Sites in the Ancient Near East.” *Fides et historia*, 19, no. 3 (1987), 30.

¹⁷⁷ Andrew Tobolowsky, “Where Doom Is Spoken: Threshing Floors as Places of Decision and Communication in Biblical Literature.” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 16, no. 1 (June 4, 2016), 95–120.

Israel's eventual restoration. Likewise, threshing floors in Jeremiah 51:33 and Joel 3:13 also serve as metaphors for divine judgment, with the process of separating wheat from chaff symbolizing the distinction between the righteous and the wicked in the context of God's judgment. Consequently, threshing floors often function as critical spaces for decision-making, divine communication, and transformative events throughout the biblical tradition.

Tobolowsky also highlights the significance of the the threshing floor in Ruth 3.¹⁷⁸ In Ruth, the threshing floor serves as a spatial setting where a critical turning point in the narrative takes place, ultimately leading to the resolution of the main plot. He argues that the scene at the threshing floor can be regarded as a microcosm of the broader themes found in the book of Ruth, such as redemption, loyalty, and divine providence. Moreover, the threshing floor in Ruth is a site of vulnerability, both physically and emotionally, as Ruth uncovers Boaz's feet and lies down beside him at Naomi's instruction. This act of submission mirrors the broader theme of reliance on divine guidance and protection present throughout the book. Further, when Ruth asks Boaz to spread his cloak over her, the request is not only a symbolic gesture of protection and provision but also an appeal to Boaz's role as a kinsman-redeemer. From this view, it can be said that the threshing floor here becomes a space of negotiation, where both characters navigate their roles within the social and familial structures.

Although explicit divine intervention (as found in the aforementioned threshing floor scenes presented by Tobolowsky) is not found in Ruth 3, the book of Ruth portrays divine providence as a subtle component guiding the events and the decisions that were made at the threshing floor. The unfolding of the events at the threshing floor ultimately leads to Boaz agreeing to act as Ruth's kinsman-redeemer, ultimately marrying her to continue her deceased husband's lineage and secure her future.

Two interpretations of the threshing floor in Ruth

A place where the mourning is ceased. An interesting perspective comes from Bush, who draws a connection between Ruth 3:3 and 2 Samuel 12:20. Bush argues that Naomi's instructions to

¹⁷⁸ Tobolowsky, "Where Doom Is Spoken: Threshing Floors as Places of Decision and Communication in Biblical Literature," 114-5.

Ruth to wash herself, anoint herself with oil, and change her garments is to “remove the symbols ... of her widowhood,” which bears resemblance to David’s actions in 2 Samuel 12:20.¹⁷⁹ In that account, upon learning of the death of his child born to Bathsheba, David washes himself, puts on perfumed oil, and changes his garments, marking the end of his mourning period. While there is little lexical similarity between two cases (with the exception of the Hebrew verb רָחַץ, meaning “to wash”), the thematic parallels in both characters’ actions are evident.

Bush contends that Naomi’s instructions to Ruth signal the cessation of her mourning and a return to the normal activities and desires of life, including the possibility of marriage.¹⁸⁰ This interpretation emphasizes the threshing floor’s role as a transformative space in the book of Ruth, where not only critical decisions and negotiations take place but also where personal transitions and new beginnings occur. In this view, the threshing floor becomes a site for Ruth to leave behind her past and embrace the future, further highlighting its significance as a symbolic space in biblical narratives.

Bush’s comparison between Ruth 3:3 and 2 Samuel 12:20 provides an intriguing perspective on the possible end of Ruth’s mourning period, which can be further supported by examining the mourning scene in Genesis 50:11—a connection that has not yet been discussed by any of the prominent commentaries. In this passage, people mourn for Jacob at the threshing floor of Atad, and although the location is not explicitly connected to the cessation of mourning, its association with mourning and transition in biblical narratives can be seen as reinforcing Bush’s interpretation of Ruth 3:3.

In all three cases, the mourning period eventually comes to an end, marking a transition to a new phase in the lives of the characters involved. This comparison suggests that it is indeed possible to interpret Naomi’s instructions to Ruth in 3:3 as a way to end her period of mourning and subsequently a transition to a new phase in her life, one that can even entertain the prospect of being married again. The thematic similarities between the texts lend credibility to this

¹⁷⁹ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 181. See also Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 131; and Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 51.

¹⁸⁰ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 178, 181.

interpretation and demonstrate the potential for the threshing floor to serve as a symbolic space where transitions take place.

These scenes of transition—from ceasing mourning to entering a new phase of life—can also be connected to Tobolowsky’s view that threshing floors function as spaces where significant transitions occur. For example, he discusses David’s purchase of Araunah’s threshing floor as the future site of the Temple in Jerusalem. This event represents a crucial turning point in the narrative, as David’s decision to build an altar at the threshing floor leads to the cessation of the divine punishment afflicting Israel. The end of this punishment symbolizes a conclusion to the nation’s period of mourning, further emphasizing the role of the threshing floor as a location where mourning ends and new phases of life begin.

While the interpretation of the threshing floor in Ruth 3 as a site of transition from mourning to a new phase of life is indeed possible, there are a few aspects of the narrative that may raise objections to this view. One such objection is that Naomi’s instructions to Ruth in Ruth 3:3 can be interpreted in various ways, such as a strategic move to gain Boaz’s favor rather than solely as an end to Ruth’s mourning period. In the latter part of the verse, Naomi advises Ruth not to reveal herself to Boaz until he has finished eating and drinking. This instruction appears to be more focused on the timing and the opportunity to approach Boaz discreetly, rather than being related to any ritual practice of ceasing mourning. The emphasis on waiting for the right moment to approach Boaz suggests that Naomi’s instructions might be primarily concerned with ensuring the success of Ruth’s appeal to Boaz as a potential kinsman-redeemer,¹⁸¹ not so much with Ruth starting a new phase of life. Thus, this interpretation could indicate that the threshing floor scene may not be primarily focused on Ruth’s transition from mourning. Furthermore, other objections could be raised based on the absence of explicit references to mourning in the text, as well as the potential symbolic significance of other elements in the narrative that might not be directly related to the cessation of mourning.

¹⁸¹ Wetter critiques Bush’s analysis, arguing that his proposed cessation of mourning does not account for why it was necessary for Ruth to seek out Boaz specifically at night. “*On Her Account*”: *Reconfiguring Israel in Ruth, Esther, and Judith*, 48.

A place where seduction occurs. Another interpretation of the threshing floor scene in Ruth 3 posits that Naomi directs Ruth to seduce Boaz for sexual relation after he has consumed alcohol. For example, Grossman states that with “the suggestive time and setting of their planned encounter: all seems to set the scene for a midnight seduction.”¹⁸² This perspective gains credence from its links to other biblical tales, such as the story of Tamar and Judah in Genesis 38. In this account, Tamar seduces Judah, ultimately ensuring the continuation of his family line. Similarly, Ruth approaches Boaz as her kinsman-redeemer to preserve her deceased husband’s lineage. Wolde contends that Ruth and Tamar’s actions share numerous similarities, including the seduction of elderly male relatives, spatial arrangement (i.e., a public place), a timing that involves a period of waiting, the attention of clothes and attractiveness, and the eventual birth of an heir.¹⁸³ Although these factors do not establish a direct lexical connection, they reinforce the strong thematic parallels between the two narratives.

This interpretation of seduction is further supported by Hosea 9:1, which mentions the presence of harlots at threshing floors, indicating that this spatial setting might have been associated with sexual encounters. In Ruth 3:3-4, Naomi’s instructions for Ruth to wash, anoint herself, and change her clothes can be seen as preparing her for a seductive encounter with Boaz.¹⁸⁴ Additionally, the instruction for Ruth to remain hidden until Boaz has finished eating and drinking could imply that Naomi wants Ruth to approach Boaz when his inhibitions are lowered due to intoxication, which could cause him to think he is being approached by a woman who is a harlot at the threshing floor.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 209. Ziegler also notes that “[an] abundance of sexual innuendos accompanies the delineation of Naomi’s plan.” Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 294. See also Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 131-2.

¹⁸³ Wolde, “Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar,” 436-7.

¹⁸⁴ Rashi indicates that there are erotic implications on Ruth’s preparation. See Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 56. Many scholars also suggest that Naomi’s instruction is to make Ruth physically attractive for her encounter with Boaz. Hubbard suggest that Naomi “possibly instructed Ruth to dress as a bride.” Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 202. See also Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 67.

¹⁸⁵ Beattie states straightforwardly that Naomi’s plan is “planting the idea in Boaz’s head by placing Ruth in his bed.” Beattie, “Ruth III,” 43.

Support for the interpretation of seduction for sexual encounter can also be found in the thematic and lexical similarities between the story of Ruth and that of Lot and his daughters in Genesis 19. The primary objective in both narratives is to ensure the continuation of the family line. Lot's daughters aim to "preserve the seed" by bearing children with their father (Gen. 19:32), while Ruth seeks to preserve the family line for herself and her mother-in-law by approaching Boaz as a potential redeemer (Ruth 3:9). Both scenes take place at night, involve a man who is intoxicated (i.e., Lot in Genesis 19 and Boaz in Ruth 3), and feature women who take the initiative to secure their family's future.

In terms of lexical similarities, a number of lexical triggers are worth highlighting here. While the thematic similarities between two narratives have been discussed by some scholars,¹⁸⁶ the lexical parallel is given far less attention by comparison. The lexical triggers in Ruth 3:3-4—such as *יִתְדַעַי* (make yourself known), *יִדְעֵהוּ* (he shall know), *וַתָּבֹא* (she came), and *וַתִּשְׁכַּב* (she lay down)—mirror the language in Genesis 19:33, which features *וַתָּבֹא* (she came), *וַתִּשְׁכַּב* (she lay down), and *יָדָע* (he knew). Similarly, the Hebrew words *וַתִּקַּם* (she arose) and *וַתִּשְׁכַּב* (she lay down) in Ruth 3:14 also appear in Genesis 19:35. These lexical parallels further strengthen the connection between the two narratives, suggesting that the author of Ruth deliberately drew upon this earlier narrative to create a meaningful connection between the two stories and also to emphasize the seductive elements in the encounter between Ruth and Boaz. By drawing a connection between the two narratives, the author of Ruth highlights the resourcefulness and determination of both Lot's daughters and Ruth in their efforts to preserve their family lineage. In both stories, the women take the initiative in challenging circumstances, navigating morally ambiguous situations to ensure the survival of their families. This emphasis on their resourcefulness can be seen as a nod to the seductive interpretation of Ruth's encounter with Boaz.

The parallel between the stories of Ruth, Lot, and Tamar may also be an invitation to consider the role of divine providence in the lives of the characters. In all three cases, the preservation of the family line is ultimately successful, which could be interpreted as a sign of divine intervention and guidance. The connection between the stories of Ruth, Lot, and Tamar

¹⁸⁶ For example, Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 298-300; Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 41.

underscores the idea that God is actively involved in the lives of individuals and families, even in situations that appear morally ambiguous or challenging. This interpretation suggests that the seductive elements in Ruth's encounter with Boaz, Tamar's encounter with Judah, and the actions of Lot's daughters may be part of a larger divine plan for redemption.

In this act of seduction, one key point to consider is the plan as a motif in both narratives. Firstly, this plan is plotted by Naomi, not Ruth. On this point, Fewell and Gunn note that "Naomi's scheme is dangerous and deceptive,"¹⁸⁷ and similarly Bush perceives the plan as the "greatest risk to both [Ruth's] reputation and her person."¹⁸⁸ While Naomi is the instigator, the consequences of her plan failing would most likely be solely borne, a point well expressed by Grossman: "If Naomi's gamble backfires, Ruth may end up losing everything."¹⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the present work suggests that it is important to consider the above points in Naomi's plan in parallel with Tamar's case. If Ruth and Boaz indeed have sexual intercourse at the threshing floor, Naomi could have expected that, like in Tamar's case, the action of Ruth would ultimately be justified (Gen. 38:26) as Boaz is one of her legal kinsman-redeemers, and a son would be born to continue the family line. In this view, the risk would have been deemed worthwhile and even necessary.

Likewise, although the traditional commentators reject this interpretation of seduction for reasons most likely due to embarrassment,¹⁹⁰ the author of the book of Ruth may have intentionally created this thematic intertextuality with the story of Tamar and Judah to justify Naomi's instructions and Ruth's actions. By drawing parallels between the two narratives, the author may have sought to convey that Ruth's encounter with Boaz at the threshing floor, even if it involved seduction, was divinely sanctioned and ultimately served a higher purpose. This

¹⁸⁷ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth*, 99.

¹⁸⁸ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 183.

¹⁸⁹ Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 211.

¹⁹⁰ For example, Broch, from a Talmudic-Midrashic view, explains that Ruth's physical preparation before going to the threshing floor is "to cleanse herself from idolatry ... to anoint herself for good deeds and righteous conduct ... put on Sabbath garments," and the uncovering Boaz's feet is "to remind him of his responsibility toward her." Broch, *Ruth: The Book of Ruth in Hebrew and English with a Talmudic Midrashic Commentary*, 72-4. See also Yerushalmi, Shmuel. *The Torah Anthology, MeAm Lo'ez*. Edited by Zvi Faier. Translated by Aryeh Kaplan (New York: Maznaim, 1977), 93-6. Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 51.

purpose would be the continuation of Ruth's deceased husband's lineage and the securing of her future, just as their forefather and foremother did.

Thus, the connection between the stories of Ruth and Tamar serves to emphasize the redemptive nature of their actions, despite the unconventional means employed. The intentional intertextuality between the two narratives helps to strengthen the justification for Naomi's instructions and Ruth's actions, as it positions the threshing floor scene as a pivotal moment in the story that leads to the resolution of the main plot. Incorporating Tamar's story into this analysis deepens the understanding of divine providence in the face of morally complex situations. Tamar's seduction of Judah ensures the continuation of the family line and ultimately leads to the lineage of King David. By connecting the narratives of Ruth, Lot, and Tamar, the author invites readers to consider the possibility that God can work through seemingly immoral actions to bring about redemption and the fulfillment of divine purposes. This common thread among the three stories further supports the interpretation of seduction in the encounter between Ruth and Boaz.

Based on this interpretation, the characterization of the characters takes on a more complex and proactive dimension than in the traditional understanding of these characters. Naomi, who is traditionally seen as a wise and nurturing mother-in-law, is depicted in this interpretation as a shrewd strategist, utilizing her knowledge of social customs and leveraging the situation at the threshing floor to achieve her goals. While her actions might seem morally ambiguous, they also reveal her resourcefulness and her strong commitment to the well-being of her family line. This portrayal adds depth to her character and highlights her resilience in the face of adversity.

Ruth, on the other hand, is often portrayed as a loyal and virtuous woman who is devoted to her mother-in-law and committed to following the path of righteousness. In this interpretation, Ruth's willingness to follow Naomi's instructions and potentially seduce Boaz demonstrates her unwavering loyalty to Naomi and her determination to secure a future for both of them. It also showcases her courage and adaptability, as she navigates an unfamiliar and potentially dangerous situation. While this may initially seem at odds with her traditional characterization, it ultimately reinforces her strength and dedication to her family.

Likewise, Boaz is not merely a benevolent kinsman-redeemer who recognizes and rewards Ruth's loyalty and devotion. Instead, he becomes an essential player in the unfolding

plan, as Naomi and Ruth's strategy relies on his willingness to accept and fulfill his role. Even as he acknowledges that Ruth's actions (i.e., Naomi's instructions) are not entirely appropriate (as observed in his words to Ruth in 3:14, "Do not let it be known that the woman came to the threshing floor"), Boaz's decision to take responsibility for Ruth and her family could be seen as him recognizing and respecting the determination and courage displayed by both women.¹⁹¹ This interpretation emphasizes the possibility of a more complex dynamic between Ruth and Boaz, wherein Ruth's actions at the threshing floor may serve as a catalyst for Boaz to step into his role as kinsman-redeemer.

With all the above in mind, it can therefore be stated that the ambiguity of the text "swarm throughout the episode,"¹⁹² particularly in relation to the threshing floor scene, in turn allowing for multiple readings and inviting readers to consider the broader implications of the characters' choices and motivations within this specific context. According to Sternberg, this ambiguity might be the author's deliberate application of the literary technique of "gap-filling". For instance, the text does not provide explicit details about what transpires between Ruth and Boaz at the threshing floor, leaving a gap that invites diverse interpretations, some of which highlight the threshing floor as a site of mourning, transition, or seduction.

Both Boaz's reaction to Ruth's presence at the threshing floor and his subsequent actions also contain a degree of ambiguity. He praises her loyalty, yet he also asks her not to let anyone know she was there. This narrative gap leaves room for readers to consider Boaz's motivations and to evaluate his character within the context of the threshing floor. Each understanding adds to the complexity of the characters' actions and motivations at the threshing floor, allowing for a richer and more nuanced appreciation of their roles in the narrative and the symbolic significance of the threshing floor.

¹⁹¹ It is worth noting that the text does not explicitly specify whether a sexual relationship occurs between Ruth and Boaz at the threshing floor, and it is not the focus of this study to determine the nature of their interaction.

¹⁹² Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 131.

The City Gate

Significance of the location

In the biblical context, aside from providing citizens protection and defense, city gates served several important functions in the society:

1. Legal transactions and judicial matters: City gates were often the venue for resolving disputes and carrying out legal transactions.¹⁹³ One example can be found in Deuteronomy 25:7-10, where the gate is the location for resolving issues of the Levirate marriage.

2. Social interactions and gatherings: City gates functioned as places where people would meet for social interactions, both formal and informal.¹⁹⁴ In Genesis 19:1, Lot meets the angels at the city gate of Sodom, demonstrating that the gate was a place where people could encounter one another.

3. Trade and commerce: City gates were crucial for trade and commerce, as they provided access to the city for merchants and traders.¹⁹⁵ In 2 Kings 7:1, the city gate of Samaria is the location where the prices of food are announced, thus showing the gate's significance in economic life.

4. Political affairs: City gates also served as places where leaders gathered to make important decisions.¹⁹⁶ In 2 Samuel 15:2-6, Absalom stands at the gate to garner support and

¹⁹³ Natalie N. May, "Gates and Their Functions in Mesopotamia and Ancient Israel." In *The Fabric of Cities: Aspects of Urbanism, Urban Topography and Society in Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome* (Bilingual. Boston: Brill, 2013), 95-100; Daniel A. Frese, *The City Gate in Ancient Israel and Her Neighbors the Form, Function, and Symbolism of the Civic Forum in the Southern Levant* (Leiden: BRILL, 2020), 151-9; Carey Walsh, "Testing Entry: The Social Functions of City Gates in Biblical Memory." In *Memory and the City in Ancient Israel* (Penn State University Press, 2014), 49-54.

¹⁹⁴ May, "Gates and Their Functions in Mesopotamia and Ancient Israel," 89-90, 93-4; Frese, *The City Gate in Ancient Israel and Her Neighbors the Form, Function, and Symbolism of the Civic Forum in the Southern Levant*, 127-39.

¹⁹⁵ May, "Gates and Their Functions in Mesopotamia and Ancient Israel," 104-6; Frese, *The City Gate in Ancient Israel and Her Neighbors the Form, Function, and Symbolism of the Civic Forum in the Southern Levant*, 168-71.

¹⁹⁶ May, "Gates and Their Functions in Mesopotamia and Ancient Israel," 91-3; Frese, *The City Gate in Ancient Israel and Her Neighbors the Form, Function, and Symbolism of the Civic Forum in the Southern Levant*, 141-150; Walsh, "Testing Entry: The Social Functions of City Gates in Biblical Memory," 49.

influence the opinions of those who come to the city for judgment. This scene highlights the gate's role in political affairs.

Possible interpretations of the setting

A place where transitions happen. The scene in Ruth 4 mainly takes place at the city gate. Hubbard explains that Boaz chooses the gate area for two reasons: "First it offered the best place to locate the other kinsman ... second it was the place where legal transactions took place."¹⁹⁷ However, the significance of the city gate in this narrative could be more profound.

In Carey Walsh's article, "Testing Entry: The Social Functions of City Gates in Biblical Memory," one particular function of city gates that is discussed is the acceptance of foreigners. Walsh examines the cases of Rahab, Esther, and Ruth to illustrate how the city gate functions as a transitional space for the change of identity, especially for foreign women who become part of the Israelite community.

In the case of Rahab, a Canaanite woman from Jericho, her acceptance into the Israelite community is symbolized by her aiding the Israelite spies and her family's subsequent integration into the Israelite community after the fall of Jericho (Josh. 6:25). The city gate serves as a metaphorical threshold between her previous identity as a Canaanite and her new identity as an Israelite. Esther's story also involves a transformation of identity at the city gate. As a Jewish woman in the Persian Empire, Esther becomes the queen through a series of events orchestrated by her cousin Mordecai. The city gate is the place where Mordecai first learns of Haman's plot (Esther 2:19-23) and later becomes the site where Mordecai is honored by the king (Esther 6:10-11). The gate symbolizes the entry of the Jewish people into the Persian community and the transformation of Esther's and Mordecai's statuses.

On the story of Ruth, Walsh argues that the city gate plays a critical role in her acceptance as a foreigner within the Israelite community. Ruth, a Moabite woman, chooses to stay with her mother-in-law Naomi and to adopt the Israelite way of life. The city gate becomes the spatial setting where Boaz acknowledges Ruth's right to be redeemed and ultimately secures her future by marrying her (Ruth 4:1-12). This scene at the city gate also marks Ruth's

¹⁹⁷ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 232-3.

acceptance by the people of Bethlehem, who bless Ruth and recognize her loyalty to Naomi and her new place within the community (Ruth 4:11-12). This event at the city gate not only marks Ruth from a vulnerable foreign widow to a respected member of the Israelite community but also signifies her inclusion in the lineage of King David (Ruth 4:18-22).

Based on this view, the present work suggests that the city gate not only marks the social boundaries that determine who belongs inside (i.e., who is counted as an insider in the larger community of Israel and who was excluded),¹⁹⁸ but it also serves as a place of transition for an individual from being an outsider to an insider, both physically and socially. Physically, city gates are the points of entry and exit to the enclosed space of a city, as they create a separation between the inner and outer realms. This liminal space becomes a site of encounter, exchange, and transformation, as individuals pass through the gate to enter or leave the city, or to engage in various social, political, and economic activities. Socially, the city gates represent a symbolic threshold between different realms and can also be seen as a metaphor for spiritual transformation.

In the context of the biblical cases we have discussed, the city gate serves as a transitional space where individuals, particularly foreigners, experience a change in their identity as they move from being an outsider to an insider. In the cases of Rahab and Esther, the city gate symbolizes the shift in their statuses within the community as they are accepted into the new societies. The physical and spiritual aspects of the city gate converge to highlight the transformative nature of these liminal spaces. Thus, the city gate transcends beyond its physical function to become a metaphorical space where the boundaries between the earthly realms blur, allowing for transformative encounters and experiences.

In the case of Ruth, the city gate is likely the author's deliberate spatial setting, and it could have been chosen to indicate the symbolic place for Ruth's transition. By placing the narrative at the city gate, the author emphasizes the transformative nature of the space in Ruth's personal identity, namely moving from the Moabite community into the Israelite community physically and spiritually. This choice of setting underscores the powerful role of the city gate in biblical narratives as a symbol that serves for pivotal moments of change.

¹⁹⁸ Walsh, "Testing Entry: The Social Functions of City Gates in Biblical Memory," 48.

A place where “he sits among the elders.” The story of Ruth shares some fascinating connections with Proverbs 31. One of these can be found in the concept of the virtuous woman, or אִשֶׁת חַיִּיל (*eshet chayil*), which is mentioned in both Ruth 3:11 and Proverbs 31:10.¹⁹⁹ Interestingly, Proverbs 31:23 also mentions a scene at the city gate: “Her husband is prominent in the gates, as he sits among the elders of the land.” Roland K. Harrison argues that the city gates were essential locations where prophets, priests, and wise men addressed the people, and the square in front of the gate was a natural gathering place.²⁰⁰ The city gate was where legal tribunals took place, and only individuals with credible reputations could take a seat at the gates. Elders, who were representatives of major social communities, were ideally old men with unquestioned religious and moral character, proven integrity, and tested honesty.²⁰¹

The poem in Proverbs 31:10-31 praises the character of the virtuous woman, while also suggesting that her husband, an elder in Israel, has extensive authority in local jurisdiction and represents the community. The male figure in Proverbs 31:23 is suggested to have earned his seat among the elders at the gates not only because of his wife’s outstanding virtues but also due to his own godly and moral character qualities. The husband’s recognition as a man of integrity, respect, honor, and noble character would have qualified him to serve among the elders of the city in administering justice and providing wise counsel in political affairs. This context implies that the husband of the virtuous woman was a responsible family head and a reputable figure in society.²⁰²

The social setting of Proverbs 31 seems to resemble a rural communal and familial environment where everyone was familiar with each household—such an environment stands in stark contrast to a densely populated cosmopolitan setting. The book of Ruth also appears to be

¹⁹⁹ Ziegler notes that a midrash acknowledges a general connection between Ruth and the poem in Proverbs 31, suggesting that the latter may indeed be a reference to Ruth. Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 235; See also Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 154.

²⁰⁰ R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1970), 1012.

²⁰¹ Some other possible cases of elders at the city gates: Gen. 19:1, 23:10; Deut. 22:15, 25:7; Jer. 26:10; Isa. 29:21; Amos 5:10, 12, 15.

²⁰² For a detailed discussion on Proverbs 31:23, see Joel Kamsen Tihitshak Biwul, “What Is He Doing at the Gate? Understanding Proverbs 31:23 and Its Implications for Responsible Manhood in the Context of African Societies.” *Old Testament Essays* 29, no. 1 (2016), 33–60.

set in a similar social context as the one in Proverbs. For instance, upon Naomi's return to Bethlehem, the whole town is aware of her arrival (Ruth 1:19-20). This communal awareness of individual lives highlights the interconnectedness of the community and underscores the importance of each person's actions and decisions in relation to the well-being of others. Likewise, when Ruth begins gleaning in the fields, Boaz quickly learns of her identity and her loyalty to Naomi, emphasizing the close-knit nature of the community (Ruth 2:11). The fact that Boaz is well-informed about Ruth's situation suggests that information about individuals and their circumstances is readily shared and discussed within this social setting. This close-knit social setting serves to underscore the importance of individual actions and decisions, as well as the collective nature of the society. By portraying the characters within this context, the narrative emphasizes the significance of virtuous behavior and the impact that individual choices can have on the well-being and harmony of the community.

It is reasonable to assume that Boaz, as one of the elders frequently present at the city gate, might hold a significant position of authority,²⁰³ potentially even serving as the head of the elders. This is supported by the fact that Boaz takes the initiative in asking another kinsman (Ruth 4:1) and ten elders (4:2) to sit at the gate in order to resolve the matter of Ruth's redemption. On this point, Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky observe that the words of Boaz "conveys both formality and authority,"²⁰⁴ and Grossman also agrees that "Boaz's words ... reveal much about his status at the gate—he tells them what to do, and they follow."²⁰⁵ In addition, although not indicated in the text, some scholars also suggest that Boaz chooses specifically ten men from the elders for resolving this particular case,²⁰⁶ which also demonstrates his authority. Moreover, both Boaz's actions at the city gate and his interactions with the elders not only illustrate his authority and leadership within the community but also emphasize his virtuous character, much like the husband described in Proverbs 31. His determination to redeem Ruth and secure the continuation of her family line is a reflection of his commitment to

²⁰³ Wolde states that Boaz is a prominent figure in the city, and as one of the elders, he frequently participates in legal cases. Wolde, *Ruth and Naomi*, 94-5.

²⁰⁴ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 72.

²⁰⁵ Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 263.

²⁰⁶ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 235; Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 71.

upholding justice and maintaining a strong sense of integrity. This is evident both in his personal life and his role within the larger community. By drawing a parallel between Boaz and the husband in Proverbs 31, the implied readers can better appreciate Boaz's actions as an expression of his virtuous character and the importance of his role in the community.

Therefore, the city gate in Ruth 4 serves as a critical location where Boaz's character and intentions are revealed. The connection between Ruth and Proverbs 31 provides a compelling backdrop against which Boaz's actions at the city gate can be understood. Just as the husband in Proverbs 31 gains recognition and prestige due to his virtuous character and the virtues of his wife, Boaz's actions in redeeming Ruth and upholding justice at the city gate demonstrate his moral qualities and commitment to the well-being of his community. This connection highlights the importance of the city gate as a place where moral character and virtuous actions are recognized and celebrated.

A place where the Divine rules. In his article "Gates and Gods: High Places in the Gates," Dale W. Manor explores the notion that city gates were cultic places in the time of ancient Israelites.²⁰⁷ To support this claim, Manor provides various types of evidence, including archaeological, iconographic, and textual sources. Focusing on the textual evidence, Manor cites several biblical passages that suggest the presence of cultic activities at city gates. For example, in 2 Kings 23:8, King Josiah removes the high places and idolatrous practices at the city gates of Jerusalem. The evidence suggests that city gates were not only locations for secular functions, such as legal proceedings and commerce, but also spaces where religious rituals and worship occurred, highlighting the multifaceted nature of city gates in the lives of the ancient Israelites. Matthews also posits that the city gate serves as a conduit between two regions, and justice is commonly believed to have originated in a deity or deities at the city gate.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ Dale Wallace Manor, "Gates and Gods: High Places in the Gates." *Stone-Campbell Journal* 2, no. 2 (1999), 235–53. See also May, "Gates and Their Functions in Mesopotamia and Ancient Israel," 80-6; Frese, *The City Gate in Ancient Israel and Her Neighbors the Form, Function, and Symbolism of the Civic Forum in the Southern Levant*, 160-168.

²⁰⁸ Matthews, "Entrance Ways and Threshing Floors: Legally Significant Sites in the Ancient Near East," 26.

Nevertheless, Cat Quine points out that the study of city gates in biblical scholarship has been approached from various perspectives—archaeological, sociohistorical, comparative biblical/ancient Near Eastern, and biblical memory—but these methods have not been applied to analyze city gates as a literary device.²⁰⁹ In her work, she highlights the deaths of three characters (i.e., Eli, Abner, and Jezebel) that occur at city gates, and she argues that this specific setting is crucial to understanding the narratives on a deeper level: Eli, the high priest of Shiloh, dies when he hears the news of the Ark of the Covenant being captured by the Philistines (1 Sam. 4:18);²¹⁰ Abner, the commander of Saul's army, is killed by Joab at the city gate of Hebron as an act of revenge (2 Sam. 3:27); and Jezebel, the infamous queen of Israel, meets her demise when she is thrown from a window and is trampled by horses at the city gate of Jezreel (2 Kings 9:30-37). In each of the three narratives, the characters meet their end at the city gates, which can then be seen as a representation of God's judgment on their actions. Eli's death symbolizes the end of his priestly line and the divine punishment for his sons' corrupt practices. Abner's death signifies a turning point in the struggle for power between the houses of Saul and David, with God ultimately favoring David. Jezebel's gruesome death fulfills a prophecy and serves as retribution for her wickedness and idolatry. By examining the function of city gates in these narratives, Quine demonstrates that they serve as a symbol of divine judgment. Even though God does not appear explicitly as a judge in these stories, His presence and judgment are manifested through the city gates as a literary device. This approach to studying city gates enriches our understanding of their role and significance in biblical narratives.

Accordingly, the present work claims that the city gate serves not only as a place of cultic practice but also as a literary device, specifically as a location associated with God's divine presence and is considered to be where God exercises judgment and provides guidance in the Bible. This realization is consistent throughout the Bible, as seen in the following:

²⁰⁹ Cat Quine, "On Dying in a City Gate: Implications in the Deaths of Eli, Abner and Jezebel." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 40, no. 4 (June 2016), 412.

²¹⁰ Quine observes that scholars have differing interpretations regarding whether Eli is sitting by the city gate or by a temple gate. She posits that it is more likely at the city gate for several reasons. First, there is no other reference to a tradition of sitting upon a seat by the temple, apart from the mention in 1 Samuel 1:9, while there is a known tradition of leaders sitting in a city gate. Second, the existence of a gate at the temple in Shiloh is uncertain on a biblical level, as 1 Samuel 1:9 only describes Eli sitting by the doorpost. Lastly, the archaeological evidence from Shiloh suggests that there was no dwelling within the tabernacle area. See *Ibid.*, 404-5.

1. In Genesis 19:1, the angels sent by God to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah arrive at the city gate of Sodom, where they meet Lot. The angels' arrival at the gate and subsequent judgment on the cities underscore the idea of the city gate as a location where divine presence and intervention are manifested.

2. In Deuteronomy 6:9, God instructs the Israelites to write His commandments on the gates, indicating that the city gates should serve as a reminder of God's presence and the importance of adhering to His laws.

3. In Deuteronomy 21:18-21, the city gate is where the elders of the city will judge the rebellious son, suggesting that the city gate is a place where divine justice is administered.

4. In 1 Kings 22:10, King Ahab and King Jehoshaphat sit at the city gate to hear the words of the prophets before going to war against Ramoth-Gilead. The prophets, as the mouthpiece of God, deliver His message to the kings at the city gate, indicating God's presence at this pivotal location.

5. Psalm 24:7-10 speaks of the "gates" and "ancient doors" being lifted up so that the "King of glory" may enter. The imagery here suggests that the gates are a threshold where God's presence is acknowledged and honored.

6. In Amos 5:15, the prophet Amos exhorts the people of Israel to "hate evil, love good, and establish justice in the gate" so that God might be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. This verse emphasizes the importance of upholding justice at the city gate to receive God's mercy.

7. In Zechariah 8:16, God instructs the people to "render true judgments in your gates." This command further emphasizes the association between the city gates and judgment, an act that is commonly attributed to God, and the command also reinforces the notion of the gates being a place of justice and truth, which also are qualities attributed to God's administration.

As can be noted in the above examples, the city gate in the biblical narrative serves as a powerful symbol of God's presence, divine intervention, and the administration of justice. By examining the various examples throughout the Bible, it becomes evident that the city gate functions as a significant literary device, one that highlights the role of God's presence and guidance in the lives of the people and the community. By contrast, the narrative of Ruth predominantly focuses on human actions and initiatives, without God's intervention mentioned

explicitly,²¹¹ except in Ruth 4:13. Some scholars argue that the story's various scenes, including the gate scene, are primarily driven by human characters such as Boaz. However, others claim that certain scenes imply God's subtle guidance and influence behind the scenes, orchestrating the development of the narrative.

Building upon this notion of the city gate being viewed as a symbol of God's presence and divine intervention, it is possible to assume that the author of Ruth intends to convey the idea that God is overseeing the events at the gate. In other words, God exercises His authority and approval through the consultations and decisions enacted by the human characters, particularly within the city gate setting. This interpretation aligns with the gate's established role as a place of divine presence and intervention in other biblical narratives. With this point in mind, it can therefore be suggested that the city gate in the narrative of Ruth serves not only as a location for legal transactions and community gatherings but also as a literary device that subtly suggests God's presence and guidance. By interpreting the gate in this manner, readers can appreciate the deeper implications and meanings within the text, recognizing that God is subtly working behind the scenes. In this context, the city gate functions to highlight the divine approval of Ruth's case, with an emphasis that the unfolding events are not merely driven by human action but are also under the watchful eye and guidance of God.

Summary and Conclusion

The spatial setting in the book of Ruth plays a critical role in shaping the narrative, contributing to the understanding of the text, and constructing the characters. Through a comprehensive examination of various spatial elements, namely the field of Moab, the initial meeting place for betrothal, the threshing floor, and the city gate, this chapter demonstrates the significance of these settings in the overall structure and development of the story. The spatial

²¹¹ Most of God's interventions are indirectly inferred through the characters' speech and actions, rather than through explicit divine appearances or declarations. However, Ruth 2:3 may be considered a subtle hint of God's direct intervention. In this verse, it is mentioned that Ruth happens upon the field belonging to Boaz by chance. This "coincidence" can be interpreted as a sign of God's guiding hand, leading Ruth to the right place at the right time to ensure her and Naomi's well-being. Thus, even though God's presence is not overtly depicted in the narrative, His influence can still be discerned through such subtle indications. See Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 140-2; Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 44-5; Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 30-1.

concept in Ruth serves not only as a backdrop for the events but also as a means of highlighting essential themes, revealing character dynamics, and showcasing the progression of the narrative. The various settings in the story—from the field of Moab during the time of the judges to the intimate threshing floor and the public city gate—reflect the characters’ journeys and transformations throughout the book. By analyzing the structure of Ruth according to different spatial settings, it becomes apparent how these locations interconnect with one another and provide a cohesive framework for the story. The relationship between spatial settings contributes to the unfolding of the narrative and the development of the characters, as they navigate the complexities of their situation, cultural norms, and divine guidance.

Taken on the whole, this deep analysis of different spatial items has enriched the understanding of the text by revealing layers of meaning and symbolism embedded within the narrative. For instance, the discussion of the threshing floor highlights the possible themes as well as divine providence, while the examination of the city gate underscores its role as a place of transition, judgment, and divine presence. Furthermore, the exploration of these spatial elements helps build characterization, illuminating the qualities and motivations of Ruth, Boaz, and other characters in the story; for example, the gate scene demonstrates Boaz’s leadership and integrity within the community. On the other hand, the discussion of the “field of Moab” as a neutral geographical term during the time of the judges presents a different understanding than previously assumed, prompting a reevaluation of the characters’ behavior and the anticipated outcome of their actions. This fresh perspective allows for a deeper appreciation of the nuances and complexities within the narrative, as well as the development of the characters.

In summary, this chapter shows that the spatial setting in the book of Ruth is vital to the narrative, as it provides a framework for the story’s progression, reveals thematic elements, and enhances the characterization. By examining the spatial settings, a deeper appreciation of the text’s richness and complexity is gained, allowing for a more profound engagement with the narrative and its underlying messages.

Chapter 2: Social Settings

The book of Ruth is frequently regarded as a vivid and harmonious representation of the social setting of ancient Israelite society,²¹² which is characterized predominantly by an adherence to social norms, kinship significance, and religious values. Firstly, the narrative demonstrates a strong observance of customs, such as gleaning, an act that reflects compassion and generosity to the less fortunate.²¹³ In gleaning for herself and Naomi, Ruth's dedication exemplifies how she upholds the values of observing customs, as practiced in the earlier society. Secondly, the book emphasizes the importance of kinship, with Ruth's loyalty to Naomi and her willingness to marry Boaz, a distant relative, illustrating the ideal of family solidarity and responsibility.²¹⁴ The Levirate marriage concept further underscores the significance of familial ties and the protagonists' qualities in this idyllic society. Lastly, religious values play a central role, with characters displaying piety, trust in divine providence, and adherence to religious customs. This emphasis on faith and divine guidance underpins the moral and ethical foundations of the community, and ultimately the characters are rewarded with redemption and prosperity.²¹⁵

This positive social setting depicted in Ruth is particularly remarkable when contrasted with the turbulent and chaotic atmosphere portrayed in the book of Judges,²¹⁶ as seen especially

²¹² Myers says that the scenes in Ruth "are so vivid and realistic that no one has any difficulty in picturing them to himself." Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth*, 4.

²¹³ Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 228-30.

²¹⁴ Fewell and David writes, "It was her [Ruth's] lovingly loyal behavior that brought back fullness to her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi, aided by Naomi's worthy relative Boaz." *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth*, 11.

²¹⁵ Larkin states that in "putting ... major themes together, it can be seen that God uses the faithfulness or ordinary people to achieve great things." Larkin, *Ruth and Esther, Old Testament Guides*, 50. See also Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 68-71; Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 29-33.

²¹⁶ Louis Wolfenson says that "the quiet and peace pervading the Book of Ruth is in striking contrast to the turbulent and unsettled age of the Judges." Louis Wolfenson, "The Character, Contents, and Date of Ruth." *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* XXVII, no. 4 (July 1911), 290. According to Ziegler, "Even a brief glance at the two books reveals how profoundly different they are, despite their purported chronological overlap. Ruth's portrayal of a harmonious and peaceful lifestyle is a welcome contrast to the relentlessly violent and warring atmosphere of the Book of Judges." Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 29. Considering the association of the book of Ruth within the time of the judges, Ilana Pardes posits that the text

in the final chapters (Judges 17-21). What is most noteworthy here is the fact that, this setting in Judges is the historical temporal setting in which the story of Ruth is situated: as noted by the author in Ruth, the story takes place in “the days of the judges” (Ruth 1:1).²¹⁷ This short, simple description begs the question of whether the actual situation in Ruth’s time is as idyllic as some readers have pictured it to be, when only a surface reading of the text is taken into account. If the action that unfolds in Ruth is not in isolation from the violent environment of the judges’ time, it is imperative then to seriously consider how “the days of the judges” is a key factor in interpreting the entire book of Ruth.

Social Conditions in Ruth and Judges

Since the temporal setting of both Judges and Ruth is the same (i.e., a time when judges ruled), the events in both books are likely to have taken place in a very similar social setting, if not the same. Before examining the social setting in Ruth, however, it is worthwhile to compare how other scholars have analyzed the characteristics of Israelite society depicted in both the book of Judges and the book of Ruth. After presenting the findings of this comparison, some major implications are given towards the end of the section that subsequently opens up the primary discussion of this chapter.

Previous Comparative Studies on Social Characteristics in Judges and Ruth

Firstly, as noted by Ziegler, the contrast in people’s morality between the stories in Judges and those in Ruth highlights different social conditions as presented in both books.²¹⁸ In Judges, the Israelite society is deeply fragmented and marred by violence, with recurring cycles of conflict and strife; it can be seen that people often fail to follow God’s commandments and accordingly engage in behaviors that would be considered corrupt under the standards of God’s commandments. The story of Micah and his mother exemplifies this: Micah steals money from

offers “an alternative human possibility, or perhaps, a glimpse of a different chapter within this period” due to its unique ambience. Ilana Pardes, *Ruth: A Migrant’s Tale* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 4.

²¹⁷ Grossman comments that “the book [of Ruth] explicitly opens in the period of the Judges, and is embedded with other, gentler allusions that invite the reader to read the story against a backdrop of the concluding stories of the book of Judges.” Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 19-20.

²¹⁸ Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 39-40.

his mother, who then dedicates the stolen money to God by using it to create an idol, despite idolatry being strictly prohibited in the Israelite faith. The refrain in Judges 17:6 (“In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did as he pleased”) emphasizes the lack of leadership, unity, and adherence to God’s commandments during this time period. Yet, the book of Ruth portrays a society in which people are more devoted to God and are more virtuous in their actions.²¹⁹ Boaz, Ruth, and Naomi exemplify this devotion through their interactions with each other and the blessings they offer to God. Boaz consistently invokes God’s blessings upon others, and Naomi recognizes and appreciates Boaz’s kindness towards Ruth; in this story, the blessings uttered by the characters are genuine and heartfelt, reflecting their strong faith and commitment to God’s teachings.

The contrasting illustrations of hospitality further underscore the distinctions in morality between the two books. In Judges, the story of the Levite and his concubine displays a society filled with violence, immorality, and a warped sense of duty. The Ephraimite is willing to sacrifice his own daughter and the Levite’s concubine to protect the Levite; such an act highlights the twisted values of this society. The shocking and brutal actions in this story—particularly the concubine’s rape, murder and dismemberment—reflect a time of chaos, moral decline, and the absence of righteous leadership. By contrast, the book of Ruth portrays a society where individuals treat each other with respect, kindness, and proper hospitality. Boaz’s treatment of Ruth and Naomi serves as an example of how to act virtuously towards others. When Ruth approaches Boaz, he recognizes her as a virtuous woman and protects her reputation by allowing her to stay until morning in order to ensure her safety. Boaz’s actions are guided by compassion and a sense of responsibility, which stand in stark contrast to the depraved men in the book of Judges.

The portrayal and significance of women distinctly vary between these two books. While the book of Judges presents exceptions, such as Deborah, Yael, and Achsah, who exemplify the potential for women to exercise power and influence within their society, the overarching narrative portrays women as victims of violence and oppression. The story of the Levite’s concubine is a particularly poignant example of this trend. Cast aside by her master, she suffers a

²¹⁹ According to Pardes, “There are no villains in the book of Ruth.” Pardes, *Ruth: A Migrant’s Tale*, 4.

horrifying fate at the hands of a violent mob, highlighting the stark vulnerability and disposability of women in this period. Likewise, Jephthah's daughter is portrayed as a tragic victim of her father's reckless vow, reflecting the often helpless situation of women in a patriarchal society. Samson's Philistine wife, who remains unnamed and is caught in the power struggles of men, is ultimately given in marriage to Samson's best man, underlining the lack of autonomy and voice women possessed. These narratives collectively reveal that women's roles are largely marginalized, granting them little agency or influence to affect societal change. Conversely, the book of Ruth portrays women as central characters who actively contribute to the narrative's development.²²⁰ Both Ruth and Naomi are strong, resourceful, and resilient women who navigate the challenges they face with wisdom and faith. Ruth's loyalty, hard work, and commitment to Naomi ultimately lead to her marriage to Boaz and the restoration of their family's fortunes. These women exemplify the potential for positive change when they are given the opportunity to participate in shaping their destinies.

Adherence to traditional law also differs between the two books.²²¹ In Judges, the Israelites are seen to frequently stray from God's commandments, leading to cycles of disobedience, punishment, and redemption; the people's disregard for God's laws results in social chaos, moral decline, and suffering. The book of Ruth, however, demonstrates the positive outcomes that arise from following God's commandments and adhering to traditional law. For instance, Boaz's adherence to the Levirate law and his willingness to act as a redeemer for Ruth and Naomi exemplify the importance of upholding tradition and maintaining social order. The people of Bethlehem also show their respect to the tradition and legal consult at the gate. The narrative showcases how abiding by God's laws can lead to blessings and the restoration of a just and stable society.

In considering these points as a whole, scholars generally find that the books of Judges and Ruth present contrastive social settings. The book of Judges depicts a period characterized by an absence of a central authority, immoral leaders, and a pervasive disregard for God's commandments. This environment perpetuates chaos, moral decline, and the marginalization of

²²⁰ Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 49-51.

²²¹ Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 38-9.

women. By contrast, the book of Ruth is commonly seen to portray a society that values righteousness, virtuous pattern, and a commitment to following God’s teachings. This setting allows for the emergence of characters who actively contribute to the narrative’s development and promote a harmonious and just society.

Situating the Book of Ruth within the Time of the Judges

Contrary to this prevailing perspective on the social setting in the book of Ruth, this study proposes an alternative viewpoint that emphasizes the shared aspects of lawlessness between the book of Ruth and the book of Judges. Rather than depicting an idyllic and harmonious society, this analysis posits that the book of Ruth reflects a social setting marked by deviations from the Pentateuchal standards, a setting encompassing not only transgressions against biblical laws but also improper conduct, ignorance, and the incorrect implementation of laws and traditions.

Scholars generally acknowledge that the book of Ruth offers a portrayal of Pentateuchal customs, yet they also recognize that the narrative refers to Israelite law in a somewhat “problematic manner.”²²² Despite this observation, few researchers have explored the implications of situating the book of Ruth within the social context of the book of Judges. A closer examination, as demonstrated by Shepherd, reveals that when comparing the field scene in Ruth 2 with the narratives in Judges 19-21, a common theme of violence—specifically sexual violence—emerges in both accounts. This connection suggests a greater interrelation between the two texts, inviting a further analysis of their shared social settings and themes.

The book’s opening phrase of “in the days of the judges” prompts a serious look at the environment in which the action takes place. Against such a background, this study underscores the importance of situating the narrative within its broader social context and suggests that the social setting of the book of Ruth is not entirely distinct from the tumultuous backdrop of the book of Judges. Through a close reading of the text, this study aims to uncover both the lawless deviations from Pentateuchal principles, as seen in the book of Ruth, and the shared social

²²² Larkin, *Ruth and Esther, Old Testament Guides*, 26. Schipper also notes that “[in Ruth] references to legal ideas and uses of technical legal terminology can seem unclear when read in isolation.” Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 14. Similarly, Grossman asserts that “each law [in Ruth] deviates greatly from its usual form.” Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 39.

setting between Judges and Ruth, thereby shedding light on the potential literary devices employed by the author. Furthermore, this examination of lawlessness as a deliberate literary technique presents an opportunity for readers to reevaluate their understanding of the characters,²²³ as well as the narrative as a whole. By doing so, this analysis challenges the conventional understanding of the book of Ruth as an idealized representation of ancient Israelite society, and specifically, it invites readers to consider the ways in which the narrative complicates and problematizes the social norms and values that underpin the community.

Re-examination of the Social Setting in Ruth

The temporal setting of “the days of the judges” in Ruth 1:1 is the lens through which we examine the text in Ruth. By positing that both books share the same social setting, this study assumes by way of extension that the violence and lawlessness that are characteristic of the society in Judges are also characteristic of the society in Ruth. In examining this shared social setting within the context of this thesis, it is crucial to clarify that the term “lawlessness” refers to the portrayal of people’s apprehension, violent violation, ignorance, unfamiliarity, and alteration of Pentateuchal law and custom. Importantly, this lawless social setting does not necessarily imply morally reprehensible or evil acts. Rather, it is characterized by a deviation from and even in adherence to the established standards of Pentateuchal law, and accordingly the usage of “lawlessness” should be understood in such a way throughout this chapter. In this primary section, the study analyzes a number of key phrases and passages through the lens of a lawless social setting that deviates from the Pentateuchal law. Each highlighted text points to an aspect of the social setting that is worth newly examining under such a perspective.

The Case of Moabite Wives (Ruth 1:4)

In the preceding chapter, which was an analysis of the spatial setting, the “field of Moab” in Ruth 1:1 was presented as a spatial setting, and the intertextual examination there appeared to

²²³ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky also note that the “hints of violence in the book [of Ruth] suggest that the author intends to evoke the more typical image of Judges as an unruly time; the protagonists’ kindness in Ruth is therefore even more striking against a background of violence.” Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, xxiv.

confirm that the field of Moab functions as a consistent geographical term across various biblical narratives. However, it is important to note that the Bible also demonstrates an unfavorable attitude towards Moabites and other foreign groups, particularly regarding exogamous relationships between Israelites and outsiders.

For example, one may consider the stringent prohibitions against intermarriage between Israelites and foreign nations outlined in the book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 7:3-4, the text explicitly forbids marriages with individuals from the surrounding nations in order to maintain the religious purity and cultural identity of the Israelite people. This policy reflects a broader concern within the biblical narrative that intermarriage may lead to the introduction of foreign religious practices and the subsequent erosion of Israelite beliefs and traditions. Another passage worth considering for this discussion is Deuteronomy 23:3-6: although marriage with Moabites is not explicitly specified, the verses indicate that mixed marriage with Moabites could be considered highly inappropriate. This viewpoint is also reinforced by other biblical narratives (Num. 25:1-5, 1 Kings 11:1-2, Ezra 9:1-2, Neh. 13:1-2) that recount how sexual relations with Moabite women led to the adoption of cultic practices by Israelites, thereby undermining the religious and cultural integrity of the Israelite community. These accounts serve to emphasize the negative consequences associated with exogamous relationships involving Moabite women, reinforcing the notion that such unions were deemed undesirable and potentially harmful to the social and religious fabric of ancient Israelite society.

Despite the prohibitions against exogamous relationships in the Bible, numerous scholars contend that the book of Ruth presents a distinct perspective on this issue, one that challenges the Deuteronomic prohibition. To these scholars, the narrative illustrates the successful integration of a Moabite woman, Ruth, into the Judahite community, where she eventually becomes the foremother of King David. This apparent contradiction has led some scholars to view the book of Ruth as a counterpoint to the broader biblical stance on exogamy. For example, Braulik emphasizes that Ruth 1 and 2 should be read in opposition to the Deuteronomic stance on Moabites, while Ruth 3 and 4 serve as a corrective to the negative image of Moabites found in Genesis 19; in other words, this positive image of Moabites given in these latter two chapters not only contrasts the one presented in the first two chapters but also functions as a positive

allusion to Deuteronomic laws.²²⁴ From this view, the book of Ruth actively challenges the negative portrayal of Moabites by alluding to Deuteronomic laws. Victor Harold Matthews concurs with this perspective, arguing that the book of Ruth functions as a broad critique of the “ethnic purity” policy found in Deuteronomy 12-26, particularly the prohibition against Moabites in Deuteronomy 23:4.²²⁵ This argument is further supported by scholars such as Lacocque,²²⁶ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky,²²⁷ Hubbard,²²⁸ and Larkin,²²⁹ who posit that the openness to exogamy in the book of Ruth is related to the book’s postexilic dating. Some of them suggest that the narrative was written, at least in part, to oppose the exclusivist views represented by Ezra and Nehemiah in the postexilic period.²³⁰

On the other hand, recent scholarship, as exemplified by Schipper, offers a different perspective on the book of Ruth’s treatment of exogamous relationships.²³¹ Schipper contends that the narrative does not directly address or challenge the negative attitudes towards Moabites found in other biblical texts. Instead, he highlights additional instances in the Bible where exogamous relationships involving Israelites are mentioned without explicit censure. Schipper’s argument suggests that it may not be necessary to interpret the book of Ruth as a direct counterpoint to the condemnations of Judahite marriages with Moabites that are found elsewhere in the Bible. Rather, one could consider the narrative as part of a broader collection of texts that discuss such relationships without presenting a clear polemic against them. This interpretation implies that the book of Ruth may not be as revolutionary or oppositional in its portrayal of exogamy as some scholars have argued.

²²⁴ Braulik, “The Book of Ruth as Intra-Biblical Critique on the Deuteronomic Law,” 7-8.

²²⁵ Victor Harold Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (Cambridge, UK: New York, 2004), 212.

²²⁶ Lacocque, *Ruth: A Continental Commentary*, 25.

²²⁷ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, xviii, xli.

²²⁸ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 28.

²²⁹ Larkin, *Ruth and Esther, Old Testament Guides*, 53-4.

²³⁰ For example, Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, xli.

²³¹ Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 38-40.

Building on these discussions, the present work suggests another approach: to understand how the book of Ruth's treatment of exogamous relationships can be derived from its temporal setting, as in "the days of the judges" (Ruth 1:1). This assumes that the author and the implied readers possess familiarity with the social setting of that time period, as depicted in the book of Judges. Examining the book of Judges can provide valuable insights into the prevalent exogamy views that are exhibited in the society in which the story of Ruth is set. By analyzing various narratives within the book of Judges, we can better understand how the ancient Israelite community approached the subject of intermarriage during the era of the judges. This, in turn, can shed light on the broader social and cultural implications of the book of Ruth's depiction of exogamy.

A comprehensive analysis of instances relating to exogamous relationships can provide a clearer understanding of the attitudes towards exogamy during the era of the judges. Within the book of Judges, several examples demonstrate a predominantly negative view of exogamy, but only two key instances will be discussed here. The first case is found in Judges 3:5-8 with the mention of Israelites marrying Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. Here, it can be seen that the Israelites intermarried with the surrounding nations, thereby directly disobeying God's command not to do so (Deut. 7:3-4).²³² The author's attitude towards this exogamy is negative, as the text describes the Israelites' subsequent worship of foreign gods and their abandonment of God's laws. The consequences were divine anger and subjugation under foreign rulers, which are portrayed as direct results of their disobedience. The second case is in Judges 14-16 regarding Samson and his Philistine wives. As previously mentioned, Samson's marriages to Philistine women, who are foreigners, result in tension and conflict. His first wife, a Philistine woman from Timnah, betrays Samson's riddle to her countrymen, leading to violence and her eventual death. Samson's relationship with Delilah, another Philistine, ultimately causes his downfall, as she deceives him and delivers him to his enemies.

²³² Susan Niditch argues that this passage not only employs Deuteronomic idioms but also echoes the primeval story in Genesis 6:1-4, where inappropriate marriages to the "other" result in evil and destruction. Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 56.

These instances within the book of Judges, when considered collectively, suggest that the text largely portrays exogamous relationships in a negative light. In the two aforementioned cases in Judges, both illustrate tragic consequences of exogamous relationships. Additionally, the examples illustrate the various complications and conflicts that may arise from intermarriage with foreign individuals, often leading to adverse consequences for the Israelite community. Moreover, the broader social setting of the book of Judges indeed expresses a clear negative attitude towards foreigners, as the text primarily revolves around the Israelites' struggle with neighboring nations.

While there is no explicit example of exogamy with Moabites in Judges, the negative attitude towards Moabites and other foreigners is evident. For instance, Moabites are portrayed as oppressors of Israel in Judges 3:12-30, with Eglon, the Moabite king, subjugating the Israelites for eighteen years before being defeated by Ehud. Additionally, the ongoing conflicts with other nations such as the Canaanites, Philistines, and Ammonites underscore the general tension between the Israelites and their foreign neighbors. These examples demonstrate the book of Judges' negative portrayal of foreigners, which further contextualizes the attitudes towards exogamy in the biblical narrative.

Building upon the assumption that the particular social setting of the book of Judges—as characterized by a negative attitude towards exogamy and foreigners—is also the social setting of the book of Ruth, evidence of this shared context might be traced in the narrative of the book of Ruth. In the previous chapter, it was discussed that the words of the young overseer in Boaz's field (2:6) may be interpreted as a display of contempt for Ruth's foreign origin, suggesting the presence of the same social prejudices observed in the book of Judges. The negativity towards Ruth's identity can also be seen in the frequent emphasis on her foreign background, specifically where she is referred to as "Ruth the Moabite" or "the Moabite woman" (Ruth 1:22, 2:2, 2:6, 2:21, 4:5, 4:10), as a subtle reminder of her outsider status.²³³ According to Lau, this repeated mention emphasizes her status as an "other."²³⁴ In light of other biblical accounts of Israel's dealings with "Moabite women", it is likely that the implied reader would have stereotyped Ruth

²³³ Hubbard claims that "the term [the Moabite woman] casts a dark shadow over the otherwise happy and potentially propitious scene." Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 147.

²³⁴ Lau, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach*, 113.

as immoral—both culturally and sexually.²³⁵ This reference to her Moabite identity underscores the cultural and social barriers that she need to overcome, resonating with the broader theme of Israelites’ struggle with foreigners in the book of Judges.

The attitude towards exogamy is worthy of more exploration in the book of Ruth. One instance that might reflect a negative view of exogamy is found in Ruth 1:13, where Naomi says, “כִּי־מָרַלְתִּי מְאֹד מִיְהוָה כִּי יָדִי־הָקְוָה”. The second half of this clause is commonly translated as “the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me,” referring to the family tragedy at the beginning of the book of Ruth, but the first half of the clause is more ambiguous and has been described as “a problem” by Campbell²³⁶ and “open to interpretation” by Schipper.²³⁷ Most scholars and Bible translators suggest the translation “for it is far more bitter for me than for you,” which seems logical within the context.²³⁸ From a Hebrew syntactic or grammatical perspective, however, the first half of the clause could also be rendered as “for it grieves me much because of you.”²³⁹ If interpreted this way, the entire clause can be seen as a complaint by Naomi against the exogamy, implying that God has punished her family and caused her grief as a consequence of these mixed marriages.²⁴⁰

It is worth noting that the narrative of Ruth is often seen as bearing a deliberate resemblance to the story of Tamar. The death of Naomi’s two sons may be thematically linked to the death of Judah’s two sons in the Tamar narrative. Importantly, in the case of Tamar, Judah appears to hold Tamar responsible for the demise of his sons (Gen. 38:11). This connection may offer a vital hint that Naomi, too, blames her daughters-in-law for the death of her sons in Ruth 1:13. This connection becomes even more significant when considering the likelihood of Tamar

²³⁵ Ibid., 92.

²³⁶ Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 70.

²³⁷ Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 97.

²³⁸ Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 27.

²³⁹ Schipper’s argument is that the translation of this clause partially depends on the understanding of Naomi’s attitude towards her daughters-in-law, and such a stance is one that I agree with. Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 96-7.

²⁴⁰ Ziegler also suggests that “Naomi may be asserting that her bitterness has been caused by her daughters-in-law, who are somehow responsible for the divine punishment.” Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 144.

being a Gentile wife as well.²⁴¹ If such is the case, exogamy can be viewed as a common factor leading to the death of sons in both cases. Further textual evidence linking Ruth 1:12-13 to the Tamar narrative can be found, and this connection will be explored in the subsequent section, as it is deemed more pertinent there.

This interpretation is further supported when considering the context of Naomi's request for Orpah and Ruth to leave her. As she prepares to return to Judah, it becomes clear that Naomi wishes to distance herself from the issue of exogamy, which could have resulted in the death of her sons,²⁴² if based on this interpretation. In this light, Naomi as a central character in the narrative seemingly confirms that the mixed marriages between Israelites and Moabites have led to the tragic demise of her sons.

Another example can be observed in Naomi's perception of her Moabite daughters-in-law. It is possible that she considers the exogamous marriages to have brought shame upon her family and tarnished their reputation within the Israelite community. This notion is further supported by Naomi's declaration upon arriving in the field of Bethlehem: "The LORD has brought me home empty" (1:21). Naomi's assertion that she has returned "empty" is striking, as it effectively disregards the presence of Ruth, her daughter-in-law and loyal companion. By describing herself as empty, Naomi seems to imply that Ruth's Moabite background renders her insignificant or unworthy of acknowledgment.²⁴³ This interpretation is reinforced by the observation that Naomi "[speaks] as though the loyal companion at her side was invisible."²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ Wolde, "Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar," 430. For a relevant discussion on this topic, see Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Royal Origins: Tamar." In *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 264-77.

²⁴² Nielsen suggests that Naomi's eagerness to bid farewell to Ruth and Orpah could be attributed to her past experiences with them. It appears that neither of the women can bear children, and both have lost their husbands. Nielsen raises the possibility that Moabite women might pose a danger to Israelites. If that is the case, there would be a strong rationale for insisting that they return to their homeland. Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 47.

²⁴³ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky also claims that "the reader knows that Naomi is not alone ... but Naomi does not acknowledge Ruth's presence.... Naomi is ambivalent or even resentful of Ruth's presence." Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 25.

²⁴⁴ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth*, 75. Tribble, too, is struck by this oversight and somewhat tentatively proposes that the reason for this omission might be due to the "aged widow" being "overpowered" by her sense of divinely inspired calamity. Tribble, *God and Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 174.

This apparent dismissal of Ruth highlights the social stigma surrounding exogamy and underscores the challenges that Ruth faces as an outsider in the Israelite community.

The hesitance of the unnamed kinsman-redeemer to marry Ruth, as described in Ruth 4:6, also provides the potential social stigma associated with exogamy. Although his primary reason for refusing to redeem the land and marry Ruth is related to concerns about jeopardizing his own inheritance, it is worth considering whether this reluctance also reflects an underlying aversion to entering into an exogamous marriage with a Moabite woman.²⁴⁵ In the narrative, the kinsman-redeemer initially agrees to redeem the land but then changes his mind upon learning that he must also marry Ruth to maintain the family lineage. This change of heart suggests that the prospect of marrying a foreign woman, even one as dedicated and loyal as Ruth, may have been unpalatable or even taboo within the Israelite community. The reluctance of the kinsman-redeemer to fulfill his role in the story highlights the societal barriers that Ruth faces as a Moabite woman seeking to integrate into the Israelite community.

Overall, by comparing the instances of exogamy in the book of Judges and drawing on several examples from the book of Ruth, it can be assumed that the marriage to Moabite wives can be regarded as an inappropriate action and even a case of lawlessness within the social context of “in the days of the judges”. This perspective certainly alters our earlier comprehension of the text: although the narrative does not explicitly attribute the deaths of the two husbands to their marriages with Moabite women, it is possible that the prevailing social attitudes and the stigmatization of exogamous relationships contribute to this interpretation. This perspective aligns with the broader social setting presented in the book of Judges, which portrays a society marked by conflict, lawlessness, and a general disregard for the divine commandments.

In addition, new insights are obtained in the characterization of Naomi and Boaz. In the case of Naomi, she as an Israelite woman is confronted with the consequences of her sons’ exogamous marriages. Her character development throughout the narrative reflects a complex mix of grief, guilt, and acceptance. Initially, Naomi discourages Ruth and Orpah from accompanying her back to Bethlehem, possibly due to her recognition of the difficulties that

²⁴⁵ Fewell and Gunn propose that marriage to Ruth, as a Moabite woman, carries a conventional value that is “distinctly negative.” Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth*, 87. Also, Broch, *Ruth: The Book of Ruth in Hebrew and English with a Talmudic Midrashic Commentary*, 95.

Ruth, a Moabite woman, may face in the Israelite community and the social stigma attached to their Moabite origins. However, as the story unfolds, Naomi's attitude transforms, and she comes to appreciate Ruth's devotion and support. This shift in attitude illustrates Naomi's growth, acceptance, and adaptation in the face of adversity, as well as her ability to reevaluate her own beliefs and expectations within the challenging social context of her time. As for Boaz, he emerges as a compassionate and honorable figure who willingly embraces his duty to perform the Levirate marriage, despite Ruth's Moabite background. His willingness to prioritize the fulfillment of his legal obligations and protect the family lineage underscores his commitment to upholding the Pentateuchal principles, even when faced with potential social disapproval. Furthermore, his genuine affection and his respect for Ruth, which transcend the societal barriers and prejudices against exogamy, speak to his admirable qualities of empathy and kindness.

The purpose of the author's inclusion of an exogamous marriage in a social setting that disapproves of exogamy merits discussion, as there may be several possible reasons for this. First, the implied readers might be aware that King David was a descendant of a mixed marriage with a Moabite woman in a society that disapproved of exogamy. By purposefully including virtuous characters and a positive portrayal of Ruth and Boaz's union while emphasizing their commitment to fulfilling their Pentateuchal duty, the author seeks to vindicate the implied readers' perception of David's lineage. This narrative strategy is undoubtedly relevant to the purpose of the book of Ruth.²⁴⁶ Second, the inclusion of an exogamous marriage in the book of Ruth could also serve as a literary device employed by the author to create a dynamic and engaging narrative. By incorporating elements of tension and conflict, such as the societal disapproval of mixed marriages, the author crafts a captivating story that keeps readers invested in the outcome. This literary strategy can highlight the resilience and determination of the characters involved as they navigate the challenges imposed by their social context, ultimately leading to the triumph of love and devotion over prejudice and societal norms. Moreover, an exogamous marriage in Ruth could challenge the implied readers' preconceptions and encourage them to reevaluate their attitudes towards foreigners and mixed marriages. By presenting the main characters as individuals with admirable qualities and a steadfast adherence to their duties,

²⁴⁶ Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 54.

the author may be subtly inviting the audience to reconsider their assumptions and recognize the potential for virtue and righteousness in people of different backgrounds and cultures. This corresponds with some scholars' views that the story opposes the exclusivist views represented by Ezra and Nehemiah in the postexilic period. Lastly, such a narrative device may also emphasize the theme of divine providence and the idea that God's plan can transcend societal expectations and boundaries. By depicting Ruth's journey from a Moabite widow to revered ancestress of King David, the author emphasizes the role of divine intervention in shaping the course of human history. This notion suggests that the union between Ruth and Boaz, despite its potential inappropriateness in the eyes of society, was part of a greater divine plan that ultimately led to the establishment of the Davidic dynasty.

In conclusion, by comparing the book of Ruth with the book of Judges, we can deduce the social setting in which the story of Ruth unfolds—a setting characterized by negativity towards exogamy and foreigners. Recognizing this social context is crucial to understanding the narrative and the author's intentions. The discussion highlights the importance of analyzing the book of Ruth within its social setting, as it reveals the complexities and nuances of the story. As demonstrated in this discussion on exogamy, a thorough understanding of this social backdrop allows readers to appreciate the author's skillful literary deployment and the innovative narrative strategies employed to create a captivating and thought-provoking text, one that can even challenge the notions of exogamy at that time. This analysis provides a more comprehensive view of the narrative, offering insights into the characters' motivations, the challenges they face, and the broader themes the story seeks to convey. Ultimately, examining the exogamy within the social setting of the book of Ruth enriches our understanding of the text, enabling a deeper appreciation of its depth and complexity.

The Case of Naomi's Understanding of Levirate Marriage (Ruth 1:12)

As previously stated, scholars concur that the book of Ruth encompasses numerous instances of Pentateuchal law and custom, such as gleaning, Levirate marriage, and the redemption of land and property. Scholars continue to debate the extent to which Levirate marriage is actually implemented in the book of Ruth. However, it is undeniable that the narrative contains some elements of this custom. As Thomas Thompson and Dorothy Thompson point out, the book of Ruth upholds the same values as Deuteronomy, even if the specific

situations it addresses may differ: “In light of specifically Israelite values, we find that the book of Ruth upholds the same values as Deuteronomy, despite the potential differences in the concrete situations presupposed by Deuteronomy.”²⁴⁷ Despite a lack of consensus on this matter, the present study posits that Levirate marriage is indeed practiced in the book of Ruth. However, due to a social setting characterized by lawlessness, the characters’ understanding of Levirate marriage deviates from the standard custom. This deviation, in turn, explains the unique enactment of Levirate marriage in the narrative, which diverges from its original form and intention. By examining the relationship between the characters’ comprehension of Levirate marriage and the broader social setting, this research seeks to shed light on the complexities and nuances in the book of Ruth.

In the Hebrew Bible, Levirate marriage (יְבוּמִים) is a custom intended to preserve the family lineage and provide for the welfare of widows. The custom is described in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, a segment of the Torah that enumerates a range of laws and guidelines for the Israelites. This practice is illustrated in the narrative of Tamar (Gen. 38), even though the latter is thought to have preceded the account in Deuteronomy. According to the Levirate marriage law, when a man dies without leaving any male heirs, his brother is obligated to marry the widow. Through this union, the firstborn son is considered the deceased man’s child, thus continuing his lineage and preventing the loss of inheritance. This practice ensures that the widow is taken care of, and that the family’s property remains within the clan.

In Ruth 1:12-13, Naomi says, “If I should say: I have hope, should I even have a husband to-night, and also bear sons; should you wait for them to grow up? Should you on their account debar yourselves from marriage?” Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky suggest that Naomi’s argument alludes to the biblical institute of the Levirate marriage.²⁴⁸ Here, Naomi expresses her concern for her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, highlighting the improbability of her bearing more sons who could grow up and marry them in accordance with the Levirate custom. Nielsen suggests that Naomi’s utterance here is to “reject the possibility of a levirate marriage for Ruth

²⁴⁷ Thomas Thompson and Thompson Dorothy, “Some Legal Problems in the Book of Ruth.” *Vetus testamentum* 18, no. 1 (January 1968), 89. While Grossman denies that Boaz’s marriage to Ruth constitutes a levirate marriage, he asserts that “from a literary perspective, the scene is unmistakably designed to evoke the act of levirate marriage.” Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 260.

²⁴⁸ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 14.

and Orpah.”²⁴⁹ However, this conversation reveals Naomi’s awareness of the Levirate principle, as she acknowledges the possibility of her grown-up sons marrying their deceased brothers’ wives to preserve the family lineage.

Further evidence suggesting a connection between Naomi’s words and the concept of Levirate marriage can be found in the lexical and thematic similarities between the book of Ruth and Tamar’s narrative in Genesis 38, another account involving Levirate marriage. Lexically, a connection can be drawn between the phrase *יָגֵדְלִי אֶתְּ אֶתְּ אֶתְּ אֶתְּ* in Ruth 1:13 and *עַד־יִגְדֵּל* in Genesis 38:11, both of which convey the idea of waiting until sons have grown.²⁵⁰ Thematically, there are also parallels between the two narratives. In Ruth, Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers’ homes, while in Genesis, Judah asks Tamar to go back to her father’s house. Furthermore, both narratives feature a focus on the deaths of sons and their perceived relationship with their foreign wives. In Ruth 1:13, Naomi laments the deaths of her two sons and discusses the impact on her daughters-in-law, while in Genesis 38:11, Judah’s thoughts imply that he sees Tamar as the cause of his two sons’ deaths. The lexical and thematic links between the two accounts emphasize the significance of the Levirate marriage as a foundational concept in Naomi’s dialogue with her daughters-in-law, and it is likely that the author employed these connections intentionally to underscore the theme.

Having established the presence of the Levirate concept in Naomi’s conversation with her daughters-in-law and its parallels with the Tamar narrative, it is crucial to compare Naomi’s understanding of Levirate marriage with the Pentateuchal prescription. It should be noted firstly that the Levirate law in the Torah specifically applies to sons who share the same father.²⁵¹ This custom is deeply rooted in the patriarchal structure of ancient Israelite society, where lineage and inheritance were passed down through the male line. It mandates that the surviving brother marry his deceased brother’s widow, with the firstborn son of this union carrying on the deceased brother’s name to ensure the continuation of the deceased brother’s lineage. By doing so, the Levirate law preserves the family line and upholds the patriarchal order of inheritance. However,

²⁴⁹ Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 47-8.

²⁵⁰ Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 104.

²⁵¹ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 109.

in Ruth 1:12-13, Naomi's understanding of Levirate marriage seems to deviate from this standard: she suggests that a potential new husband for her daughters-in-law could be one of her future sons, rather than a male sibling of her deceased husband, Elimelech. Bernard S. Jackson observes that the situation does not adhere to the "classical" (i.e., Deuteronomic) form of Levirate marriage. In this case, the offspring would only be a half-brother to Mahlon and Chilion, and that too, on the maternal side.²⁵² This deviation from the Pentateuchal Levirate law highlights the possibility of a biased understanding of the custom in the narrative's social setting.²⁵³

In light of this discrepancy, some scholars suggest that Naomi's concern is not her husband's lineage but the security of Ruth and Orpah.²⁵⁴ However, this present work argues that Naomi's speech reflects a broader social phenomenon in the narrative's setting. The fact that Naomi—as a representative character in the narrative—displays a biased understanding of Pentateuchal law and custom, suggests that the Israelites in her society may also have struggled with properly comprehending and adhering to these laws and customs. This misinterpretation of Levirate marriage in the book of Ruth could be indicative of a general unfamiliarity with the Pentateuchal law or tradition among the Israelites during this period. Consequently, the narrative in the book of Ruth seems to be situated within a social setting characterized by lawlessness, where the standard interpretation and implementation of Pentateuchal laws and customs were not consistently followed or properly understood. This observation provides valuable insight into the social setting of the book of Ruth and offers a new perspective on the characters and events within the narrative.

The book of Judges also displays instances of characters demonstrating a deviation in understanding or practicing Pentateuchal law and tradition, further supporting the notion that both the book of Ruth and the book of Judges may share a similar social setting of lawlessness. In Judges 11:29-40 with the story of Jephthah's vow, Niditch argues that the vow serves as a form of preparation for war, wherein a warrior promises a sacrifice to God in exchange for

²⁵² Bernard S. Jackson, "Law and Narrative in the Book of Ruth: A Syntagmatic Reading." *Jewish Law Association Studies* 27 (2017), 7.

²⁵³ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, xxxvi.

²⁵⁴ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 97; Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 103-4.

victory in battle (Num. 21:2-3). This notion is evident in the war ideology of the ban, where entire towns are destroyed as a “whole burnt offering” to God (see Deut. 13:16), which is intrinsically linked to an ideology of sacrifice.²⁵⁵ In the case of Jephthah, a judge of Israel, he makes a vow to God, pledging to sacrifice the first thing that emerges from his house to greet him if God grants him triumph over the Ammonites. Regrettably, his daughter is the one to first come out and meet him. Although the Torah explicitly forbids human sacrifice (Lev. 18:21, Deut. 12:31), Jephthah feels obligated by his vow and ultimately sacrifices his daughter.²⁵⁶ This example illustrates an attempt to honor a vow made to God while deviating from the Torah’s prohibition against human sacrifice.

An alternative interpretation is presented by P. Reis, who argues that Jephthah’s vow was not an offer to sacrifice what emerged from his house but instead reflects the concept found in Leviticus 27:1-8 concerning the redemption of a sacrificed object. However, T. J. Schneider points out that, although Jephthah demonstrates knowledge of Israel’s history, there is no indication in the book that any of the cultic laws of Israel were remembered, implemented, or practiced in any way. Consequently, even if Jephthah made his vow with this act of redemption in mind, it remains doubtful that he would have acted accordingly.²⁵⁷ As a result, the sacrifice of his daughter can be seen as an example that illustrates the deviation in understanding the Pentateuchal law redemption of a sacrificed object.

Jephthah’s example in the book of Judges demonstrates that the Israelites often attempted to adhere to the Pentateuchal law and tradition but deviated from the proper understanding of those laws, resulting in actions that were contrary to the spirit and intention of the law. This suggests a shared social setting of lawlessness between the book of Judges and the book of Ruth,

²⁵⁵ Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 133.

²⁵⁶ E. John Hamlin highlights that Jephthah’s vow resembles a bargain-style vow, similar to those made by Jacob (Gen. 28:20-22), Israel (Num. 21:1-3), Hannah (1 Sam. 1:11), or Absalom (2 Sam. 15:7-8), in which a person promises to perform a specific action in response to God’s intervention. However, the issue lies in the fact that Jephthah’s response involves a Canaanite practice explicitly condemned by Israelite law. E. John Hamlin, *At Risk in the Promised Land: A Commentary on the Book of Judges* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans-Lightning Source, 1990), 117-8.

²⁵⁷ Tammi J. Schneider, *Berit Olam: Judges* (Collegeville, Minn: Michael Glazier, 2000), 174.

where characters in both narratives struggle to correctly comprehend and practice the Pentateuchal law and tradition.

The Case of Gleaning in the Field (Ruth 2:3)

The custom of gleaning has its roots in the Bible and serves as an essential aspect of the ancient Israelite society's social welfare system. As outlined in the Torah, specifically in Leviticus 19:9-10, Deuteronomy 24:19-21, and Exodus 23:10-11, this custom mandates that landowners leave the corners of their fields and any fallen produce for the poor, widows, orphans, and foreigners to collect. This practice ensured that the most vulnerable members of society had access to food and sustenance.

It has been suggested that the book of Ruth presents a vivid and positive portrayal of the Pentateuchal gleaning custom in practice within the context of ancient Israelite society.²⁵⁸ Through a detailed account of Ruth's experience—as seen in her seeking permission, working diligently, and interacting with others—the narrative demonstrates the practice as a form of social welfare. It provides sustenance for Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, and this provision illustrates how the gleaning custom functions as a safety net for vulnerable individuals. Furthermore, this picture of Ruth the Moabite gleaning showcases the inclusive nature of the custom, allowing her as an outsider to participate alongside Israelites. This portrayal highlights the potential for gleaning to bridge cultural divides and thus encourages a more inclusive understanding of the Israelite community.

In contrast to the positive portrayal of the gleaning custom in Ruth, this thesis argues that the narrative presents an Israelite society where the Pentateuchal law is either not commonly practiced or not adhered to. Although the people might be aware of the gleaning custom, it appears that they may not consistently practice the custom, or alternatively, may practice it in their own manner apart from the law's standards. This behavior reflects a social setting where the Pentateuchal law is either disregarded, infrequently adhered to, or even enforced, thus suggesting a society of lawlessness. To support this argument of the narrative presenting such a lawless

²⁵⁸ A relevant discussion can be found in the chapter "The Pastoral Gleaner" in Pardes' work, *Ruth: A Migrant's Tale*, 84-110.

social setting, several places in the text are presented below as textual evidence, and each will be further elucidated:

1. Ruth's belief of needing favor for gleaning (Ruth 2:3)
2. The report from Boaz's overseer (2:6-7)
3. Boaz's instructions to Ruth (2:8)
4. Boaz's instructions to his servants (2:15)
5. Naomi's reaction to Ruth's return (2:19)

The first piece of textual evidence is seen in Ruth's assertion that she requires favor to glean in the field (Ruth 2:3), which implies that she does not perceive gleaning as an inherent right but instead as a privilege bestowed upon her by the landowner.²⁵⁹ Linafelt posits that the reasoning behind this is that although adherence to the legislation was expected, it was not always the case in practice that landowners granted the right of gleaning.²⁶⁰ One could contend that Ruth's foreign background may contribute to her lack of familiarity with her entitlements under the Pentateuchal law; however, as we will later see in the rest of this subsection, evidence from the narrative bolsters the idea that within the given social setting, gleaning is indeed regarded as a favor rather than an assured right. Nielsen further proposes that this can be discerned from the prophets' recurrent critiques of societal conditions.²⁶¹

The second piece of textual evidence can be found in the words of Boaz's overseer (Ruth 2:6-7). The overseer reports Ruth's request to "gather after the reapers among the sheaves," a request that appears to exceed the rights afforded to her by the gleaning custom and seems to be "a request so contrary to customary practice."²⁶² However, the interpretation of this verse is complex, and scholars have offered various opinions on its meaning. These scholarly views can

²⁵⁹ In Ziegler's book, she raises the following question: "Why does Ruth believe she needs to find someone who favors her in order to obtain the basic rights that any stranger, orphan, widow, or poor person is entitled to?" Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 207.

²⁶⁰ Linafelt, *Ruth*, 26.

²⁶¹ Nielsen directs attention to several relevant verses on this matter, including Amos 5:10-15, 8:4-6; Micah 3:1-3; Isaiah 1:21-24; and 5:8-13. Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 54-55.

²⁶² Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 135.

be broadly divided into two categories: the first group maintains that Ruth indeed makes the request, which the overseer subsequently conveys to Boaz, while the second group believes that Ruth never did. As part of the first group, Campbell posits that Ruth's request, as quoted by the overseer, remains unanswered. Sasson also adopts this perspective and further argues that Ruth "was deliberately presenting the overseer with a request he was not in a position to grant." Sasson suggests that Boaz initially denies her request but later, after dinner, grants her permission to gather among the sheaves (2:15). Hubbard agrees with this approach but differs from Sasson in asserting that Boaz had granted Ruth's request from the outset. According to Hubbard, verse 15 should be interpreted as Boaz's instructions to the reapers, informing them of the permission Ruth had been granted earlier in the day.²⁶³ Additionally, Adele Berlin highlights the narrative style in which a reader of Scripture is provided with specific details at later points in the story. Looking at this verse from the second view—where scholars posit that Ruth never actually makes such a request—one argument is made by Grossman, who assumes that the overseer is the one requesting on Ruth's behalf:

This point is critical for resolving the difficulty we mentioned earlier, regarding how Ruth dared to ask for such an extraordinary privilege. The answer is, quite simply, that Ruth never did ask for such a privilege; this is merely the perspective of the supervising boy and the manner in which he sought to characterize Ruth!²⁶⁴

Some scholars, such as Yair Zakovitch, believe that the overseer's words reflect his concern for Ruth, as he is moved by her diligence (2:7b),²⁶⁵ a point also made by Nielsen, who contends that through the overseer's description, "the reader is thus given a picture of Ruth as a modest, diligent woman who deserves respect."²⁶⁶ However, others, such as Grossman, argue

²⁶³ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 147-8.

²⁶⁴ Jonathan Grossman, "'Gleaning among the Ears': 'Gathering among the Sheaves': Characterizing the Image of the Supervising Boy (Ruth 2)." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 4 (2007), 708.

²⁶⁵ Yair Zakovitch, *Mikra Leyisrael - A Biblical Commentary for Israel, Ruth* (Hebrew). Tel Aviv: Hebrew University Magnes Press (1990), 71.

²⁶⁶ Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 58.

that the overseer's account implies that Ruth has been "gathering" grain excessively in the field. By using slight exaggeration, such as changing the verb from "glean" to "gather" and altering the place of gathering, the overseer may be attempting to persuade Boaz to impose restrictions on the Moabite girl. Ziegler suggests that this portrayal of Ruth's behavior as greedy and unlawful might be intended to persuade Boaz that this foreigner should not be permitted to glean in his field.²⁶⁷

The present thesis concurs with the view that Ruth never makes such a request,²⁶⁸ and it argues that the overseer's account of her "gathering" is an inaccurate report, an act that not only shows his attitude towards Ruth but also towards the law. To prove this point, a lexical analysis is needed at the onset to show how Ruth has not done any gathering of grain among the sheaves but has only been gleaning. Firstly, the author/narrator consistently describes her actions using phrases such as "gleaned in the field after the reapers" (Ruth 2:3), "she gleaned in the field until evening" (Ruth 2:17), and "gleaned until the barley harvest and the wheat harvest were finished" (Ruth 2:23). Secondly, the strict instruction given by Boaz to Ruth where he tells her, "Don't go to glean in another field" (Ruth 2:8), suggests that he is only aware of her gleaning activities in the field. In each of these instances, the Hebrew word לָקַט (glean) is used instead of קָטַף (gather), and the term שָׂדֵה (field) is consistently mentioned, but never בְּתוֹכֵי הַקֶּלָּחִים (among the sheaves). These textual details support the argument that Ruth's actions are in line with the practice of gleaning and that she is not gathering among the sheaves.

In light of this textual evidence presented, it is worth re-examining the overseer report concerning Ruth's gleaning. As already established, the phrase "gathering among sheaves" in his report stands in contrast to the narrator's consistent usage of the word "glean" as well as the narrator's mention of the "field" but no mention of "sheaves". The narrator's inclusion of this contrast appears to be deliberate, as if there is an intention to highlight the discrepancy between the two descriptions of Ruth's actions. As implied in his report, the overseer is tracking the time she spends in the field, and thus he should be well aware of what she is doing and where she is. It is then rather odd that he, unlike the narrator, does not describe Ruth's action as "gleaning in the

²⁶⁷ Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 214-6.

²⁶⁸ Nevertheless, if Ruth indeed makes such a request, it demonstrates a disregard for the law, as it exceeds the scope of the right of gleaning.

field” but instead calls it “gathering among sheaves”. This discrepancy suggests that the overseer does not approve of her gleaning in the field and does not want her there, and it implies that her actions may give him a feeling of unease. Importantly, it suggests that he is in fact aware of the Pentateuchal law of gleaning and thus recognizes that Ruth has the right to glean; therefore, he cannot outright condemn Ruth’s gleaning, especially in front of Boaz, who is portrayed as a character who respects and adheres to the law. Since it would be improper to condemn her from the perspective of the law, it makes sense if the overseer does indeed resort to inventing a false request from Ruth with the intention of either restricting her gleaning or excusing himself from any potential loss resulting from her actions. It should also be noted that if the overseer is aware of the gleaning custom, he should be practicing dutifully in the same way as Boaz does; instead, his report suggests a seeming reluctance in complying with the law. While it is beyond the scope here to explore the reasons for his actions, this analysis nonetheless strengthens the argument that the narrative presents a social setting characterized by a noncompliance with the Pentateuchal law and custom; in such an environment, characters may possess knowledge of the law, but ultimately they may choose not to practice it. This phenomenon contributes to the overall portrayal of a lawless social setting in the book of Ruth.

The third piece of evidence that shows the narrative presenting a society where Pentateuchal law is not commonly practiced is seen in Ruth 2:8 where Boaz advises Ruth, “Do not go to glean in another field, nor go from here, but stay close to my young women.” On the one hand, this can be viewed as Boaz’s permission to allow Ruth to glean,²⁶⁹ even though such permission is not required according to the Pentateuchal custom, as the custom affords her this right automatically. On the other hand, this statement suggests that other field owners would likely prohibit Ruth from gleaning in their fields, as Linafelt highlights that Boaz is not only advising Ruth to avoid other fields as potential gleaning opportunities but also to refrain from even stepping foot outside of his field.²⁷⁰ In giving Ruth these instructions, Boaz displays a responsibility to ensure her safety and access to resources by encouraging her to remain within the confines of his property. The implication of Boaz’s warning is that the broader society is not

²⁶⁹ Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 49.

²⁷⁰ Linafelt, *Ruth*, 33.

adhering to the Pentateuchal law pertaining to gleaning, as there seems to be a general reluctance or refusal to exercise the gleaning custom.

The fourth piece of evidence can be found in Boaz's instructions to his servants where he states, "Let her glean even among the sheaves" (Ruth 2:15). The Hebrew word אֵלֵּי is used in this context, which translates to "the same" or "even". This term can be employed to convey either the same or an incremental degree of similarity between two actions or concepts. In this case, this word אֵלֵּי may indicate that Boaz has already given a command in the same vein. Considering the context, it is plausible that this previous instruction was permission for Ruth to glean in the field. This directive would likely have been issued concurrently with Boaz's order for the servants "not to touch [Ruth]" (Ruth 2:9). The necessity for Boaz to explicitly grant Ruth permission to glean in his field and ensure her safety suggests that without his clarification, his servants may disapprove of her gleaning, despite it being mandated by the law and technically requires no further instruction. Such an attitude from the people may be common at that time, which further suggests that the Pentateuchal law of gleaning is not a widely accepted or practiced custom in the society.

Lastly, Naomi's reaction to Ruth's return from gleaning exemplifies the attitude of those living in a social setting in which gleaning is not commonly practiced. Naomi exclaims, "Blessed be he who took such generous notice of you" (2:19). This statement implies two things: first, Naomi is astonished by the plentiful yield Ruth brings back from the field, and second, from Naomi's perspective as a member of the society, the field owner's act of permitting Ruth to glean is perceived as an act of generosity rather than adherence to an obligatory law. Naomi's response further demonstrates that the practice of gleaning, as prescribed by the Torah, is not a widely accepted or enforced custom in the society depicted in the book of Ruth.

Overall, the abovementioned textual evidence presented in Ruth reveals a social setting where the Pentateuchal law of gleaning is not commonly practiced or enforced, despite the characters' awareness of its existence. In addition, this realization of the Pentateuchal law provides valuable insights into the character of Boaz, particularly his role as a figure of compassion, justice, and generosity. By recognizing the societal context in which Boaz operates, we can better understand and appreciate the depth of his kindness towards Ruth and his commitment to upholding the law. One instance where this can be seen is when the overseer attempts to persuade Boaz to impose restrictions on Ruth: not only does Boaz decline to do so,

but he also extends his kindness further by utilizing the overseer's words to display his generous gestures towards Ruth. Boaz's actions highlight his astute awareness of the attitudes and intentions of those around him, including the overseer, his workers, and other field owners; his grace reaches its peak in the literary design, setting him apart as a character who truly embodies the spirit of the Pentateuchal law. Furthermore, Boaz's character is further enriched by his understanding of the social conditions that have led to the inadherence to and non-enforcement of the Pentateuchal law in his society. He recognizes the challenges faced by Ruth as a poor, widowed foreigner and takes deliberate steps to ensure her protection, support, and well-being, even in a society that generally disregards the obligations outlined in the Torah. Boaz's actions demonstrate his commitment to justice and the equitable treatment of the vulnerable, making him a compelling and admirable character within the narrative.

Similar cases can also be found in the book of Judges, where characters who are not ignorant of the law deliberately choose either not to practice it or to act contrary to it. One notable example is found in the story of Micah and his idol (Judg. 17-18). Micah, an Ephraimite, creates a shrine and installs his own son as a priest, despite the Pentateuchal law specifying that only Levites can serve as priests. As the narrative progresses, Micah encounters a young Levite and decides to replace his son with this Levite as the priest for his shrine. Schneider posits that Micah regards the Levite as having greater prestige, particularly in matters concerning the Israelite deity.²⁷¹ This notion is further supported by Micah's later statement in Judges 17:13, which demonstrates his awareness of the Pentateuchal law. In doing so, Micah's actions reflect the societal perception of a Levite's superior status and the significance of adhering to religious norms. This episode in Judges further reinforces the concept of a lawless social setting shared between the two books.

To conclude, in both narratives, there is enough evidence to suggest that the characters seem to be knowledgeable of the Pentateuchal law but choose not to abide by it in their actions, either for personal gain or other motivations. This common feature suggests that the two books share a similar social context, one that reflects a society where the enforcement and practice of

²⁷¹ Schneider, *Berit Olam: Judges*, 236.

the Pentateuchal law are inconsistent, thus leading to instances of lawlessness and deviation from the prescribed norms.

The Case of Potential Sexual Violence (Ruth 2:9)

In Ruth 2:9, Boaz addresses Ruth, saying, “Have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch thee?” The interpretation of the Hebrew word *נָגַח* in this verse has been a subject of scholarly debate, particularly concerning the potential implication of violence against Ruth. Despite the extensive discussion surrounding the term, the specific nature of the violence in question often remains a briefly explored topic in academic discourse. Some scholars acknowledge the potential danger Ruth faces in the field, but they often discuss this issue very briefly and do not necessarily identify it as sexual violence. For instance, Sasson argues against translating this word to “molest”, as he believes it is unlikely for a widow like Ruth to be molested while gleaning. To him, this term must be related to granting Ruth permission to drink from the harvesters’ water supply in the next phrase.²⁷² This perspective downplays the severity of the potential violence Ruth might experience, understating the risks associated with her vulnerable position in the field. Conversely, there are some other scholars, particularly those adopting a feminist approach to biblical interpretation, who tend to interpret the threat as potentially involving sexual violence. These scholars argue that Ruth, as a vulnerable foreign widow, would be at a higher risk for sexual harassment or assault while gleaning in the field. This interpretation emphasizes the importance of understanding the social context of the book of Ruth.

To explore the implications of this potential threat, it is crucial to examine the interpretations of the Hebrew word *נָגַח*. This term is often translated as “touch” in biblical accounts; however, in some contexts involving interactions between men and women, the word is associated with sexual contact and even sexual violence. This connection is important when considering the potential threat faced by Ruth in the lawless social setting of her story. Nielsen highlights that the verb *נָגַח* can denote a sexual attack, as seen in Genesis 20:6. In this passage,

²⁷² Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 50.

God speaks to Abimelech in a dream, informing him that He has protected him from “touching” Sarah, Abraham’s wife.²⁷³ This example demonstrates the potential for the term to refer to inappropriate or harmful sexual contact. Another example can be found in 2 Samuel 13:11-14, where Tamar pleads with her brother Amnon not to “force” (עָלָה) her. In this context, the term is linked to sexual violence, as Amnon proceeds to rape Tamar despite her pleas. This tragic story further illustrates the potential association between the verb עָלָה and sexual violence.

These examples show that the term עָלָה can carry implications of sexual contact and even sexual violence, depending on the context. Considering this, it is important to reevaluate the interpretation of the word in Ruth 2:9, as it could imply a risk of sexual harassment or assault for Ruth. In the context of this verse, additional textual evidence suggests the possibility of sexual violence in that social setting. Boaz’s charge to Ruth in 2:8-9 (“Don’t go elsewhere, but stay here close²⁷⁴ to my girls ... go thou after them [the maidservants]”), can be interpreted as his awareness of the potential sexual violence that Ruth may face in the fields.²⁷⁵ Boaz’s insistence that Ruth stay close to his maidservants and not venture to other fields where he cannot exercise control over the situation implies his concern for her safety (2:8). This concern is further emphasized by his command for her to follow his maidservants (2:9), rather than mingling with the male servants.²⁷⁶ By ensuring Ruth’s proximity to the female workers, Boaz may be attempting to minimize the risk of any potential violence against her. Linafelt posits that this concern likely stems from the potential for sexual assault or at least unwanted sexual attention.²⁷⁷ Campbell points out that the specific use of the feminine plural term “my girls” in 2:8 is likely intended to remind readers of the importance of protecting the “elected” woman from harm and

²⁷³ Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 58.

²⁷⁴ Bush notes that the term “תִּדְבַקְנִי” (“stay here close”) has various poetic usages, such as describing skin clinging to bone (Job 19:20), a stain on the hand (31:7), a warrior’s hand cleaving to a sword (2 Sam. 23:10), and Ruth’s attachment to Naomi (1:14). With a semantic range encompassing “cling”, “cleave”, “stick to”, “hold onto”, Bush suggests “stick close to” as a contextually suitable translation. Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 143.

²⁷⁵ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 34.

²⁷⁶ Hubbard connects this with the relationship between men and women, suggesting that it sets the stage for Boaz’s later praise of Ruth (Ruth 3:10) by portraying her as a marriageable young woman in the midst of eligible bachelors. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 159.

²⁷⁷ Linafelt, *Ruth*, 34.

even the possibility of the wrong marriage for her, as seen frequently in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis.²⁷⁸

In Ruth 2:15, Boaz’s directive to his male servants, instructing them not to “put her to shame,” invites various interpretations. On one hand, this command may be understood as a directive ensuring that Ruth is not denied the opportunity to gather grain from the sheaves. On the other hand, as Campbell posits, this instruction can also be perceived as an effort by Boaz to safeguard Ruth against potential violence from his male servants working in the field,²⁷⁹ particularly when considering how Boaz tells Ruth to stay close to the maidservants with no mention of doing the same with the male servants. In this view, Boaz’s command underscores his determination to protect Ruth from any improper advances that might be made by the men. Boaz’s concern for Ruth’s well-being is evident throughout the narrative, and this particular command emphasizes his intent to ensure her safety and dignity while she gleanes in his field. By instructing his male servants not to shame her, Boaz is actively working to create a secure environment for Ruth.

Naomi’s statement in Ruth 2:22 (“...that you go out with his maidens, lest others fall upon [יִפְּגְעוּ] you in another field”) can also be interpreted as an indication that she is aware of the potential for sexual violence in the fields. Notably, in this statement she deliberately changes the word used by Ruth in 2:21 when Ruth recounts Boaz’s instructions of “stay close by my [Boaz’s] workers” (where “workers” is in the masculine or common gender); by using the word “maiden” instead of “workers”, Naomi appears to be emphasizing that Ruth should specifically go with the female workers and not the male ones. The term *יִפְּגְעוּ* is typically rendered as “encounter” or “meet”, but it can also denote an attack, including a sexual assault.²⁸⁰ This nuanced understanding of the term is significant, especially considering the fact that Naomi makes this

²⁷⁸ Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 97. See also Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 157.

²⁷⁹ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 176-7.

²⁸⁰ Schipper notes that the term *יִפְּגְעוּ* used by Ruth in 1:16 is part of a similar construction when she tells Naomi, “Do not pressure me.” However, the context of Naomi’s use of this word here seems to suggest something more forceful than mere pressure. Schipper posits that it could imply an “attack” and might even encompass the possibility of a sexual assault. Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 137. See also Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 107-8.

statement after learning that Ruth was gleaning in Boaz's field and being taken care of by Boaz, who is a "redeeming kinsman" (2:20) and could potentially continue Elimelech's lineage through marriage with Ruth.²⁸¹ Given this context, ensuring Ruth's safety from sexual violence and maintaining her reputation becomes crucial for Naomi.²⁸² Schipper's observation that other fields might have the threat of rape or murder reinforces the notion that the social setting is one where public safety is a privilege that is not universally enjoyed or assumed by all parties, particularly by women and ethnic or racial minorities.²⁸³ In this context, Naomi's concern for Ruth's safety and her emphasis on staying with the maidservants highlights the precarious nature of their social position and the potential dangers they face in an environment where the law is inadequately enforced or upheld.

As a way to conclude this account in Ruth, Ruth 2:23 highlights the fact that Ruth stayed close to the maidservants of Boaz. On one hand, this detail serves to emphasize Ruth's obedience and compliance with the instructions given to her by Boaz and Naomi. On the other hand, it also provides the implied reader with assurance that Ruth remains safe and untainted by the potential sexual violence in the fields. By keeping close to the maidservants, Ruth is depicted as someone who maintains her chastity and reputation, which is crucial given the social context and the unfolding narrative in the book of Ruth.

²⁸¹ Nielsen suggests that Ruth's report to Naomi in 2:21 includes two significant pieces of information: firstly, that she is to remain in Boaz's field and, secondly, that she is to continue doing so until the end of the harvest season. Naomi's reaction, however, focuses solely on the first point. In contrast to her earlier indifference when Ruth initially set out to glean, Naomi now displays concern for Ruth's safety as a worried mother-in-law. This change in attitude can be attributed to Naomi learning that Boaz is the field owner, which underscores the importance of Ruth staying close to Boaz's female workers. Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 64. Hubbard presents his perspective in the form of questions: Was Naomi aiming to divert Ruth from potential romances with other workers until her relationship with Boaz could run its course? Did she want to guard Ruth's chastity? Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 191.

²⁸² Fewell and Gunn contend that the field presents a certain level of danger for an unattached young foreign woman, as the recurring references to the risk of unwelcome attention and molestation indicate. They assert that Naomi is aware of these risks but, due to her prejudice against foreigners (a point with which the present thesis disagrees), she sends Ruth to the field without advice or warning. The authors suggest that Naomi's sudden concern arises from her realization of the potential bounty at hand, as evidenced by Boaz's evident interest in Ruth. Fewell and Gunn, "A Son Is Born to Naomi!": Literary Allusions and Interpretation in the Book of Ruth." *JSOT* 40 (1988), 104.

²⁸³ Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 137.

The social setting of sexual violence in the book of Ruth can be compared to that found in the book of Judges, as suggested by Shepherd in his article, “Ruth in the Days of the Judges: Women, Foreignness and Violence.”²⁸⁴ According to Shepherd, Ruth’s vulnerability to violence is closely linked to her multiple identities as a foreign woman. He draws a parallel between Ruth’s situation and the account of an act of sexual violence against a woman who is treated as “foreign” in Judges 19, where the Levite’s concubine experiences a tragic fate. Shepherd argues that the violence inflicted on the woman in Judges 19 stems from her being treated as profoundly “other” by the Benjaminite of Gibeah. This otherness is attributed to the Levite’s status as a marginal Other. Since Levites were not defined geographically or tribally but were incorporated individuals who removed themselves from their families for divine service, they were often considered outsiders. Similarly, Ruth as a Moabitess has no tribal connections in Bethlehem upon her arrival, having left her family of origin behind in a bold act.

The comparison between Ruth and the Levite’s concubine highlights the vulnerability of women, particularly those who are considered foreign or an Other within the social settings of both the book of Ruth and the book of Judges. This shared feature underscores the prevalence of sexual violence and the lawless nature of the societies depicted in these biblical texts. By examining the experiences of Ruth and the Levite’s concubine, it becomes evident that their vulnerability is a direct result of their marginalized status, which ultimately exposes them to potential acts of violence. This commonality between the two books serves to emphasize the lawless social setting as a place where women could easily encounter violence; what is different is that in the book of Ruth, despite the lawlessness in the society, some women do receive protection when there are those around them who uphold the law in an upright way, as seen with Boaz.

The recognition of potential sexual violence in the lawless social setting of the book of Ruth can serve as a literary device that enhances the positive characterization of Boaz. As a landowner and prominent figure in the community, Boaz’s actions stand in contrast to the pervasive lawlessness and potential violence faced by vulnerable individuals such as Ruth. Moreover, Boaz’s protective nature becomes evident through his specific instructions to Ruth to

²⁸⁴ Shepherd, “Ruth in the Days of the Judges: Women, Foreignness and Violence.”

remain close to his maidservants and not to glean in other fields where he cannot ensure her safety (Ruth 2:8-9). This demonstrates his awareness of the potential dangers Ruth may encounter and his willingness to provide her with a secure environment in which to work. Furthermore, Boaz commands his male servants not to “put her not to shame” (Ruth 2:15), which can be interpreted as him protecting Ruth from potential sexual harassment or assault from the male workers in his field. By providing Ruth a safe environment and actively seeking to prevent any harm from befalling her, Boaz emerges as a compassionate and responsible figure within a society plagued by lawlessness and sexual violence. His actions not only ensure Ruth’s physical safety but also preserve her reputation, which is particularly important given her status as a potential candidate for marriage within the context of the redeeming kinsmen (Ruth 2:20).

In conclusion, the lawless social setting marked by sexual violence in the book of Ruth serves to emphasize Boaz’s positive characterization. His protective actions towards Ruth, who is vulnerable due to her status as a foreign woman, demonstrate his adherence to moral and ethical principles within a society that often disregards them. Boaz’s character is thus strengthened by his role as a protector and advocate for the vulnerable, which sets him apart from the prevailing lawlessness and violence that are characteristic of the times he is living in.

The Case of “Not Following the Young Men” (Ruth 3:10)

In the preceding sections, this thesis has explored the discrepancies in the comprehension of the Levirate marriage as well as the inadherence of implementing the gleaning custom, as seen within the book of Ruth. Building on these findings, this paper now delves into another instance of deviation from or inadherence to Pentateuchal laws—the restrictions associated with a Levirate marriage. According to Deuteronomy 25 and Genesis 38:11, Levirate marriage not only serves as a legal means for a widow to seek redress but also imposes certain obligations on her.²⁸⁵ These obligations require the widow to marry the deceased husband’s male sibling unless he formally refuses the union. Additionally, an official ritual must be conducted to conclude the obligation (Deut. 25:7-10), after which the widow is free to engage in relationships with others.

²⁸⁵ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 261.

This context sets the stage for further examination of the lawless social setting on the understanding and practice of Levirate marriage in the book of Ruth.

Regarding the phrase found in Ruth 3:10 (“thou didst not follow [לָקַח אַחֲרַי] the young men, whether poor or rich”), there is no explicit indication in the text that the phrase is being used in a specific sense. However, the expression “לָקַח אַחֲרַי”, which stems from the literal meaning of “walk behind, after; follow after” (Gen. 32:20), is employed in a wide variety of derived and figurative senses. Campbell cites passages such as Genesis 24:5, 8, 39 and 1 Samuel 25:42, where a woman follows after messengers once a marriage proposal has been made and accepted. He concludes that it was highly likely for Ruth to have received marriage proposals, possibly from the young men who harvested Boaz’s crop.²⁸⁶ Hubbard contends that the contexts in which the expression appears are close enough to make it highly plausible that it signifies “not offering yourself [in marriage] to the choice young men.”²⁸⁷ Linafelt contend that this term frequently carries the connotation of pursuing a sexual relationship, as seen in Proverbs 7:22 and Hosea 2:7.²⁸⁸ Regardless of the phrase’s explicit meaning, it undeniably suggests an intimate relationship.

Building on the interpretation of this phrase, it becomes evident that the young men and the society at large disregard the restrictions imposed on widows regarding Levirate marriage. Even though the potential candidates for Levirate marriage have not formally rejected Ruth and the official procedure to end her obligation has not yet been conducted, others still appear to be pursuing her. This once again highlights the social setting in which the inadherence of Pentateuchal customs and people’s indifference towards them are prevalent. Furthermore, given that only through the role of the *goel* (גֹּאֵל, translated as ‘redeemer’ or ‘kinsman-redeemer’) can Levirate marriage be performed and the lineage of the deceased husband continued,²⁸⁹ Boaz’s commendation of Ruth’s loyalty for “not going after the young men, rich or poor” serves as

²⁸⁶ Campbell *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 124.

²⁸⁷ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 214.

²⁸⁸ Linafelt, *Ruth*, 57.

²⁸⁹ Frymer-Kensky asserts that Boaz recognizes Ruth has approached him not because he is the only potential spouse, but because, as Naomi’s kinsman (*goel*), he is in a unique position to assist Naomi by aligning himself with Ruth. Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 62.

additional evidence of this social setting. As Bush highlights, Boaz's words imply that Ruth is a free agent when it comes to marriage and, thus, not legally obligated to enter into a Levirate marriage with any relative of her deceased husband. Grossman also asserts that Boaz conveys the impression that Ruth has the freedom to marry whomever she chooses, be they young or old, rich or poor.

In essence, Ruth is not required to prioritize Levirate marriage, but if she does so, it is an act that genuinely merits praise in a society where few people concern themselves with whether or not she observes it. This point demonstrates that, although people are cognizant of the Levirate obligation, adhering to it has evolved into more of a moral and loyal concern for the deceased husband's family, rather than a legal responsibility in a lawless society. This perspective addresses Bush's "first and most important"²⁹⁰ objection to the existence of Levirate marriage in Ruth. In his note on Ruth 3:10, he contends that the custom does not possess the binding character of a legal formulation, as neither Naomi nor Ruth have acted in a manner suggesting they had any such legal right. Furthermore, Boaz, who is consistently portrayed as a man of exemplary character and honor, has not taken any action up to this point in the narrative that would imply he is subject to such a legal obligation.²⁹¹ This thesis posits that Bush's oversight lies in his failure to consider the social setting of the narrative, because in a lawless society, the obligations and restrictions of legal customs are disregarded, as evidenced by the text.

Lastly, the utilization of a lawless social setting as a literary device enables a deeper exploration of the characters and their actions, particularly Ruth's adherence to the Levirate obligation and her demonstration of loyalty to her deceased husband's family. In such a context, Boaz's appreciation of Ruth's behavior becomes even more significant, especially with her Moabite background. These characters stand in stark contrast to the others in the narrative, who appear indifferent or ignorant when it comes to the law in a society that has little to no regard for the law. This distinction highlights the remarkable nature of Ruth and Boaz's actions, as they choose to honor traditions and maintain loyalty to their family despite the prevailing societal

²⁹⁰ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 261.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 201, 261.

disregard for such customs. Consequently, their choices exemplify a rare dedication to morality and familial bonds, emphasizing their unique and admirable qualities within the narrative.

The Case of Naomi Selling “the Land of our Brother Elimelech” (Ruth 4:3)

The deviation from the Pentateuchal law’s established standards, as discussed in the previous sections, is characteristic of the lawless social setting in Ruth, and this trait can also be seen in the instance of Naomi needing to sell Elimelech’s land. Specifically, the focus in Naomi’s case is on the adaptation of Pentateuchal laws relating to the redemption of the land and Levirate marriage, which may have been altered out of necessity, practicality, or convenience during the specific historical period. In analyzing Naomi’s case in Ruth 4:3, it should be mentioned that this verse has generated considerable debate and varying interpretations among scholars.²⁹² To begin the discussion, we first identify the issues arising from the text, which reads, “Naomi, now returned from the country of Moab, must sell [מְכַרָּה] the piece of land which belonged to our kinsman Elimelech.” It is crucial to acknowledge that, according to the case of the daughters of Zelophehad (Num. 27:1-11), a woman could inherit land, but she must marry within her father’s tribe to preserve the tribal inheritance (Num. 36:6-9). However, in Naomi’s case, the text specifies that “the piece of land ... belonged to Elimelech” (Ruth 4:3), making it evident that this land is not part of her own inheritance from her original family. Furthermore, when Boaz completes the transaction, he states, “I am acquiring from Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon” (Ruth 4:9). This statement clarifies that the land in question is the property of Elimelech and his sons.

This situation raises questions concerning Naomi’s right to sell the land. According to Pentateuchal customs, the typical practice was for sons to inherit property (Deut. 21:15-17); in the absence of sons, daughters would inherit (Num. 27:7-8). However, if a man died without male descendants, his property would first pass to his brother, then to his father’s brothers, and

²⁹² For detailed reviews of scholarship, see Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 108-15; Bush, *Ruth-Esther, Word Biblical Commentary* 246-51.

ultimately to “the closest relative of his clan” (Num. 27:9-11).²⁹³ In Naomi’s case, she seemingly has no right to inherit this piece of land and consequently no right to sell it. Bush refers to this issue as “the most baffling and difficult development in a narrative replete with such enigmas”²⁹⁴ in the book of Ruth.

To explain this conundrum, scholars have proposed various ideas, which are expounded below. One main approach is based on interpreting מְכַרָּהּ in a past sense, where it is posited that Elimelech sold the usufruct of his land before emigrating to Moab, with the field subsequently coming into the possession of others.²⁹⁵ In this view, Naomi, through Boaz, calls upon a near redeemer to repurchase the field from its current possessor, as depicted in Leviticus 25:25. However, such an interpretation overlooks the text’s explicit statement that “Naomi sold [מְכַרָּהּ] the land” (4:3). If the sale had taken place before the migration, the text should have stated that “Elimelech sold the land.” Additionally, it is also plausible to understand מְכַרָּהּ as “chronologically present action,”²⁹⁶ which would translate the form to *she is selling*.²⁹⁷

Another interpretation focuses on the “clear implication of the language of verse 3,”²⁹⁸ which suggests that Naomi is “selling” the usufruct of Elimelech’s field, as well as 4:5, which indicates that the field is to be acquired from Naomi. To support this interpretation, some scholars propose that upon departing from Bethlehem, Elimelech may have entrusted the plot to family or friends,²⁹⁹ or alternatively, someone else might have silently appropriated the abandoned property,³⁰⁰ yet Naomi has reclaimed it upon her return. However, this interpretation

²⁹³ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 237. These transfers might entail financial transactions, as they represent a “right of redemption to purchase it,” as illustrated in Jeremiah 32:6-15.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 234

²⁹⁵ Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 156; Gordis, “Love, Marriage and Business in the Book of Ruth: A Chapter in Hebrew Customary Law,” 254.

²⁹⁶ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 239.

²⁹⁷ Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 164; Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 73; Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 384.

²⁹⁸ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 249.

²⁹⁹ Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 113.

³⁰⁰ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 53.

presupposes that Naomi possesses the right of ownership and usufruct of Elimelech's field, a notion that Bush argues "seems to make nonsense of the story!" Furthermore, he contends that since Naomi and Ruth have been living as paupers dependent on Boaz's generosity throughout the narrative, the coherence and credibility of the story would surely preclude the possibility that Naomi had either the right to or the actual possession and usufruct of such land.³⁰¹

To better understand the scene in question, it is crucial to examine similar cases in the Bible concerning the land ownership rights of widows. In 2 Samuel 14:4-20, a widow from Tekoa appeals to King David; in her case, the widow claims that her two sons fought, and one killed the other, leaving her with only one son. The townspeople demand that she hands over her remaining son for punishment, which would leave her with no heir, and consequently, no inheritance (14:7, 16). This example illustrates the proper understanding of the relationship between a widow and the inheritance from her husband, as perceived by the common people in that society. Another relevant case is found in 2 Kings 8:1-6, which tells the story of a widow and her son who return from the land of the Philistines. After hearing the widow's plea, the king orders the restoration of all her property (2 Kings 8:6). Though it may seem that the property belongs to the widow, the presence of her son suggests otherwise. As the son is still young (cf. 2 Kings 4), it can be inferred that the property is temporarily under the mother's management until he comes of age to inherit it. This case also adheres to the standard of Pentateuchal principles.

These two cases occur during the time when Israelites were ruled by kings, and the cases provide a contrastive social setting to the time of the judges, in which the narrative of Ruth takes place. It is plausible that these different social situations contribute to the distinct approaches to land ownership of widows. The differences serve as evidence of the social setting characterized by the phrase, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased" (Judg. 21:25). This lawless condition is evident in both the books of Judges and Ruth, where widows handle property in a manner that does not adhere to Pentateuchal traditions, possibly for their sustenance. In such a chaotic time, the rights of widows (such as gleaning and Levirate marriage) are not generally practiced. Consequently, if a widow's only means of survival is a piece of land, she may choose to retain the property or sell it on her own. By contrast, when kings ruled over

³⁰¹ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 249.

the Israelites, many Pentateuchal laws were likely restored, creating a social setting in which people followed the law or the king's rule. In both aforementioned cases, the widows were able to appeal to the kings for assistance in their situations. Society was no longer as chaotic and lawless as it was during the time of Judges. Therefore, in comparing the case of Naomi in the days of the judges with the other two cases in the time of the kings, the different social settings play a significant role in explaining the discrepancies in how widows handle property.

In the book of Judges, there are also cases that reflect the adaptation of the law and commandments due to necessity and social situations. One such instance can be found in the case of the tribe of Dan, who, unable to conquer their assigned land, sought to conquer another territory instead. This situation can be related to the Pentateuchal portion found in the book of Numbers (Num. 34:1-29), where the boundaries of the Promised Land are delineated and the division of land among the tribes is outlined. According to later allotment in Joshua 19:40-48, the tribe of Dan is allocated a specific portion of land. However, as described in Judges (Judg. 1:34; 18:1-31), the tribe of Dan find it challenging to conquer their assigned territory, as they face resistance from the Amorites who force them into the hill country. This led the tribe to seek a new territory, eventually conquering the city of Laish and renaming it Dan. This deviation from the assigned land can be seen as a practical adaptation of the Pentateuchal law in response to the social and military challenges faced by the tribe of Dan during the time of the judges. Such adaptations are not limited to the tribe of Dan alone; other tribes, such as Ephraim, Manasseh, and Judah, also face difficulties in conquering their assigned territories and have to adapt to these challenges in various ways (Judg. 1:27-36), in turn deviating from the original allocations specified in the Torah.

These examples demonstrate that the period of the judges was characterized by malleable social settings, in a time where Israelites generally had to adapt Pentateuchal laws and principles to address the specific challenges they faced. The adaptations they made were driven by necessity and practical concerns, and this phenomenon reflects the lawless social setting described in the book of Judges. From this perspective, a key aspect that previous scholars have failed to take into account when attempting to understand the case of Ruth 4:3 is the fluidity and adaptability of the Pentateuchal law during the period of the judges. The chaotic and lawless conditions as evidenced by the book of Judges, at a time where "everyone did as they pleased" (Judg. 21:25), may have necessitated the adaptation of the Pentateuchal law in Ruth 4:3. In the

context of Ruth, Naomi's right to sell the land may have been an example of a practical adaptation, driven by the need for survival or the exigencies of life in a society where many rights of widows, such as gleaning and Levirate marriage, were not generally practiced. While earlier scholars have proposed various interpretations to resolve the issue of Naomi's right to sell the land, their arguments tend to overlook the lawlessness and fluid social settings that characterized the period of the judges. By considering these unique circumstances, it becomes apparent that the adaptation of the Pentateuchal law in response to necessity and practical concerns could have allowed for the deviation from the standard inheritance rights described in the Torah.

The significance of this perspective becomes even more noteworthy when examining the aspect of Levirate marriage in the book of Ruth. To fully comprehend the situation, it is essential to identify the problems associated with the case of Levirate marriage presented in the narrative. The primary issue and reason for disputing the existence of Levirate marriage in Ruth stems from the evident fact that Boaz is not Mahlon's brother, a requirement of Levirate marriage explicitly stated in Deuteronomy 25 and exemplified in the case of Tamar in Genesis 38. Instead, it is Boaz, in his role as the goel, who ultimately marries Ruth to continue Mahlon's lineage. Epstein identifies the marriage of Ruth as a Geullah (גְּוֹלָהּ, transliterated as *Ge'ullah*, meaning the act of redemption that the goel carries out) marriage and highlights the distinction that, in a Levirate marriage, the widow remains within the same family household, whereas in a Geullah marriage, she moves to the residence of a close relative.³⁰² Hubbard asserts that the marriage between Boaz and Ruth is undoubtedly representative of the Geullah tradition, rather than the Levirate. This assumption is heavily influenced by the definition of the word "goel", as both Naomi and Ruth refer to Boaz as a goel throughout the narrative (cf. Ruth 2:20, 3:9). According to Hubbard, the Geullah, who primarily focuses on redeeming property, encompasses a broader role that includes duties resembling those of Levirate nature;³⁰³ this interpretation is widely

³⁰² Epstein, *Marriage Laws in the Bible and the Talmud*, 84-88.

³⁰³ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 56-7.

accepted by numerous scholars.³⁰⁴ Taking the above points in mind, it is then crucial to highlight the various functions of the goel within the biblical text:³⁰⁵

1. The goel has an obligation to redeem land that, due to poverty, must be or has been sold outside the family (Lev. 25:24-25), which demonstrates that God is the true owner of the land: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine, for you are strangers and sojourners with me” (Lev. 25:23). Moreover, as depicted in Jeremiah 32, the goel also had the right to purchase the property before it was placed on the open market, which aligns with Naomi’s situation.

2. The goel has the responsibility of redeeming a relative who has been compelled by poverty to enter into slavery to a non-Israelite, as described in Leviticus 25:47-55.

3. The goel has the duty to receive the payment of restitution that accompanies a guilt-offering in the event of the death of the relative to whom this restitution was owed (Num. 5:5-8).

4. The goel has the role of an avenger, acting on behalf of a deceased relative in cases of murder or manslaughter, as outlined in Numbers 35:9-28 and Deuteronomy 19:6-13.

A concise, comprehensive description of the goel’s role, as given by A.R. Johnson, is to “protect the life or vitality of both the individual and the kin-group and thus preserve their standing in society by maintaining their essential unity or integrity.”³⁰⁶ Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that, in contrast to the land redemption, the notion of a Geullah marriage does not appear elsewhere in the Bible.

In this study, it is proposed that the use of the term goel in the context of Ruth not only refers to its specific responsibilities but also serves as a literary device to denote a close blood relation. The initial description of a character often provides essential information that

³⁰⁴ Ephraim Neufeld, *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws: With Special References to General Semitic Laws and Customs* (London: Longmans, Green and co, 1944), 42.

³⁰⁴ Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 103, 119-36; Beattie, “Ruth III,” 39-48; Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 84-89.

³⁰⁵ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 161-2; Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 188-9.

³⁰⁶ A. R. Johnson, “The Primary Meaning of lxxg,” *SVT*, 1, (1953), 71-2.

contributes to the development of the narrative. In Ruth 2:1, Boaz's status is introduced as "a kinsman [מִדָּוָע, *moda*] on [Naomi's] husband's side ... of the family of Elimelech." According to Bush, the term *moda* means "close associate, intimate friend," and it appears six times in other contexts (2 Kings 10:11; Ps. 31:12; 55:14; 88:9, 19; Job 19:14).³⁰⁷ Discussions on the term by other scholars have also underscored this presence of a close blood relation: in Campbell's book, he develops a more elaborate hypothesis in which he interprets the term as "covenant-brother,"³⁰⁸ while for Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, in noting that the term is also used in Job 19:14, highlights the fact that it is coupled with the phrase "those who are near to me."³⁰⁹ In general, the term emphasizes the close relation that the author wants readers to recognize.

This notion of a close relation as a usage of the term is well understood by the people of that time, as exemplified in several other instances in the book of Ruth. When Naomi identifies Boaz as a goel, she initially emphasizes the proximity by stating, "קָרוֹב לָנוּ הֵאֱיִשׁ" [This man is close to us]" (Ruth 2:20), thereby accentuating their closeness rather than the legal obligation.³¹⁰ In his commentary on Ruth 2:20, Bush also recognizes that the term goel is not at the forefront and is not employed in its technical legal sense within this context; on this point, he observes, "The context here makes it clear that Naomi is not using Goel 'redeemer,' in any of its technical legal senses."³¹¹ In Ruth 3:1, when Naomi suggests that Ruth find a "resting place" (i.e., a husband), which can be viewed as the central motif of the narrative, she again uses the term *moda* to emphasize that closeness is the key factor in this potential marriage. In Ruth 3:12, Boaz clarifies that there is another goel who is closer to them than he is (קָרוֹב מִמֶּנִּי), and in doing so, he employs a term similar to the one Naomi uses in Ruth 2:20.³¹² Thus, although the term goel

³⁰⁷ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 117.

³⁰⁸ Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 88-91.

³⁰⁹ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 27.

³¹⁰ Schipper asserts that, based on Leviticus 21:2, the term used for "close to one" could encompass an individual's parents, children, or siblings. Moreover, in situations where there are no children, siblings, or parental uncles, the term is employed more broadly to signify a remaining relative from the same clan, as seen in Numbers 27:11. Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 135.

³¹¹ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 161.

³¹² Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 151.

initially conveys legal obligations, within the context of the book of Ruth it predominantly underscores the notion of proximity, as reiterated through the utilization of the terms *goel*, *moda*, and other related expressions. Additional support for this assumption can be discovered in Ruth 4:14-15 where the women address Naomi, stating, “Blessed be the LORD, who hath not left thee this day without a goel ... for he is born of your daughter-in-law.” In this context, the goel referred to is Obed, the son of Ruth. Considering that Obed does not fulfill any of the four previously mentioned functions of a goel, it is more plausible that his designation as a goel primarily signifies his close familial relationship with Naomi. This further underscores the importance of emphasizing close kinship in the narrative rather than the legal responsibilities associated with the term goel.

The central question at hand is the relevance of the close blood relationship, as indicated by the term goel, to the marriage of Ruth. This study proposes that the marriage between Boaz and Ruth can be considered a Levirate marriage. This assertion is supported by the fact that the union preserves all the primary principles of Levirate marriage documented in other biblical accounts. The sole issue of Boaz not being Mahlon’s male sibling is argued to be closely related to the social setting of Ruth. Rowley suggests that Levirate marriage was not exclusively restricted to the male sibling of the deceased husband in early Israelite society. However, this paper posits that Levirate marriage might have been extended from the male sibling within a nuclear family to encompass the larger blood relations of close relatives.³¹³ This interpretation not only aligns with the broader principles of Levirate marriage but also acknowledges the unique social setting in which the story of Ruth is situated.

The expansion of Levirate marriage to include close relatives in the larger family unit, as suggested in the case of Ruth, can be understood in the context of the social setting during the time of the judges. This was a period characterized by instability, wars, and famine, as evidenced by the narrative of Ruth and the broader context of Judges. Such challenging circumstances often led to the decimation of families, with members becoming prone to departing from their family due to war and other adversities. In the case of Ruth, for instance, a famine drove Elimelech’s

³¹³ In addressing the problem of Levirate marriage in Ruth, Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky present four possible solutions. One of these suggests that practices and laws may have changed over time or are not fully represented elsewhere in the Bible. However, this particular solution is not adopted by them. Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 76.

family to Moab, where both Elimelech and his sons, Mahlon and Chilion, eventually died, leaving their widows without male protectors; this vulnerable situation is indicative of the unstable social setting in which the story takes place. Similarly, in the case of the tribe of Benjamin at the end of the book of Judges, a devastating civil war led to a shortage of women for the surviving men of the tribe. In response to this crisis, the other tribes devised a plan to provide wives for the remaining Benjaminites to ensure the continuation of their lineage (Judges 21). In both cases, the diminishing number of men or women forced the Israelite society to adapt to their challenging circumstances. The inclusion of close relatives in Levirate marriage arrangements can be seen as a practical response to such situations, ensuring the continuation of family lineages and providing support for widows in a time when traditional Levirate marriages may not have been feasible.

The adaptation of Levirate marriage to include close relatives in the larger family unit might also be evidenced within the text of Ruth itself, and such changes demonstrate the flexibility of the institution to accommodate the social realities. In the narrative, Boaz is consistently associated with Elimelech's family (Ruth 2:1) and is even referred to as Elimelech's brother (Ruth 4:3),³¹⁴ indicating a close familial relationship between the two men. This textual evidence underscores the expansion of the Levirate marriage concept to encompass not only immediate male siblings but also other close relatives within the extended family. Such an expansion of the concept of "brother" and "family" serves to raise connotations of the law of Levirate marriage, which, according to Deuteronomy 25, applies to brothers. Although the case before us deviates from the classic Deuteronomical legal situation, the author already begins to color the scene with Levirate associations.³¹⁵ By broadening the institution's scope within the narrative, the author appears to highlight the fact that such adaptations can be seen as a pragmatic response to the challenges faced by Israelite society, as it enabled the continuation of family lineages and provided essential support for widows in the absence of immediate male kin.

³¹⁴ Campbell highlights that the term "brother" is often employed beyond its literal meaning of blood kinship. Instead, it frequently designates more distant relatives or even close friends, particularly those in covenant relationships with one another. This broader usage of the term warrants consideration when interpreting its significance in various contexts. Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 143.

³¹⁵ Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 271.

The adaptation of Levirate marriage in the narrative of Ruth is further demonstrated by an aspect that has received limited attention from scholars. Specifically, the text implies that Boaz, as a close relative and “brother” of Elimelech, should ideally marry Naomi, who is likely of a similar age as Boaz. Textual evidence for their comparable ages can be inferred from Ruth 4:3, where Boaz refers to himself as a brother to Elimelech. Further evidence is found in Ruth 3:10, where Boaz praises Ruth for not pursuing younger men, suggesting that he himself is not a young man. Moreover, Boaz addresses Ruth as “my daughter” (Ruth 2:8, 3:10) in the same manner as Naomi does (Ruth 2:22, 3:10, 11),³¹⁶ which is a term typically used by an elder to address someone from a younger generation. However, the narrative presents a practical challenge to this arrangement, as Naomi is considered too old to have a husband and bear children (Ruth 1:12).³¹⁷ In light of these constraints, the narrative demonstrates a flexible adaptation of the Levirate marriage concept by having Boaz marry Ruth instead of Naomi. Although this does not strictly adhere to the traditional Levirate marriage guidelines, it is a pragmatic and reasonable response to the particular circumstances. The decision for Boaz to marry Ruth instead of Naomi illustrates the adaptability of the Levirate marriage tradition in addressing the unique social and personal realities faced by the characters. By deviating from the standard practice of Levirate marriage, the narrative demonstrates the importance of prioritizing the welfare of the widow and the continuation of the family lineage over adherence to rigid traditional norms.

In conclusion, the narrative of Ruth illustrates the adaptation of Pentateuchal laws within the context of land redemption and Levirate marriage. These adaptations are driven by practical concerns and the necessities of society, and additionally they are characterized by the need to address specific challenges. The flexibility and adaptability demonstrated in response to unique circumstances, however, can also be seen as a departure from the strict standards of Pentateuchal law, thus reflecting a lawless social setting.

³¹⁶ Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 67; Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 154.

³¹⁷ According to Sasson, Naomi’s point is not about her being too old to marry, but rather, having passed menopause, she is too old to engage in sexual relations that would lead to pregnancy. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 24-5.

The Case of “All the People in the Gate” (Ruth 4:11)

The scene at the city gate, wherein land redemption and Levirate marriage play a central role, reveals additional evidence of the lawlessness that permeates the social setting of the narrative. This section delves into the nuances of the gate scene, and it highlights the stark contrast between Boaz’s initiative and familiarity with the law and the general inaction and ignorance exhibited by the other characters. A thorough examination of the details in this scene will provide a richer understanding of the social context that shapes the narrative.

Firstly, according to the Pentateuchal custom, the legal cases of land redemption and Levirate marriage should be actively addressed by the city elders shortly after Naomi’s return. Deuteronomy 25:5-10 exemplifies the proper implementation of Levirate marriage, wherein the elders are responsible for ensuring the continuity of the deceased brother’s lineage. However, in the narrative in Ruth, it becomes evident that Naomi and Ruth have already returned to Bethlehem for a considerable period by the time chapter 4 begins, and yet, these issues remain unresolved.³¹⁸ Bush asserts that in the general governance of cities and tribal territories of ancient Israel, elders typically serve as the governing body.³¹⁹ However, in the book of Ruth, the city elders’ inaction in addressing critical matters highlights the limitations of Pentateuchal law enforcement within this particular context. Were it not for Boaz’s initiative in tackling these issues, it is likely that the elders would have continued to neglect their responsibilities, further illustrating the lawlessness that is pervasive in the social setting of Ruth.

Secondly, the city gates serve as the location for judgments and decisions made by the elders,³²⁰ as evidenced in Deuteronomy 21:18-21 and 22:13-21. These passages suggest that the elders were expected to be readily available for the people, constantly present at the city gates to address the community’s legal matters. However, in the narrative of Ruth, the text (Ruth 4:2)

³¹⁸ In Sasson’s note on Ruth 3:10, he raises a pertinent question: “If Naomi had returned from Moab at least a couple of months previously, why did this plot of land, which belonged to her husband, not become an issue until this very moment?” Ibid., 108.

³¹⁹ Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 232.

³²⁰ Thompson and Thompson state that in the ancient Near East, the assembly of elders were those who knew and preserved the traditions of the land. The real legal power resided in their corporate assembly. Thompson and Thompson, “Some Legal Problems in the Book of Ruth,” 83.

implies that the elders' gathering at the city gate is more a result of Boaz's invitation and selection, rather than their own initiative to fulfill their duties.³²¹ The elders' attendance seems to be specifically for the given case brought forth by Boaz, rather than a consistent presence to address the community's needs. This deviation from the ideal representation of law authority in Deuteronomy reveals an absence and inaction of the elders in Ruth's social context.

Thirdly, the handling of the case at the city gate in the narrative of Ruth is notable for the dominant role played by Boaz, who singlehandedly presents the case, explains the relevant laws, and makes the final decision. In contrast to the ideal practice described in other biblical accounts, the elders in this situation appear to be largely passive; their involvement is limited to serving as witnesses and offering concluding blessings.³²² As a comparison, in Deuteronomy 21:18-21, the elders are actively involved in the case of a rebellious son, with the parents bringing the matter before them. The elders, in turn, are responsible for investigating the situation and ultimately carrying out the punishment if the son is found guilty. Similarly, in Deuteronomy 22:13-21, the elders are expected to play an active role in the case of a husband accusing his wife of not being a virgin. They are responsible for examining the evidence and making a judgment based on their findings. In the narrative of Ruth, however, the elders' role in the legal process is strikingly minimal, as Boaz assumes the primary responsibility for handling the case. This discrepancy further emphasizes the departure from the ideal implementation of Pentateuchal law in this particular society, and it contributes to the overall portrayal of lawlessness within the social setting.

Lastly, the reaction of the other goel in the narrative of Ruth provides further evidence of the pervasive unfamiliarity with the Pentateuchal law within the society. When presented with the opportunity to buy the land, the other goel initially agrees, seemingly unaware of his right to redeem the land as part of his duties. This indicates that he lacks knowledge of the customs and

³²¹ Campbell posits that Boaz gathers elders as they pass through the gate and situates them in their appropriate seats, suggesting a seemingly random selection process. Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 156.

³²² Ziegler observes that the ten elders appear to serve as venerable witnesses rather than formal judges, noting that "no formal decision is issued by this body of ten men." Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 378-80.

legal responsibilities tied to his role.³²³ It is only after Boaz explains the custom that the other goel passively makes a decision, further highlighting his ignorance of the law.³²⁴ Moreover, when the other goel learns that he would also be required to fulfill the duty of Levirate marriage as part of the redemption process, he appears to be taken aback and ultimately changes his mind (4:6). This reaction suggests that he is not aware of the Levirate duties associated with being a goel, as he would not have initially agreed to buy the land had he known about this obligation. Again, this lack of knowledge demonstrates the overall unfamiliarity with the Pentateuchal law within the social setting, reinforcing the notion of a lawless society.

Nevertheless, this scene greatly serves to enhance the characterization of Boaz, in contrast to the other characters at the city gate. Firstly, Boaz's initiative to address the matters of land redemption and Levirate marriage demonstrates his proactive approach in upholding the law, which contrasts sharply with the inaction displayed by the city elders. His actions at the city gate portray him as a responsible figure, driven by a commitment to ensure the proper execution of Pentateuchal customs and the welfare of those involved, particularly Naomi and Ruth. Secondly, Boaz's ability to explain the legal responsibilities and customs associated with land redemption and Levirate marriage highlights his comprehensive understanding of the law and his authoritative role at the time. This display of knowledge reinforces Boaz's status as a respected authority within the community, capable of guiding others through complex legal matters.³²⁵

Lastly, Boaz's adherence to the Pentateuchal law and customs, coupled with his compassionate nature, exemplifies the qualities of a righteous and virtuous individual. In

³²³ Campbell raises several questions regarding this matter: "Why is the near redeemer seemingly so ill-informed? Why has he not initiated the plan himself if he was so ready to agree to it when Boaz broached it? And why could he not foresee the 'master-stroke'... that he must take Ruth with the land?" The approach presented in this thesis may provide answers to these inquiries. Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 158.

³²⁴ Nielsen offers a different interpretation of the other goel's negative attitude towards the law, suggesting that he is not ignorant but has intentionally refused his responsibility up until this point. In her analysis of the other goel's anonymization, Nielsen contends that it serves as an "indirect condemnation of him as a man who refuses to safeguard the good name of the family for posterity. He deserves to remain nameless." This interpretation, however, also emphasizes the other goel's negative stance concerning the law. Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 82-3.

³²⁵ Lau contends that Boaz's capacity to gather ten elders of the town as witnesses, likely diverting them from their ongoing tasks, emphasizes his social standing in the community (Ruth 4:2). Lau, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach*, 57. This point is also discussed in relation to the city gate in the first chapter of this thesis.

handling the case, Boaz demonstrates his commitment to justice. He presents the case of redeeming Naomi's land in order to allow the other goel to willingly acknowledge his role and further identify his Levirate responsibility, thereby granting him the freedom to choose,³²⁶ as seen the way Boaz addresses the situation in Ruth 3:13a: "If he will perform unto thee the part of a kinsman, well; let him do the kinsman's part." Conversely, through this process, Boaz establishes himself as a secondary goel, emphasizing the prospect that "if he be not willing to perform the duty of a kinsman to thee, then I will assume the role of a kinsman to thee, as the LORD liveth" (3:13b). Although there might be a possibility that the other goel would choose to marry Ruth, and despite Boaz's possible affection for Ruth,³²⁷ Boaz strictly and justly follows the Pentateuchal law and customs.

Overall, this portrayal of Boaz as a knowledgeable, responsible, and compassionate figure serves to elevate his characterization, making him a memorable and admirable character within the narrative of Ruth. His unwavering commitment to justice and adherence to the Pentateuchal law, as well as his empathetic approach to the plight of Naomi and Ruth, distinguishes Boaz as a virtuous individual in a time when such qualities were not always evident in the wider society.

Summary and Conclusion

Rauber's statement that "the great key to the reading of Hebraic literature is sensitivity to pattern, and nowhere is response to patterning more important than in Ruth"³²⁸ serves as an essential guiding principle for the present work. While Rauber is specifically referring to the symbolic pattern in the narrative, this study extends the notion to incorporate the social setting of

³²⁶ Schipper's observation that the interpretation of Boaz's intentions (i.e., whether he desires to marry Ruth or hopes to find someone else for her), which largely depends on how one perceives his character, is valid. Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 174. Boaz's action of asking the other goel to marry Ruth can be seen as an attempt to emulate and honor Ruth's loyalty towards her deceased husband's family, which he greatly admires. However, it is important to note that as long as it is a Levirate marriage, it does not necessarily have to involve Boaz. From this perspective, Boaz is ensuring that if the other goel chooses to acquire Naomi's land, potentially for personal gain, he should also bear the responsibility of a Levirate marriage.

³²⁷ Linafelt asserts that Boaz is "taking an extraordinary risk with his relationship with Ruth; he cannot be certain that the redeemer will reject the stipulation requiring him to acquire Ruth." Linafelt, *Ruth*, 68.

³²⁸ Rauber, "Literary Values in the Bible: The Book of Ruth," 29.

Ruth as well. To achieve this, it is vital to identify distinguishable or salient patterns in the text, namely the ones that encompass the expressions, experiences, and social environment of multiple characters through a close reading of the text. By doing so, we can ascertain the dominant theme, which in turn reveals the nature of the social and cultural setting.

The temporal setting of the story of Ruth during “the days of the judges” necessitates a comparative examination of the book of Judges. Analyzing the texts of Ruth and Judges with the assumption that they share a common social setting offers both valuable insight into understanding the text and a possible resolution to debated issues. Additionally, connecting the legal cases or customs in Ruth with their possible origins in the Torah and identifying their differences allows for a nuanced approach in resolving these differences through the lens of social setting.

Taking all approaches into account, this study concludes that the social setting of Ruth, contrary to the view held by many scholars who perceive it as pastoral and positive, is one of lawlessness. This conclusion is supported by seven key findings, as summarized in the following points:

1. On the topic of exogamy, it can be seen that even during the chaotic days of the judges, exogamous relationships were disapproved of, and the marriage of Ruth exposes the impurity within the predominantly exclusive society. Yet, the author skillfully uses this relationship as a literary device to convey a positive message, demonstrating the transformative power of love, loyalty, and determination in overcoming social barriers and prejudice.

2. Naomi’s understanding of the Levirate law demonstrates a deviation from the Pentateuchal prescription, as she interprets the law in a broader sense than the specific provisions laid out in the Torah. Her actions and advice to Ruth reflect a flexible and accommodating approach to the Levirate law, diverging from the strict interpretation prescribed in the Torah.

3. The gleaning practice in the fields of Bethlehem reveals an inadherence to the Pentateuchal law. The maltreatment of Ruth by other gleaners, as well as Boaz’s need to issue special instructions for her protection, suggests that the spirit of the gleaning law is not fully upheld in the society, highlighting the lawlessness in the social setting.

4. The presence of sexual violence in the fields is indicative of a dangerous environment for women, akin to the situation in the book of Judges. This commonality suggests that the social setting of Ruth shares some features with the lawless and violent environment depicted in Judges.

5. Boaz's admiration for Ruth's decision not to follow young men highlights the ignorance of the law by the general society in this social setting. In a context where adherence to the law is uncommon, those who follow it stand out as exceptional.

6. The adaptations of the laws regarding land redemption and Levirate marriage further attest to the flexibility and pragmatism necessitated by the particular social conditions, which also speak to the values of that time, as seen in people placing greater attention on fulfilling their own needs than on fully complying with the law.

7. The gate scene presents the inaction of the city elders and the unfamiliarity with the law displayed by the other redeemer. These factors provide further evidence of the pervasive lawlessness in the social setting.

Incorporating the perspective of the lawless social setting not only offers a deeper understanding of the narrative context but also enriches the characterization of the key figures within the book of Ruth. Boaz, in particular, stands out as a righteous, compassionate, and knowledgeable character in a society that has largely deviated from the Pentateuchal law. His actions, which consistently show how he adheres to the customs and demonstrate a commitment to justice, make him an admirable figure in the narrative. This lawless social backdrop highlights the virtues of Boaz, Ruth, and Naomi, who exhibit faith, loyalty, and kindness in the face of societal challenges. Consequently, this social setting serves as a crucial lens through which to appreciate the strength and resilience of the characters, as well as the broader messages conveyed within the book of Ruth.

Chapter 3: Confluence of the Settings

In the preceding chapters, this dissertation embarked on an in-depth exploration of two distinct facets of setting within the book of Ruth, treating them as separate entities. However, it is critical to acknowledge that within the intricate tapestry of biblical narratives, the singular application of a particular type of setting may not be sufficient to convey the author's nuanced messages in their entirety. Indeed, even in cases where one category of setting is ostensibly emphasized over another, it is commonplace for the narrative to leverage a composite of settings to fortify its context, thereby rendering its contentions more persuasive, lucid, and holistic. Consequently, it becomes an imperative task to devote a portion of this research to scrutinizing the interplay and mutual enhancement between distinct types of settings in a composite framework, where our discussion transcends beyond the spatial and social parameters to include the temporal setting as well. We begin our discussion by looking at the roles of the spatial setting and of the temporal setting to see how both these settings serve to

The spatial setting in biblical narratives, including natural and geographical boundaries, frequently serves as a barometer of societal values. This socioculturally delineated space encompasses political, linguistic, and cultural zones and frontiers, often intersecting with class divides. The sociocultural space holds paramount importance as it defines identity and in-group territories, given that it is anchored in the classifications that people apply to their environments. Areas associated with external groups are frequently viewed as alien, and they are typically characterized by divergent social circumstances. Spatial depictions are commonly employed to manifest a particular atmosphere, and they convey the narrator's interpretation of the locale, which in turn contributes to character creation. In certain texts, space is instrumental to the unfolding action as it plays a crucial role in the delineation of character or social status. It is here that individuals even become part of the setting: they bring along their identity and merge with the space to become a component that is integral to the setting itself, and it is this merging that gives the space its social significance.

The temporal setting, rather than assuming a dominant role, is more often intertwined with other types of settings, typically spatial. However, it remains a crucial component of the social setting; references to chronological time in the narrative equip the implied readers with the means to conceive the extant social conditions. Further, typological references or time units

provide a yardstick against which to gauge actions. This auxiliary function gains prominence when the temporal setting converges with spatial settings, thereby enriching the narrative with a more comprehensive contextual frame. Consequently, the social setting, often developed incrementally and integrated within the narrative through character interactions, can also be apprehended through spatial and temporal dimensions. Even when a text principally engages with space and time, these elements can be instrumental in shaping the implied social contexts, considering that these contexts at first glance may not be as apparent and as readily grasped as the components depicting space and time. Conversely, understanding the social conditions can assist readers in deciphering the spatial and temporal contexts more accurately.

The information given by the three types of settings can function together in an intertwining way to enhance a reader's understanding of a narrative. Consider, for instance, a narrative suffused with detailed spatial data and set against a distinct historical backdrop; within the mind of the implied readers, such a narrative might serve as a reverberation of an era. Although the narrative might merely specify the year and place, it often concurrently invokes sociocultural implications of the period. In other scenarios, the narrative revolving around an event might be limited to personal recollections, which can underscore the intersubjective essence of the story. Such narratives serve as a convergence point of temporal, spatial, and social settings, providing a more sophisticated understanding of the sociocultural milieu. To illustrate this point, the following discussion covers two examples in Ruth, namely in Ruth 1:1 and Ruth chapter 3, to elucidate how the settings work in tandem in enhancing a reader's comprehension of the narrative.

The initial verse of the book shows how the evolution of the narrative is contingent on the collective sociocultural knowledge corresponding to a particular historical epoch in a given region. At the onset of the story, the author presents a temporal setting, namely "the days when the judges ruled," along with a spatial alteration moving from famine-affected Judah to Moab.³²⁹ Together, these setting elements not only delineate the narrative's chronology and geography but also subtly convey the sociocultural circumstances of the narrative. At this point based on this verse only, implied readers could use the information from the settings to draw certain

³²⁹ Campbell asserts that in this verse, readers are provided with a "plausible geographical and historical setting." *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 57.

associations, one of which could be that the story unfolds in a time of chaos and violence where the characters start from a place of reverence (Judah) to a place considered despised (Moab).

To understand the unique role of the temporal setting in situating the action, it is crucial to see how the temporal setting carries considerable implications. In a broad sense, it situates the narrative within a distinct historical phase characterized by sociopolitical and religious turmoil, as portrayed in the book of Judges. Campbell insightfully notes that the story presents a chronological envelope that is of immense importance for the story's purpose. The story is mindful of the historical situation in the amphictyonic period, and this inclusion is not incidental but intentional.³³⁰ This era, typified by a recurring cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and deliverance, is indicative of a society deviating from Pentateuchal law and divine order. The readers, by association, may anticipate similar features within the current narrative, hence accepting a chaotic social setting as a given.³³¹ Simultaneously, characters such as Ruth and Boaz emerge as even more striking figures against this chaotic backdrop and would be thus considered as noble. Such a backdrop painted by the settings should prove to be an effective literary device if the implied readers are able to identify the contrast between the characters' actions and the expected behavior of the society in that temporal setting.

Similarly, the role of the spatial setting is a key factor in depicting the tone of the story from the onset. The spatial shift from Judah to Moab, triggered by famine, not only serves to echo similar biblical accounts as discussed in previous chapters, but it also simultaneously carries significant sociocultural implications. In particular, it highlights how the chaotic social condition precipitates extreme physical hardships, thereby setting the stage for the ensuing narrative where characters grapple with issues related to food and agricultural activity. Concurrently, it also rationalizes the occurrence of exogamy, which represents a clear sociocultural deviation, aligning with the societal turmoil of the judges' era.

It is noteworthy that scholars often tend to overlook the subtlety of the setting conveyed in the book of Ruth's initial verse, and it is all the more puzzling how often the story is perceived

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Nielsen, in his analysis of this setting, stimulates the reader's curiosity by posing the question: "Are we about to hear a tale of injustice and lawlessness or about God's intervention on behalf of His people through the creation of something new?" *Ruth: A Commentary*, 40.

merely as a contrast to the turbulent sociocultural environment presented in the book of Judges. Such a simplified interpretation may fail to appreciate the intricate relationship between the temporal, spatial, and social settings that serve to enhance the narrative depth. On the whole, the opening verse of the book of Ruth serves as an exemplary demonstration of the nuanced interweaving of temporal, spatial, and social settings. It underscores how these settings, though presented distinctly, interact intricately to build key information upon one another, thereby painting a layered sociocultural backdrop for the unfolding narrative. The setting, far from being a passive canvas, actively shapes the narrative's progression and the characters' engagements, offering the audience a richer, more nuanced understanding of the story within its historical and societal context.

The interplay of personal description with the comprehension of the location and temporal frame in which the event transpires can also facilitate a sociocultural assessment for the readers. In a more localized narrative context, the scene at the threshing floor in Ruth 3 offers a concentrated focus on the interplay of different settings. In this scene, both the spatial and temporal settings coalesce around a specific location and timeframe. These distinct yet intertwining settings, despite their seemingly narrow focus, provide a complex and complementary elucidation of the social environment within the narrative. As discussed in chapter 1 of this study, one interpretation of the spatial setting of the threshing floor carries with it suggestive sexual undertones. The association is drawn from a comparative study of the narratives of Ruth, Lot, and Tamar, as well as an allusion in Hosea 9:1, which states the presence of harlots at threshing floors. Consequently, the threshing floor, as a spatial setting, is construed as a symbolically charged site, steeped in implications of sexual seduction.

Adding to this spatial nuance, the temporal setting further enriches our understanding of this narrative moment. The clandestine maneuvers of Ruth towards Boaz are set against the veil of night—a typological reference. Her arrival occurs at night (Ruth 3:2),³³² her waking Boaz takes place at midnight (3:8), and her stay extends until the whole night (3:13).³³³ Moreover,

³³² Grossman points out that “the suggestive time [at night] and setting of their planned encounter: all seems to set the scene for a midnight seduction.” Grossman, *Ruth: Bridges and Boundaries*, 209.

³³³ Campbell, seemingly aiming to mitigate any negative connotations associated with Ruth's actions, argues that the narrative's author “has apparently chosen the wrong term; his designation (of the night) should be pertinent to the hours from about 2:30 to 6:30pm.... [O]ne would think this would be the more appropriate term

Boaz insists that Ruth departs before the break of dawn, before one could distinguish another, aiming to obscure the fact that a woman had been at the threshing floor (3:14). This sequence of nocturnal events not only accentuates the surreptitious nature of Ruth's actions at the threshing floor, but it also further sustains a narrative undercurrent of potential impropriety. Hence, the temporal setting, in union with the spatial setting, collectively delineates the threshing floor as a site possibly rife with immorality. Together, they suggest that Ruth might have adopted the role of a seductress during her interaction with Boaz.

The confluence of temporal and spatial settings not only constructs a compelling narrative backdrop but also offers critical insights into the prevailing sociocultural norms within the narrative of Ruth. Central to this discussion is Naomi, a key character, whose actions and decisions can be seen as a reflection of the social setting. Naomi conceives an unconventional plan for a secure future for her daughter-in-law, Ruth. This plan involves Ruth surreptitiously attempting to seduce Boaz on the threshing floor, an act that aims to ensure Ruth's resting place (3:1) and to perpetuate the name of Naomi's deceased son through Levirate marriage. The fact that such a plan, viewed as inappropriate by contemporary standards,³³⁴ is devised and perceived as unexceptional by Naomi, indicates a societal context where the sense of impropriety or shame is not particularly salient.

Concurrently, this narrative exposes the limitations of societal norms and obligations, particularly as they relate to Levirate law. This custom, supposedly a societal obligation upheld by its authorities, appears to be largely overlooked and forgotten within the narrative.³³⁵ It reaches such an extent that the burden of realizing this duty falls onto the shoulders of the widow herself. The expectation that Ruth, a Moabite widow, should personally and rather indirectly coax the goel into fulfilling this societal duty underscores the laxity of the law enforcement in

here.” However, given the context, this argument appears to lack persuasive force. *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, 119, 122, 131.

³³⁴ Ziegler refers to Naomi's plan as an “immodest proposal”. *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 291-302.

³³⁵ Hubbard raises the question of why none of the kinsman-redeemers have yet stepped forward to fulfill their duty, attributing this lack of action to the fact that such a duty was optional rather than obligatory. *The Book of Ruth*, 205. Contrastingly, Bush attributes the absence of Levirate marriage in the narrative to the universal disregard of this custom within society, despite considering it a stringent binding legal tradition. *Ruth-Esther, Word Biblical Commentary*, 261.

this society. Thus, through an improper and covert means, Ruth must navigate the Levirate custom, a task that should have been handled by society's leaders. This narrative facet starkly reveals a sociocultural backdrop where societal norms and obligations are not strictly adhered to, painting a vivid picture of a society in lawlessness.

On the other hand, the synthesis of spatial and temporal settings within this narrative subtly uncovers the sociocultural underpinnings that dictate character interactions and plot progression. The implications of these settings resonate in the societal attitudes, practices, and constraints, and are intricately mirrored in the characters' responses to the circumstances presented to them, notably in the case of Boaz. In the face of Ruth's implicit advances, Boaz's measured response provides key insights into his disciplined restraint and deep respect for societal norms. Ziegler's observation comes to the fore here, as he points out that Boaz's virtuous character is brilliantly highlighted when he wakes to Ruth's presence and abstains from succumbing to the tempting situation as one might expect.³³⁶ His open acknowledgment of his feelings for Ruth (3:10-11) underlines his honesty and emotional transparency. Yet, instead of responding with physical reciprocation, he chooses to soberly analyze the implications of a Levirate marriage (3:12-13). This illustrates his unwavering commitment to abide by societal norms and duties, further reinforcing his noble character.

Additionally, Boaz demonstrates an awareness of societal perceptions and their potential impact. His advice to Ruth to stay for the night but leave before daylight (3:14) is an attempt to protect her from potential reputational damage, underscoring his considerate nature and the value he places on preserving societal honor.³³⁷ Furthermore, Hubbard points out that Boaz's counsel also serves as a safeguard against the physical dangers that Ruth could encounter during the dead of night, such as roving drunkards celebrating the harvest or opportunistic thieves lurking about the threshing floor.³³⁸ By including these precautions, Boaz exhibits not just mindfulness of

³³⁶ Ziegler makes an intriguing comparison here between Boaz and Samson. While Samson is frequently depicted as succumbing to sexual temptation, Boaz represents a stark contrast with his steadfast resistance to such urges. *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 316-323

³³⁷ Bush identifies the situation as one of significant danger, noting that it presents the "greatest risk to both [Ruth's] reputation and her person." *Ruth-Esther, Word Biblical Commentary*, 183.

³³⁸ Hubbard further elaborates on the potential consequences of Ruth's exposure, predicting disastrous outcomes: "An old man victimized by a seductive Moabitess, a clandestine lovers' tryst, a conspiracy to get around

Ruth's reputation but also a concerted effort to protect her from physical harm. This multi-dimensional protective stance once again underscores Boaz's thoughtful and considerate character. Furthermore, Boaz's empathy extends to Naomi, as evidenced by his gift of barley and his comforting words, "Do not go to your mother-in-law empty-handed" (3:17).³³⁹ This illustrates his understanding of the societal expectations of a kinsman-redeemer, and his willingness to fulfill these roles beyond what is strictly necessary.³⁴⁰ Thus, the interplay of the spatial and temporal settings within this narrative serves to reveal the social setting, in turn reflecting the societal norms and expectations of the time and shaping the characters' actions and interactions accordingly. Boaz's reactions and decisions, under these specific conditions, underscore his adherence to societal norms, his consideration for others' reputations, and his understanding and fulfillment of societal expectations.

On the whole, it can be seen that through the interlacing of spatial and temporal settings, the fabric of the social setting is finely woven into the narrative of the book of Ruth. This interplay between distinct types of settings creates a holistic narrative landscape that goes beyond a simple backdrop, actively informing character development, shaping actions, and adding depth to the narrative's thematic substance. A narrative's spatial and temporal settings, while singularly capable of providing sociocultural hints, are most effective when they work in concert. It can be concluded then that the setting is not merely a vessel to carry the story; it becomes an active participant, shaping the narrative flow and guiding the characters through their journey.

It is also crucial to understand how the spatial and temporal elements operate in a symbiotic relationship, in which they reveal social nuances and lay bare the societal norms and values that influence the narrative. For instance, take a narrative that is rich in spatial information and set against a unique historical context. Such a narrative serves as an echo of a bygone era, with the sociocultural implications of the period embedded in every reference to time and place.

the law and defraud the nearer kinsman.... The repercussions could be catastrophic." *The Book of Ruth*, 218, 221. See also Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, 63-5; Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 79.

³³⁹ Broch labels these phrases as "words of consolation," suggesting their purpose is to provide comfort or reassurance. *Ruth: The Book of Ruth in Hebrew and English with a Talmudic Midrashic Commentary*, 88.

³⁴⁰ Hubbard points out that "the grain assured Naomi that Ruth would soon marry—an answer to her long-forgotten prayer (1:9)—and that, in turn, would make the birth of an heir possible." *The Book of Ruth*, 227. See also Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 160-1.

However, it is not enough to exclusively concentrate on these individual elements. To appreciate the narrative's richness, one must also examine the mutual enhancement of these settings, namely how they cross-pollinate and inform each other to render a fuller, more nuanced portrait of the societal milieu.

This interaction is strikingly evident in the narrative of the book of Ruth, as demonstrated in the two examples given in this chapter. As discussed, the temporal setting ("the days when the judges ruled") couples with the spatial shift from Judah to Moab, constructing a multilayered tapestry of sociocultural circumstances that subtly enrich the narrative. This interweaving of settings extends beyond mere chronology and geography. In essence, it unearths the societal fabric that guides character development, directs plot progression, and provides a rich context for reader interpretation. The scene at the threshing floor in Ruth 3 epitomizes this setting confluence: here, the spatial and temporal settings combine to produce a richly textured social backdrop. The symbolic potency of the threshing floor, coupled with the cover of night, paints a narrative tableau loaded with sexual and societal implications. This amalgamation of settings not only shapes the narrative landscape but also unveils the prevailing sociocultural norms that underpin the actions of key characters such as Naomi and Boaz.

In summary, the settings in the book of Ruth—whether spatial, temporal, or social—are often interdependent and interconnected, each influencing and being influenced by the others, and they cannot be only understood in isolation. The narratives' spatial and temporal landscapes are the social setting's mirror, reflecting its norms, practices, and constraints; simultaneously, the social setting provides a prism through which readers can view and interpret the spatial and temporal settings. In this way, the settings weave together to form a multifaceted narrative tapestry, underscoring the interplay and mutual enhancement of different types of settings within the composite framework of biblical narratives. Furthermore, these interwoven elements collectively form the sociocultural landscape that guides character development and shapes the narrative flow. Consequently, the intricate dance between these settings, their mutual enhancement, and their combined influence on the narrative, provide a rich, comprehensive context that enriches the reader's understanding of the text. This underscores the critical role of settings in narrative construction and interpretation, as well as the value of considering these elements in tandem to fully appreciate a narrative's depth and complexity.

Conclusion

The primary goal of this study is to explore the book of Ruth from the perspective of its spatial and social settings. In employing narrative criticism, this thesis posits that the settings of the book of Ruth are crucial and even indispensable to understanding the narrative. While other scholars have not paid significant attention to the importance of the settings in Ruth, this thesis emphasizes the analysis of these settings and demonstrates how a proper understanding of them aids implied readers in grasping the nuances of the setting, thus facilitating deeper or alternative interpretations of the narrative.

Key Findings

Chapter 1 examined the spatial settings within the book of Ruth, initially proposing two innovative structures of the book based on these settings. The research then delved into the implications and interpretations of different spatial settings, utilizing intertextuality as a tool for analysis. The examination of these settings revealed a number of key findings that enriched our understanding of the narrative. First, the term “the field of Moab” (Ruth 1:1) underwent an intertextual study in relation to the accounts in Numbers 21 and Judges 11. This led to an alternative understanding of the term, which has generally been considered in a negative light. Second, the research challenged Alter’s suggestion that the field scene in Ruth 2 simply represents a betrothal type-scene. Instead, it argued that this scene encompasses a more complex amalgamation of elements mainly drawn from different narratives in Genesis. The third point tackled the potential interpretations of the threshing floor in Ruth 3. Two possible interpretations were proposed: (1) a transitional place where mourning evolves into a new phase of life and (2) a location where sexual seductions occur. Each interpretation, bolstered by intertextual evidence, offers a novel and distinct understanding of the threshing floor scene. Lastly, the research probed the city gate as the fourth spatial setting. The traditional understanding of the city gate was expanded to propose additional interpretations: as a transitional space where Ruth, the foreigner, experiences a shift in identity from an outsider to a member of society; as an authoritative location that manifests Boaz’s esteemed position in the city; and as a divine site where God's authority and approval are exercised through human consultations and decisions.

Chapter 2 shifted the focus to the social setting within the book of Ruth, with an objective to pinpoint salient patterns of social traits and overarching thematic generalizations that paint a coherent picture of the characters' social interactions and organizational structure. This chapter dissected seven key cases, whereby the study provided nuanced interpretations to better understand the social context within Ruth. Through these cases, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the society depicted in the book. First, the social setting appears to be one that harbors negativity towards exogamy and foreigners, as seen in the case on Moabite wives in Ruth 1:4. Second, women are largely regarded as a vulnerable group—particularly widows—and may be prone to experience sexual violence, as seen in the case illustrating potential instances of sexual violence in the field in Ruth 2:9. It may be common to see widows receive improper advances from other men despite the restrictions placed on them, as shown in the case on the societal attitudes towards the observance of the Levirate marriage custom in Ruth 3:10. Third, regarding the law, people may either lack a proper understanding the laws and traditions of the Torah, as is with the case of Naomi's misunderstanding of the Levirate marriage in Ruth 1:12, or for those who may know the law, they may not fully adhere to the Pentateuchal traditions, as seen in the gleaning case that transpires in Boaz's field in Ruth 2:3. In addition, divergences from the original Pentateuchal customs may occur, which could be due to practical adaptations driven by societal needs, as seen in the case in Ruth 4:3 regarding Naomi's sale of land and Ruth's marriage to Boaz. Lastly, those who have specific duties and roles to fulfil within the Pentateuchal law have largely failed to carry out their commission, as seen in the case with the scene at the city gate in Ruth 4:11, where various characters, such as the elders, are depicted as negligent and incapable of fulfilling their societal roles. Interestingly, while these seven cases do showcase people's general disregard for the law, the cases concurrently highlight a positive characterization of key characters (such as Boaz) in upholding the law. Overall, this comprehensive exploration of seven key cases within Ruth's social setting leads to the overarching conclusion that Ruth's society exhibits a characteristic lawlessness, which can also be found in the social setting of the book of Judges.

Chapter 3 elucidates the interplay and mutual enhancement between different types of settings. The spatial setting could serve as a reflection of societal values, as it helps to define identity and sociocultural context. Moreover, it functions as a barometer of societal attitudes, often highlighting class divides and creating character significance within the narrative. The

temporal setting, often intertwined with the spatial, provides a chronological context for understanding the social conditions. This auxiliary function is emphasized when the temporal setting converges with the spatial setting, thereby creating a richer narrative context. The social setting, meanwhile, is developed incrementally and can be better understood through the lenses of spatial and temporal dimensions. As discussed, the combination of temporal (the era of judges) and spatial settings (shifting from famine-stricken Judah to Moab) intricately conveys the sociocultural circumstances of that time. This interplay of settings actively informs character development and the narrative's progression. Similarly, in the scene at the threshing floor in Ruth chapter 3, the interplay of spatial and temporal settings creates a complex and nuanced depiction of the sociocultural environment. The suggestive sexual undertones of the spatial setting (the threshing floor) and the veil of night (temporal setting) offer insights into societal norms and expectations.

Hence, the book of Ruth exemplifies that the settings within a narrative are sometimes interwoven elements that shape character development and narrative progression. The intricate interplay between these settings, their mutual enhancement, and their combined influence on the narrative, provide a comprehensive context that enriches the reader's understanding. This highlights the crucial role of considering settings in narrative construction and interpretation, and it underscores the need for examining these elements in tandem to appreciate a narrative's depth and complexity.

Unique Contributions

This thesis makes numerous significant contributions to the field of Ruth's studies. The first innovation is its fresh approach to the analysis of spatial and social settings within the book of Ruth—an aspect often overlooked in past scholarly work. This innovative perspective not only provides a unique insight into the narrative but also fills a crucial gap in the existing literature, in turn advancing our comprehension of the text.

A second contribution lies in the study's findings. The results of this research not only align with many existing interpretations but also introduce some unique understandings of the text. Particularly noteworthy is the resolution of long-debated discussions in Ruth, such as the problematic legal issues present in the narrative. These solutions were facilitated by the study's

innovative focus on the social setting and its practical implications, whereby the study provided a practical perspective to comprehend these complexities.

The third major contribution is the creation of a replicable and flexible research methodology. The focus on spatial and social settings within the narrative opens a new avenue for studying additional biblical texts. This method can be used to reinterpret existing interpretations and to potentially uncover new insights in other biblical narratives.

Finally, this study could transform the landscape of biblical studies by encouraging a new focus and innovative research methodology. It paves the way for novel interpretations and approaches, and it has potential to influence how future research is conducted in this field. The broader implications of this work extend beyond the text of Ruth, and it is hoped this method can be further employed to challenge and stimulate scholarly discussion in biblical studies at large.

Thus, the novelty of this study lies in its unique focus, innovative methodology, and the implications it holds for future biblical research. This study serves as a testament to the value of exploring familiar narratives from fresh perspectives to deepen understanding and stimulate further scholarly discussion.

In summary, by employing narrative criticism and illuminating the spatial and social settings within the book of Ruth, this thesis provided a distinctive and refreshing lens through which we can examine a well-studied narrative. The study uncovered new insights and offered innovative solutions to longstanding interpretative challenges. The methodological approach adopted in this study could hold significant implications for the analysis of other biblical texts, potentially reshaping understanding and stimulating further scholarly exploration. The thesis, with its unique contributions, hopes to spark continued conversations surrounding the book of Ruth, inviting scholars to re-examine familiar narratives through the lens of their settings. Therefore, the significance of this research extends beyond its immediate findings and paves the way for more nuanced, context-aware studies in biblical literature, enriching our understanding of these narratives within their broader spatial and social contexts.

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תקציר

התזה פותחת בסקירת המחקרים הקודמים על מגילת רות. בדגש על איתור פערים בתחומי הביקורת הספרותיות והעיסוק ברקעים שונים בתוך הטקסט, דרך חקירה ייחודית של הרקע המרחבי והחברתי. התזה לא רק מגדירה את המונח 'רקע' אלא גם מאירה את תפקידו המרכזי בעיצוב המבנה הספרותי והעומק הנושאי במתודולוגיה. המתודולוגיה משמשת כרקע יציבה המכשירה את הדרך לניתוח מדוקדק, כפי שמוצג בגוף העבודה.

הפרק הראשון מציג הבנה חדשה על הרקע המרחבי במגילת רות. ההבנה נוצרת באמצעות ניתוח טקסטואלי והערכה מחדש של הגישות האקדמיות המקובלות. גישה חדשנית זו מספקת פרשנות חדשה ל'שדה מואב', ומפרקת את ההנחות ההיסטוריות והספרותיות שלו. יתרה מכך, היא מנתחת מחדש בקפידה את סצנת השדה בפרק השני של רות, ופורצת דרך חדשה בדיון סביב המשמעויות החברתיות והתרבותיות שלה. כמו כן המתודולוגיה מיושמת גם ברקעים מרחביים נוספים בטקסט - במיוחד, רצפת הגורן ושער העיר. מרחבים אלו אינם רק מקומות גאוגרפיים, הם מתגלים כרקעים דינמיים ורב-שכבתיים עם השלכות חברתיות, תרבותיות וספרותיות מרחיקות לכת.

הפרק השני מתמקד ברקע החברתי. הוא ממקם תחילה את מגילת רות בהקשר של ספר שופטים. מחקרים השוואתיים בין התנאים החברתיים במגילת רות לבין ספר השופטים עוסקים בנושאים שנויים במחלוקת, כמו האקסוגמיה ("נישואי חוץ") והבעיות בהבנה והיישום של הייבום. בנוסף הפרק חוקר את יישום מנהגי הלקיטה בשדות, מציג את הסיכונים של אלימות מינית אפשרית וצולל לתכונות חברתיות נוספות שמאירות את הרקע החברתי הייחודי של מגילת רות. הפרק גורס כי הרקע החברתי אינו רק רקע חסר ערך משמעותי בסיפור, אלא אלמנט דינאמי שפועל נמרצות לעיצוב האינטראקציות בין הדמויות והתקדמות הנרטיב.

הפרק השלישי משלב בין הרקע המרחבי וחברתי לבין תפיסת הזמן, ומדגים כיצד שילוב הרקעים מאפשר הבנה עשירה יותר של מגילת רות. נטען כי כל הרקעים פועלים בצורה סימביוטית ליצירת נוף חברתי-תרבותי מעודן, המנחה את התפתחות הדמויות ומעניקה זרימה לנרטיב. לדוגמא, התמזגות הרקעים בגורן בפרק ג—שם הרקע המרחבי, הזמני והחברתי מתאגדים—משמשת כמיקרוקוסמוס של האינטראקציה המורכבת שמעצבת את הנרטיב.

לסיכום, עבודת התזה מדגישה שהרקעים במגילת רות אינם רק רקעים פסיביים, אלא כלים ספרותיים פעילים בסיפור. חידושו של המחקר הוא שהוא משלב ממדים מרחביים וחברתיים במסגרת פרשנית ייחודית להבנת המגילה. המחקר מבקש להדגים את המקום המרכזי שעשויים לתפוס רקע המרחב, רקע הזמן, והרקע החברתי בניתוח הסיפורת המקראית.

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מחקר הרקעים במגילת רות

וואנגהוי גואו

עבודה זו מוגשת כחלק מהדרישות לשם קבלת תואר מוסמך
במחלקה לתני"ך ע"ש זלמן שמיר
של אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

תשפ"ג

רמת גן