

the problem of the passage which tells of Obed's birth (4.13-17). Although Ruth is the one who marries Boaz and gives birth to a son and heir, Naomi is 'redeemed'. Her daughter-in-law is described as the agent of redemption, but not as the chief beneficiary (vv. 14-15).¹ From this point onwards Ruth is never mentioned, and Naomi is depicted as the child's nurse or adoptive mother (v. 16).² This seems strange while—presumably—the real mother is alive and well. The new-born is proclaimed to be Naomi's son by the neighbours involved in the naming ceremony, while Ruth (who was formerly named the biological mother) is completely excluded (v. 17); and the original, suitable name for the baby—as has been suggested by several scholars—should have been 'Ben Noam' or a similar form derived from *n'm*, after Naomi,³ rather than the present MT Obed.

Furthermore, Naomi and Ruth share the dominant role of the chief heroine or, rather, are placed in this position interchangeably. Let us follow up this statement chapter by chapter. Naomi is undoubtedly the central figure in ch. 1. In her capacity as acting head of the unfortunate family, she is the one who initiates the homecoming as well as the attempt to separate herself from her daughters-in-law. Ruth's loyalty to her is superbly touching; however, this does not elevate Ruth to a superior position. The Bethlehem women make a great fuss over Naomi, while Ruth is neither introduced nor referred to. On the contrary, Naomi categorically states that she is an empty vessel (1.21), a widow without hope. No mention is made of Ruth as a present or future means of consolation and change. Her silent

standard introductions to biblical literature and commentaries ad loc. For a discussion and summary of the problem see also J.M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979; The Biblical Seminar, 10; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 2nd edn, 1989), pp. 178-87.

1. Sasson, *Ruth*, pp. 162-63.
2. Hebrew *'ōmenet*, which is far from clear. Cf. BDB, KB, Gray (*Joshua, Judges and Ruth*), Sasson (*Ruth*), and P. Joüon, *Ruth: commentaire philologique et exégétique* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1953) for this verse.
3. See, for instance, Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, p. 404.

NAOMI AND RUTH*

Athalya Brenner

I

Many readers and commentators have noted that Naomi and Ruth¹ 'belong together and cannot be separated', and that 'the one would be nothing without the other'.² On the other hand, it has been suggested that the source of the story may have been 'a family saga, perhaps a straightforward story of the return of the widow Naomi and her levirate marriage... or that of her daughter-in-law Ruth'.³ The purpose of this article will be to try to explore the second possibility—namely, that the book of Ruth is composed of two still-distinct strands, a Naomi story and a Ruth story; that each of the two strands originally belonged to a separate, although parallel, folk-tale or novella; and that the seams which combine them are still discernible.

II

In its present form, the book of Ruth contains several difficulties which cannot be easily dismissed. Even if we exclude the final genealogical passage from our discussion (4.18-22),⁴ there is still

* This essay first appeared in VT 33.4 (1983).

1. The spelling of biblical names follows that of the NEB.
2. O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (trans. P.R. Ackroyd; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), pp. 481-82.
3. J. Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth* (Century Bible; London: Nelson, 1967).
4. Many scholars think that this passage, whose style is obviously different from the rest of the book, is an appendage. For details cf. the

presence is briefly alluded to at the end of ch. 1 only (v. 22), within a verse which abounds in problems of both syntax and contents.¹

In ch. 2 the situation dramatically changes. Ruth, hitherto the more passive and definitely secondary figure, is at the centre of the stage: she takes the initiative and starts acting independently. She dutifully shares her plans with Naomi, and the latter expresses her consent but remains inactive. Now the tables are turned: Naomi is mentioned incidentally to Ruth, not vice versa (2.6, 11-12); and is not referred to again until the end of the scene (v. 18), when Ruth comes back a victorious breadwinner. Even then Naomi remains no more than an adviser (vv. 19-20). Ruth manages to look after herself and her mother-in-law until the end of the harvest season without further instruction. Furthermore, Naomi has no part in Boaz's elevation of Ruth to be a 'handmaid', that is, family retainer (vv. 8ff.).

In ch. 3 Naomi continues where she left off (ch. 1). Her idea for solving her problem, which is also Ruth's problem, is well thought out. Ruth accepts her guidance and carries out her directives without a murmur (vv. 6ff.), and the seduction scene is executed in a suitably effective manner. While it is true that Ruth occupies the centre of the stage, she nevertheless—and in contradistinction to her previous mode of behaviour (ch. 2)—follows Naomi's scheme. Naomi's land is then redeemed,² and the change in her personal fortune attracts more attention than Ruth's (4.13-17; and see above). One gets the impression that, whenever both women are in public together, Naomi's position is more dominant (as befits their family relationship); in private, on the other hand, they exchange roles: at times Naomi is the leading figure, at others Ruth.

How can this state of affairs be explained? It can be argued that this type of thing does happen in 'reality'. A person may either act overtly in order to further his or her aims, or he or she may choose a covert mode of behaviour, for example, to manipulate other people into doing his or her own work for him or

her. In both cases actor and acted upon, manipulator and manipulated, may derive equal or similar benefits from the results of their shared action. Hence, they may agree to exchange roles—either deliberately or else spontaneously, consciously or unconsciously—for their mutual benefit. To this line of argument we might answer: in this instance we are dealing with fiction, not with 'reality'. In fiction, more so than in 'real' life, this kind of role-exchange has to be not only plausible (and necessary to the advancement of the plot), but also essential. Otherwise, why employ such a clumsy device? So, is this see-saw movement between the two women essential to our story?

One imagines that the portrayal of Ruth as a more dominant character, together with an ending which posits her as the centre of attention and a prologue which establishes the special relationship between the two women, would convince us equally well. If so, there must be another principle behind the present structure of the book.

At this point we should perhaps refer back to our initial notion, namely, that Naomi and Ruth are inseparable, and ask: in what way do these two women belong together, so much that one is nothing without the other?¹ One possible answer sees them as the two faces of the same Eve, a composite figure which embodies two separate aspects of the same entity. These are youth's hopeful femininity on the one hand and aged, spent womanhood on the other. A similar concept underlies the ancient Greek Demeter-Persephone myth. This myth, to be sure, is partly analogous to the story of Naomi and Ruth, but also differs from it on a number of counts.²

1. Cf. the beginning of this article.

2. Demeter's chief concern is to be reunited with her daughter who, for her part, remains childless. Indeed, once the annual reunion between the two is arranged and accomplished Persephone has no need to become a mother herself: she can remain a perpetual child at her mother's side, at least for six months at a time. Naomi, on the other hand, worries about Ruth's childlessness, and Ruth's eventual motherhood serves to redeem them both. The emphasis on motherhood is the core of woman's existence in youth as well as in maturity. However, because both Greek and Hebrew stories (one a myth, the other a non-mythic tale) are linked to the cereal harvest, and because both of them

1. Jöüon, *Ruth*, pp. 45-46; Sasson, *Ruth*, pp. 36-37.

2. For the redemption problem see the summary in Sasson, *Ruth*, pp. 138-39 with literature cited and evaluated.

The suggestion that our book of Ruth is a mythic narrative, or that it contains straightforward allusions to a myth of dual femininity,¹ seems unwarranted by the text. Yet, neither Naomi nor Ruth seems to be a full, 'round'² figure in her own right. If we accept the notion that they both exemplify the principle of femininity—albeit in two distinct stages of its development—then the division of labour, initiative and reward between them is plausible, for the only difference between the two sides of the same coin (the elder woman and her younger counterpart) is their age.

What can we say against this line of interpretation? Its psychological, Jungian slant is self-evident. Even though it has the above-mentioned partial parallel in Greek literature, the analogy is far from complete or satisfactory. No literary connection (as differentiated from similarity of theme) for the two can be traced or established. The psychologists would probably respond by saying that no literary links need be proven since we deal here

feature an older and a younger woman who have a mother-daughter relationship, the analogy between them has been pointed out often enough. See M.H. Jameson, 'Mythology in Ancient Greece', in S.N. Kramer (ed.), *Mythologies in the Ancient World* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 251-52; E. Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of an Archetype* (trans. R. Manheim; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2nd edn, 1974 [1963]), pp. 307-309 and other index references to Demeter and Persephone-Kore. Cf. also M.C. Astour, *Hellenosemitica* (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

1. To the best of my knowledge, the fullest 'psychological' treatment of Ruth is—unfortunately—an unpublished one. This is a dissertation written by Dr Y. Kluger, who is a practising Jungian analyst, and presented to the Jung Institute in Basel. My thanks are due to Dr Kluger for letting me read his manuscript.

2. This famous term was coined by E.M. Forster. In his old but still valuable contribution to literary criticism, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1954) he defines (in ch. 4) a *dramatis persona* as 'round' if he/she can surprise us convincingly, while still remaining plausible. If it does not, or if its plausibility becomes impaired, then it is a 'flat', one-dimensional or symbolic figure. To my mind, the changes of initiative and role between Naomi and Ruth are not adequately grounded in the narrative (as it now stands); hence, the figures themselves are far from 'round'.

with primary archetypes, and archetypes are commonly stored within humanity's collective memory. Still, more than a general notion of similarity must be established if the principle of the two faces of femininity is to be applied to our book. And finally, no similar motif is to be found within the Hebrew Bible itself. (Naturally, this last argument cannot be considered a conclusive piece of evidence but only a supplementary one.)

III

Recently, a new commentary on the book of Ruth has been published by Jack M. Sasson (see above). One of the more interesting features of this commentary is Sasson's application of modern ethno-poetic criteria to the analysis and interpretation of the *dramatis personae*,¹ which he supplies Propp's categories of the *personae*,² which are applicable to fairy tales as well as to folk-tales. Accordingly, the book of Ruth is examined as if it were a folk-tale.

Propp's list includes the following figures (which, in his opinion, are common to all or most tales of the types just mentioned): (1) Villain, (2) Donor (provider), (3) Helper, (4) a Sought-for Person, or b. Father, (5) Dispatcher, (6) Hero (seeker or victim), (7) False Hero.²

If this list be applied to the book of Ruth, says Sasson, the three primary figures (whose influence on the development of the plot is the most crucial) are those of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. Naomi is then the Dispatcher who sets the Heroine Ruth on her quest and, ultimately, draws most of the benefits from this quest.³ Boaz fulfils more than one role: that of the Donor (ch. 2),⁴ and that of a 'new Hero, inasmuch as [he is] the Hero's Helper'.⁵ The Sought-for Person is the *gō'el* (Ruth's/Naomi's offspring), while the False Hero is the *p'loni 'almōni*.⁶

1. V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (ed. L.A. Wagner; Austin, TX, 2nd edn, 1968), pp. 74ff.
2. Sasson, *Ruth*, p. 201.
3. Sasson, *Ruth*, pp. 201-202.
4. Sasson, *Ruth*, p. 205.
5. Sasson, *Ruth*, p. 211.
6. Sasson, *Ruth*, p. 202. The complete analysis of character roles and

Although Sasson's approach is undeniably novel and attractive, it has its weaknesses. An initial 'state of lack' features instead of the 'villainy', which is well within Propp's scheme.¹ However, Boaz's activities must be analysed, within this frame of reference, in terms of at least two different roles—which is not impossible, but rather complicated and potentially misleading. Even more important is the fact that the chief difficulty—the apparent exchange of roles between Naomi and Ruth at various points in the plot—is not satisfactorily removed. Sasson explains Naomi's pronounced gain (ch. 4) from Ruth's actions (which she has instigated, ch. 3) by the general observation that the Dispatcher is the person who ultimately benefits the most from the Hero's toils. This is, indeed, quite true. Nevertheless, it does not clarify the literary necessity for Ruth's assuming of the initiative without having been dispatched (ch. 2). Nor does it justify the complete lack of reference to her at the end of ch. 4. Even though Naomi is the appropriate chief beneficiary of the plot, must her daughter-in-law be ignored altogether? It seems, therefore, that on these two counts our story, as it stands, does not wholly conform to Propp's scheme.

Similarly, Sasson's analysis of the movement forward and the functions of the plot could be criticized too. By describing the action in Propp's terms Sasson still does not account for the partial confusion between Ruth and Naomi. Propp allows for the repetition of one plot element and the movement ('function') resulting from it—namely, an initial act of villainy or a state of lack which sets the tale moving. In our case the first lack is Naomi's (ch. 1), the second Ruth's (chs. 3, 4) but Naomi's too (ch. 4). Sasson says that, in the second instance, 'The lack... is that of a husband for Ruth'; and adds (in brackets): 'This lack should not be confused with that of Naomi, the Dispatcher, the fulfillment of which will allow the tale to come to an end'.² According to this description Ruth's lack—later satisfied by Boaz—is that of a husband, while Naomi lacks a son and

plot functions, to which I shall refer presently, is to be found on pp. 203-204.

1. Sasson, *Ruth*, p. 203—Propp's junction viiia.
2. Sasson, *Ruth*, p. 207.

sustenance.¹ It seems to me that these fine distinctions are not borne out by the text. Initially, both Naomi and Ruth lack food, husbands and heirs.

Ultimately, both achieve a reversal of the problem of livelihood (not only Naomi); and there is no clear-cut distinction as to whose child the new-born is: it is as if he belongs, directly and simultaneously, to both of them. Again, in my opinion the difficulty is not resolved by stating that the Dispatcher always benefits by the Hero's actions. Benefits, yes, but—as in our case—to the point of supplanting the presumed Heroine, while at the same time exchanging roles as well? This difficulty is sustained even after the application of Propp's method. Perhaps we should turn now to another avenue—that of a historical analysis. As such, my hypothesis does not contradict Sasson's application of Propp's scheme, but merely seeks to supplement it at its weaker spots.

IV

My working hypothesis and starting point is that, once upon a time, there existed two (oral?) tales. Both tales shared a common main theme, a theme which is well known from patriarchal and other stories: the reversal of feminine fortune (a destitute/barren woman becomes the mother of a hero/important person). Both tales originated in the same geographical (Bethlehem of Judah) and social (the Judahite Perez family)² milieu. In each of these supposedly local family traditions we can discover a convergence of various themes which are found elsewhere too—in the Torah and the Former Prophets.³ In other words, the topic and structure of the two tales were similar, although they differed in details of plots or sub-themes. In each narrative

1. Sasson, *Ruth*, pp. 208-209, 213.
2. The genealogies of the tribe of Judah, with the descendants of Perez among them, are mentioned in the following places: Gen. 38.29, 46.12; Num. 26.20; Ruth 4.12, 18ff.; Neh. 11.4-6; 1 Chron. 2.4-5, 4.1ff., 9.4ff.; Mt. 1.2-6.
3. Such as in the stories told about the Matriarchs (Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel) and their handmaids; Samson's mother; and Hannah (Samuel's mother).

only one of the two leading women (Naomi and Ruth) featured as the sole heroine. Let us call the Naomi story 'Variant A' and the Ruth story 'Variant B', and attempt to reconstruct them side by side.

	A. <i>The Naomi Story</i>	B. <i>The Ruth Story</i>
Heroine	Naomi (Judahite).	Ruth (foreigner; link by marriage).
Marital status	Elder widow, bereaved mother, in exile.	Young and childless widow, in own home-land.
Economic position	Destitute, but still has some land in Bethlehem.	Destitute—no land, no apparent source of income, no protection.
Starting point	Return (alone from Moab to Bethlehem). ¹	Spontaneous migration ² from home-land to the unknown—dead husband's land.
Expectations	Reversal of fortune (to previous position of wife and mother).	Change—reunion with late husband's unknown family.
Additional difficulties	Long absence.	Lack of recognition and connections.
Plot	Naomi comes back, is recognized; still has title or rights of sorts to family's land, and must be redeemed or	Ruth appears at the unknown land. Using courage and initiative, she manages to introduce herself to

1. Cf. the same starting point in the patriarchal 'reversal of fortune' scheme (within the framework of the divine promise), viz. famine—exile—apparent loss of hope—reversal—return.

2. A voluntary migration, not even dictated by a divine command (Cf. Abram, Genesis 12). This is a completely new theme, the opposite of the negative 'foreign woman' theme that we find in Proverbs 1-9 (if, indeed, the phrase 'foreign woman' here refers to someone from a foreign land), the Deuteronomic writings, and Nehemiah.

released from ties. She calls on Boaz,¹ who redeems her and her land after discouraging the other *gô'el*. A son is born, and later an heir, and family line and estate are retained and Naomi's fortune fully reversed.

Outcome	Satisfactory solution.	Satisfactory and surprising.
Main themes	Reversal of fortune (status and land). The older woman is reinstated and becomes a mother.	Reversal of fortune. A young, defenceless widow becomes a foremother of a dynasty. A stranger joins Judahite society and religion voluntarily, and becomes integrated through her wit, efforts, looks and faith.

After having reconstructed the two hypothetical tales, we should note the following considerations:

1. Variant A (Naomi) is closer to the patriarchal and other exceptional birth stories (Samson's mother, Hannah) than B, for the latter contains fewer themes of the types recurrent in the former and its parallels.
2. Variant B introduces favourably a relatively new theme: the integration of a foreign young woman into Judahite society.
3. In both stories the 'happy ending' serves to reinforce the existing social order.
4. Some of the items which appear in each of the variants are either similar (childlessness, destitution, later marriage and birth) or else compatible (knowledge about the heroine's right to a piece of family property). Other factors, though, would be

1. Cf. Volz and Gunkel (mentioned in Sasson, *Ruth*, p. 245).
2. Sasson, *Ruth*, pp. 48-57.

incompatible. These are the different ages cited, the ethnic origin, and the names. Therefore, it is impossible to use only one version—even after bringing into it some elements of the other one—without losing a substantial part of the flavour that marks the second (whatever the choice for the 'basic text' may be). If one wants to preserve the chief features of both stories, they have to be joined in a way that will retain the two heroines, will supply them with a meaningful relationship, and will somehow reconcile (for the sake of credibility) all or most of the conflicting features.

5. The only way to do that is to bind the two women in a simulated mother/daughter relationship which fits both variants—it does not cancel out either Naomi's difficulties or Ruth's troubles. (A true mother/daughter relationship will not do, for then part of the inheritance problem—in the absence of male kin—is solved as a matter of course.) This way most of the main themes common to A and B, or unique to any one of them, can be included in the combined version and the differences minimized, if not disposed of altogether. Thus Naomi, the older woman, is made foster-mother for Ruth's baby.

6. One ought to remember that the Ruth story (Variant B) is an independent story only in the sense that it is one item in a series: the third instalment, so to speak, in a series which begins with Lot's daughters and the birth of Moab and Ammon (Gen. 19.30-38) and continues with Tamar's tale (Genesis 38). All three stories are linked by common themes (foreign women,¹ Moab; the seduction of a male relative for the purpose of giving birth to a male heir; the continuation of the blood line through sexual relations or marriage with a male relative; the author's positive evaluation of the woman's initiative, at least in the cases of Tamar and Ruth),² and by the fact that they belong to King

1. Tamar, too, is considered foreign by some modern commentators.

2. Even the story of Lot's daughters, if originally an ethnic non-Israelite legend, might have been a heroic tale praising their courage or initiative. Only later, after it had been integrated into the Israelite framework, was the story misinterpreted and used as a crude joke against Israel's neighbours. This is supported by the fact that the author's attitude towards the other two women (Tamar and Ruth) is quite respectful.

David's genealogy. Indeed, the three stories anticipate David's foreign connections and his weakness for women by overtly claiming that these two things were in the king's blood. Thus elements of the Ruth story which relate to King David's heritage could not have been easily dismissed by the author-compiler. On the other hand, the Naomi story contains patriarchal themes (see above) which were probably well known and loved by listeners and authors alike. In short, the author of the combined version (our MT book of Ruth) could neither drop one variant—or parts of it—in favour of the other, nor commit himself or herself by deciding which one was 'truer' or had the greater literary and didactic merit.

7. The final combined version is not without flaws, for the author refuses to part with themes of the original tales even when they become a hindrance rather than an asset. As a result, the book suffers from some unevenness and inconsistencies. The chief difficulties arising from the joining process seem to be: (a) the exchange of roles and dominant positions between Naomi and Ruth at various points of the plot; (b) a tension underlying the motherhood of either Naomi or Ruth, or both; (c) the redemption problem: who is being redeemed—Naomi, Ruth or both?

V

It is widely recognized that in some cases of doubt authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible, especially those of the Torah and the Former Prophets, preferred to combine sources rather than completely to suppress a given source or tradition in favour of another. In so doing they sometimes deleted redundant passages, while at other times leaving parallel materials side by side, contradictions and all. Two such cases from the Pentateuch spring immediately to the mind: the story of the flood (Genesis 7-8); and the story of the town/city (Gen. 11.1-9) which, since Gunkel, has been acknowledged (albeit not unanimously) as a composite narrative in which two similar but originally different tales converge.¹ In both cases the principle and structure of the

1. H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (HKAT; repr.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck &

two single tales underlying the final MT versions are quite close, although the contents and means are different. Faced with such a situation, the authors probably preferred to combine two variants rather than to elide one of them. We might suppose that the force of tradition, the author's respect towards both versions and, consequently, this inability to determine which one should be used as an exclusive source were the considerations that informed his decision to create a composite story. I have advanced the hypothesis that a similar process determined the composition of the book of Ruth. As corroborating evidence I shall cite one more example, this time from the Writings—the book of Esther.

The principle of source combination is used in the book of Esther too, but in a different manner. Within this literary composition there is an abundance of—and fondness for—double structures, be they on the lexical-grammatical or the contents-plot level. The examples for each category are too many to be enumerated here, and the interested reader is referred elsewhere.¹ Let me just note the feature which is of the most relevance to the problem under discussion. The author makes use of two chief themes or strands which represent two distinct types of folk-tales, and which are consciously(?) interwoven into one unit. These are the story of the two viziers competing for the king's grace (in this case, Haman and Mordecai), and that of the two women competing for the king's heart and the position of queen (Vashti and Esther).² The two strands³ were modified and

Ruprecht, 3rd edn, 1964 [1910]), pp. 92-97; B. Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), p. 153; H. Gressman, *The Tower of Babel* (New York: 1928).

1. Cf. A. Brenner, 'Esther Through the Looking Glass', *Beth Miqra* 86 (1981-83), pp. 267-78 (in Hebrew).

2. Cf. E. Bickermann, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), pp. 172-73.

3. For another two-strand theory for the book of Esther see H. Cazelles, 'Note sur la composition du rouleau d'Esther', in H. Gross and F. Mussner (eds.), *Lex tua veritas: Festschrift für Hubert Junker* (Trier: Paulinus Verlag, 1961), and also for another viewpoint D.J.A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of a Story* (JOTSUP, 30; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984).

then worked together so that they would serve the main theme of the book, which is the reversal of fortune—from threatened extinction to victorious revenge—of the Jewish community in Susa and its environs.¹

To be sure, the combination of two distinct, although similar, sources into one narrative (as in Gen. 7-8 and 11.1-9 and, as I have attempted to show, in Ruth) is not the same as the conscious use of two types of tale in a wider framework. The former technique (incorporation of two traditions/tales with minimum deletion of contents and themes) is simpler and probably earlier.

It is through the repeated literary practice of creating composite tales out of distinct but similarly structured and motivated narratives that the latter technique (use of different tales/tale types within or in the service of a wider framework) could have become acceptable. The flood story, the tower/city narrative and the book of Ruth possibly represent an earlier stage of Hebrew literary development, the book of Esther a later stage, one that could have evolved only through the acceptance, repeated use and diffusion of its predecessor.

VI

So far I have dealt with the process that led to the composition of Ruth. Inasmuch as I have commented upon the relationship between Naomi and Ruth, this was mainly linked to the problems inherent in the narrative and which could have arisen from its (admittedly hypothetical) composite nature and double-barrelled history. I think, however, that a few words regarding the end product (our MT Ruth) as a literary unit complete in itself are in order here.

Naomi and Ruth function harmoniously as a team. Whatever the internal shifts in the balance of power may be, they are in the struggle for survival together and thus cooperate. Naomi is the senior, Ruth the junior partner. Naomi does her duty by her

1. Thus the reversal of fortune undergone by individuals—be they (from the author's point of view) the heroes or their adversaries—is secondary, for its function is to highlight and enhance the fate of the community as a whole.

daughter-in-law—she tries to dissuade her from coming to Bethlehem and later propels her towards Boaz. Ruth, however, goes one step further. She is actually motivated not only by duty and obedience, but also by love for her mother-in-law. Her affection and respect are her hallmark. As the neighbours say to Naomi (4.15), Ruth's love makes her more useful than ten male offspring. This emphasis on the emotional commitment of one woman towards another is very special (cf. Boaz's words to Ruth, 3.11-12). A quick glance at the fights and squabbles of women, handmaids and rival sisters in the book of Genesis, for instance, will verify this at once. In that sense Ruth is a unique character, a symbol of unconditional love and loyalty. The impact of this love-motif on the reader is so strong that—in the last analysis—it lends the story depth and credibility, and serves as a focal point which unites the various strands of the plot.

RETURNING HOME:

RUTH 1.8 AND THE GENDERING OF THE BOOK OF RUTH*

Carol Meyers

As one of the two biblical books bearing a woman's name, the book of Ruth has attracted considerable attention from feminist biblical scholars and also from women seeking to reclaim their biblical foremothers. Clearly Ruth deserves such attention. Unlike Esther, the other book with a woman's name, Ruth is almost entirely a woman's tale. Esther as heroine shares the limelight to a certain extent with Mordecai; and King Ahasuerus as well as his vizier Haman have prominent roles. Males enjoy no such foregrounding in Ruth. To be sure, Boaz is indispensable to the story; yet he hardly plays a central role.¹ Ruth the

* Somewhat different versions of this paper have appeared as "To Her Mother's House": Considering a Counterpart to the Israelite *bêt 'ab'*, in D. Jobling, P.L. Day and G.T. Sheppard (eds.), *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1991), pp. 39-51, 304-307; and as 'Behind the Veil of Scriptural Androcentrism: "The Mother's House" in Ancient Israel', in T. Frymer-Kensky (ed.), *Women in Religion and Society* (forthcoming).

1. See A. LaCocque, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 111. LaCocque also points out that Boaz's appearance does not interfere with the central role of the Naomi-Ruth pair; the story follows Ruth and Naomi and not Boaz after the wedding, with Boaz's role as parent of Obed virtually ignored (except in the concluding genealogy, which is possibly an addition to the tale and in any case stands distinct from the narrative). Indeed, the Midrash on Ruth also sees Boaz as secondary—it has him die after only one day of marriage (*Ruth Zuta* 55; *Lekah Tov* [Ruth] 4.17).