Handling a crisis via a combination of human initiative and godly direction: Insights from the Book of Ruth

The biblical text introduces Ruth, a Moabite woman, at a time of personal crisis. She faces destitution. Life has handed her multiple blows, amongst them widowhood and childlessness. Her single asset? Naomi, a cranky, elderly but endearing mother-in-law. Naomi, an Israelite and also widowed, is now quite determined to go home to Bethlehem. Ruth joins Naomi’s journey, but for Ruth it is a pilgrimage, for it is at this time that she switches allegiance from the gods of Moab to the God of Israel. As an immigrant facing change on every level – a new culture, a new religion, no friends and no job – Ruth nonetheless triumphs. Within only a couple of months, not only does she marry a prominent and prosperous bachelor, Boaz, but also wins the hearts of her mother-in-law’s friends, the women of Bethlehem. This analysis of her successful pilgrimage offers contemporary guidelines for facing dramatic changes. Using a literary method, this article examines one of the Bible’s accounts of how a personal crisis is resolved via a combination of God’s providence and human initiative and courage.

Introduction

One day several years ago when I was teaching seminary students biblical Hebrew and using the Book of Ruth as an example, I stopped in the middle of a discussion on some thorny Hebrew verb problems and said, ‘You know, class, the Book of Ruth, a story set in the time of the Judges, shows us how to begin a new season in life. For instance, Ruth, a Moabite woman, gives us guidelines on facing new challenges and handling them well’ (see Bush 1996:37; Iser 1980:51). The students (delighted to have a break from Hebrew and to be able to converse in English again) listened to my insights and brainstormed some of their own. Indeed, the Book of Ruth (when read through the lens of immigration and personal crises such as bereavement, childlessness, the struggle to survive and unemployment) provide examples of how to live successfully after experiencing major losses. One scholar goes so far as to say that a theme in the Book of Ruth is imitation. In other words, ‘Go and do thou likewise’ (Bush 1996:53). Go and live boldly like Ruth!

Other scholars see Ruth and the book named after her differently, of course. Bush (1996:55) notes that a major theme is surprises; God brings about surprises through ordinary events in life. Jordaan (2006:7) looks at the Book of Ruth via narrative therapy, a discipline that does not see

1. A good story (and the Book of Ruth is a masterfully written story based on real people and historical circumstances) contains the following elements: setting, characters, conflict or problems, complications, resolving the incidents, denouement, and conclusion (see Bush 1996:37). This article takes a literary approach to the Book of Ruth. A modern aspect of literary analysis is reader-response. Iser (1980:51), a proponent of reader-response, encourages imagination when reading a text; when thus engaged, imagination enables the reader to start ‘the task of working things out for himself’. A principle in the article is that the biblical text encourages participation through imagination; yet imagination must be kept within the boundaries of the text. Several times in this article I emphasise imagination and yet advise that it be kept within the text’s parameters.

a person as a problem but a problem as a problem. Loader (1994:25) sees the Book of Ruth as exemplifying the presence of a matriarch who fulfils the important roles of bringing together Boaz and Ruth and of providing security for herself and her daughter-in-law. Masenya (2004:46) emphasises that Ruth and Naomi become the agents advocating their own survival; their story speaks to modern African women who likewise struggle in their efforts to cope with emptiness and poverty. Sakenfeld (2002:164) believes that in no way is the Book of Ruth an idyllic tale; instead it confronts readers with the reality of women’s suffering bodies. The traditional rabbinc interpretation is that Ruth asks God to repay her according to her deeds (‘Ruth, Book of’ 1971). Van Dyk and Van Dyk (2002:2009) connect the extraordinary suffering of Ruth and Naomi as women in the Book of Ruth to similar suffering of HIV and AIDS affected women in Africa. Martin (2008:505) cites similarities to, and marked differences with, the courtship and betrothal of Boaz and Ruth and other romances in the biblical text. Seeing a theological purpose, Bland (1981:129) states that ‘a presentation of God’s activity in man’s daily routine of life is the predominant theme ... of the book of Ruth’. Siquns (2009:443) argues that the book’s most important topics ‘are foreignness and the acceptance of foreigners by Judahite society’. Westermann (1999:285) believes the book continues the biblical tradition of ‘family narratives that celebrated the daring undertakings of independent women who, in threatening situations, seized the initiative to find a solution’. Bauckham (1997:35) says the story combines both female and male perspectives; it contrasts them, too, in, for example, the sections on the struggles of the two women and then in the congratulatory remarks of the people (dominantly men) given to Boaz on his marriage to Ruth. Ostriker (2002:357) calls the Book of Ruth an extraordinary ‘erasure of the boundary between one’s own people and the enemy’. Fewell and Gunn (1989:48) offer insights on the motives of Boaz: he wants to maintain his position in society, act responsibly and marry Ruth, whom he greatly desires.

Ruth and the book named after her are relevant today when unemployment in America stands at 9.2% and home foreclosures run in the millions. Meanwhile in South Africa, unemployment stands officially at 25%. A third of South Africans live on less than R14 per day, about $2 per day. On a worldwide level, unemployment rose from 178 million to 212 million in late 2009 because of the global economic crisis that started in 2007. Clearly, the Book of Ruth and Ruth’s own immigration to a new land can speak to us today (see Eagleton 1991:76). A text such as the Book of Ruth invites participation because it can evoke memories, create expectations and form conclusions that are personal for a reader (see Hansbury 1986:4). The Book of Ruth invites readers and hearers to come into the text (see Bauckham 1997:42).

This article examines aspects of Ruth’s character that emerge when she faces major transitions in life. These aspects include forming a strategy for facing dramatic change, her consistent work ethic, her willingness to take on the lowest job in town, her lifestyle that allows for no ugly gossip, her decision to adapt to her new environment, her relationship with her mother-in-law (see Westermann 1999:301) and her choice to keep her opinions to herself (see Greenblatt 2006:46).

Other aspects of her character that are discussed are her humility, courtesy and humour. We will see how she rises out of poverty and achieves status in her new land (see Siquns 2009:452). When flirted with, she flirts! Significantly, her pilgrimage starts with her conversion to Israel’s God. Indeed, her lonely decision to take the hard path and accompany her mother-in-law led others, including the narrator of the Book of Ruth and God, to honour her (see Lostracco & Wilkerson 1998:1). Significantly, the Book of Ruth remains consistent with the overall practice of the biblical canon for it gives few physical details describing Ruth and other characters (see Linfelt 2010:117–118). Although Ruth’s story ends happily, or at least with a guarantee of provision for herself and Naomi, the birth of a son (see Sutskover 2010:283), the respect of other women and the unexpected honour of being in the line of David the king, it is not an idyllic tale (see Roop 2002:17).
Historical setting

The biblical text introduces Ruth within the context of a family crisis (see Block 1999:600–601). Readers and hearers meet Ruth and two other women at probably the lowest point in their lives (see Loader 1994:32; Eagleton 1991:77). Ruth has lost her husband Mahlon (see Sasson 1995:18), her sister-in-law Orpah has lost her husband Kilion; and their mother-in-law Naomi has lost not only her two sons but also her husband Elimelech (Rt 1:1–5) (see Fewell & Gunn 1988:99–102). The women are not only widows but also are childless, specifically, without sons (see Loader 1994:26–27). They lack both current protection and future protection. Ruth and Orpah are Moabite women. Naomi and her family emigrated from Bethlehem years earlier because of a famine; they are Israelites (1:1–5). In what must be the first encouraging news in months or years, Naomi hears ‘that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them’ (1:6). Naomi decides to go home, and so the story begins, concentrating on Ruth and Naomi (see Bull 1972:40, 45). The story’s action takes place primarily within six to eight weeks, during the time of the wheat and barley harvests (see Greenblatt 2006:A66). Significantly, the narrator presents Naomi and Ruth favourably, conveying in his tone and point of view that he wants them to succeed (see Lostracco & Wilkerson 1998:26–28; Van Dyk & Van Dyk 2002:216).

Contemporary features

The Book of Ruth and Ruth herself provide valuable insights not only for coping in the ancient world but also for coping in today’s world in which chaos frequently predominates and losses of home, life, and job strike seemingly at random (see Bland 1981:134). Although the text and Ruth herself do not say this, Ruth makes creative use of a crisis. Actually, she faces multiple crises decisively (see Jordaan 2006; Sasson 1995:27).

This article looks at the insights provided by Ruth about facing personal upheaval in the ancient world with courage, ingenuity, perseverance, flexibility and boldness, as well as with a flirtatious femininity (see Lostracco & Wilkerson 1998:12, 14) This article acknowledges the Book of Ruth’s literary artistry (see Roop 2002:16). It takes a literary approach by emphasising character, plot, setting, tone, dialogue, narration, conflict and resolution (see Lostracco & Wilkerson 1998). The biblical text is terse, complex and, therefore, fascinating (see Linfelt 2010:120). The Book of Ruth and Ruth herself offer multiple guidelines for facing multiple crises, especially the crisis of finding food and work (see Propp 1968; Baylis 2004:413).

17 See Dillard and Longman (1994:130). The Book of Ruth sets itself in the ‘days in which the judges ruled’ (Rt 1:1). This is a time of conflict between the Israelites and the Amorrites (Josh 4–8) and the Philistines (Josh 14–16) and others (such as Eglon of Moab, Jdg 1). It would seem, however, that the action in the Book of Ruth occurs in a time of peace between Israel and Moab. The story takes place in the Iron Age. Broadly speaking, the Iron Age in the Ancient Near East was approximately 1300–600 BC. Ruth and Naomi lived in a time in the history of Canaan, Israel of Canaanites (Jdg 4–5) and the Philistines (Jdg 14–16) and others (such as Moab and the Ammonites).

18 Whilst the context may be a family crisis, the Book of Ruth carries on an important message that no matter what transpires, the story will end happily. Ruth 1:1, Genesis 14:1, Esther 1:1, Isaiah 7:1 and Jeremiah 1:13 alike can be translated, ‘Now it came to pass…’. Each time the three Hebrew words appear indicates a season of severe adversity but one accompanied by divine deliverance and a happy outcome (see Bull 1972:40, 45).

19. The story opens with a formula alerting astute, original hearers and later readers that no matter what transpires, the story will end happily. Ruth 1:1, Genesis 14:1, Esther 1:1, Isaiah 7:1 and Jeremiah 1:13 alike can be translated, ‘Now it came to pass…’. Each time the three Hebrew words appear indicates a season of severe adversity but one accompanied by divine deliverance and a happy outcome (see Bull 1972:40, 45).

21. It takes a literary approach by emphasising character, plot, setting, tone, dialogue, narration, conflict and resolution (see Lostracco & Wilkerson 1998). The biblical text is terse, complex and, therefore, fascinating (see Linfelt 2010:120). The Book of Ruth and Ruth herself offer multiple guidelines for facing multiple crises, especially the crisis of finding food and work (see Propp 1968; Baylis 2004:413).
Ruth converts to Israel’s God and chooses to accompany Naomi

Do not let a good crisis go to waste! Ruth’s actions and her three brief speeches (see Block 1999:588)33 show that she uses the crises at hand – bereavement, destitution, barrenness, and survival (see Propp 1968:30; Lostracco & Wilkerson 1998:21)34 – to make wise decisions. It is the author’s opinion that readers and hearers today can relate to Ruth’s struggles and triumphs. Ruth is proactive and not placid in her struggle to provide for herself and her mother-in-law. In the process, not only does her character shine, but it also deepens; she is not a static character but a developing one too (see Lostracco & Wilkerson 1998:14). Although the word hope is not mentioned, Ruth’s actions express hope (see Scioi, Ricci, Nyugen & Scioi 2011:94).35 Nevertheless, the extraordinary suffering of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, brought on by these crises cannot be dismissed or glossed over (see Van Dyk & Van Dyk 2002:2009–2024; Propp 1968:39).36 Their losses bring them prolonged agony; indeed, the text records Naomi’s bitterness and anger (1:13, 20–21) (see Mancini, Bonanno & Clark 2011:144; Exline, Park, Smyth & Carey 2011:138).37

The Book of Ruth ends with the women surviving and even flourishing. Yet, their initial calamities heralded an irrevocable disruption – economic, social, psychological and spiritual - in their lives. Ruth leads the duos as they begin a new season that involves both recovery and survival. However, when looking at Ruth’s decisions and her journey, it is important not to minimise the suffering she faced in virtually every area of her life (see Roop 2002:22).38

Ruth begins her new life with conversion. She chooses to follow the God of Israel. In perhaps the book’s most beloved verse, Ruth tells Naomi, ‘Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God’ (1:16) (‘Ruth, Book of’ 1971; Sasson 1995:30).39 Ruth’s declaration calls on God to keep his covenant. Ruth makes a decision and God blesses it radically (see Baylis 2004:427).40

The radical nature of this decision cannot be over emphasised (see Burnett-Bletsch 2007:248; Bull 1972:45).41 Ruth leaves her home, country and gods. Significantly, she stops any search for a husband in her own land in order to provide economically for her mother-in-law in Naomi’s land (see Greenblatt 2006:A73).42 She binds herself to a cranky, elderly woman who describes herself as past childbearing age and bitter (Rt 1:11, 20) (see Baddeley & Singer 2009:202).43 Naomi gives no indication in the text that she is able to work; indeed, once she arrives in Bethlehem, she stays home (Rt 2:2, 18).44 Arguably, Ruth saves Naomi’s life (see Propp 1968:43).45

Ruth chooses to immigrate to Bethlehem (see Propp 1968:39).46 Acting in a non-traditional way, Ruth does not look for a man to protect them. Neither does she wait for one to show up. Instead, she looks to herself to protect an old woman embittered by losses and angry at God (see Sasson 1995:27).47 Trible (1978:173) is correct when she boldly declares: ‘Consequently, not even Abraham’s legacy of faith surpasses this decision of Ruth.’

Ruth’s conversion forms the foundation of the story. The Book of Ruth shows that God hears her words, takes them seriously, works behind the scenes on her behalf (even in what seems the worst of times) and accomplishes His plan. Amazingly, Ruth’s life blesses generations. The plot’s details include the famine and deaths; the journey to Bethlehem; the hard work of gleanings; the courage of

33. Because Ruth gives only three short speeches, much of modern scholarship finds it remarkable that the book carries her name. Perhaps the text should be called the Book of Naomi, because Naomi is the central character and Ruth is from Moab and outside the covenant (see Block 1999:588).


35. Scioi et al. (2011:94) agree that hope can be likened to a ‘healthy portable environment’. In other words, Ruth’s earlier character traits come to the fore in her facing her present crisis, and one of those traits is hope.


37. Modern psychological theory has long noted that people react to major events in life like bereavement and joblessness but then eventually return to their normal state of well-being (Mancini et al. 2011:144). Ruth seems to be an example of that general tendency. However, Naomi’s bitterness shows the response pattern of another individual (see Mancini et al. 2011:144). Warning against characterising life’s events in generalities, Mancini et al. (2011:151) write that ‘the impact of life events may depend largely on individual differences and on life circumstances’. Another modern study indicates that ‘participants interpreted the term negative feelings toward God as implying anger rather than sadness, fear, or guilt’ (Exline et al. 2011:138). Naomi’s words (Rt 1:8–13, 20–21) together create a deep-seated anger and a daily mental rehearsal of it. This same study found that younger people who lost a loved one were more likely ‘to hold God responsible for the loss’ (Exline et al. 2011:140). In contrast, Naomi is an older widow and yet still holds God responsible for the loss of her husband and sons.

38. Ruth and Naomi act in response to a divine command but to the losses they experience; there is no dramatic, divine intervention. Chapter 1 introduces the family in terms of famine and death (see Roop 2002:22). As the story progresses, the women seek to activate the existing societal structures (gleaning and marriage) for their benefit (Roop 2002:75).

39. Traditional rabbinic comment on the phrase, ‘your people will be my people’ is that Ruth vows to destroy all idolatry within her (‘Ruth, Book of’ 1971). Sasson (1995:30) notes that in Ruth’s choice of lan, to lodge, the narrator may be implying that ‘Ruth was willing to share with Naomi any unsettled future, so long as nothing parted them’.

40. Examining the verb shub, to return, which occurs frequently in Chapter 1, Baylis (2004:427) notes the possible difference in perspective between Naomi and Ruth. While Naomi believed that the value of the return of property to Naomi was not a condition of Ruth’s return, Ruth realised that her return gave her privilege of a relationship to the God whom she had come to love, Baylis (2004:427) maintains.

41. Throughout the biblical text, the broad principle of retribution theology (the idea that obedience brings blessing and disobedience brings punishment) prevails. Yet the biblical text also shows instances where repentance from disobedience reverses a crisis or disaster. Burnett-Bletsch (2007:248) sees the portrayal of Manasseh in Chronicles this way. Likewise, perhaps Elimelech’s decision to leave Bethlehem, the house of bread, for Moab led to death (Rt 1:1–3). Certainly the biblical text renders no indication that he prayed about his decision, sought the Lord, or was told by the Lord to leave Bethlehem (see Bull 1972:45). Consequently, his widow Naomi’s decision to return to Bethlehem may be a form of repentance. Her decision clearly reverses the bad tide of the family fortunes.

42. Most of the action takes place in Bethlehem; in literary terms, Bethlehem is the ‘scene’ (Greenblatt 2006:A73).

43. Naomi evidently tells and retells the story of her losses. Modern research on bereavement indicates that ‘disclosing the narrative of one’s loss does not per se promote emotional recovery’ (Baddeley & Singer 2009:202).

44. Perhaps the text contains some irony here for Naomi at least had the strength to walk from Moab to Bethlehem.

45. A key element of a story is that a hero performs some service (Propp 1968:43), usually it is extraordinary. Ruth consistently performs extraordinary service. She leaves Moab; she gleans; she proposes marriage to a man capable of providing for her and her mother-in-law.

46. Propp (1968:39) puts it this way: The hero leaves home.

47. Naomi thinks that God has been especially unkind to her, even so unkind as to be bringing her new life’s events in generalities. ‘Scene’ (Greenblatt 2006:A73).
going to the threshing floor for an assignation at night; the boldness of a Moabitite proselyte proposing to a prominent, unmarried Israelite and the white-knuckle, winner-take-all meeting at the city gate. All these details come within the narrative’s focus on Ruth’s conversion. The Book of Ruth gives encouragement that God’s plan is good.

**Survival insights gleaned from the Book of Ruth**

After Ruth’s declaration, in which she switches her allegiance to the God of Israel, her life takes on an adventurous quality. In her struggle to survive and to provide for her mother-in-law and herself, (see Nairne, Thompson & Pandeirada 2007:271) Ruth encounters unexpected kindness from the foreman, the gleaners, and the owner of the field herself, Boaz (Rt 2) (see Siquans 2009:452). He commands his field hands not to touch her and to make sure she receives ample gleanings (2:9–15). When Boaz calls Ruth ‘my daughter,’ (Rt 2:8–9) he publicly displays a kindness to her besetting his seniority in age and social status (see Loader 1994:28). Textual surprises like this are a narrative tool.

In an adventure, expect to meet people of like character and disposition along the way. Ruth does when she meets Boaz. Each is described as a hayyil, a person of character (2:1; 3:11). The women of Bethlehem become her friends and admirers (4:14–17). According to rabbinic tradition, the Book of Ruth emphasises the community’s treatment of outsiders (see Sakenfeld 1999:4). The people of Bethlehem end up treating Ruth well.

Furthermore, the story of Ruth points to God’s control over one’s steps. Bush (1996) puts it as follows:

> Not only Boaz’s faithfulness and Naomi’s risky plan are part of God’s controlling, behind-the-scenes hand, but also Ruth’s steps are shown as God’s interest in the world he has created.

(p. 47)

Certainly, in the case of the prayer and blessing of Boaz, this is true (see Sasson 1995:51; Bland 1981:131). Ruth comes under his wing (2:12; 3:9).

In an adventure, expect not only unexpected kindnesses, but also detours. In literary terminology, they are called surprises. For example, it is expected that a man provide for his family. But in the Book of Ruth, Ruth provides for Naomi. Perhaps that kind of sacrifice by a woman for another woman is so rare that it causes wonderment by Naomi’s friends. They express it this way: Ruth, the daughter-in-law, is better to me than her seven sons (1:15).

In another significant plot twist, Ruth *just happens* to look for sustainable work and finds it in the field of Boaz, a man in Elimelech’s family positioned to be a kinsman-redeemer (2:1–7, 20). The writer’s tone, which reveals his attitude toward his subject (see Lostracco & Wilkerson 1998:49), seems to indicate that the Hebrew phrase *wayyiqra* migrelo (2:3) be read with a smile. This phrase could be translated in the following ways: ‘It just so happened’; ‘Her encounter encounters’ (see Block 1999:609); ‘Her hap happens’; ‘As chance would have it’; ‘Her luck brought her to’; and ‘As it turned out’. It even carries an overtone of an exclamation: ‘And can you imagine?!”

**Aspects of Ruth’s character in an ongoing crisis and God’s guidance**

In a crisis, extend kindness to others. The Bible calls loving kindness ‘hesed’. Naomi introduces this theme when she says to Orpah and Ruth, ‘May the Lord show kindness [hesed] to you as you have shown to the dead and to me’ (1:8). The concept of hesed generally means that someone of higher rank extends kindness to someone of lesser rank. Often without immediate hesed, the supplicant faces death. The Book of Ruth significantly expands the concept that somebody prays for somebody else (1:8–9; 2:20; 4:11–12, 14–15) (see Block 1999:612–613). Truly, there is a correspondence in the Book of Ruth between how people act toward each other and how God acts toward them (see Campbell 1985:29).

Ruth not only extends kindness but also keeps on extending kindness. Hesed marks her character. The ways in which Ruth extends kindness are to travel with Naomi to Bethlehem, to work to support Naomi and herself in the fields of barley and wheat and to propose marriage to Boaz (1:22; 2:22f; 3:9–10). The consequences of Ruth’s actions of repeatedly extending kindness are that a son named Obed is born and a good life (with provision and hope for a future) replaces Naomi’s earlier feelings of bitterness and emptiness (see Bush 1996:11–12).

Ruth certainly engages in hard physical labour. The text emphasises this, perhaps to the wonderment of the people in Bethlehem. Evidently the Moabites did not have a good reputation on several levels with the Israelites. Firstly, the Moabites descended from an incestuous union (Gn 19:30–38). Secondly, Jeremiah 48:11 sketches an unfavourable character portrait of the Moabites. He writes, ‘Moab has been at rest from youth, like wine left on its dregs’ see Bull (1972:57, 60). Consequently, in contrast to most of her countrymen, Ruth, a self-starter, exhibits energy and initiative. Negative assessments of Israel and her neighbours in the biblical text are not uncommon.  

---8.A modern study argues that memory systems ‘evolved to help us solve problems, particularly problems related to survival’ (Nairne et al. 2007:271). The Book of Ruth shows that Ruth was creative and intuitive about solving her problem of survival.

9.Siquans (2009:452) argues that the Book of Ruth shows that Ruth attains a legal status that allows her to marry because she is wife of a dead Israelite (Rt 4:5, 10). Siquans (2009:450) also notes that Ruth has legal rights to look for food based on Deuteronomy 24:19, a verse which allows the alien, the fatherless and the widow the right to glean.

50. Sasson (1995:51) also noticed this as a result of Boaz’s prayer. Boaz prays, ‘May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge’ (Rt 2:12). Bland (1981:131) explains that ‘blessing does not always refer to the potential advantages which are granted by it. But when a blessing is given, it is the potential power that is transmitted.’ Certainly in the case of the prayer and blessing of Boaz this is true.

51. The latter is my own translation and reflects what I hear as the narrator’s tone.

52. Hesed is mentioned in Ruth 1:8; 2:20 and 3:10.


54. Jerusalem, for example, also was not exempt from a harsh prophetic word against laziness. Consider Zephaniah 1:12: ‘At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, “The Lord will do nothing”’ Also consider the prophetic regional indictments against Damascus, Gaza, Edom, Ammon, Moab and even Judah and Israel (Am 1:3–15, 2:1–16).
Ruth seeks work with immediate payment. In accepting a menial position, she faces hard economic facts: she needs immediate work in order to eat. Significantly, the text remains silent about any help the townspeople might have given the returning Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law (Rt 1:19–22). Considering that none is mentioned, most probably none was offered. Ruth becomes Naomi’s unexpected helper. Significantly, the text mentions nothing about Ruth’s concerns or her desire to be back in Moab. By working at the lowest job in town, Ruth demonstrates that she was not concerned about her image (see Hess 1979:47). She exhibits no second thoughts, no modern ‘buyer’s remorse’ about her decision to come to Bethlehem. Ruth does not look back.

Significantly, Ruth finishes what she starts. Gleaning and any farm work are hard, hot, heavy physical labour. I once was asked if I had ever picked cotton. ‘No,’ I said. ‘Then you really haven’t lived,’ came the reply. Perhaps the same is true of gleaning. Granted, Ruth cannot abandon her work although it is very demanding physically for she is the sole provider for herself and her mother-in-law. The text points out that Ruth not only gleaned until evening, but also threshed the barley (2:17). In other words, she completed the entire task of finding food and preparing it to be used. Her work earned her about an ephah, approximately 22 litres or three-fifths of a bushel (Sasson 1995:57; Propp 1968:45).55

A crisis can entail silence

Ruth adapts well to her new life in Bethlehem. She does not try to change the conditions she encounters. It seems that Ruth had determined beforehand that she was the one who would need to change. After all, she had left her family, culture, and gods for the family, culture and God of Naomi. She chooses a new life.

When reading a biblical story, a helpful analytical tool entails imagining what a character could have done or said in a situation. For instance, Ruth could have arrived in Bethlehem and told the people how much better things were in Moab, laughed at them for their backward farming methods, and pointed out that the earlier Canaanites had manufactured more metal tools and weapons than did the Israelites.56 But she does not. Ruth’s natural reticence and her silences add to her mystery. They make her more prominent. They give her something of her mystery. They make her more prominent. They give her something new and may continue to find favour in the eyes of Boaz (Rt 2:12b–13a). She flirts a little with him by calling him my lord and by thanking him publicly for speaking kindly to her, even though his servant girls have more standing in the community than she. She speaks well of him in front of his workers.58 Those listening probably smiled. Ruth is a very wise worker!

Ruth acts in a chaste manner (see Schwartz, Weisskirch, Zamboanga, Ham et al., 2011:27).59 The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) presents sexual matters forthrightly60 and dully notes her lack of sexual promiscuity. Where does she sleep? Chapter 2 ends with this answer, ‘And she lived with her mother-in-law’ (Rt 2:23). Boaz evidently also had noticed her living arrangements, for he again commends her, but this time privately when they are alone at night on the threshing floor. He says, ‘You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor’ (Rt 3:10b).

55.Sasson (1995:57) thinks it is possible she gathered anywhere from 29 to 55 pounds of grain, enough for herself and her mother-in-law for about two weeks. Often food or drink becomes an important element in a story and is consumed by the hero (Propp 1968:45).

56.The Canaanites certainly had modern warfare tools. Judges 4:3 states the Canaanites under Sisera had 900 chariots, the ancient equivalent of weapons of mass destruction. The text remains silent on any countering weapons on Israel’s side.

57.A modern study of immigrant and Korean American women finds they are a population at risk for substance abuse, suicide, battering, loss of employment, deficits in parenting, and mental health problems (Kim & Grant 1997:243). Ruth’s profile, as seen in the biblical text, gives no evidence of any of these patterns.

58.Abigail also flirts with David openly in front of his men, calling him my lord [a designation that can mean husband!], reminding him of his life with the Lord, and telling him she believes he will have a lasting dynasty (1 Sam 25:23–31). In short, Abigail is the first in the biblical text, in addition to the prophet Samuel, to affirm David’s anointing as Israel’s future king. Quite possibly Jonathan, Saul’s son, knew it too (see 1 Sam 20:12–14).

59.Studies show that behaviour patterns (called heritage practices) before immigration are carried on after immigration (Schwartz et al. 2011:27). Ruth showed no evidence of promiscuity.

60.See Genesis 19:30–38; 38, 39; Judges 19, Ruth 4:12; 2 Samuel 11, 13, 16:21–22, etc. Also notice Ruth 4:13: ‘Boaz took Ruth and she became a wife to him, and he went into her and Yahweh gave to her conception and she bore a son.’
The narrative pauses for an extended look at the threshing floor scene. Sakenfeld (2002:166) says that chapter 3 is ‘fraught with the possibility of sexual intercourse’. Words and phrases with double meanings include feet (traditionally a euphemism for genitals) (3:7, 8, 14); to lie down, used eight times in verses 4–14; to uncover (3:6, 7); and to go into (3-4, 7, 14).

Did sexual intercourse take place (see Baylis 2004:428–430)?

I do not believe that it did; others believe it did (see O’Kane 2010:144–143). I side with Ruth’s chastity and Boaz’s restraint. (see Ostriker 2002:356) The reason I say this is because there is ample textual evidence already given for their celibacy. The narrator presents each as a person of noble character (Rt 2:1; 3:11; see Block 1999:690, 692). Although I believe there was plenty of natural attraction, I do not think consummation occurred. However, I think Boaz was terribly flattered that he was pursued in such a way. The tone of the text is favourable toward Ruth and Boaz (see Lostracco & Wilkerson 1998:49). Consequently, the text invites us as readers and hearers to smile with understanding about what is happening. It invites us to imagine the scene. It creates suspense by leaving its readers and hearers wondering whether these two exemplary people will marry and find joy with each other, and hoping that they will!

My imagination (see Iser 1984:52) as a woman marks the scene as the most memorable conversation of Ruth’s life and of Boaz’s life, one each would remember with fondness. What did they talk about? Quite likely they grew to know one another better, and hoping that they will!

61.Baylis (2004:428–430) believes that Naomi, in sending Ruth to meet Boaz at night at the threshing floor, goes against the Mosaic Covenant in four ways. These include the following:

1. Naomi should have referred to Boaz as the legal next of kin or redeemer (a legal term), instead of as a kindred, a non-legal term similar to the word kin.
2. Naomi should have sent Ruth to the city gate during the day, the normal place and time for legal matters.
3. Naomi should not have insisted that Ruth change from her mourning clothes, clothes which identified her legal and societal status.
4. The matter of the legal obligation of Boaz should have been brought up not when he was influenced by food, drink and exhaustion from the harvest.

In contrast to Naomi, Boaz responds in a manner in accord with the Mosaic Covenant; he promises Ruth that she will be taken care of by him or by another kinsman redeemer (Baylis 2004:430).

62.Others, however, emphatically say yes. One is the painter Marc Chagall who did a series of paintings on the Book of Ruth. O’Kane (2010:144–143) in writing about two of them, Ruth at the Feet of Boaz and Boaz Awakes and Sees Ruth at His Feet, says the mood conveyed is sensual and sexual. O’Kane (2010:143) describes the two paintings this way: ‘As Ruth lies at the feet of Boaz, her breasts reflect the light of the shimmering moon, whilst in the final picture, both figures are naked. The throbbing red sun suggests the passion of their union, whilst the sheaves of wheat suggest the fruitfulness of their future marriage. The reclining position of the fully clothed Boaz with his arm above his head as he sleeps in the penultimate image is reversed in the final image as the naked Ruth with her arm above her head reclines in rest. Unlike the biblical text, which is ambiguous as to what took place on the threshing floor, Chagall’s interpretation leaves nothing to the imagination.’

63.Ostriker (2002:356) also sides with the chastity of Ruth and Boaz. She writes that “… what charms us in Ruth is the inextricability of behavior from erotic gratification. Is Boaz doing the right thing, and more than the right thing, is he acting as God wishes men of honour to act, because he is attracted to this attractive woman? Well, yes. And is he attracted to her in part because she herself has behaved honourably, beyond the line of duty? Yes again. And eros and ethics join as, and at the moment of, harvest.’

64.Block (1999:690, 692) argues that Boaz does not interpret Ruth’s unexpected presence as an offer of sexual favours; furthermore, ‘instead of cursing her and shooing her off as some immoral whore, he blesses her’. Block’s insights back up my view that Boaz and Ruth did not commit fornication.

65.A story’s tone reveals the author’s attitude toward the characters or subject matter (Lostracco & Wilkerson 1998:49). An indication of the author’s favourable tone is the long recorded conversation amongst Naomi, Orpah and Ruth (1:8–18). The conversation expresses values of sacrifice, love, devotion and faith.

66.Iser (1984:52) writes that a reader’s imagination sets a given situation against a background which endows it with far greater significance than it might have seemed to possess on its own.

67.Love is not a foreign concept in the literature of the ancient Near East. Sumerian and Egyptian texts in particular and Ugaritic texts to a lesser extent exhibit traits similar to the Song of Songs, the Bible’s great love poem (Lucas 2003:180–184).

68.The symbolism, however, is lost on modern readers. However, because the biblical text mentions numbers rarely, the times when it specifies a number are generally treated as significant. Six is traditionally the number associated with humanity, because man and woman were created on the sixth day. It seems safe to say that the narrator assumes that readers and hearers will know the meaning of six measures of barley. Naomi surely did.

69.In this, she resembles other exemplary characters in the Hebrew Bible: Joseph, Daniel, and Esther. Boaz himself is called a gibbor hayil (Rt 2:1); a designation connoting honour, prosperity, nobility and sterling character. See Block (1999:613–614) for some good insights on this. Another gibbor hayil is Naaman the Syran (2 Ki 5).

70.According to the Gezer Calendar, the barley and wheat harvests occurred in April / May and May / June (Sasson 1995:38).
person may have had to a set of circumstances. Ruth never whines, complains or expresses anger; she refrains from engaging in the poetry of lament.\(^{71}\) Ruth could have stayed at home in Moab, a choice Naomi indicates as easier than relocating to Bethlehem (1:11–13). Ruth could have talked in a disrespectful way to Naomi, her elder. Ruth could have been promiscuous.

Instead, Ruth exhibits humility, courtesy, wisely-chosen words and chastity. People remember her gracious words and good manners. Although she is an adult, she asks permission of her mother-in-law to go and glean (2:2). Her good manners likewise are evident in the workplace.\(^{72}\) The field foreman recounts to Boaz that she asked permission from him to glean in the field. The text records she even said please, a word used with emphasis elsewhere in the biblical text (see Harris, Archer & Waltke 1980:2:54).\(^{73}\) ‘Please let me glean and gather amongst the sheaves behind the harvesters,’ Ruth said (2:7). Actually, verbal courtesy and good manners abound in the Book of Ruth and in the workplace, the barley field, itself (see Lostracco & Wilkerson 1998:35).\(^{74}\) Boaz greets his workers with this cherubic blessing: ‘The Lord be with you!’ The workers respond with an equally gracious reply, ‘The Lord bless you!’ (2:4) (see Ginzbarg 1968:6:191).\(^{75}\)

Ruth honours others. By her hard work, she honours Naomi, who evidently is old and cannot provide for herself anymore. Ruth honours Boaz in front of his field hands. When he singles her out in front of everybody, she listens courteously and then, amazingly, bowes face down on the ground and addresses him from the ground by looking up at him (2:10).\(^{76}\)

Ruth dresses for success. Despite her impoverished economic condition, the text arguably shows she knows she is attractive. Quite likely she dresses modestly yet becomingly, even for work in the field. Something must have singled her out from the other women workers in the field. Boaz’s first question (2:5) when he comes to check his field is, ‘To whom does that young woman belong?’\(^{77}\)

The text indicates that Ruth makes an excellent first impression. Boaz likes what he sees (see Harley 1986).\(^{77}\) A true woman, Ruth enjoys being noticed. She responds in a sweet, flirtatious way that acknowledges his interest, praises him as a man and makes him look good in front of his workers. No doubt her actions and words bring smiles to all in hearing distance. Ruth shows her intelligence, grace and humour. Ruth lets Boaz know she has noticed him too and that she likewise likes what she sees!

The silences in the text bear more scrutiny.\(^{78}\) From Ruth’s first day of work in Boaz’s field to their night-time meeting at the threshing floor, the text records no additional verbal communication between them. It is all right to imagine the daily drama during the harvests, for the text encourages both participation in a story and one’s own visual imagination (see Sakenfeld 2002:168).\(^{79}\)

Let us assume that during the six-to-eight weeks of the barley and wheat harvests Ruth and Boaz made eye contact. Maybe they exchanged nods. Maybe they took a break together at the water jars. Maybe they ate together in public during the communal meals. Undoubtedly they assessed each other during the working season. As the story soon verifies at the threshing floor, each gave the other a positive assessment.

Perhaps likewise the harvest workers noticed the non-verbal cues going back and forth between Boaz and Ruth. Perhaps they enjoyed the development of a romance. Perhaps it created a winsome diversion during a time of hard labour (see Fewell & Gunn 1989:54).\(^{80}\)

Waiting on God: Transitions in the Book of Ruth

Ruth waits. The ability to wait, a sure sign of emotional and spiritual maturity, gives God time to move gloriously on one’s behalf. Ruth waits through bereavement, the journey to Bethlehem, the adjustments of life with new people, poverty, and the hard work of the barley and wheat harvests. The text indicates she waits silently. A South African expression about waiting is to carry on. Whilst she waits, Ruth ‘carries on’ with the tasks at hand, namely, feeding herself and her mother-in-law, making new friends, adjusting to a new life in Bethlehem. Actually, Ruth waits actively.

Ruth gives people space to be themselves. With kindness and humour, the biblical text presents Naomi as a woman with strong opinions, one who quite possibly is hard to live with. Probably Ruth’s companionship, having enough to eat and being back home in Bethlehem all work together to soften Naomi. Arguably, God pampers her with rest and food.

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71. David composes lament psalms in times of difficulty (see the superscriptions for Ps 3 and 142); Job challenges God (Job 29–31); Ruth writes nothing.
72. Not only do her courteous requests to her mother-in-law and the foreman to glean in a field show her good manners, they also show that she plans ahead. She enters the job market, so to speak, seeking to work in a field belonging to someone ‘in whose sight I might find favor’ (Rt 2:2).
73. The word na’ can mean please, now, or even I pray. It is a particle of entreaty or exhortation and used in Genesis 12:13; Numbers 20:10; Psalm 118:25 (Harris et al. 1980:2:54). An interesting word, no (now or please), is used in Genesis 22:2: ‘Take, now/please, your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go …’
74. Diction refers to the author’s choice of words (Lostracco & Wilkerson 1998:35). The brevity of the biblical text indicates a careful choice of words.
75. An interesting sideline is that courtesy greetings changed in Israel. Rabbinic tradition notes that the salutation, ‘The Lord bless you’, that was common in the days of Boaz and Ruth was absent during the reign of Ahaflah (Ginzberg 1968:6:191).
76. Judith (Jdg 10:23), Abigail (1 Sam 25:23–24), and Esther (Es 8:3) all bow before a man in authority, and all eventually get what they want.
77. Many men appreciate a good-looking wife; see Harley (1986), especially pages 100–102.
By Chapter 3, the end of the wheat harvest, Naomi shows some emotional healing from her bereavements; she is able to think past her own needs to Ruth’s permanent welfare. Soon feeling like her old self, she makes a plan, as one says in South Africa, and matchmakes her way to security. Naomi decides it is time for Ruth to settle down in a new home of her own (Rt 3:1). Ruth listens to advice; specifically, she heeds Naomi’s advice. Naomi, that lovable, meddling matchmaker, has picked Ruth’s husband, Boaz.61

In addition, Ruth must wash herself, put on perfume, wear her best dress and go to the threshing floor where Boaz is keeping watch (Rt 3:1–4). Does Ruth shed her widow’s garments and dress in a way signifying she is ready for marriage (see Walsh & Shulman 2007:368)?62 We as readers and hearers don’t know.63 We do know, however, that Naomi’s advice is meant to make Ruth as physically attractive as possible (see Sakenfeld 2002:165; Propp 1968:54).64 For an encounter that will change their lives, Ruth obeys Naomi and probably dresses very becomingly!

Significantly, Ruth asserts herself only after earning the respect of others, only after she is confident in her new environment, only after she has made friends. When the scene changes to the threshing floor, gender roles switch. Ruth proposes to Boaz, telling him he needs to marry her because it is his duty, ‘Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are my kinsman redeemer’ (Rt 3:9). By her bold request (unique in the biblical text), Ruth gently rebukes yet compliments Boaz. She knows the law, as does he, about the next-of-kin’s duty to raise up offspring for the man who has died to preserve his name in Israel. Boaz indicates he has thought about marrying Ruth. It seems that shyness or knowledge of another with a closer blood tie or ethnic prejudice stopped him from speaking earlier. Perhaps Boaz is elderly, for he commends Ruth for not running after the unnamed relative at the city gate, Boaz has thought through a plan to acquire land from the elders and the women. They, too, offer kindness to Ruth. They trust Boaz. They trust his judgment. The widows have put their lives and futures into his hands. They trust that he will work on their behalf. Ruth’s fate rests on Israelite law.

Throughout the story, Ruth trusts her instincts. This is crucial in a crisis and makes it an adventure. Ruth expresses no self-doubt. This is key to a successful outcome, especially one in which her future and the economic survival of herself and her mother-in-law are at stake. Her irregular, bold action of going alone, unbidden, to visit a single, eligible, wealthy man at night and proposing to him do not conform to accepted behaviour (also see Cook 1913:12).65 Ruth’s unusual, non-conforming actions in the threshing floor scene include the following:

- As a foreigner, a Moabite woman but a proselyte, she asks an Israelite to marry her (see Sasson 1995:53).66
- As a woman, she propositions a man (see Martin 2008:505–507; Alter 1981:51–62).67
- As a woman, she openly shows her sexual interest in a man.68
- As a younger woman, she seeks union with an older man.
- As a nearly destitute day labourer, she seeks the wedded protection of a wealthy man.
- As a secondary owner of property through her husband’s family, she seeks the financial security of a prosperous landowner.
- As a woman asking for the covering of a man, she leaves something unsaid. This covering must extend (in terms of protection and financial security) to her single dependent: her widowed mother-in-law.69
- As a very junior, adjunct and seasonal employee, she chooses to marry her employer.

After the scene at the threshing floor, Ruth returns to Naomi. Perhaps Naomi chuckles and smiles as she listens to Ruth and gives this advice: ‘Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today’ (Rt 3:18; see Greenblatt 2006:A72).70 Perhaps present at the city gate or no doubt watching anxiously at her window at her lodgings, Ruth awaits the outcome of Boaz’s legal manoeuvres (see Prinsloo 1980:338).71 She and Naomi trust Boaz. They trust his judgment. The widows have put their lives and futures into his hands. They trust that he will work on their behalf. Ruth’s fate rests on Israelite law.

Just as the town seemed to erupt in confusion when the two women first arrived (Rt 1:19), the town seems to erupt with joy with the news of a wedding (Rt 4:11–12). Ruth accepts blessings from the elders and the women. They, too, offer kindness to her. Actually the elders and the women speak prophetically over both Ruth and Boaz, but mainly over Ruth. The prophetic words are that she becomes an ancestress in Israel as famous as Rachel and Leah and as Tamar who bore Perez. She does. They pray that Boaz may himself become famous

81. In a family story reminiscent of the Book of Ruth, my mother jokes that it took her several years of married life to learn not to approach my father with anything important until after she had fed him. Similarly, Naomi tells Ruth to make sure Boaz has eaten and drunk before she speaks to him (Rt 3:3).
82. It may also signify that Ruth, from a psychological perspective, may have completed mourning for her home, country, husband and culture and is fully ready to enter more completely into Israelite society (Walsh & Shulman 2007:368).
83. Ruth, although poor, seems to have had a small wardrobe or at least a change of clothes (Rt 3:3).
84. Propp (1968:54) adds insights when he notes that in a story, the object of the search is obtained with the help of enticements and is caught. Ruth 3 brings a smile because readers and hearers know that Naomi actively searches for a matchmaker to Boaz to ‘spread the corner of your garment over me’ (Rt 3:9) makes her multiple meanigngs quite clear.
85. Cooke (1913:12) however, refuses to judge Ruth’s conduct as forward or unbecoming. Why? This is because he does not know the standards of the day.
86. In her two dialogues with Boaz, Ruth first describes herself as a siphah (Rt 2:13), a maidservant, and then at the threshing floor elevates herself to a ophah (Rt 3:9). Sasson (1995:53) views the terms as ‘quite distinct’ and believes a siphath was the lowest rung on the social ladder whilst a ophah could become the wife or concubine of a free man. In Chapter 2, Ruth clearly, as a gleaner, occupies the lowest job in town. In Chapter 3 on the threshing floor, she indicates, by calling herself a ophah that she is Boaz’s equal, at least in love.
87. Put in literary terminology, this is an amazing speech act. Iser (1978:55) says that ‘speech acts are units of linguistic communication through which sentences are situated and take on meaning in accordance with their usage’. Ruth’s command to Boaz to spread the corner of your garment over me (Rt 3:9) makes her multiple meanings quite clear.
88. In mentioning this irregularity specifically, Martin (2008:505–507) points out that the threshing floor as a betrothal scene differs from the archetypes described by Alter (1981:51–62) in his classic work, The art of biblical narrative.
89. Significantly, in this second encounter, Ruth shows she remembers her first encounter with Boaz. She remembers that she first said she was a siphah. She remembers that Boaz prayed she would find shelter under the wings of the Most High. She uses the same word wing to ask that Boaz spread his garment over her (Rt 3:9). By her choice of repetitive words, she credits Boaz by knowing that he, too, thought their first encounter memorable.
90. Naomi praises Ruth for her skilful use of rhetoric, the art of verbal persuasion (Greenblatt 2006:A72).
91. Prinsloo (1980:338) believes that Boaz’s conduct at the city gate is ‘an example of human initiative which achieves its goal by means of a subtle strategy’. Clearly, between the encounter with Ruth at the threshing floor and the encounter with the unnamed relative at the city gate, Boaz has thought through a plan to acquire Ruth as his wife and the field of Mahlon as part of his holdings.

And Naomi’s neighbours, the women of Bethlehem, also join in prayer and praise, but their words also gently remind Naomi of what has happened in her life in such a short time because of God and Ruth (Rt 4:14–15). The women remind Naomi that everything about Ruth is worth more to Naomi than if she had borne seven sons. What a compliment! Whilst the elders concentrate on a large picture of prayer and blessing, the women concentrate on the small boy in Naomi’s lap. They pray that he will be her kinsman-redeemer, that he will renew her life and sustain her in her old age. They remind Naomi that Ruth, her daughter-in-law, loves her. This is the only mention in the biblical text of the love of a daughter-in-law for her mother-in-law.

Conclusion

Through these multiple ways, the text shows Ruth succeeds admirably in her new life in Bethlehem (see Propp 1968:63). She offers generations of readers and hearers a model to follow when facing multiple crises. She gives guidelines for finding success amidst many crises and in a time of many transitions. Accepted and loved within the community, she receives the highest praise of all from the women of Bethlehem who have been completely won over by her exemplary character and her consistent, kind care of her mother-in-law. Perhaps they wish for the same treatment from their daughters-in-law! Upon the birth of a son to Ruth and Boaz, the women say to Naomi that her daughter-in-law ‘who loves you is better to you than seven sons’ (Rt 4:15). Indeed, that is true.

As is common throughout biblical narrative, the providence of God is actively at work behind the scenes (see Branch 2009:181–184). The Lord cares for and protects all those who come to trust under his wings (Rt 2:12). In this domestic drama of bereavement, loss, survival, adventure and extreme need stands the covenant promise to Israel from a faithful God. He fills the needs of those who trust in his divine power to save, and especially of those who treat each other in a similarly caring manner (see Matthews 2004:242).

The Book of Ruth addresses a major theme throughout Israelite literature, especially Wisdom literature: Where is God in the big questions of life and death and tragedy? On the surface, the Book of Ruth reads like an artful romance, a folktale often ends with the marriage of a hero and his ascent to the throne; in this story’s link to royalty. But there is more. As is common throughout biblical narrative, the providence of God is actively at work behind the scenes (see Branch 2009:181–184). The Lord cares for and protects all those who come to trust under his wings (Rt 2:12). In this domestic drama of bereavement, loss, survival, adventure and extreme need stands the covenant promise to Israel from a faithful God. He fills the needs of those who trust in his divine power to save, and especially of those who treat each other in a similarly caring manner (see Matthews 2004:242).

For example, if there is only one God, then God is responsible for both good and evil, a concept mentioned in Isaiah 45:7 (see Bland 1981:133). The Book of Ruth not only lets stand Naomi’s accusation of bitterness toward God over the deaths of the men and providers in her family, but also shows the kind hand of God toward her in restoration, rest, provision and the birth of a son to gladden her old age (see Bland 1981:132).

Ruth, a valiant woman, a loyel, faces her crises of bereavement, barrenness, destitution and survival with exemplary character. The enormity of the risks she repeatedly takes should not be minimised. She handles ‘the new’ in her life – new country, new people, new customs, new job and a new status in life – without complaining. She exhibits much grace. She faces danger with resolution. She chooses to immigrate to Bethlehem, an irrevocable decision, arguably out of love for her mother-in-law and in order to provide security for her. She gives joy to her mother-in-law by giving her a son to play with. Trible (1978:181) is not extreme at all when she says that Ruth’s salvation is by courage alone.

Ruth’s pilgrimage clearly offers guidelines to suffering women and marginalised women and to men and women alike who are cut off from the mainstream of life by overwhelming losses and difficulties. Ruth’s pilgrimage invites imitation, gives hope and affirms yet again the biblical principle that suffering ends. The Book of Ruth explores the biblical principle that hesed is a commitment to a loving involvement in the lives of others, a long-term commitment to helping them (see Bland 1981:136–137). Ruth learned that by extending hesed to others, God extended it to her.

Indeed, throughout the biblical text, women take charge of their own lives and reverse their present unfortunate circumstances or bad fortunes by their own hands. The story of Ruth and Naomi carries on this theme, as do the story of Esther in the book bearing her name and the story of Judith in the book bearing her name in the Apocrypha. Quite frankly, Ruth and Naomi, two women who enter the biblical text containing David’s genealogy (4:18–22) (see Loader 1994:34). The seventh person ‘is Boaz, the hero of the Book of Ruth’. The seventh person in the genealogy in Genesis 5 ‘is the sainly Enoch’, he adds. Prinsloo (1980:341) sees the genealogy as showing ‘that the blessings of Yahweh are ... not to be confined to a single family but to extend much further’. 95.Bland (1981) agrees in the sense that ‘[f]rom a biblical perspective the question that remains is not so much the source of evil (Naomi affirms that it is from God), but rather how this relates to the goodness of God and why such evils and calamities occur’ (p. 133). I would temper this to note the comments of Joseph when his terrified brothers came to him in fear of their lives, because their father was dead and they had no protection against Joseph’s wrath. Joseph said, ‘Don’t be afraid. Am i in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives’ (Gn 50:19–20).

Ruth’s pilgrimage clearly offers guidelines to suffering women and marginalised women and to men and women alike who are cut off from the mainstream of life by overwhelming losses and difficulties. Ruth’s pilgrimage invites imitation, gives hope and affirms yet again the biblical principle that suffering ends. The Book of Ruth explores the biblical principle that hesed is a commitment to a loving involvement in the lives of others, a long-term commitment to helping them (see Bland 1981:136–137). Ruth learned that by extending hesed to others, God extended it to her.

96.Bland (1981:132) points out that in short stories and biblical storytelling alike, a key interpretive statement may be found at the end. He sees Ruth 4:13 as that: ‘And Boaz took Ruth and she became to him a wife and he went unto her and the Lord gave unto her conception.’ Their son Obed shows God’s direct and affirming guidance in the lives of Ruth, Boaz and Naomi (Bland 1981:132).

97.For example, the suffering of Job ended with the restoration of his finances and his prominence in the community; furthermore, he had additional sons and daughters (Job 42:12–17).
scripture encourages all people—men, women and children—to aggressively seek their own betterment and the betterment of others. The canonical backing for this is Psalm 56:9b: ‘By this I will know that God is for me’ and Romans 8:31: ‘If God is for us, who can be against us?’ The canonical witness is that God works alongside those who work for *hesed* [loving kindness], holiness, justice, mercy and righteousness, and in relieving the plight of the poor.

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