

A woman praised by women is better than a woman praised by seven men

James Alfred Loader

Institut für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft und Biblische Archäologie

University of Vienna

Professor Extraordinarius, UNISA

Abstract

The title, a parody on Ruth 4:15bb and Proverbs 31:28, counterposes the motif of praise in the final scene of what is probably the opus classicum for the foregrounding of women in the Old Testament with the same motif in a text notorious for praising women into subservience. After a short presentation of the text of Ruth 4:13-17, its main ideas and compositional relationships with the rest of the Book, the focus falls on the praise of the women of Bethlehem, its presuppositions, logic, use of terms and the role of its speakers in the story. It is concluded that a non-feminist, intentional reading highlights the critical perspective of women in the narrative, which means that the gist of mainstream feminist readings of the Ruth story is corroborated even from a perspective independent of feminist hermeneutic.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Book of Ruth is a traditional focal point for attention to the female and the feminine in the Bible. Long before the advent of feminism, this story was valued for both its narrative quality and its documentation of ancient Hebrew morphology, especially the documentation of rare feminine verb forms of the third and second person. But since the introduction of a plethora of new reading strategies and fresh insights from the feminist perspective, the Ruth novella has waxed into a focal point of major issues in present-day scholarship. One of these is addressed by Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes in the following terms:

In recent years the hypothesis of a women's culture has been set up (in various forms) by anthropologists, sociologists and socio-historians in order to connect with the primary cultural experiences of women as expressed by women (despite the prevailing

A woman praised by women is better than a woman praised by seven men

androcentricity of interpretive theories and frameworks). With the aid of the concept of women's culture a distinction can be made between the roles, activities, preferences and rules of behaviour prescribed for women and those activities, preferences and functions which arise from the lives of women themselves.

(Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:135)

Taking her cue from cultural anthropology and feminist literary criticism, she continues:

Orally transmitted songs or stories are always, though in varying degrees, the products of a collective process. Even if, as in the case of Ruth, the interplay between the narrator and public can only be advanced as a hypothesis it is nevertheless highly plausible that this story is indeed a collective creation of women's culture, a story shaped by the cooperation between (a tradition of) wise women narrators and their actively engaged (predominantly female) audience.

(Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:138-139)

In what follows, I propose to contribute to her suggestion by offering some observations of my own on the words of the townswomen in Ruth. I shall try to avoid being influenced by such hypotheses or feminist reading in general, since that would mean being slanted towards confirming the proposal and therefore contribute little. I shall therefore rather develop my argument beginning from observations put forward in my own commentary on the Book of Ruth (Loader 1994:89-98). A principal aspect of this is that the importance of the comments by the townswomen in Ruth 4:14-15.17 is highlighted by the long-distance parallelism to their words in Ruth 1:19.

2. THE TEXT AND ITS STRUCTURE

The passage in question is the final scene of the story and, but for the genealogy following it, the last section of the book. Despite the misgivings of Fischer (2001:67-76), the genealogy of vv 18-22 is a secondary corroboration of King David's lineage, since it incorporates the house of Boaz in the house of Perez, which is at variance with the comparison of, and therefore distinction

between the two houses in v 12.¹ But in vv 13-17 the threads come together, which in itself lends the passage weight. Although this is as joyful a conclusion as could be wished for, it is not your ordinary happy ending, for it contains a serious critical note. We will now turn our attention to this. The text itself is deceptively simple in its construction:

<p>13 וַיִּקַּח בְּעוֹ אֶת־רוּת וַתְּהַיָּלַל לַאֲשֵׁרָה וַיָּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה לָהּ הַרְבִּיּוֹן וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן:</p>	<p>A Marriage and birth</p>
<p>14 וַתֹּאמְרָנָה הַנְּשִׁים אֶל־נְעָמִי בְרוּךְ יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִשְׁבִּית לָךְ גֹּאֵל הַיּוֹם וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל: 15 וְהָיָה לָךְ לְמָשִׁיב נֶפֶשׁ וּלְכֹלֵל אֶת־שִׁבְתְּךָ כִּי כָלַתְךָ אֲשֶׁר־אֶהְבְּתְךָ יִלְדֶתוּ אֲשֶׁר־הִיא טוֹבָה לָךְ מִשְׁבַּעַת בָּנִים:</p>	<p>B Blessing</p>
<p>16 וַתִּקַּח נְעָמִי אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וַתִּשְׁתַּהוּ בְּחִיקָהּ וַתְּהַיָּלַל לַאֲמֵנָת:</p>	<p>C "Adoption"</p>
<p>17 וַתִּקְרָאנָה לוֹ הַשְּׂכֵנֹת שֵׁם לֵאמֹר יֶלֶד־בֶּן לְנְעָמִי וַתִּקְרָאנָה שְׁמוֹ עוֹבֵד הוּא אֲבִירִישִׁי אֲבִי דָוִד:</p>	<p>D "Naming"</p>

Sections on what happens (A and C) alternate with sections on what is said (B and D). The former are each time introduced by the verb לקח, followed by ו and ליה-ה (italics above), and the latter by the third person feminine plural of

¹ Cf the survey by Sasson (1995:179-180). Zakovitch (1999:172-175) refers to a "joining" of an unimportant Elimelech branch of the clan with the central Perez branch, but does not consider the implication of the bifurcation of the two houses (v 12), who are not joined through the events, but according to the genealogy are part and parcel of the same branch. Neither does Zenger (1986:93) consider this, which enables him to go as far as ascribing the very elements in tension (vv 11-12 and 18ff) to the same editor. Van Wijk-Bos (2001:62-63) presents a balanced judgement in being prepared to consider both alternatives as possible. Pointing out that we must anyway deal with the genealogy on either count, she proposes to "fill in the gaps" of the male list by reference to the ancestral women mentioned in vv 11-12 as well as the words of the women in our section.

A woman praised by women is better than a woman praised by seven men

respectively אמר and קרא, followed by ו and קרא שמו (darkened above).² It is possible that vv 14-15 are an example of a genre that could be called “birth songs”, traces of which Van Dijk-Hemmes (1996:93-94) believes to have found in the Old Testament. The relationship of the motifs within the units is simple, consisting as it does of a straightforward chronological chain of events:

- 13 events: marriage – consummation – pregnancy – birth
- 14f words: blessing
- 16 events: taking of the child – placing on the lap – becoming a caretaker
- 17 words: calling a name for the child – giving him a name + identification

We will focus on the words of the women. They speak three times. In vv 14-15 they say 37 words (29 if only the orthographic units are counted), in v 17a 4 (3) words and in v 17b only one. The mere quantitative aspect of these statistics shows the heavy emphasis on the blessing of vv 14-15.

3. MOTIFS IN THE PASSAGE

3.1 Section A

3.1.1 In verse 13 the passage is *linked to the previous* one by the reference, “And so Boaz took Ruth ...” This association will prove to be of importance for our purpose, since in vv 1-12 a defined group of men chosen from the elders (עֲשָׂרָה אַנְשִׁים מִזְקְנֵי הָעִיר; v 2), the elders themselves (הַזְקֵנִים; v 11), and the assembly of the עַם of the town make up concentric circles of the town’s population who act as a male unit, since they all speak the same words and perform a unitary legal function (vv 1-12).³ The counterpart of this group is about to be introduced – a closed group of women, likewise speaking from one mouth. But also the female group is presented in concentric fashion: First they are called “the women” (הַנְּשִׂיִם, with the definite article, v 14), then a specified group of women, “the neighbour women” (הַשְּׂכִינֹת, with article, v 17). We shall return to the meaning of this below.

3.1.2 This verse is in itself germane to our present purpose. It contains signs about male and female roles and images corresponding completely to what we

² The symmetry in the structure of the passage is therefore further-reaching than observed by Fischer 2001:251 (where she follows Bush 1996:5), since not only vv 13 and 16 (as “happening” sections), but also vv 14f and 17 (as “saying” sections), contain lexeme parallels.

³ Testifying to deeds, marriages and commercial transactions (vv 9 and 11) is a male legal function.

find in the rest of the story – including, as we shall see, the rest of our passage. In accordance with what is to be expected in a patriarchal society, it is the man who “takes” the woman, who then becomes a wife “for” (לִי) him. The man “goes in” to the woman, but *it is Yahweh who gives* (נתן) pregnancy. Moreover, he gives pregnancy “to her” (לה) so that she can bear a child. It is thus a divine gift to the woman. Although there is nothing earth-shattering about the formulation of the verse, it subtly suggests the prominence of Ruth at the cost of Boaz. This is highlighted in at least three ways: first, in the context of the self-conscious roles actively played thus far by the women in the story, second, in the context of the female activity to follow in the passage, and third, because נתן is a *Leitmotiv* linking the beginning and the end of the story (cf 1:6, 9; 4:11, 12). V 13 relates directly to v 11, since the wish that Yahweh may “give” Boaz a son is fulfilled, but the focus is moved from male to female (cf Fischer 2001:252f). The male’s “giving power” (as e g expressed in Gn 30:1) is thereby relativised (as also realised by Jacob, cf Gn 30:2) and, by the same token, the position of the woman asserted (as in the interpretation of Leah, Gn 29:32).⁴ Still, the parameters remain that of a male-dominated society: the man “takes” and the woman can only achieve security by being “taken”.

3.2 Section B

In the speech of the women’s chorus there are several quite noteworthy things, together having the cumulative effect of underscoring its importance.

3.2.1 The son is called Naomi’s “redeemer” (גואל, v 14). But he is not her redeemer in the normal sense, that is, as the term has been used in the story up to now. Being redeemer has been the role played by his father Boaz, who, as the financially stronger clan member, had to bail Naomi out of her precarious situation. Having achieved that a couple of months earlier in tandem with a levirate marriage to Ruth, he finds that, whatever credit he may be entitled to for not having acted like Peloni Almoni (v 6), the townswomen don’t even think of him in these terms any more. What they are actually saying, is that Naomi will need *no* redeemer in future. In their opinion her grandson is also her own son, and as such will see to it that he “brings back her soul” and “supports” her in her old age. He will do what his deceased “brothers” Mahlon and Kilyon would have done, as sons are supposed to. Using the prophetic sounding formula (v 15), they seem to be quite sure that this will be the case. So the storyteller sidelines Boaz by having him sidelined in the view of the women of Bethlehem.

⁴ In these passages from the Rahel and Leah stories, precisely those two women who feature in the wish of Ruth 4:11 play the central roles.

A woman praised by women is better than a woman praised by seven men

3.2.2 This drift is enhanced even further by *the substantiation* offered by the women. How do they know that Obed will look after Naomi so well? “Because” (כי) Ruth is the one who bore him. That means Obed will take after his biological mother. She has already proven herself to be loyal to Naomi and to look after her. So the same could be expected of her son. This also highlights Ruth at the cost of Boaz. It is equally thinkable that Obed will do for Naomi what his biological father has done, notably being very considerate and kind to her in her plight as Boaz indeed was.⁵ But this is ignored. Since we are given no reason for this, the mere negative fact has its straightforward effect: the male perspective just is not there. What is told here is told from a *female* perspective.

3.2.3 The women know that the newly born son is to have great importance. This again picks up a contrasting element in the previous section and supplies an opposing element. In the wish of the men spoken in verse 11, only a local element appears. They wish Boaz a “name” in Bethlehem and its immediate vicinity (Ephratha). When the women speak, they also wish for a name to be made (“called out”), but this time the name has relevance for all Israel. The firm contrast, being paralleled as it is by several other elements, makes Zenger’s thesis of a secondary addition by an “Israel redaction” not only superfluous, but decidedly detrimental to the finely crafted fabric being woven by the storyteller (cf Zenger 1986:12-13, 28, 97). Of course this may suggest a royal perspective when read with verse 17b, but even on Zenger’s submission it does not have to. The words of the women have an appreciably *farther sighted* dimension than those of the men. The men wish Boaz importance in Bethlehem, the women wish “Naomi’s son” importance in the whole of Israel.

3.2.4 The *long-distance parallel* of the women speaking in these verses to those in 1:19 is significant. In Chapter 1, as here, they are also a defined group within a group: The “whole city” (כל-העיר) notices the returning Naomi and Ruth, but only the women among them speak (1:20). There the context is Naomi’s emptiness as she laments the loss of her husband and sons (1:21), here the context is her fullness as joy is expressed over a new son born for her (cf the explication of this fact in 4:17a). In 1:20-21 Naomi is bitter against Yahweh, here

⁵ This seems to have been missed by Fischer (2001:252), who is generally quite keen to observe aspects of a female point of view in the narrative, while Zenger (1986:96-98) underestimates not only the reference, but neglects the whole verse. Zakovitch (1999:169), somewhat surprisingly, finds the mentioning of Ruth “incidental” in the blessing. I would argue that the כי-clause in which she is mentioned without the use of her personal name is, on the contrary, quite basic since it provides the foundation for their view.

Yahweh is praised. Initially she experienced him to be the cause of her plight,⁶ whereas in the present context it is overtly said twice that Yahweh is the giver of the blessing (4:13b and 14a). Perhaps most importantly, the speaking women of Chapter 1 remain silent after Naomi's accusation of God, whereas here they speak out when she takes the gift of God to her bosom. They speak only when there is something to say. There is no answer to Naomi's problem as to the causality of suffering; therefore they eloquently say nothing (cf Loader 1998:135). But at the positive counter-pole of the story there is much to say; therefore the women comment eloquently on the causality of blessing in God *and* in humans. All of this illustrates the importance of the collective female voice in the Book of Ruth. Both in silence and in words the chorus women only comment on important things. Therefore their words should be treated according to the weight they carry.

3.2.5 “Bringing back the soul” (משיב נפש, v 15) may (also) refer to the new bounce expected to be brought into Naomi's existence by Obed, but the primary reference is to the life restored to her. In terms of her lament at the return to Bethlehem and especially in the recurring theme of the “name” to be established for her deceased son Mahlon, her emptiness means that her life has been drained. The significance of the fact observed by most commentators, that the women see *life restored to Naomi*, is that it has a negative side. Life is *not* seen to be restored to Mahlon, that is, to the normal male line to be “established” by Boaz as he himself sees it (vv 5, 10). The male perspective of Boaz is the normal genealogical one for which the institution of levirate marriage was designed. The female perspective of the chorus women concerns the personal blessing and happiness of another woman. This reveals the deeply personal aspect of the female perspective. The women do not focus on the typically male corporate personality to be kept intact, but on the individual aspect of a woman's physical and mental wellbeing.

3.2.6 This brings us to what is probably the most categorical and therefore the most daring element in the words of the chorus: the *relative construction* appended to their substantiation of the great expectations for Naomi's future (v 15b β): “she who is better for you than seven sons”. The relative clause follows another אֲשֶׁר-construction (v 15b α) in which the women refer to Ruth's love for Naomi. Ruth is not merely motivated by pragmatic considerations or even by social obligation, but by personal affection. That is the basis for the sweeping judgement that follows.

⁶ Cf Loader (1998:133), Tribble (1978:171) on the lament of Naomi.

A woman praised by women is better than a woman praised by seven men

- The formulation itself is *categorical*. Ruth is called “better than” (טובה מן) seven sons. The generic meaning of טוב is to be taken seriously for the very reason that the “goodness” of her relationship to Naomi is founded in love. Ruth is therefore called “better” in the encompassing, fundamental sense, not merely “useful”, as Brenner interprets it. Not the convenience of such a useful daughter-in-law, but the intimate relationship conveyed by the verb אהב is what makes Ruth special. Therefore she is better in the bold and sweeping general sense: better in all respects.
- The comparative element is *seven sons*.⁷ The significance of this is of course that they are male, but also that their number is seven. This number is ideal, pointing to completeness (Zakovitch 1999:169-170). Ruth is therefore better than any number of male offspring. One woman is in all respects better than any number of males. This involves an important matter of principle. Of course it cannot be logically construed to mean that all women are better in principle than all men, but it does add yet another sweeping aspect to the female perspective in their comparison of male and female. To their minds it *is* possible that one woman can outweigh men generally. That betrays the principle underlying the women’s judgement. Women are not intrinsically inferior to men. In fact, they may be superior. The social implication of this is fundamental, as we shall see shortly.
- The context for the judgement is Ruth’s love for Naomi. It has just been expressed by the root אהב, personal affection, not by חסד, group loyalty. Nevertheless the whole story is embedded in Ruth’s *practice of collective חסד*. She in fact does fulfil her obligation to the clan of her deceased husband, she does manage to establish Mahlon’s name within the social unit, she does her part to “build” the house of Israel and thereby she becomes a veritable national matriarch like Rachel and Leah, as the men of the town want her to be (4:11). This is also how Boaz judges her from his male perspective. He has noticed her love for Naomi (2:11a; 3:10), but relates it to her social role within her new people (2:11b; 3:9; 4:5, 10). When he calls her an אשת חיל (3:11), as the ideally functional housewife is labelled in the Book of Proverbs (Pr 31:10), that is the perspective from which he sees her. She is not just nice to her mother-in-law, but she is

⁷ Brenner (1993b:84) has a little lapse of memory when she declares the number to be ten. Perhaps she confuses the dictum of the women with that of one man who finds himself “better than ten sons” (1 Sm 1:8, a couple of verses further on in Bibles other than the Hebrew).

really all that an Israelite *man* could wish for.⁸ That means that male interests are the norm for judging what a good woman is.

- This is also the logic of the comparison with men. If Ruth's ideal goodness is measured by the extent to which she exceeds men, the latter are the *criterion* for gauging her quality. Even if she beats them hands-down, the norm is male.
- All of this is underscored by the narrative plot itself. Ruth achieves fulfilment within the traditional *patriarchal structures*. Only in a marriage can she achieve her goal and only in the role of motherhood can she attain the fullness that was not only taken away from Naomi (1:21), but equally from her. She needs a husband and a son in order to find the happiness denied her for so long.
- The elements of the comparison therefore contain *tensions* among themselves and with the framework of the story within which they are told. It is often noted in feminist expositions that the prevalent male-dominated or patriarchal social framework remains intact (e.g. Pardes 1992:101-102; Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:135; Fuchs 2000:89-90; Fischer 2001:254).⁹ However, they do not usually see this as an element of *narrative tension*. In this context the effect of the *de facto* acknowledgement of male dominance and interest is often accompanied by other observations. So Reimer (1994:103-104) argues:

Not surprisingly, given her earlier initiative, Ruth willingly becomes a wife. Becoming a mother, however, requires divine intervention. ... The phrase "the Lord gave her conception" refers neither to a biological problem that must be corrected nor to prayers for a child that must be answered. Here God intervenes not to facilitate a longed-for conception but almost, it seems, to force one. The absence of any description of Ruth's joy over birth or her maternal responsibilities – she neither names her child nor nurses him – reinforce the possibility that divine intervention was necessitated by Ruth's reluctance to become a mother.

⁸ This seems to be what Trible (1984:85) has in mind when she calls the elders at the gate "benevolent", but adds that they "threaten to subsume the concerns of [the] females to male perspectives" – which is exactly what the male voices in Pr 31:10ff do.

⁹ In speaking of a "design" offered by the book, Fischer intimates a conscious social model espoused as a "realistic counter-policy" ("realpolitisch mögliche[r] Gegenentwurf"), *vis-à-vis* offering women an impracticable revolutionary utopia in a patriarchal society. That implies that the Book of Ruth intends a clear programme for the social reality of the day.

A woman praised by women is better than a woman praised by seven men

But this does not eliminate the clash between the two poles. Even on the submission that Ruth is a willing bride but a reluctant mother, she *had* to become a mother. It would mean *a fortiori* that divine intervention took place on the side of the patriarchal interests, which in effect would heighten the tension appreciably.

The argument takes on a variant form in the idea that Ruth subverts sexual mores to uphold the posterity of her house. So Frymer-Kensky (2002:263) compares her sexuality in Chapter 3 with her foremother's incestuous sexual activity as this is narrated in the Sodom story (Gn 19:30-38):

[T]he unnamed mother of Moab and her much later descendant Ruth have much in common. Ruth, of course, does not commit incest; the incestuous relationship between the progenitors of a people is not a paradigm to be repeated in the real world of actual families. But she does aggressively pursue Boaz, and comes to his bed in the middle of the night. Like her foremother, Ruth does not consider herself bound by conventional mores when an important issue is at stake. Both women are faced with the problem of begetting children when they have no husbands, and both opt to search for a solution within the family, so that the house to which they are attached would survive. Ruth's story is like a less intense echo of the Moab story. Her situation is not as dire, and her act is not as drastic, but she and the daughters of Lot share a common thrust. When the posterity of their house is in peril, these women act unconventionally, even contra-conventionally, to preserve it. Subverting one cultural norm, conventional sexual mores, they reinforce and support an even more primal principle, paternal lineage.

It is quite true that Ruth is presented in the threshing-floor scene as a daring erotic adventurer.¹⁰ Whether this actually is subversion of the sexual mores, is – if not necessary – quite probable from the narrator's point of view, for not only did Ruth give Boaz the jitters in bed (וַיִּחַרְרַר ... וַיִּלְבַּת, 3:8), but so did the thought that somebody might find out about his spending a whole night with “the woman” (3:14). Nevertheless, her purpose and achievement was to “build the house”, that is, serve the interests of the male line. Even if she, at the instigation of Naomi (3:3f), subverted sexual customs, by that very act she paradoxically reinforced “a more primal principle, paternal lineage”, as Frymer-Kensky has to admit.

Likewise Pardes (1992:106-107) notices the force of the narrative plot that carries the whole story:

¹⁰ Elsewhere I have argued at length in support of a reading of Ch 3 according to which ambiguity enhances the erotic dimension of the encounter between Ruth and Boaz (Loader 1993:18-30).

Perhaps as a way of assuring the joint motherhood of Ruth and Naomi, neither of them names the child. It is the women of Bethlehem who, in a collective female voice, give him the name "Obed". One may well wonder why the plot of female bonding is the plot of fertility. ... [At stake] is male awe concerning female bonding and a reassurance that such bonding need not necessarily hinder the continuation of the line or the growth of grain.

She is certainly right in pointing out that female bonding between Naomi and Ruth (I would include the townswomen) takes place in a "plot of fertility". But this is again paradoxical. The male interest is enhanced by the self-conscious (and successful) development of the female interest, according to Pardes so that males can be reassured that female bonding does not hinder male lineage. Far from easing the tension between the male and female perspectives, this demonstrates yet another literary heightening within the narrative.

- There is more to this than meets the eye (cf Brenner 1993c:141). What these authors, without developing the idea of inner-literary tension, have drawn attention to, is the existence of a paradoxical tension between female and male perspectives. I would suggest that we should take one step further and consider the *social reality* on the one hand and the *intention of the story-teller* on the other. The very fact of the tension between the two vying perspectives *in* the story demonstrates a tension between the *intention* of the story-teller and what Fischer (2001:254) calls the "only realistic possibility", that is, in the extra-literary social context of the time. There is no question about the historical reality of the social organisation portrayed and its practical invincibility. Therefore, plausibility requires male interests to prevail in the story (read with or without the male genealogy). Reaching the end, we find that men have remained the masters and their values have carried the day. Illustrating the limits of the concept of text-immanent reference, the author realises the impossibility of denying this without sacrificing credibility. The story could not possibly have ended with a revolutionary utopia (Fischer) as Ruth takes over Boaz's fields, finds fulfilment in her own social security, perhaps giving Boaz a job as overseer, or in which Naomi manages Elimelech's field in defiance of the social customs of redemption, levirate and child-bearing. The only realistic way to survive and lead a meaningful existence at the time was within a patriarchal society. That is the *social reality* depicted in the story and within which the story was told. But even if it could not be overthrown, it was not unassailable. Its stereotypes could be undermined, its weaknesses could be exposed and its muted

A woman praised by women is better than a woman praised by seven men

minorities could be heard. That is what the story-teller has done with such sophistication that the critical element cannot be denied *intentional status*. As Fischer rightly states, the author does not instigate a revolution. She is better than seven revolutionaries, because in this way the socially muted voice of women has become an audible literary voice. That is why the male figurehead Boaz could be sidelined in the final scene and even be eliminated in the Jewish reception of the story, dying the day after the wedding, as the Midrash of Ruth tells us. He had obviously only just survived the night before on the threshing floor, but could not live up to his name (“In him is power”) through another night. Ruth does seem to be better than men on several counts.

On this basis my thesis can now be formulated: There is a clear literary *polarisation* of male and female perspectives in the story, the subtle handling of which reveals a *critical* point of view adopted by the story-teller. This in turn exposes not only a differentiation of the interests and values of women and men within the given extra-literary society, but indeed the *controversial* manifestation of the female perspective versus the dominant male one. Although the literary expression of the issue by a male author is thinkable, the story’s perception of social reality is so delicately attuned to the nuances of practical female experience that the *authorship of a woman* seems more likely¹¹.

Turning to what follows on Section B, we find that the rest of the passage corroborates this.

3.3 Section C

In verse 16 there is a suggestive gap. The child (יָלֵד) points back to the deceased “children” of Naomi referred to by the same word in 1:5 even though they were married men when they died. They were *her* children (the third person feminine singular suffix is used in Chapter 1), and the suggestion is that the new born son takes their place. Becoming an אִמָּתָא for the boy must refer to what transpired on the spot, since the calling of a name “for” him (v 17a) and the naming of the boy “Obed” (v 17b) are specific events that follow after this act. It thus cannot be a resumé based on knowledge of what happened later in the boy’s life, but must mean the specific act by which Naomi became his caretaker, whether we choose to dub it “adoption” or not. The emphasis is on Naomi and *her* new role, just as it was on her interest when the chorus women spoke of Yahweh’s looking after *her* (v 14), of *her* soul being brought back, and *her* security in old age (v 15). So the author slants all recent events concerning

¹¹ So Goitein 1988:1-33; Bledstein 1993:116-133; Fischer 2001:93-94; cf. Campbell 1978:22-23.

redemption, levirate, preservation of lineage and agricultural property away from the collective perspective of the men sitting in the city gate and towards the individual woman, Naomi, just as the townswomen perceive these events solely in relation to her interests. Without being denied, the male, collective and clan interests are merely ignored. Which, as a powerfully critical gap, supports the thesis just outlined.

3.4 Section D

The same effect is created in the last section (v 17). Not only important for explicitly calling the child Naomi's son, it speaks of the calling (קרא) of a name (שם) in two differing constructions. In the second case the normal construction (x קרא שמו) is used, but parallel to an unusual one at the beginning of the verse (קרא שם לאמר). The neighbour women (שכנות) do the naming, not the mother herself, which is usually the case, or the father, which is occasionally the case¹². Although Fischer (2001:257) finds it "not unusual" that women present at the birth may name a child, both her examples are uncertain and at least ambiguous (cf Gen 35:17-18 and 38:28-30). In the context of the rest of our passage, however, this is only another element in the foregrounding of women. The real significance becomes apparent when we consider the first half of the verse: "And the neighbour women called a name for him, saying, 'a son has been born to Naomi!'" Since this is not the giving of the proper name, the name they call out "for" him must relate to their own explanation, which is added directly (לאמר): he belongs to Naomi. The proclaimed name is therefore Naomi. The child is thus associated with Naomi, he receives his identity from her. So he is associated, not with his biological father Boaz and his clan, not even with his father in terms of levirate law Mahlon and the Elimelech clan, but with an individual woman whose relationship to him fuses motherhood with the function of caretaker/nurse and grandmother. Whoever finds this complicated, finds it complicated in terms of rigidly cast roles as defined by traditional patriarchal society. For the women, all of this recedes into the background. All that matters, is the personal happiness of one woman among them. So their voice may be muted to the men who sit in the city gate listening to themselves testifying important legal matters, but we as readers hear them loud and clear. By contrast, we don't hear the men any more, and the women don't even consider the strictures of social roles and functions or legal ramifications and logical compatibilities. *Of course* women who think this and entertain these priorities will think that one female of the Ruth calibre is better than a host of men who can uphold what they legislate in the town gate.

¹² Cf Gn 29:32-35; 30:24; 35:18; 1 Sm 1:20.

4. A SOCIAL PHENOMENON?

In conclusion I return to Van Dijk-Hemmes's proposal of "women's culture" as a possible social setting for the kind of phenomenon we have found. At face value this sounds very plausible, since it is well known in many cultures that women bond. This is to be expected even more in societies where women are restricted to male-defined roles prescribed for them. In her study on informal women's groups, Carol Meyers (1999:110-127) focuses on our passage, but also introduces ethnological data in support of her argument for taking the existence of such networks seriously. She says (Meyers 1999:122):

Women's networks in small agricultural communities function in several important economic and social ways. The nature of women's daily routines, given the division of labor by gender, and also the spatial organization of Iron Age villages, with domestic clusters adjoining each other, meant that Israelite women had more access to each other than men did to other men. Many repetitive household activities performed by women, such as certain food preparation tasks would have been done in each other's company. Such regular and intimate contact creates familiarity; and the shared tasks, problems and experiences create a sense of identity. Familiarity and identity foster the solidarity of the women of a community – the neighborhood associations visible in the Bible.

I think that what we have found in our passage can plausibly be seen as the literary expression of such a social situation. The argument offered above fulfils all three criteria offered by Van Dijk-Hemmes (1993:136), notably a "less than normally androcentric" intent, "(re)definition of reality from the female perspective", and "defineable [*sic*] differences between the view of the male and the female figures." In addition, the clear definition of the women's chorus as a confined group, speaking as a single unit, adds to the picture. We have seen above that they span the story from the first to the last chapter and comment on highly significant issues. But they also figure directly after the male group of the first half of Chapter 4. These men are benign, as are the men who speak in Proverbs 31 and sit in the city gate thinking their wives find them important (Pr 31:23). But the women of the Ruth story are not only important themselves, they are also defined as a distinct unit *over against* their male counterparts. This identity is already apparent in the returning scene, where the whole community is excited, but only the women speak when they recognise an old comrade from their group.

The motifs in our story attain profile and colour when read as testimony to the social phenomenon of female networking. And so does the thesis that it is a female creation.

Works consulted

- Bledstein, A J 1993. Female companionships: If the Book of Ruth were written by a woman ..., in Brenner 1993a:116-133.
- Brenner, A (ed) 1993a. *A feminist companion to Ruth*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. (The Feminist Companion to the Bible 3.)
- Brenner, A [1983] 1993b . Naomi and Ruth, in Brenner 1993a:70-84.
- Brenner, A 1993c . Naomi and Ruth: Further reflections, in Brenner 1993a:140-144.
- Brenner, A 1999. *Ruth and Esther*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. (The Feminist Companion to the Bible, Second Series 3.)
- Bush, F W 1996. Ruth 4:17: A semantic wordplay, in Coleson & Matthews 1996:3-14.
- Campbell, E F 1978. *Ruth: A new translation with introduction, notes, and commentary*. Garden City: Doubleday. (The Anchor Bible 7.)
- Coleson, J E & Matthews, V H (eds) 1996. *Go to the land I will show you*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
- Fischer, I 2001. *Rut übersetzt und ausgelegt*. Freiburg: Herder. (HTThKAT.)
- Fuchs, E 2000. *Sexual politics in the biblical narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. (JSOTS 310.)
- Frymer-Kensky, T 2002. *Reading the women of the Bible: A new interpretation of their stories*. New York: Schocken.
- Goitein, S D [1957] 1988. Women as creators of biblical genres. *Prooftexts* 8, 1-33.
- Kates, J A & Reimer, G Twersky (eds) 1994. *Reading Ruth: Contemporary women reclaim a sacred story*. New York: Ballantine.
- Loader, J A 1993. Erotic allusion in Ruth 3. *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 75(1) (NS 4), 18-30.
- Loader, J A 1994. *Ruth: een praktische bijbelverklaring*. Kampen: Kok. (TT.)
- Loader, J A 1998. Noomi und Hiob, Schubert und Mahler: Überlegungen zu einem alttestamentlichen Beitrag in Wien. *WJTh* 2, 125-142.
- Meyers, C 1999. Women in the neighborhood: Informal female networks in ancient Israel, in Brenner 1999:110-127.
- Pardes, I 1992. *Countertraditions in the Bible: A feminist approach*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Reimer, G T 1994. Her mother's house, in Kates & Reimer 1994:97-106.
- Sasson, J M 1995. *Ruth: A new translation with philological commentary and a formalist-folklorist interpretation*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. (Biblical Seminar 10.)
- Trible, P 1978. *God and the rhetoric of sexuality*. London: SCM.
- Van Dijk-Hemmes, F 1993. Ruth: A product of women's culture?, in Brenner 1993a:134-139.
- Van Dijk-Hemmes, F 1996. Traces of women's texts in the Hebrew Bible, in Van Dijk-Hemmes & Brenner 1996:17-109.
- Van Dijk-Hemmes, F & Brenner, A (eds) 1996. *On gendering texts: Female and male voices in the Hebrew Bible*. Leyden: Brill. (Biblical Interpretation Series 1.)
- Van Wijk-Bos, J W H, 2001. *Ruth and Esther: Women in alien lands*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Zakovitch, Y 1999. *Das Buch Rut: Ein jüdischer Kommentar*. Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk. (Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 177.)
- Zenger, E 1986. *Das Buch Ruth*. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag. (Zürcher Bibelkommentare AT 8.)