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Narrative and Poetic Art in the Book of Ruth

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Although the Book of Ruth is in many respects a classic example of biblical Hebrew *narrative*, with its stripped-down style and the opaqueness of its character's inner lives and motivations, there are two examples of formal poetry in the book (1:16–17 and 1:20–21). Biblical poetry works with a very different set of literary conventions than narrative, and by taking note of those conventions, we can see the distinctive contributions made by these poems to the book as a whole.

To speak about the literary art of the Bible is really to speak more specifically about its *narrative art* or its *poetic art*, since biblical narrative and biblical poetry each works with a very different set of conventions and techniques—with different literary toolkits we might say. A literary approach to the Bible, then, means more than just close reading, as it is so often understood. It also means becoming familiar with and attending to the distinctive and specific workings of narrative texts and poetic texts. It seems clear that the ancient authors were very much aware of the differing conventions and possibilities associated with narrative and with poetry, respectively, and that their audiences would have responded differently to these two primary literary forms. The better we understand these forms, the better we are as readers.

The book of Ruth is, of course, composed primarily of narrative: it tells a story. But there are two passages—Ruth's speech to Naomi in 1:16–17 and then Naomi's speech to the women of Bethlehem in 1:20–21—that are marked as poetry: they take the form of verse, and may be set off in lines. By keeping in mind the distinctive literary resources of biblical narrative and biblical poetry, then, we can appreciate not only the artfulness of the book of Ruth as a story, but also begin to discern the function of the two poems that the book employs in the first chapter.

NARRATIVE

Perhaps the single most distinctive characteristic of biblical Hebrew narrative is its rigorous economy of style. That is, biblical narrative tends to evince a drastically stripped-down

manner of storytelling, making use of a fairly limited vocabulary and pretty consistently avoiding metaphors and other sorts of figurative language. Indeed, biblical narrative tends to avoid description of any sort, metaphorical or otherwise. It is striking how rarely we are told what either people or objects in biblical stories look like. What do Adam and Eve look like? We do not know. Abraham? Sarah? Moses? We do not know. Occasionally, a certain quality is ascribed to some person or object: we are told that Eve perceives that the tree of knowledge is "a delight to the eyes" (Gen 3:6), and likewise we are told that Joseph is "handsome and good-looking" (Gen 39:6). But as a rule such minimal notations are given only when necessary to introduce some element that is important to the development of the plot. The attractiveness of the tree of knowledge leads, of course, to the eating of its fruit, and Joseph's attractiveness leads, in the next verse, to the sexual aggression of Potiphar's wife and thus indirectly to Joseph's imprisonment. And even here we are not told what it is that makes the fruit lovely to look at or just what physical qualities make Joseph so attractive.

Beyond a lack of physical description in the biblical stories, one notices, too, that descriptions of personal qualities are largely absent. Characterization in biblical narrative, in other words, is rarely explicit, but rather must be teased out of the narrative based on what characters do and what they say. We know Jacob is cunning and deceptive, for example, not because we are told so, but because we see him trick his brother, his father, and his brother-in-law Laban, and we hear him lie to them. As a rule, it is the actions and the dialogue of the characters that leads to the readers' judgments about them, rather than explicit commentary or moral evaluation on the part of the narrator.

The Book of Ruth exhibits this same sort of reticence in describing its characters. Although readers often assume that Boaz is an older man, for example, the fact is that we are never told his age. There is the hint, in Boaz's words to Ruth in 3:10 ("you have not gone after the young men [*habbaḥūrim*], whether poor or rich") that he does not consider himself a young man, but that still leaves us with a range of, say, twenty to seventy years old (although the average lifespan would have been closer to forty or fifty years). The only information that might count as a direct description of Boaz is his designation by the narrator in 2:1 as "a prominent rich man" (*'ish gibbôr ḥayil*). But this is clearly an indication of his public, social status, and not any sort of moral evaluation. It characterizes Boaz, in other words, as the kind of man whose workers are quick to answer his brusque queries (as in 2:4–7) and whose fellow citizens are quick to assent to whatever Boaz demands of them (as in 4:1–2). But such a designation gives no indication of whether Boaz is a good or bad person, a patient or impatient man, honest or deceptive, etc. In other words, we as readers have to decide for ourselves what sort of man we think Boaz might be.

So also with Ruth herself, we are given only minimal description and a sense of how she is perceived publicly. The latter is striking, because Ruth is repeatedly called "the Moabite" or described as having recently returned "from Moab." Thus, when Boaz inquires after Ruth's attachments in ch. 2 ("Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, 'To whom does this young woman belong?'" [v. 5]). His servant replies, "She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab" (v. 6). This reference to Ruth's nationality is placed in the mouth of a character, but the narrator had earlier made a similar statement at the end of ch. 1: "So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab" (1:22). What do these social and familial designations convey? The narrator's statement in 1:22 is almost certainly meant to be read ironically. If references to Moabites (and especially to Moabite women) in other biblical texts are any indication, the Bethlehemites who witness Naomi's return (see 1:19), and perhaps the original audience for the book, are likely to have a very negative view of Ruth *as a Moabite*.¹ At the same time, and by way of ironic counterpoint, the narrator seems to give a hint—though hardly more than that—of a more positive evaluation of Ruth's character, since after all Ruth is the daughter-in-law who "came back with her" when Naomi was destitute and could not understand why anyone would want to stay with her. By the time the plot has worked itself out, the women of Bethlehem can state this positive evaluation of Ruth explicitly ("your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons" [4:15], with no mention of her Moabite origins), though we notice that the typically reticent narrator never does.

The emphasis on Ruth's Moabite identity by Boaz's foreman in 2:6, unlike the narrator's, would seem to hold no ironic double meaning. The boss has asked for information and the servant gives it: the young woman is not attached to any man and, being Moabite, is fair game. The possible allusion to the proverbial promiscuity of Moabite women constitutes no irony coming from the mouth of the foreman, since it only reinforces his message of Ruth's sexual availability. It is difficult to say with certainty that the servant's words are intended to hold such an allusion to Moabite sexuality, but it seems at least that Boaz takes them that way, since he immediately turns to Ruth, without answering the servant, and instructs her to stay in his field to glean and furthermore to "keep close to my young women," and since he has to warn the young men away from her (2:9, 15).

In the same way that readers often assume that Boaz is an older man, so, too, they often assume that Ruth is both young and beautiful, though there is little explicit evidence for the former and none for the latter. It is true that Ruth is referred to as a *na'ârâ* (often translated as "young woman") by Boaz and the foreman in their exchange in 2:5–6 and again by the

¹ The land of Moab and the Moabites are freighted with animosity in Israel's memory. See, for example, Num 21:29–30; Num 22; Amos 2:1–3; Jer 48:1–9. For the association of Moabite women with illicit sexuality, see the story of Lot's daughters in Gen 19:30–38 and of the incident at Baal-Peor in Num 25:1–5.

woman of Bethlehem in 4:12, but we must keep in mind that Ruth had been married for ten years (1:4) before the death of her husband Mahlon, so she can hardly be all that young (and the life-span for women would have been even less than for men). And in the dialogue between Boaz and the foreman, the term *na'ārā* functions primarily to associate Ruth with the workers in the field, who are also called "young women" (*nē'ārōt*) and "young men" (*nē'ārīm*). As far as her beauty goes, well, who knows? We are simply never told anything about her looks, although biblical authors have been known to specify a woman's beauty (or a man's for that matter, as we saw with Joseph and Potiphar's wife above) if it is thought to be crucial to the plot: thus Rachel (Gen 29:17), Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:2), Vashti and Esther (Esth 1:11 and 2:7), and Job's daughters (Job 42:15).

In the book of Ruth, then, as is the case with biblical narrative in general, we encounter an economical narrative style that works with little explicit description of characters or their essential qualities, though we do get a handful of potentially important public and social designations. It would be a mistake, however, to take this economy of style as an indicator of the simplicity or primitiveness of biblical narrative or of the book of Ruth. Indeed, it is primarily this terseness that lends biblical narrative its complexity as literature. By not directly revealing the qualities of character of the actors in the narrative, the narrator puts the onus of interpretation on the readers, who must work out on their own—albeit with hints given—what they think of these characters. This is not the *absence* of characterization, but is a *certain mode* of characterization and, in fact, a fairly complex mode at that.

Moving beyond the question of what characters might look like or what sort of people they might be, we may best see the complexity of this mode of characterization when it comes to the inner lives of the characters. Readers of Western literature—both classical and modern—are used to having access in one form or another to the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of literary characters. But in biblical narrative, we are only rarely told what a character might be thinking or feeling at any given moment. What are Eve and Adam thinking when they reach for the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden of Eden? What is God thinking in forbidding that fruit? (Despite Christianity's long tradition of original sin, the answer to neither of these questions is immediately clear, and both prove quite interestingly complex if taken seriously.) What goes through Abraham's mind when God demands, in Gen 22, that he sacrifice his son Isaac? (The inner calm of absolute faith? Perhaps. But perhaps also anger, disbelief, or even disgust—with God for demanding such a sacrifice, or with himself for failing to protest.) Why does Moses kill the Egyptian who is beating a Hebrew slave in Exod 2? (It is not clear whether Moses, raised an Egyptian, knows that he was born a Hebrew; and so his motivation might range from an elemental sense of justice, unrelated to ethnicity, to a specifically ethnic identification

with the victim.) What is going through Aaron's mind when his two sons are burned alive with fire from God in Lev 10? (The narrator reports only that "Aaron was silent." Does this indicate mute acceptance? Crippling grief? A barely controlled anger? Pure shock?) As these examples show—and there are many more that we could bring to bear—biblical narrative exploits to great effect a genuine inner life and a complex, private subjectivity.² In other words, biblical narrative is essentially "realistic" in its portrayal of human characters, since in real life, we do not have direct access to the inner lives of those we encounter, learning to rely instead on hints we receive about what people are really thinking or feeling, and basing our sense of what sort of people they are on what they do and what they say, on actions and dialogue.³

How does this narrative style play out in the book of Ruth then? To my mind, one of the most important consequences of the convention in biblical narrative of rendering the inner lives of characters opaque is that it tends to leave open, in a literarily fruitful way, the question of character motivation. If we are given only very limited access to the thoughts and feelings of the characters about whom we read, then it follows that the motivation behind what they do and say is also largely obscure. And the question of character motivation is paramount for interpreting the book of Ruth, as it is with most narratives. Naomi, for example, is nearly always characterized by interpreters as a model of loving, motherly concern. But if that is the case, why does she allow Ruth to go off into the fields to glean at the beginning of ch. 2 without so much as a word of warning (again, that the situation is potentially dangerous is shown by Boaz's advice to Ruth in 2:9 and his warning to the young male workers in 2:15), and then exhibit an exaggerated motherly care at the end of the chapter, after seeing the interest that Boaz has shown in Ruth? And is it possible that her strenuous attempts to dissuade Ruth and Orpah from returning with her from Moab resulted from a desire not to be burdened with two Moabite women (and two more mouths to feed) in Judah? Does she even imagine that these Moabite women might well be the source of some killing curse, since both her sons died after marrying them (as for example Judah admits to thinking about Tamar in Gen 38)? The fact is that we just do not know what Naomi is thinking, about these or other issues; but our reaction to Naomi and to the developing plot depends on filling these gaps in our knowledge.

So also with Boaz, there is real ambiguity in his approach to Ruth in ch. 2, when he first spies her in his field. Clearly, he displays a keen interest in her, but what is the source and nature of that interest? Is it familial and altruistic, as he implies in his statement in 2:11–12? Or is it sexual or romantic, as the exchange with his foreman (with its emphasis on her Moabite identity) earlier in the chapter might imply? Or are we even to imagine that Boaz himself is not entirely aware of his motivations—after all, at what point does one "realize" that one is interested in another romanti-

² To be sure, one can find instructive counter-examples that prove the rule: Jacob's love for Rachel, for example ("So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her" [Gen 29:20]), or the transparency of Saul's machinations against David in 1 Sam 18. These examples seem intentionally to flaunt the rule, though they are few and far between, and usually very limited.

³ The classic modern statement on the terseness of biblical narrative style and its importance for characterization, and still the best place to begin thinking about biblical narrative, is Erich Auerbach's "Odysseus' Scar," published as the first chapter of his book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (trans. Willard R. Trask; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 3–23.

cally? And of course such interest does not preclude other interests and motivations. And in ch. 3, what is Boaz thinking when he awakes—half-drunk and half-clothed—in the middle of the night, with a woman at his feet? The awkward, rambling syntax of his response to Ruth in 3:10–13 (which seems to mirror the awkward, rambling syntax of Joseph’s response to Potiphar’s wife as he tries to escape her unwanted sexual advances in Gen 39) shows us that he is flustered, though we are not told the source and nature of his unease. It is entirely possible, even likely, that he himself is unaware of just what has transpired with this woman—who at first he does not recognize—and what sort of trouble he might have gotten himself (and her) into. As we wonder what Boaz might be thinking here, we are apt to wonder too about his motivations for “acquiring Ruth the Moabite” (4:10) as wife.

The scene in private at the threshing floor in ch. 3 is in many ways the climactic scene of the book, setting up the final, public resolution of the plot that follows in ch. 4. So it is particularly striking that the scene turns not only on the unstated knowledge and motivations of Boaz but also and especially on those of Ruth. There is, in the first place, the question of what exactly Ruth intends to be doing in the scene. When she says to Boaz, “spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin” (3:9), is she making an offer of betrothal, as many commentators argue, or is she making an offer of her sexual favors, as a few others have suggested?⁴ And when, in her speech to Boaz, Ruth links their relationship with the duties of a “next-of-kin” (*gō’el*), what does she intend?⁵ Beyond the question of what Ruth is doing, there is the question of why is she doing it? Does she actually care for Boaz; does she desire him for herself? (The book is often read in this romantic light.) Does she desire to have a child, and take Boaz for a likely father? Or is she acting primarily on behalf of Naomi, in order to give Naomi the heir she needs to secure her legal rights in Judah? Or is it all a strategy for keeping together herself and Naomi, as perhaps suggested by the linking of levirate with next-of-kin duties, since the former apply more to Ruth and the latter to Naomi? The narrator refuses to tell us the answers to any of these questions, although we must surely wonder about them; and the way we as readers choose to answer them determines in no small way how we understand the plot movement and resolution, and to a certain extent I think “the meaning” of the book.

A fuller analysis of the narrative art of the book of Ruth would pay attention not only to these issues of characterization and character motivation, but also—among other things—to the strategic use of repetition (such as repeated keywords), to larger structuring patterns, and to the artful use of dialogue as a means of advancing plot. The book of Ruth certainly rewards such study, but it will have to wait for another time, since I want to turn now to the book’s use of poetry.

⁴ For the former interpretation, see, e.g., Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB7; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 123; Paul A. Kruger, “The Hem of the Garment in Marriage: The Meaning of the Symbolic Gesture in Ruth 3:9 and Ezek. 16:8,” *JNSL* 12 (1984): 79–86; Kristin Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 73; and Victor H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 234. For the latter, see especially Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (LCBI; Westminster John Knox, 1990), 102.

⁵ The duties of a *gō’el* (“next-of-kin,” or “redeemer”) are primarily economic in nature (see Lev 25:25). The duties of the *levir* (“brother-in-law”), on the other hand, have to do with marrying the widow of a brother who has died without children (see Deut 25:5–6). It seems that neither duties are really incumbent upon Boaz, since

POETRY

Although the book of Ruth is almost entirely in the form of prose narrative, there are two places where the author shifts into poetry—into, that is, formally marked lines of verse. I want to provide here my own, fairly literal translation, set out in lines as I think the passages ought to be, along with just a bit of the surrounding prose. The first of the passages is Ruth’s speech to Naomi in 1:16–17, occurring just after Naomi admonishes Ruth to follow Orpah’s example and to remain in Moab rather than returning with Naomi to Judah:

And Ruth said,
Do not press me to leave you,
to turn back from after you.
For wherever you go, I will go,
And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God shall be my God;
wherever you die, I will die,
and there I will be buried.
Thus may the Lord do to me and more, if anything but death separates me from you.

The second passage is Naomi’s speech, in 1:20–21, to the women of Bethlehem upon her and Ruth’s arrival at the city, after Naomi has been gone for at least a decade:

And the two of them came to Bethlehem, and as they went into Bethlehem the whole city was buzzing about them; and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” And she said to them,
Do not call me “Naomi,”
Call me “Mara,”
for the Almighty has made me “bitter” indeed.⁶
I was full going away,
and empty the Lord has brought me back;
Why call me Naomi,
when the Lord has afflicted me,
and the Almighty brought evil upon me?

Before considering why it might be that the author shifts, for these passages only, into poetic form, we should say a few words about what it is that makes them poetry.

In fact, most translations do not represent these speeches as poetry. The KJV, the RSV, the NEB, the NIV, and the *Tanakh* (IPS Version), among others, all render the speeches as prose. Neither do the major scholarly editions of the Hebrew text, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS)

⁶ Naomi makes a sarcastic pun here on her name, which sounds like the Hebrew word for “delight” (*nō’am*), by saying that she should instead be called “Bitterness” (*mārā*).

or *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (BHQ), set the verses off as poetry. But both the NRSV and the Jerusalem Bible, as well as some individual scholars' translations, represent the speeches as formal lines of poetry, or verse, though they tend to differ on how to lineate the poetry. The Jerusalem Bible, for example, renders Ruth's first line ("Do not press me to leave you and to turn back from your company, for. . .") as prose, but beginning with the phrase "wherever you go, I will go," the rest of the speech, including all of v. 17, is presented as verse; and in a similar way, it represents Naomi's first line as prose ("Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for Shaddai has marred me bitterly") but the rest of the speech as verse. My own lineation is very close to the NRSV for both of the passages, except that I take the final part of v. 17 ("Thus may the Lord do to me and more, if anything but death separates me from you") to be prose. The latter simply does not demonstrate the sort of rhythm and parallelism that characterize the rest of Ruth's speech. Moreover, all other oaths of this sort in the Bible are in more obviously prose contexts.⁷

Parallelism—the matching of two or sometimes three short lines that mirror each other semantically (in meaning), syntactically (in word arrangement), or with regard to diction (word choice)—has been a common way of understanding the basic principle of biblical Hebrew poetry ever since Robert Lowth's influential *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (published in Latin in 1753 and in English in 1787). More recent work on biblical poetry has made clear that the old notions of parallelism are too simple. In the first place, the widespread characterization of the second (or third) lines as essentially saying the same thing as the first, but in slightly different words, has given way to a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between the lines, so that we now recognize that the second or third lines will often intensify, heighten, or otherwise move beyond (sometimes chronologically, for example) the first.⁸ And secondly, the idea that parallelism is the single defining feature of biblical poetry has come under question, since there are in fact quite a few lines that do not exhibit strict parallelism.⁹

Nevertheless, such parallelism is one of the commonest ways of articulating poetic lines in the Bible, and we see it functioning in our passages here. For example, Ruth's first line, "Do not press me to leave you," is clearly paralleled by the second, matching line, "to turn back from after you." The jussive verb-phrase "do not press me" governs both lines, and the matching infinitives "to leave" (*'āzab*) and "to turn back" (*šūb*), each marked with a second-person singular object ("you"), function as a semantically-related word pair that binds the lines together into a common couplet form. After Ruth's opening line, a fairly strict semantic and syntactic parallelism structures the next second and third couplets: "wherever you go, I will go, // and wherever you lodge, I will lodge," and then "your people shall be my people, // and your God shall be my God." The double repetition of semantically related verbs in the second couplet ("go . . . go" and "lodge . . . lodge") gives way to a

double repetition of noun-phrases in the third ("your people . . . my people" and "your God . . . my God"), each of the latter exhibiting of course the grammatical shift from second to first person. But we also see in these middle two couplets the subtle dynamism or movement between lines that I mentioned above. The second couplet moves chronologically from "going" to "lodging," and there is a hint of intensification in the implication that not only will the journey *begin* ("you go . . . I go") with us together, it will *end* ("you lodge . . . I lodge") with us together as well. The third couplet exhibits intensification or heightening in affirming that *not only* will your people be my people, *but also* your God will be my God, insofar as it is likely a stronger statement in the author's mind to switch theological allegiance than ethnic allegiance (the latter of which, one might argue, Ruth has already done by marrying into Naomi's family).

The fourth and final couplet of Ruth's poetic speech to Naomi introduces more variety into the parallel structuring of the lines, such final variation being a not uncommon way of marking closure in biblical poems. There is still the semantic and grammatical parallelism of the two first-person singular imperfect verbs "I will die" and "I will be buried," as well as in the matched particles "wherever" and "there." But the second line of the couplet, and thus the final line of the poem, exhibits an elegant and emphatic conciseness, comprising only two words in the Hebrew: *wēšām* 'eqqābēr ("there I-will-be-buried"), lending both a structural and a thematic finality to the poem. Structural finality is achieved by the substituting of "there" for the expected fourth occurrence of "wherever" (which we have seen already three times in this handful of lines) and by the way the reader is brought up short by the brevity of the final line, thus breaking the poetic rhythm. The use of the Hebrew *šām* ("there") rather than *'āšer* ("wherever") achieves conciseness not only by replacing a two-syllable word with a one-syllable word, but also by allowing the author to drop the second-person verb we expect to be there; so instead of the expected "*wherever you are buried*, I will be buried" we get the terser "*there* I will be buried." Thematic finality also inheres in the substitution of "there," in the sense that there are no more "wherevers," only a final "there," but is evinced even more strongly of course in the final verb "I will be buried," an appropriate final phrase if ever there was one.

Naomi's speech displays a similar sort of poetic parallelism. Compare, for example, her first two lines in v. 20: "Do not call me 'Naomi,' // call me 'Mara,'" with the repetition of the verb "call" (*qārā*; once in the negative and once in the positive) and of the first-person preposition "to me" (*lî*; represented in English simply as "me"). The line-ending occurrences of "Mara" and "Naomi" are syntactically and grammatically matched (as double accusatives and as proper names, respectively) and are matched, in Naomi's sardonic pun on her own name, as a semantically opposed

⁷ See, for example, 1 Sam 3:17; 14:44; 20:13; 25:22; 2 Sam 3:35; 19:14; 1 Kgs 2:23; 19:2; and 2 Kgs 6:31.

⁸ On the dynamic movement between the lines, see especially Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic, 1985), chs 1–3.

⁹ For the most sustained challenge to the older notions of parallelism and a thorough, though quite technical, argument for syntax as the determining factor for poetic lines, see Michael Patrick O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1980).

word-pair, "Naomi" being related to the word for "delight" and "Mara" meaning "bitterness." Notice also the parallelism of the couplet in the first two lines of v. 21, each three words in the Hebrew: "I was-full going-away, // and-empty returned me-the Lord." Again, we see precisely matched opposing terms—"full/empty" and "go/return"—with the whole couplet framed by the opposing subjects, "I" (the first word of the couplet) and "the Lord" (the last word). Naomi has set herself over against the Lord both structurally and thematically, with the opposition heightened in the lines that close out the poem: "Why call-me 'Naomi,' // when-the-Lord has-afflicted me, // and-the-Almighty brought-evil upon-me?" While Naomi's reference to herself ("I") and to God ("the Lord") were the outer terms in the previous lines, in the first two of these final lines they are the inner terms, "Naomi" / "the Lord."

Unlike Ruth's poem, Naomi's makes use of the triplet form, that is, three lines instead of two. The poem as a whole is structured as a triplet, a couplet, and a triplet. The triplets that frame the poem match each other not only in form but in content as well, with the first line of each matching in every respect except for the opening particle: "Do-not" (*'al*) being replaced by "Why" (*lammā*). The second lines in each triplet essentially function as effect ("call me 'Bitterness'") and cause ("the Lord has afflicted"), thus further emphasizing the opposition that Naomi has set up between herself and God. The third lines of each triplet are tied together by the repetition of the Hebrew term for God, *šaddai* (translated above as "the Almighty") in the subject position, by the first-person preposition *lī* ("me" or "upon me"), and by the sound-play between the two verbs, *hēmar* ("made bitter") and *hēra'* ("brought calamity"), which share two of their three letters.¹⁰ But in comparing the length of the two lines, the third line of the second triplet, and thus the final line of Naomi's poem, exhibits, like the final line of Ruth's poem, a brevity (three words to five) that brings the reader up short and provides an effective sense of closure. That formal closure is thematically reinforced—again, in a way comparable to the final line of Ruth's poem—by the implacable despair of its content: "Shaddai has brought calamity upon me."

THE MIXING OF NARRATIVE AND POETRY

There is a great deal more that one might say about the poetic art of Ruth's and Naomi's speeches, both in terms of form and content. But it seems clear that we have here two carefully constructed poems, which stand out from the surrounding prose narrative by virtue of their verse form. The question then becomes, why does our author place this formally marked poetry into the mouths of Ruth and Naomi? The beginning of an answer to this question lies, I think, in the differing literary conventions and resources of biblical narrative and poetry. And one of the

most striking differences between the two is their treatment of the inner lives of characters and speakers. If classical Hebrew narrative consistently (though not slavishly) avoids giving access to the inner lives of its characters, ancient Hebrew poetry has no such qualms. Take, for example, two biblical books composed entirely in verse form, the Psalms and the Song of Songs: the former gives eloquent expression to both the despair and the joy of its anonymous speakers, and the latter leaves readers in no doubt as to the depth of passion felt by the young lovers whose voices are represented therein. The conventions of prose narrative simply do not apply to biblical poetry, which is in any case relentlessly *non*-narrative. That is, unlike other ancient Near Eastern texts, biblical literature uses only prose to tell stories, reserving poetry for non-narrative purposes, such as the lyrical expression of feeling that we see in Psalms and in the Song of Songs. The book of Job is an interesting case in this regard, since it begins in the mode of prose narration (chs. 1–2), and we are given precious little insight into what Job (or God for that matter) is thinking as a series of horrendous events befalls him and his family.¹¹ But when it is time for Job to give vent to the emotional chaos and to the desire for death that, we learn, constitute his inner life, the Joban author shifts into verse form in ch. 3 and following. After the emotionally (and intellectually) heated exchange between Job and his three interlocutors—and, eventually, God—in chs. 3–42:6, the book shifts back into the prose narrative mode in 42:7–17, where once again we are left guessing as to Job's thoughts and feelings as he lives out his long life in the wake of catastrophe and restoration.

I would suggest, then, that the author of the book of Ruth shifts into the poetic mode here precisely in order to give the reader access to the inner lives of Ruth and of Naomi, and to signal to the reader that he or she is doing so. Why? In the first place, the shift foregrounds the importance of Ruth and Naomi for the book, since they are the only two characters who get such treatment; Boaz, then, the other major character, is confirmed on this reading as secondary to these two women. But I think also that the specific content of their speeches is important to the formation of the book's plot. For most of the book, we are left to wonder what the characters are thinking and feeling, but here at the beginning, the author wants us to know that Ruth's primary commitment and motivating factor for her actions is her allegiance to Naomi and, further, that Naomi specifically fails to understand that commitment. We are encouraged to read the two speeches in conversation with each other, since they are separated by only two verses and are the only two poems in the book. (If they occurred in different chapters, one might be less inclined to see them as so closely related.) Moreover, each speech begins with exactly the same word in Hebrew, *'al*, "do not," followed in each case by a second-person feminine jussive grammatical form ("press me" and "call me," respectively). The fact that Ruth's opening verb is a second-person feminine *singular* and Naomi's a *plural* underscores the fact that although the speeches are formally matched and

¹⁰ The Hebrew word *šaddai* would seem to be an example of poetic diction, a word that occurs only rarely in prose but quite frequently in poetry, thus lending support for our taking Naomi's speech as poetry. Of some four dozen occurrences of the term, only a very few are in prose contexts; and of the many occurrences in poetry, by far the majority occur as second terms in second or third lines, just as we find in our poem here.

¹¹ Indeed, the plot of the book of Job turns on this lack of access to Job's inner life, as neither the reader nor the Adversary ("Satan" in the NRSV) nor God is able to tell for sure the source of Job's piety; this is why he must be tested, to find out whether he "fears God for nothing" (1:9) or rather in the expectation of some reward.

meant to be read together, they contrast greatly in terms of content. Ruth addresses Naomi, but Naomi addresses the women of Bethlehem; a disjunction that is emphasized by the fact that Naomi pointedly does *not* respond to Ruth's speech of commitment, with her next reported words being those of the poem in 1:20–21.

The two poetic speeches of ch. 1, then, set up our two protagonists as the bearers of the fundamental tensions of the plot. One of those tensions is personal: Ruth has expressed a nakedly emotional commitment to Naomi, while Naomi has ignored that commitment and deemed herself "empty" as she returns from Moab. The reader, then, is meant to follow this tension to see how it is resolved by the end of the book. Will Naomi recognize and accept Ruth's commitment to her? A second tension foregrounded by these speeches is theological: Ruth brings up God almost incidentally, as she includes a commitment to "your God" in her larger vow of solidarity with Naomi, but Naomi makes God the center of her speech, referring directly to God four times (in a chiastic pattern of Shaddai—YHWH—YHWH—Shaddai), and naming God as the primary agent in her life, an agent conceived of, moreover, in an entirely negative light. How, we wonder, will this tension between Naomi and God turn out? Will Naomi be confirmed in her dire judgment that God has inflicted calamity upon her and drained her life of meaning and relationship? And whose view of reality is correct here? Is Naomi right to attribute such agency to God, or is Ruth right to focus on human relationships, relegating divine action to the margins?

It is a witness to biblical narrative's abundant "negative capability," to borrow a phrase from the poet John Keats (who defines it as "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, and doubts"¹²), that none of these tensions is finally resolved by the end of the narrative. We are still not sure of how Naomi views either Ruth or God. Recall that it is the women of the neighborhood who declare "blessed be the Lord" upon the birth of Obed (4:14) and who deem Ruth "better to you than seven sons" (4:15). From Naomi, however, we hear not a word. Naomi does take the child to her bosom we are told (v. 16), and perhaps we are to imagine that she loves and hopes again after the tragedies that have defined her life to this point. Or, perhaps it is obligation or necessity that motivates Naomi to accept Obed into her life. Then, it may well be some combination of these that defines Naomi's inner life at the end of the book, since love and loss are hardly mutually exclusive.

And what of the theological tension between Ruth's and Naomi's view of reality? Here too much is left up to the reader. The book is in fact much less explicitly theological than is often claimed, mentioning the action of God directly only twice: first, when Naomi hears in ch. 1 that God has broken the famine in Judah (v. 6), and then again in ch. 4, when we are told that when

Ruth and Boaz "came together, the Lord made her conceive" (v. 13). Other than God "making Ruth conceive" (with of course the help of Boaz), all of the action that gets done in the plot, especially in chapters 2 and 3, gets done by human characters enacting human agency in a world of recognizable human relationships, both personal and social. Indeed, it seems to me that Ruth's solidarity with Naomi is the central driving fact of the narrative, as she first provides food to keep them alive and then provides the heir that Naomi needs to secure her legal rights in Judah. Still, it is certainly possible, as the many theological readings of the story demonstrate, to see God working behind the scenes of the narrative. In the end, this ambiguity is also characteristic of Hebrew narrative, which clearly prefers to hold together human and divine agency, affirming a certain amount of providential guidance in history while also admitting and encouraging human action and moral responsibility. Philosophers and theologians might have to solve such questions—e.g., Who ensured that Jacob got the blessing over Esau, God or Rebekeh? Who led the Israelites out of Egypt, God or Moses? Who provided Naomi with an heir, God or Ruth?—but a storyteller is free to raise the questions and leave them unsolved. And thus the story both requires and rewards the work of interpretation.

The book of Ruth, then, brings together narrative and poetic art, but the narrative mode is paramount. Had the poems, with their revelation of inner lives, come near the end of the book, the tensions might be resolved more neatly and we might not be left wondering whether Naomi ever realizes the strength and depth of Ruth's commitment to her, or wondering whether Ruth ever comes to love Boaz, or wondering about the nature of reality and whether God might be said to have an explicit role in the shaping of human destiny. But in Hebrew narrative such doubt almost always wins out. Biblical poetry, when given free rein, revels in the play of language, in the generating of metaphor, in structures of intensification, and in the expression of feeling. This is very different than the deliberately stripped-down style of biblical narrative, which trades in ambiguity, in complexity of motive, and in the fundamentally unsolvable nature of human existence in the world. The book of Ruth gives us a compelling touch of poetic art, but it is ultimately in the service of narrative, so that in the end we are left to wonder.

¹² John Keats, "Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21 December 1817" in *Romanticism: an Anthology* (ed. Duncan Wu; 3d ed.; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006), 1351.

The Iconography of the Book of Ruth

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Although absent from early Christian iconography, Ruth has been a popular figure in both Christian and Jewish art from the medieval period onward. In depicting scenes from the Book of Ruth, artists have been sensitive to the nuances and subtleties of the biblical narrative and have interpreted her story visually in many original and distinctive ways.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional studies on the book of Ruth have tended to focus almost exclusively on the book's date to determine whether it was written before or after the exile (587–537 B.C.E.), to find the reasons why it was written in the first place, and to offer various explanations as to the different canonical positions the book was to hold subsequently in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin Bibles. More recently, however, interest has shifted decidedly to an appreciation of the literary qualities of the book and the sheer mastery and artistry of its composition.¹ The powerful recurring themes of exile, homecoming, and marriage, and the controlling metaphors of emptiness and fullness, famine, and harvest, so eloquently articulated by the author, were sure to appeal, too, to the imagination of the visual artist. Indeed, in the history of the iconography of Ruth, artists have not only reflected upon and illustrated the story of this obscure Moabite woman who becomes linked with the mainstream of OT history, but they have also expanded elements of the literary narrative and attempted to fill in the gaps in this all too short story in many insightful and imaginative ways. And so, before looking at some specific visual representations of the story of Ruth, it is important first to appreciate several important iconic aspects of the literary narrative that has made the story so universally appealing to artists.²

Scholars frequently draw attention to the richness and subtleties of the story of Ruth, to its structure, setting, plot, characterization, and rhetorical effect, which demonstrate that the book is a carefully wrought piece of literature that offers the reader not just one but an entire range of interpretive possibilities. In particular, they draw attention to the effectiveness of the four-part structure of the book, to the way the narrative unfolds in four chapters, each part of the story corresponding to a particular chapter.³ Chapter 1 recalls the initial tragic background as Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem; ch. 2 introduces the figure of Boaz and the possibility of

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romance and a desirable union; ch. 3 describes in understated terms how Ruth spends the night on the threshing floor of Boaz, while ch. 4 culminates in the birth of a son to Ruth. The story is thus noteworthy for its careful ordering of events, for the way its four chapters are structured to accentuate the night-time meeting between Ruth and Boaz, and for the intricate and detailed characterization of its three iconic figures, Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. Chapters 2 and 3 are parallel in structure, beginning and ending in scenes in which only Ruth and Naomi participate; their main focus is on Ruth's encounter with Boaz, which bring for her blessings both material and spiritual. Yet the settings of the two meetings between Ruth and Boaz are contrasted: the former takes place in the countryside by daylight and the latter in the intimate privacy of a threshing floor by night. Grace Emmerson makes the point that, by and large, God is "muted" in the narrative and seems present not even "in the shadows," while at least twice significant events are attributed to chance and fate (2:3; 3:18).⁴ Finally, the recurrence of the word *hesed* throughout the narrative, suggesting an enduring love that is both human and divine, ensures the book of Ruth can be read as a love story that concludes with a happy ending for the heroine.

Commentators and exegetes have long noted the prominence given to the female characters in the book of Ruth, an aspect emphasized more recently in several perceptive literary and feminist readings of the narrative. Emmerson notes that "whatever the book's original purpose, its position in the Christian canon introduces a note of hope after the negative anarchical tone of the end of Judges and restores woman and the male-female relationship to an honorable position after the sordid misogynist events of Judg 19–21."⁵ On the other hand, when the book of Ruth immediately follows the book of Proverbs, as in the canonical arrangement of the HB, Ruth is seen to be an embodiment of the exemplary wife of Prov 31. Thus, the story of Ruth has all the essential qualities required—and easily comparable to any other in ancient literature—to assure it a central place in the rich and vibrant visual afterlife of the Bible.

EXEGESIS AND INTERPRETATION

Iconographical traditions associated with any biblical character are heavily influenced by the interpretation and exegesis of the Church Fathers. Indeed, much early and medieval art frequently represent biblical topics solely through the filter of their teachings. However, in the case of Ruth, little was actually written about her in the early Christian church and, down to the period of Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian, there is only one citation from the book of Ruth.⁶ No doubt this is the reason why Ruth is completely absent from early Christian art, unlike other OT characters, for example Jonah, that receive huge attention.

⁴ Emmerson, "Ruth," 426.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The reference is in the works of Mefito of Sardis who was concerned with defending the canonical position of the book of Ruth after Judges. Jerome's comments on the book of Ruth focused on the same concern. See Elena Giannarelli, "Ruth and the Church Fathers," *Journal of the Service international de documentation judeo-chrétienne* 23.2 (1990): 12–15.

¹ See, for example, D. R. G. Beattie, "Ruth" in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation, K-Z*, (ed. John H. Hayes; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 426–28; Grace I. Emmerson, "Ruth" in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (ed. John Barton and John Muddiman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 192–95; Leland Ryken, "Ruth" in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (ed. David Lyle Jeffrey; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 669–70.

² It has not been possible to include all the images discussed in this essay. However, all the images discussed are available on a number of websites.

³ *Ibid.* (ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson;

Later exegetes were concerned with typological concerns. Like so many female figures in the OT, Ruth is seen primarily as a type of the church (*typus ecclesiae*). Hippolytus of Rome examines the invitation given by Boaz to Ruth to eat bread and dip the morsel in the wine (2:14) and to drink of the water drawn by the young reapers (2:9). He concluded that this passage must be read as referring to baptism in the church by the Apostles, with whom the reapers are to be identified. Together with the prophets, they draw water from the everlasting fount of immortality. Once grace has been received from Christ, they are able to slake the thirst of those who are spiritually parched. Origen also specified that Ruth symbolizes the church. Ruth becomes a type of the Gentiles (*typus gentium*), representing pagans who are converted to the Christian faith. Ambrose focuses on the virtues of Ruth. He states that Boaz took her as his wife not only to obey the law of Moses, but primarily because he had recognized her virtues: devotion to her mother-in-law, fidelity to her dead husband, veneration for God, and a search for justice before her own pleasure, evident in the fact that she did not turn to young men in her widowhood but to an old man, symbol of perfection.

On the other hand, the Book of Ruth receives more attention in Jewish tradition, where it has always held an important place not only liturgically, in that it was recited during the feast of *Shavu'ot* (the harvest feast of Pentecost), but also because it was debated at some length in early Jewish exegesis and commentaries. The Aramaic Targum, which is twice as long as the Hebrew MT, expands the story and fills in what it perceives as "gaps" in the original narrative. Various passages were used for didactic purposes in the Targum; for example, Ruth's declaration of fidelity to Naomi (1:16–17) is expanded into a catechism, in each phrase of which Ruth indicates her acknowledgment and acceptance of some consequence of her conversion. Ruth is thus seen as a model proselyte. In Jewish midrash, Ruth is praised for her extraordinary beauty (*Ruth Rab.* 2.4) and also her piety (*Ruth Rab.* 3.3; *Pirqe R. El.* 23.115b) and although a Moabitess, by virtue of the blessing from Boaz she became for tradition one of the "mothers of Israel" (*Pesiqta Rab. Kah.* 16.124a).⁷ The influence of early and medieval exegesis, both Jewish and Christian, on the development of the iconography of book of Ruth is substantial and indeed has yet to be fully researched.

MEDIEVAL ICONOGRAPHY

Since early Christian art did not include images of Ruth, the earliest illustrations of the book are found in the illuminated Byzantine Octateuchs. In Greek and Latin Bibles, Ruth is the eighth book in the OT and so the Byzantine Octateuch began with Genesis and ended with Ruth.

However, while the first books of the illuminated Octateuchs, especially Genesis, were adorned with a vast selection of colorful miniatures, Ruth, the concluding book, received only two scenes. It was not until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that more widespread interest in Ruth became evident, with the elaborate illustrated biblical cycles developed in Paris that reserved a particular place in honor of Ruth. The French illuminators based their illustrations on the earlier Byzantine models but also expanded and developed the range of images by including motifs from everyday rural life (facilitated, of course, by the many references to the harvest and barley in the book of Ruth). The style of the French version became widespread in Western Europe and during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries gradually turned into a general European tradition.

An early and very fine example of French illumination is the *Bible Moralisée*, one of a unique group of Bibles that contain extensive cycles of biblical illustrations and juxtapose theological texts with allegorical, interpretative images.⁸ It was produced in Paris in the early thirteenth century and contains over a thousand exquisitely illuminated medallions accompanied by textual extracts and commentaries that act as captions to the illustrations in order to reveal, by word and image, the relevance of the Bible to contemporary life. The images are arranged in such a way that the *Bible Moralisée*, is "read" by viewing/reading a biblical image with its corresponding caption and then by viewing/reading the corresponding commentary image and caption; the commentary is designed to uncover the contemporary meaning, often moralizing in character, of the biblical event for the medieval viewer/reader.⁹ The biblical text is based largely on the Vulgate. There are ten illustrations that interpret the book of Ruth: five illustrate biblical scenes of Ruth, and five offer textual and visual allegorical interpretations and expansions, based largely on the Church Fathers, and reveal a particular interest in typological interpretation. Since the captions are representative of how Ruth was interpreted visually in medieval times, I have included the biblical texts and corresponding commentary captions in full.

The illustrations focus on five pivotal episodes in the book of Ruth and provide an imaginative, if inconsistent, range of interpretations, largely based on the exegesis of the church fathers. In the first biblical medallion (figure 1), the central figure, named as Boaz, is clearly not Boaz but rather Naomi, who is seen as a type of Mother Church. But why is she called Boaz here? We should not necessarily assume that it is a mistake on the part of the scribe—it may have been intentional to establish a connection between the close union of Ruth and Naomi and the later union between Ruth and Boaz. Orpah is clearly identified in the commentary image with those who turn away from the church, with the Jews, indicated by their trademark pointed hats, a negative depiction of Jews that appears in several of the subsequent images as well.

⁸ *Codex Vindobonensis* 2554 is now in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna. All the medallions, along with translation of the captions and commentary, have been published in Gerald B. Guest, *Bible Moralisée* (London: Harvey Miller, 1995). I have taken the translations of the captions from this volume.

⁹ Guest, *Bible Moralisée*, 1.

⁷ Ryken, "Ruth," 669.

Figure 1, *biblical text*: Here is a woman named Boaz (?) who has two daughters. One of the daughters holds to her and says that she will go with her rather than part from her, and the other leaves her and her company. (Ruth 1:6, 14)

Commentary caption: The woman who has two daughters, one of whom holds to her and the other leaves her, signifies the Holy Church, who has two types of people, one holds to her and does her will, the other turns from her and renounces her.



Fig. 1. *Ruth with Naomi and Orpah*, Codex Vindobonensis 2554 (detail). Early thirteenth century. ©Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

In the next biblical medallion (figure 2, upper left), two key aspects of the story are conflated: the day-time meeting with Boaz in the grain field and the night-time meeting at the threshing floor. The commentary image depicts Boaz as God the Father, Ruth as the church, and the mantle becomes the embodiment of Christ. In a departure from the biblical story, in the third biblical medallion (Fig. 2, upper right), Boaz struggles to take the sandal from his kinsman while the message of the commentary image and text focuses on an anti-Jewish polemic. This anti-Jewish polemic continues in the next biblical medallion (Fig. 2, lower left), where the emphasis is not on the marriage of Boaz and Ruth but on the priest that performs the ceremony. The commentary image and text highlight the "good clerics" while the text condemns the Jews, who have excluded themselves from the Gospels. Following the interpretation of the church fathers, the final biblical medallion (Fig. 2, third in the right column) sees the birth of Obed as a type of new life given to the Christian in baptism.

Figure 2, upper left column, *biblical text*: Here Boaz is in the middle of his field and the girl who is named Ruth comes before him and he takes his mantle and extends it over her and covers her. (2:3–4; 3:7–9)

Commentary caption: That Boaz extended his mantle over the girl and covered her signifies the Father of Heaven who extended over the Holy Church His mantle of flesh which is of the Son and He covered her.

Upper right column, *biblical text*: Here Boaz comes and takes off the shoe of a man who had left Ruth and he drags him from his room and the man declares the woman free and leaves her to him. (4:7–10)

Commentary caption: That Boaz took off the man's shoe signifies that Jesus Christ unshod and stripped the Jews from the Gospel. That he left the woman to Boaz signifies that the Jews did not wish to retain the

Gospels but left them to Jesus Christ and did not care.

Lower left column, *biblical text*: Here Boaz comes and takes Ruth as a wife and marries her with great joy and the priest of the law gives her to him and he receives her. (4:13)

Commentary caption: That Boaz married Ruth and took her as a wife and the priest of the law gave her to him signifies the good clerics and the good prelates and all the good Christians who took the Gospels, which the Jews had left and abandoned and Jesus Christ took them and delivered them.

Lower right column, *biblical text*: Here Boaz is with his wife Ruth in a bed and has a child by her. (4:13)

Commentary caption: That Boaz engendered by his wife Ruth a child signifies that Jesus Christ has engendered and engenders each day many infants through baptism in the Holy Church.

Despite the clear anti-Jewish sentiments expressed in this particular *Bible Moralisée*, Sarit

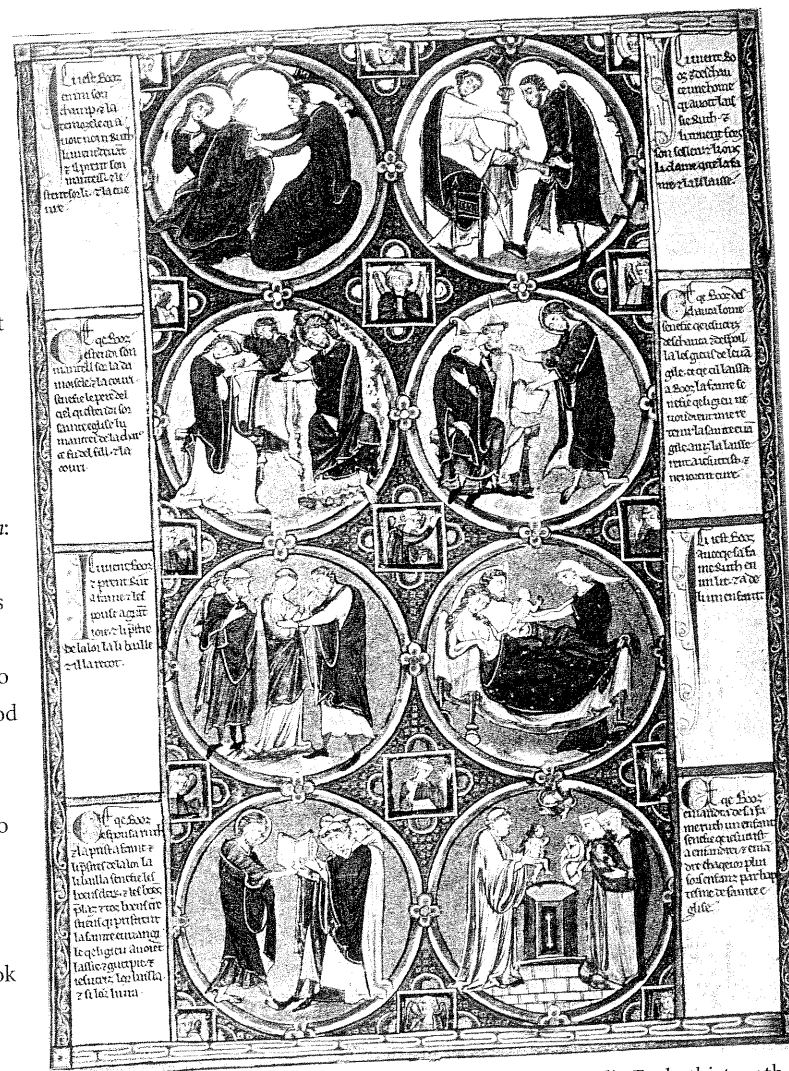


Fig. 2. *Ruth and Boaz*, Codex Vindobonensis 2554 (detail). Early thirteenth century. ©Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

Shalev-Eyni has argued persuasively that there is also considerable evidence in other illuminated manuscripts to show that, at least in some cases, Jewish and Christian illuminators worked collaboratively in producing Christian Bibles. Distinctive aspects of Jewish exegesis and illustrations of the book of Ruth, she argues, even found their way into Christian Bibles in the late medieval period.¹⁰ She shows how some aspects of the *Tripartite Mahzor* (an illustrated Jewish prayer book of 1322) and the *Padua Bible* (a Christian picture Bible of 1400 that contains around forty-six scenes from Ruth) are based on Jewish commentaries and midrashic texts and share several iconographic similarities. She argues that both go back to a common earlier Jewish iconographic tradition. The illuminated Ruth cycle of the *Padua Bible* is testimony to the Christian interest in the literal sense, and the Jewish understanding of scripture and the detailed cycle of miniatures that it contains, along with the accompanying captions, present a literal story of Ruth that manifestly incorporates several Jewish exegetical elements. Thus, Shalev-Eyni concludes, there was evidently a substantial participation of Jews in the creation and formation of this particular Christian illuminated OT and probably several others as well. Not only did the Christian scribes work under Jewish supervision but also apparently the illuminators did so who incorporated Jewish midrashic components within the miniatures and their captions.

RENAISSANCE ART

Images from the book of Ruth are extremely rare in Italian art, the most famous being Michelangelo's (1475–1564) fresco of *Salmon, Boaz, and Obed*. This appears among the fourteen lunettes of the ceiling of the Sistine chapel that document the ancestors of Christ. Michelangelo's lunettes of the ceiling of the Sistine chapel that document the ancestors of Christ. Michelangelo's inspiration for these figures was the opening genealogy of Matthew's Gospel, and this explains why the caption includes only the three male names mentioned in Matt 1:5, which states that "Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth," although the female figure depicted in this particular lunette is clearly Ruth.

While forty names of the ancestors of Christ are listed in a lunette, all of them male, Michelangelo in fact painted over ninety figures to illustrate them, including many women and young children. Andrew Graham-Dixon makes the point that many of these figures are of pedestrian quality, suggesting indeed that they were painted not by the artist himself but by his assistants. He comments wryly that the figure of Salmon verges on caricature: "the hunchbacked greybeard who stares with comical puzzlement at the carved handle of his walking stick, which is decorated with a gurning, gargoyles version of his own face."¹¹ Michelangelo, faced with the needless succession of biblical names, treated the ancestors mentioned in Matthew's genealogy not as individuals but as a collective representation of the people of Israel, waiting somewhat listlessly for the arrival of Christ.

Graham-Dixon observes that the figures seem oppressed by boredom "weighed down by the mundanity of lives that are going nowhere."¹² Within the scheme of the ceiling as a whole, the ancestors represent a phase of humanity and an aspect of the human condition decreed by divine plan. They may carry within them the physical seed of Christ, but they themselves are spiritually unenlightened. They are condemned to a vacuity symbolized by the bare and shallow spaces they occupy. Ruth, like many of the females in these lunettes, is preoccupied with caring for her child but displays no distinctive characteristics by which we might identify her as the figure of the biblical Ruth. We identify her only through association with the accompanying caption.

In seventeenth-century Protestant Holland, on the other hand, scenes from the book of Ruth, particularly those that featured the heroine herself, were very popular, since the profoundly human story of Ruth provided a model and moral example to which the Christian could aspire. It was above all Rembrandt and his followers who illustrated the story, and one of their most cherished scenes was clearly Ruth's first encounter with Boaz as she gleanes in the field (2:8–9), since there are several examples of the scene dating from this period. The story of Ruth transported into seventeenth-century Protestant Holland and expressed through the customs and costumes of the period was seen as having a timeless quality and a universal moral message.

Rembrandt himself, in fact, did not actually paint any scene from the book although he did complete several drawings, the best known of which are those that depict Ruth's statement of loyalty to Naomi (1:15–16), her meeting with Boaz (2:6–9), and Boaz's generosity in giving Ruth six measures of barley (3:15).¹³ In all three, Rembrandt portrays the emotions of the characters at pivotal moments in the story and conveys to the viewer the close and respectful bond between Ruth and Naomi and between Ruth and Boaz.

In his first drawing, Rembrandt shows Ruth and Naomi engaged in an animated discussion on the road to Bethlehem, where it is clear Ruth is determined not to leave her mother-in-law. In the second, which depicts Ruth 2:8–9, Rembrandt depicts in a skilful and sympathetic manner, through emphasizing the imposing figure of Boaz and his outstretched hand, Boaz's generosity and kindness. In his depiction of Ruth 3:15 (figure 3), where Boaz gives Ruth six measures of barley, the



Fig. 3. *Ruth and Boaz*, c. 1650, Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669). ©Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

¹² Ibid., 140.

¹³ The three drawings with notes are included in Hidde Hoekstra, *Rembrandt et la Bible* (Netherlands: VBI, 1983).

¹⁰ Sarit Shalev-Eyni, "In the days of the Barley Harvest: The Iconography of Ruth," *Artibus et Historiae* 51/XXVI (2005): 37–57.

¹¹ Andrew Graham-Dixon, *Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 139.

vigorous lines express the union of both characters, Ruth's mantle dramatically bringing both characters together in an intimate symbolic union. Two further examples from seventeenth-century Holland demonstrate the popularity of iconography associated with Ruth. A pupil of Rembrandt, Fabritius, depicted Ruth's meeting with Boaz (1660), in which Boaz appears as a member of the landed gentry in a scene totally removed from its original biblical setting and now located in Holland. We can see, too, from this painting how artists were increasingly interested in the story of Ruth as foreground (and sometimes simply as a pretext) for painting rural pastoral landscapes of autumn and harvest scenes.

Aert de Gelder's (1645–1727) painting entitled *Boaz and Ruth*, which depicts two rumbustious and rather saucy characters, has extremely little to do with the biblical story.¹⁴ At this time, there was a demand for portraits of couples disguised as biblical characters, such as the Virgin and the Angel Gabriel, and this practice became something of a social convention that had little to do with religion but was sanctioned by the church (Rembrandt's *Jewish Bride* and *Isaac and Rebecca* are other examples).

NICOLAS POUSSIN'S THE FOUR SEASONS (1660)

Nicolas Poussin's *Summer* (figure 4) is probably the painting used most often in biblical commentaries to illustrate the book of Ruth, yet it is generally taken out of context and frequently misunderstood.¹⁵

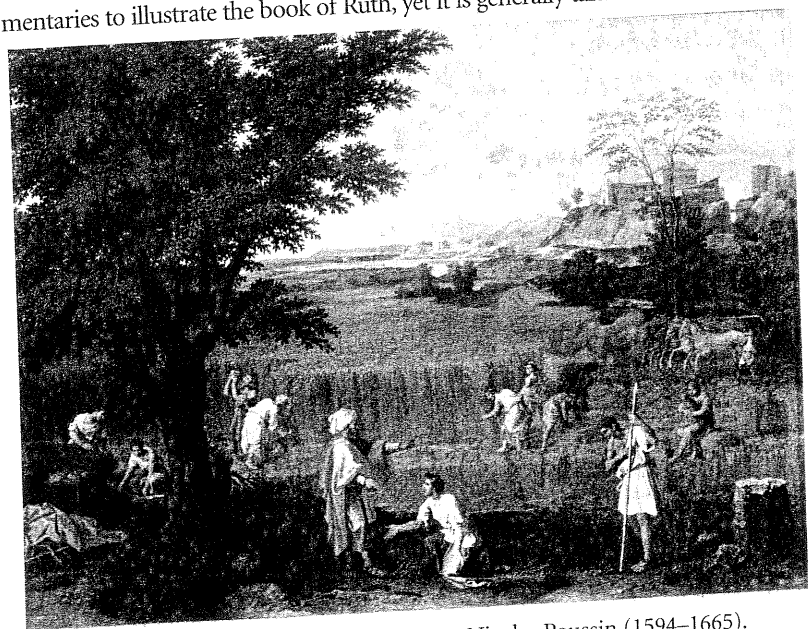


Fig. 4. *Summer or Ruth and Boaz*, 1660–1664. Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665). Location: Louvre, Paris, France. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, N.Y.

The French artist Nicolas Poussin had a profound and abiding interest in the Bible as a source of artistic inspiration. His distinctive treatment of biblical themes can be attributed to two main factors: first, his own essentially sto-

ical attitude to life and second, his professional aim as an artist to give expression to the richness of ancient literature (in this case, the Bible) through the "silent eloquence" of his paintings. It is these two major influences on the artist that make his visual interpretation of biblical stories so intellectually challenging and less dominated by traditional Christian symbolism or theological considerations than were other paintings of his day. In addition, the fact that he had relative freedom to choose his own biblical subjects allowed him to include autobiographical aspects in the stories he painted.

Poussin concluded his long artistic career immersed in exploring the parallels between the course of human life and the cycles of nature. Such interest already underlies his earlier work where the theme of life and death is set against a background landscape of transience, for example glimpses of the landscape can be seen in some of *The Seven Sacraments*, in particular *Baptism* and *Ordination*. From 1648 onward, however, he dedicated himself to exploring how the forces of nature could be employed to reflect the character or mood of important themes from ancient literature that particularly appealed to him. His final years were occupied exclusively with *The Four Seasons*, executed between 1660 and 1664, and such was his determination to complete this last cycle of paintings that he abandoned all his other works.

The Four Seasons is regarded as Poussin's most pantheistic and most stoical work and derives directly from the philosophy of Ovid, summed up in a passage from *Metamorphoses*.

Do you not see the year assuming four aspects, in imitation of our own lifetime? For in early spring, it is tender and full of fresh life, just like a little child; at that time, the herb-age is young, swelling with life, but as yet without strength and solidity, and fills the farmers with joyful expectation. Then all things are in bloom and the fertile fields run riot with their bright-coloured flowers; but as yet there is no strength in the green foliage. After spring has passed, the year, grown more sturdy, passes into summer and becomes like a strong young man. For there is no harder time than this, none more abounding in rich warm life. Then Autumn comes, with its first flush of youth gone, but ripe and mellow, midway in time between youth and age, with sprinkled grey showing on the temples. And then comes aged winter, with faltering step and shivering, its locks all gone or hoary.¹⁶

Following the perspective of Ovid, Poussin approached the paintings of his last years as a final formulation of his own philosophy of life; he gives a much less prominent role to humanity and greater importance to inanimate nature and becomes preoccupied with the themes of birth, death, and transformation in nature. His final cycle depicts a mood of philosophical resignation to the passing of time, but viewed in the context of the artist's entire output, it also provides a conclusive formulation of his thoughts on the human condition.

¹⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book XV, 199–213.

¹⁴ The painting is included in Bruce Bernard, *The Bible and its Painters* (London: Orbis, 1983).
¹⁵ For a more comprehensive discussion on Poussin, see Martin O'Kane, *Painting the Text: The Artist as Biblical Interpreter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007).

Richard Verdi argues that *The Four Seasons* are startlingly original and unique not only in Poussin's *oeuvre* but also in the entire history of art.¹⁷ Their utter originality lies in the fact that he takes four quite unrelated biblical episodes and makes them symbolic of the four seasons; each episode forms part of a large allegorical cycle that sums up universal themes of life and death. Before Poussin, artists generally depicted the four seasons in one of two ways: like Guido Reni, they could use human or divine figures to represent different times of the year, especially the figures of gods and goddesses, for example, the goddess Ceres to symbolize summer and Bacchus to represent autumn. The second way was, for example in the paintings of Pieter Brueghel, to depict landscapes with agricultural workers performing tasks appropriate to particular times of the year. But Poussin's approach is unique in that he employs a biblical theme for each season and in doing so, he creates an entirely new perspective from which to view the four biblical episodes he chooses. He takes the biblical story of the Garden of Eden to represent spring, the meeting of Ruth and Boaz in the cornfield to evoke summer, the spies with the grapes from the promised land as autumn, and the flood to represent winter. In addition, he places the four episodes at different times of the day—morning in the Garden of Eden, noon in the cornfield of Boaz, and afternoon in the Valley of Eschol, while the flood takes place in the darkness of night. In order to emphasize the natural world, his settings contain little or no architecture, and he chooses his OT stories not only for their evocative landscapes but also to suggest early moments in the primeval history of the Bible. Stylistically, the most striking aspect of each painting is its color. Each is dominated by a single prevailing hue: green for spring, golden-yellow for summer, greyish-brown for autumn, and blackish-grey for winter. The emotional essence of his theme is thus conveyed through color alone.

One of the reasons for Poussin's choice of subject for *Summer* was undoubtedly the biblical setting of the wheat field for the story of Boaz and Ruth. Unlike *Spring*, the earth has now been cultivated, and this is mirrored in the rigorously constructed forms of the landscape. The natural paradise of Genesis has now been replaced by one created by human hand. The number and variety of people that animate the painting illustrate how humankind has engaged with the landscape and works in harmony with it. The picture is highly organized and all the workers—and the horses—show how nature has been harnessed by humankind and contrasts with *Spring*, where the natural landscape in its idyllic and virginal state. The steady noonday sun reminds us that we are now at the pinnacle of life. The number of people dressed in a rich variety of ways allows for even more color and contrasts with the primeval nakedness of Adam and Eve.

Ruth kneels before Boaz and begs to glean wheat in his fields (Ruth 2:1–17). Both characters are depicted in strict profile and placed in the center foreground; Ruth kneels to highlight her suppliant attitude, while Boaz stands over her to denote his status and majesty. Thus, the position of

¹⁷ Richard Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1995), 317.

the male and female figures are reversed from those in *Spring*, where Eve towers over Adam. Richard Verdi notes that many of Poussin's paintings illustrate the artist's preoccupation with depicting either the male or female in a subservient pose but suggests that the reason for doing so remains known only to the artist.¹⁸ Here, the viewer can only note the parallel that Poussin evidently wanted to draw between Adam and Eve and Ruth and Boaz. While Eve is associated with the fruit of the tree, Ruth becomes associated with the corn (other early seventeenth-century engravings often depict Ruth holding wheat as Ceres, classical goddess of the harvest); following an exegetical tradition first expressed by Hippolytus of Rome, the symbol of the wheat evokes the Eucharist and so Ruth becomes a redemptive figure as opposed to Eve who introduces evil by picking the fruit from the tree. The picture may contain other symbolism: the seated bagpiper on the right may suggest the future marriage of Ruth and Boaz—a marriage that according to medieval interpretation was symbolic of the union of Christ and the Church. Poussin may also have wished to include another of his favorite themes, namely exile: just as Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden, so too Ruth remains always the exile, always the Moabitess.

But there may be other reasons why Poussin chose this story to represent a key aspect of the cycle of life. The biblical story of Ruth moves from famine to harvest, from death to birth, and from emptiness to fullness, and all these movements are reflected in the natural landscape described by the text. Furthermore, as I pointed out in the introduction, Emerson highlights how in the biblical book of Ruth, there is no overt intervention by God in the course of human events: significant occurrences in life are attributed to chance (2:3 and 3:18). In the first instance, Ruth “happened” to be in the part of the corn field belonging to Boaz and in the second, Naomi advises Ruth to see “how things will turn out.” The idea of important events happening by chance would have appealed to Poussin. Emerson also draws attention to the hiddenness of God throughout the book; sometimes, “he is not even in the shadows.” This general absence of God from the story also may have appealed to Poussin and enabled him to continue the theme of the absent God with which he introduces the first painting, *Spring*. Finally, the emphasis throughout the book on *hesed*, the human obligation to act according to loyalty and kindness, corresponds to the qualities of virtue and right-living that the artist believed were essential when faced with the unpredictability of life and the inevitability of fate.

THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Images of Ruth were particularly popular in nineteenth-century Victorian Britain and in this category we can begin with William Blake's well-known and idiosyncratic version (1795), which

¹⁸ Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin*, 37.

conveys so effectively Ruth's utter determination to accompany Naomi and the latter's protestations that she has little to offer her in Bethlehem (figure 5). The close union of the two women contrasts with the isolated figure of Orpah, who slips away ashamedly. Blake's subdued colors, together with the barren mountains in the background, convey the tragedy and emptiness of the scene. Allusions to Ruth as a representative of ideal yet erotic love can be found in Blake's *Jerusalem* (ch. 3, 62.11). He lists Ruth with Bathsheba and other OT women as the "Maternal Line" culminating in Mary.¹⁹



Fig. 5. *Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab* (1795), William Blake (1757–1827). Watercolor. London, England. Inv.: 69-1894. Location: Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo Credit: V & A Images, London/Art Resource, NY.

Many of the Victorian paintings of Ruth are simply pictorial in that they seek to portray a virtuous and often romanticized Ruth, frequently with Naomi or with Boaz in the barley field, against an idyllic rural background. In some cases, the story is presented as a narrative, as in the triptych by Thomas Matthews Rooke (1876), which shows the three central moments of the story: Ruth's adherence to Naomi; her meeting with Boaz; and the birth of Obed. Two interesting "groups" of painting from this period are especially worthy of note: first, the distinctive Pre-Raphaelite style and second, what we might call "orientalist" paintings that seek to situate the story within a biblical Palestinian background.

The Pre-Raphaelite images are typified by William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. In 1865, Morris completed a stained glass window of Ruth and Boaz for the Sacred Heart Church, North Gosforth, England (figure 6). Unlike other stained glass of the period that included elaborate background scenes, Morris allows the two biblical characters to stand out in much greater relief without any distractions. Boaz and Ruth are identified by their sheaves of wheat while Ruth, in addition, holds in her cloak the six measures of barley Boaz has given her. Boaz is richly dressed, befitting his status, while Ruth is barefoot, a sign of her poverty.

¹⁹ See Leland Ryken, "Ruth," 669.



Fig. 6. *Ruth and Boaz*, c. 1865, William Morris (1834–1896). Sacred Heart Church, North Gosforth, England. ©Photo credit: Sheelagh Watson.

with a more appropriate background, but it also gave the paintings a more exotic appeal. In Merle Hughes's *Ruth in the Fields* (1876), the artist evokes such a scene: the sun shines on the golden harvest and on the dark skinned features of the figures who are dressed in Arab clothes. Ruth is not the fair skinned beauty of the Pre-Raphaelites but rather she wears the simple clothes of a young Arab woman. Although she is presented as an exotic figure, her head is partially covered, suggesting her modesty and virtue.

The painter James Tissot in his watercolor *Ruth Gleaning* (1896) actually traveled to Palestine in order to paint a series of paintings of biblical subjects, of which Ruth was one. Here, Ruth is presented as a young Palestinian girl in the cornfields of Bethlehem.

In Edward Burne-Jones's version of *Ruth Meets Boaz* (1879), Boaz, who dominates the left of the drawing, stretches out his hand toward Ruth, who raises her eyes to look at him (figure 7). The garments of both Boaz and Ruth are delicately drawn, suggesting the gracefulness of the figures themselves and the romanticism of this pivotal moment in the story.

Three orientalist examples from the same period illustrate the interest in situating both the character and the story of Ruth within its "original" topographical setting in the biblical Bethlehem. This was intended to provide the figures



Fig. 7. *Ruth and Boaz*, c. 1879, Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898). All Hallows Church, Allerton, Liverpool, England. ©Photo credit: Paul Young.

A final example is *Ruth and Naomi* by the painter Philip Hermogenes Calderon, who situated the scene of Orpah's departure and Ruth's clinging to Naomi against an exotic background of cactus plants, palm trees, rocks, and semi-desert landscape (figure 8). All of these orientalist paintings serve to make the characters more exotic, the love story more intense, the journey of Ruth more hazardous, and the general ambience more authentic and "biblical."²⁰

There can be no better way to conclude a review of the iconography of Ruth than by referring to the series of paintings by Marc Chagall, which he began in 1960. In this series of paintings, Chagall uses dazzling images of the burning heat of the

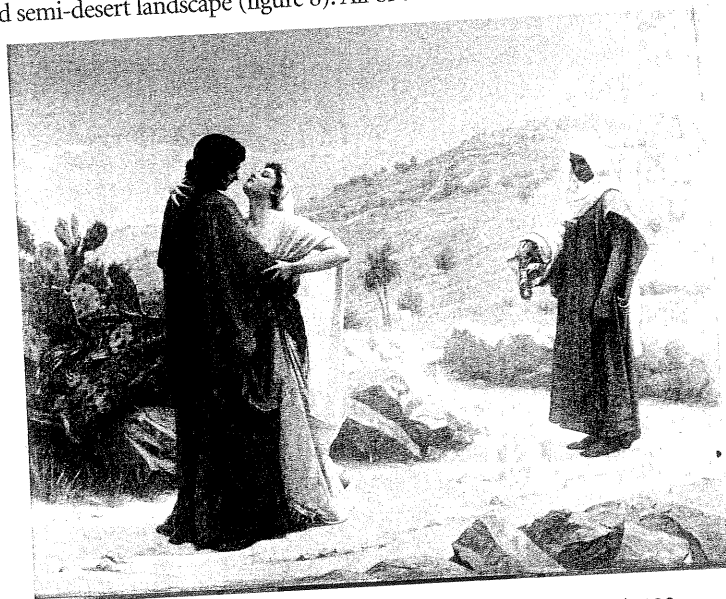


Fig. 8. *Ruth and Naomi* (1902), Philip Hermogenes Calderon (1833–1898). ©National Museums, Liverpool, England.

sun, the shades of the evening, and the shimmering moon to convey the passion and intensity of the relationship between Ruth and Boaz. His recurring colors are brown and a fiery red. Chagall selects five pivotal scenes from the book to form his narrative: Naomi with her two daughters-in-law, Ruth gleaning in the field, the meeting between Ruth and Boaz, Ruth at the feet of Boaz, and Boaz awaking to find Ruth at his feet. In the first painting, the three women huddle together; interestingly, Chagall depicts not the moment of Orpah's departure but a moment prior to that which shows the close union between the three women. The color is a subdued brown, but even here the sun throbs mercilessly in the background in anticipation of the events to come. In *Ruth Gleaning*, Chagall captures the burning heat of a day in late summer and the whole picture throbs with the heat of the sun. In the third of the series, *Ruth and Boaz Meet*, Chagall gives the impression of instant recognition, as if both figures know that their meeting was meant to happen. In the final two images, *Ruth at the Feet of Boaz* and *Boaz Awakes and Sees Ruth at his Feet*, the mood becomes more sensual

and sexual. As Ruth lies at the feet of Boaz, her breasts reflect the light of the shimmering moon, while in the final picture, both figures are naked. The throbbing red sun suggests the passion of their union, while 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.

CONCLUSION

In the history of the iconography of Ruth, it is remarkable how artists have almost always chosen scenes from the book that reflect pivotal aspects and turning points in the literary structure of the story. The iconographical tradition thus reflects and mirrors the nuances and sensitivities of the original author. It is also remarkable that the story of Ruth was popular in certain historical periods but not at all in others: Ruth does not feature in early Christian art nor significantly in the Italian Renaissance but, on the other hand, her story receives enormous theological reflection in the Middle Ages in both Jewish and Christian milieux. Ruth as a female icon becomes popular in seventeenth-century Protestant Holland and then again in Victorian Britain. Several of these pictorial images of Ruth are now used in modern editions of Bibles and in other religious and pedagogical literature but unfortunately most are taken out of context and detached from either their iconographical tradition or from their original historical setting. However, as the theology behind medieval illuminations of the book of Ruth—and the philosophical perspective that underpins Poussin's *Summer*—clearly demonstrates, images of Ruth that we all too often use as illustration were first used by the artists as interpretation to convey quite specific theological and philosophical insights. Ruth provides a pertinent case study as to how we should always try to seek out the interpretative insights biblical paintings offer us as a way of engaging afresh with the text rather than simply being content with using them as isolated and detached illustrations.

²⁰ Cheryl Exum has famously used the sexual ambiguities in this painting as her starting point to explore possible parallel ambiguities within the text in relation to Boaz and Naomi. See J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (JSOTSup 215; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 1996).