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An Indecent Proposal: The Theological Core of the Book of Ruth

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ABSTRACT: Traditionally, biblical commentators either tone down the sexual tension within Ruth 3 or celebrate it with sensationalistic exuberance. However, theologians have not attempted to integrate the provocative nature of the passage into a theological understanding of the book or the character of Ruth. This essay outlines the reasons why Naomi's plan is rightly interpreted as an attempt at sexual entrapment. Ruth follows this plan until the very last minute when she reveals herself and her intentions to Boaz. Both of these actions—showing fidelity to both Naomi and Boaz—exposed Ruth to potential harm and as such serves as a picture what *hesed* entails.

Key words: Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, *hesed*, sex, sexual entrapment, Tamar, Lot

Throughout history commentators have gone to great lengths to tone down the sexual tension and ambiguity within chapter three of the Book of Ruth. For instance, after 3,8 Targum Ruth inserts:

Even though [Boaz] saw a woman sleeping at his feet, he subdued his evil inclination and did not approach her, just like the righteous Joseph, who refused to approach the Egyptian woman, the wife of his master; and just like the pious Paltiel, the son of Laish, who placed a sword between himself and Michal, the daughter of Saul and wife of David, refusing to approach her.¹

More recently, the sexually suggestive nature of this passage has caused a commentator to strongly reject any provocative implication to this account, "[T]he overtly sexual interpretation exaggerates the significance of Naomi's previous instructions and runs roughshod over the narrator's characterization of both her and Ruth in the story."²

1. My translation; a convenient source for the Targumim and other Aramaic sources is the textual database section of the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon, <http://call.cn.huc.edu/>. Likewise, rabbinic interpretation explicitly disavows the idea that Ruth went to the threshing floor for fornication, Neusner 2001:57. Also, the Syriac Peshitta translation of 3,4 omits any mention of "uncovering," rather, "you shall draw near and lie down near his feet."

2. Block 1999:686.

In contrast to sanitized interpretations of Ruth, a straightforward reading of the passage reveals a narrative that is quite suggestive.³ Some scholars have discussed this fact with sensationalistic exuberance.⁴ However, treatments of this chapter that highlight its sexually provocative nature have not attempted to explain how this treatment contributes to a theological understanding of the the character of Ruth and the message of the book. As such these readings remain flat and fall short of theological exegesis.⁵ Therefore, I will briefly outline the reasons why Naomi's⁶ plan is rightly interpreted as an attempt at sexual entrapment. Then, we will notice how Ruth subtly departs from Naomi's scheme. Finally, I will apply this interpretation to a canonical understanding of YHWH's hesed toward his people.

Evidence for Sexual Entrapment in Naomi's Scheme

The first thing that Naomi tells Ruth to do is to bathe, change her clothes, and put on scented oil (3,3). Commentators are certainly right to connect these actions with marriage,⁷ however, making oneself attractive is not restricted to marriage ceremonies. Furthermore, it is doubtful that Naomi envisioned a marriage ceremony taking place in the middle of the night at the threshing floor since, even apart from common sense, Hosea 9,1 associates the threshing floor with prostitution not marriage.⁸ These actions should be interpreted as merely making Ruth more attractive.

After telling Ruth to prepare herself for Boaz Naomi advises Ruth to be careful that she is not seen by Boaz until he is finished eating and drinking. The implication for this seems to be that Naomi wants Ruth to wait until Boaz is drunk in order to make him a more pliable target.⁹ Often the expression, *tôb lēb* ("Boaz ate and drank and he was 'feeling good,'" 3,7), indicates some level of intoxication.¹⁰ Also, the verb, *škb*, "to lie down" which appears throughout this narrative (3,4.7.8.13.14), can be used as a euphemism for

3. Examples of "sanitized" readings of Ruth include McGee 1988:92-94 and Rofé 2009:107.

4. For instance, Kaltner, McKinzie, and Kilpatrick 2008: 168-78.

5. See Richard B. Hays' fifth of twelve identifying marks of theological exegesis (2007: 13) and Fishbane 2008:108.

6. Even though the pronunciation of this name according to Masoretic vocalization is No'omi, for the sake of tradition I will refer to her as Naomi (see Holmstedt 2010: 59).

7. For example, Zenger 1986: 67. However, b. Shabbat 113b indicates that these actions equally could be associated with prostitution in commenting that Ruth reversed Naomi's order--she went down to the threshing floor first and then prepared herself--so that she would not be mistaken for a prostitute.

8. It seems that prostitution was fairly common in ancient Israel and Phyllis Bird points out that there is no evidence that it was ever outlawed (2006:42).

9. Concerning this Nicholas of Lyra (ca. 1270-1340) commented: "She said this because it was then that men were more likely to contract and consummate marriage" (1996:61).

10. For instance, the Philistines were likely drunk from their celebrations when they brought in Samson to entertain themselves in Judges 16,25-27; see Halton 2009.

sex.¹¹ Lastly, from a canonical perspective Naomi's plan is similar to the stratagems of Tamar and Lot's daughters who tried to secure children through seducing unsuspecting male relatives.¹² The fact that the genealogy in Ruth 4,18-22 begins with Perez lends support to the link between Ruth and Tamar. Furthermore, after the official ceremony in which Boaz received Ruth as his wife the members of the community pronounced a blessing upon Ruth that her family might be like that of Perez (4,12). While each of these points could be debated,¹³ when assessed together they present a clear picture that Naomi's plan centered around sexual entrapment using Ruth as the bait.¹⁴

In addition to Naomi's plan, Ruth's obedience is also filled with sexual tension. The verb, *glh*, "to uncover" in the description of Ruth's actions at the threshing floor, "[Ruth] crept up quietly and uncovered his 'legs' " (3,7), can be used to indicate exposure of "intimate parts of the body."¹⁵ The object of this verb, *margēlōtāyw*, "his 'feet,' " is formed from the noun *regel* which appears elsewhere in the Bible as a euphemism for "the pubic region."¹⁶ One of the clearest examples of a euphemistic use is an instance in which the masoretic traditores softened the language of 2 Kings 18,27 for public reading. In this verse an Assyrian spokesman describes the condition of those under siege as so dire that "they will eat their own shit and drink their own piss." Within the masoretic text the *ketiv*, or written, text uses the word *šênêhem* for "piss" while the masoretes indicated in the *qere* that within public reading one should avoid this coarse term by using the euphemism *même raglêhem* "water of their feet."

Another way in which many translations try to obscure the sexual ambiguity of the threshing floor encounter is by translating the verb *wayyillāpēt* in 3,8 as "and [Boaz] turned over," seemingly, to exclude from consideration the euphemistic use of *margēlōtāyw*.¹⁷ After all, it would be very difficult to expose Boaz's genitals if he were sleeping on his stomach. However, all three instances of this word within the Old Testament are consistent with Akkadian uses of the analogue, *lapātu* "touch, strike, grab."¹⁸ Accordingly, Oswald Loretz interprets this word as indicating that Boaz's "hand would

11. HALOT, 1487 and Nielsen 1997:68.

12. Auld 1984: 272. Yair Zakovitch lists many similarities between the threshing floor encounter between Ruth and Boaz and the incident with Lot's daughters (1999: 50).

13. Block 1999: 683-88.

14. Fewell and Gunn 1990: 78. Moore suggests that Naomi did not blackmail Ruth but merely acted as a "wise woman," similar to an Anatolian priestess, to mediate in the situation (2000: 351-52). However, Moore's proposal is not convincing since there is hardly any similarity or point of contact between Naomi and an Anatolian priestess.

15. HALOT, pp. 191-192.

16. HALOT, 1185. Campbell believes that this word is intentionally ambiguous (1975: 121).

17. For example, NRSV, NLT, ESV; NIV has "he turned."

18. CAD L, pp. 82-94; AHw, pp. 535-537.

encounter [Ruth] as he groped about for his mantle, to cover himself from the cold” not that he turned over.¹⁹

One of the strongest reasons interpreters give to mute the sexual tension of this passage is Boaz’s characterization of Ruth as an *’ēšet ḥayil* (3,11). Hermann Gunkel and many other commentators believe that this phrase describes the uprightness of Ruth’s inner character or virtue.²⁰ Many translations render this clause as “virtuous” or “worthy woman.”²¹ In turn, commentators assert that since Ruth was a “virtuous woman” this character trait would prohibit her from engaging in a less-than-honorable scheme. For instance, regarding interpretations which portray Ruth either uncovering Boaz’s genitalia or her own Frederic Bush asserts:

Finally, one can only comment that such an action is so inconsistent with the character of Ruth as portrayed in the story as to be utterly implausible. After such an action, one wonders how Boaz could possibly have grounded his assent to her request in the fact that “everyone in town knows that you are a worthy woman” (v. 11).

However, the phrase *’ēšet ḥayil* does not primarily refer to inner character but to strength and industriousness.²² Therefore, this description does not address whether Ruth would or would not have had sex with Boaz on the threshing floor.

Ḥayil by itself merely means “strength” or “wealth.”²³ It is often used in construct phrases with the nouns *’iš*, “man”, or *’anšê*, “men,” and in these instances the phrase appears in most translations as “capable men,” “valiant warriors,” and the like.²⁴ In no case does a major translation ever render one of these phrases as “virtuous man.” However, when we compare all of the instances of *’ēšet ḥayil* in the Old Testament it is clear that we should translate the female construct phrase just as we translate the male ones.

The Book of Proverbs is the only other book besides Ruth in which the phrase *’ēšet ḥayil* is used. Proverbs 12,4 describes an *’ēšet ḥayil* as “the crown of her husband” which is contrasted with a “disgraceful one (who is) rot in his bones.” Appropriately, in his commentary on Proverbs 10-31 Michael Fox translates *’ēšet ḥayil* as “the woman of strength,” but, he restricts

19. Loretz 1964:156, italics added. I think Loretz’s interpretation stands in spite of Jack Sasson’s objections (1989:78-80). Hayyim Tawil adds an unnecessary twisting motion to Boaz’s action of grasping himself in which “his two hands grasped themselves” (2009:192).

20. Gunkel 1913:70, 78; see also, for example, Roop 2002:62.

21. For example, NIV “woman of noble character,” NLT “virtuous woman,” NASB “woman of excellence,” NRSV and ESV “worthy woman.”

22. See Ellen F. Davis’ excellent discussion of this phrase which she translates as “valorous woman” (2009:147).

23. HALOT, pp. 311-312.

24. For instance, Judg 3,29 describes Moabite warriors as *’iš ḥayil* and in 2 Sam 11,16 Joab stations Uriah in front of the opposing *’anšê ḥayil* so that he would be killed in battle.

the meaning of ḥayil in this instance to “strength of mind and character.”²⁵ However, this line is structured as a chiasm in which the “woman of strength” and the “disgraceful woman” begin and end the proverb while “diadem” and “rot” are clustered in the middle.²⁶ The word pair “diadem” and “rot” should influence our understanding of the connotation of the descriptives modifying the woman. These terms, particularly “diadem,” imply an economic context as seen in other proverbs such as 14,24 which says, “The diadem of the wise is their wealth; the folly of fools is folly.” Consequently, the message of Proverb 12,4 is that a strong, capable woman is an economic benefit to a husband while a disgraceful woman eats away at his estate like rot.

Proverbs 31,3 and 10 are the remaining occurrences of ’ēšet ḥayil. The unit that runs from verse 10 to 31 is an extended description of what constitutes an ’ēšet ḥayil. She is described as: bringing in food from far away like a merchant, one who rises early in the morning to start working, a land developer, having strong arms, a savvy trader, generous to the poor, clothing her family in luxurious clothing, speaking in wisdom, is not idle, overseeing the entire household, and as having a good reputation. While this description does not exclude inner virtue, the picture of the ’ēšet ḥayil in Proverbs 31 is a woman who exerts both mental and physical strength to accomplish economic and social gain. There is almost no mention in this passage of what we might think of as inner moral virtue or piety.

As we have seen above, ’ēšet ḥayil does not refer to what we might think of as “moral” character or inner piety (however, strength was probably seen as a positive character trait and a sign of divine blessing in the ancient world). Richard Briggs’ comments regarding moral evaluation of Naomi’s plan provide sorely needed nuance to the way we should interpret Ruth in light of her description as an ’ēšet ḥayil:

Here one could easily imagine that not all Yahwists would have thought this to represent a prudent way forward, but then equally neither does the Old Testament’s notion of walking with Yhwh fit hand in glove with modern conceptualizations of the moral life, as we have seen repeatedly. The reduction of the Old Testament’s complex vision of the moral life to moralism (whether it is then affirmed or contested) is one of the great disappointments of much of the (perhaps relatively recent) interpretive tradition.²⁷

Briggs addresses modern readers and highlights the need for a complex analysis of the Old Testament moral life; however, even within ancient traditions adjudication of ethically suspect material in the Bible was complex. For instance, the four ways in which “morally difficult passages” were addressed within Jewish interpretation included approaches which recognized that in certain time periods or situations some actions were not wrong but should

25. 2009:547.

26. For the structure of this line see Alter 1985:174.

27. 2010:152-53.

nonetheless not be imitated.²⁸ Within Syriac Christianity, Ephram freely admits that Ruth engaged in pre-marital sex with Boaz but justifies this act since, like Tamar, Ruth's actions helped bring about Jesus' birth.²⁹ In any case, some interpreters might regard Naomi's plan of sexual entrapment as morally suspect, however, ethical and theological analysis of this situation should not end there.

While it seems that Naomi's plan centered upon straightforward sexual entrapment, Ruth departed from Naomi's script at a key moment and this may provide a window into her intentions for the threshing floor encounter that differed slightly from those of Naomi.³⁰ At the end of Naomi's instructions to Ruth she told her to "uncover his 'legs,' lie down, and he will tell you what you should do" (3,4). In the next verse Ruth responds, "I will do all that you say," however, once she gets to the threshing floor Ruth does not wait passively for Boaz's direction. Instead, she takes the initiative and asks Boaz to protect her by employing similar imagery of a "wing/edge of a garment" that Boaz himself used when he spoke a blessing to her in 2,12, "May YHWH repay your work—may your wage be fully paid by YHWH, the god of Israel from whom you have sought refuge under his wings."³¹ At the threshing floor Ruth uses Boaz's previous blessing as she asks Boaz to provide her refuge. Boaz indicates his acceptance of Ruth's request in a manner that echoes almost exactly Ruth's response to Naomi's instructions ("I will do all that you say" 3,11).

By straying from Naomi's plan Ruth may have attempted to avoid the sexual entrapment that Naomi envisioned. The story line of the book centers upon Naomi recovering the men in her life that she lost. As soon as the narrator provides the setting of the story (1,1-2) we read that Naomi's husband and sons die (1,3-5). The narrative concludes with Ruth and Boaz giving birth to a son, Obed, and when the townswomen name him they say, "A son has been born to Naomi" (4,17). The account has come full circle—the sons which would have provided for Naomi in her old age (see the village women's blessing in 4:15, "He will refresh you and provide for you in your old age") are replaced with Obed. The events that come in between the framework of 1,3-5 and 4,13-17 center upon Naomi's struggle to regain stability and protection by replacing her lost sons. Naomi's plan to send Ruth to the threshing floor was similar to that of Tamar's manipulation of Judah--Naomi wanted to get Boaz to impregnate Ruth in order to obtain a replacement for her children and to coerce Boaz to provide for her as the child grew up.³² Ruth followed

28. Lesser 2000:298.

29. Jensen 1993:170-76.

30. Contra Sharp 2009:117 who says that Ruth planned "to seduce a wealthy man" while Naomi merely assisted her.

31. Green 1982:62 and Piper 2010:86-87.

32. Victor Matthews points to a subtle difference between Ruth and Tamar since Ruth seeks a long-term relationship out of the encounter while Tamar is just interested in a child, however, obtaining a child was likely Ruth's goal as well (2004:234).

Naomi's plan almost to the end but at the last minute she decided to reveal herself and her intentions giving Boaz a choice of whether he would come to their aid or not.

Theological/Canonical Implications

While there many theological messages embedded within the Book of Ruth³³ (and even more when Ruth is interpreted in light of the Christian Scriptures³⁴), one of the most prominent is the theme of *hesed*.³⁵ *Hesed* is a notoriously difficult word to translate, however, John Goldingay ably describes it as:

[A] practice of generosity or good will or beneficence that is extraordinary because it takes place either when there is no particular prior relationship between people and thus no obligation, or when there is a prior relationship but there is some reason why *hesed* could not be expected.³⁶

Robert Hubbard adds further nuance to the meaning of *hesed* as "rare, risky, and restrictive, the practice of loyal, compassionate devotion."³⁷ The Book of Ruth exhibits all of the features included within these two descriptions.

The theme of *hesed* in Ruth is central within rabbinic tradition but plays a relatively minor role in Christian interpretation.³⁸ Of the Christian interpreters that do underscore *hesed*, most accomplish this by connecting *hesed* to the character of YHWH through a salvation-history approach.³⁹ Interpreters are certainly right to link the theme of *hesed* in Ruth as ultimately pointing to YHWH but this link is not established merely from a salvation-historical

33. For a good survey see Zenger 2008:227-29.

34. Moberly 2007:98.

35. The placement of Ruth within ancient canons reveals other foci such as its position after Proverbs likely providing an example of the "Proverbs 31 woman," its placement before Psalms brought the Davidic genealogy to the fore, and the inclusion of Ruth among the Megillot employs a liturgical application. For a discussion of the theological significance of the canons and Ruth see Campell, Ruth, pp. 32-36. Seitz presents a non-liturgically based interpretation of Ruth within the Megillot (2009: 112). In addition to a theological purpose, the book of Ruth also had an apparent political purpose as well, Chavalas 1994:126.

36. 2009:590.

37. 1989:74. For book-length treatments on the meaning of *hesed* see, Glueck 1967; Sakenfeld 1978; and Clark 1993.

38. According to Ruth Rab. 2.13 the purpose of the book of Ruth is "to teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness." For the theme of *hesed* within rabbinic tradition see, Bronner 1993:146-169. In the New Testament Matthew sees "inclusion of the gentiles" as one of the main theological messages of Ruth, Schreiner 2008: 677; Ruth was also used in a similar fashion within Judaism, Kugel 2007: 402-403.

39. For instance, Dumbrell indicates "that the book points in more general terms to Yahweh's covenantal *hesed* ('loyal love, kindness') as it serves to provide background for the later career of King David" (2002:274-75) and Webb includes an entire sub-heading in his theological treatment of the book titled, "Ruth as salvation history" (2000:53). See also Murphy 1981:87.

view of the providential events recorded in the book or its genealogical link with David. The deepest illustration of *ḥesed* is seen in the radical commitment of Ruth herself.⁴⁰ The focus of the Book of Ruth is Ruth's courageous acts of fidelity toward Naomi which reach an apex at the threshing floor. Furthermore, *ḥesed* characterizes all of these acts and binds them together.⁴¹

All three occurrences of *ḥesed* within Ruth appear in blessings.⁴² In the first blessing Naomi asks YHWH to relate to her two daughters-in-law in accordance with the *ḥesed* that they demonstrated toward their husbands: "May YHWH demonstrate *ḥesed* with you both just as both of you have demonstrated with the dead and with me" (1,8b). In the narrative following this blessing we discover that Ruth is the only one of the daughters-in-law that continues in *ḥesed* with Naomi. While Orpah's husband was alive she apparently acted in fidelity but after his passing Orpah cut her losses with Naomi and headed back home.

The second blessing appears after Ruth gleaned in Boaz's field as she brought 30 pounds of barley to Naomi.⁴³ Upon seeing the load of grain Naomi asked her where she gleaned. When Naomi heard that Ruth worked in Boaz's fields she exclaimed, "Blessed be he to Yahweh, who (*'āšer*) has not abandoned his *ḥesed* toward the living and the dead" (2,20). Commentators often assert that the subject of this blessing is Boaz; therefore, they interpret the phrase as, "Blessed be [Boaz] to Yahweh, [Boaz] has not abandoned his *ḥesed*..."⁴⁴ This interpretation links Boaz's kindness and protection toward Ruth as she gleaned in the field with the *ḥesed* mentioned in this blessing. However, the subject of the blessing is probably intentionally ambiguous so that Yahweh is also implied as not abandoning his *ḥesed*. After all, "YHWH" is directly before *'āšer* and in most cases this conjunction marks a relative clause that modifies the antecedent word.⁴⁵ Therefore, Boaz acted faithfully concerning his familial obligations to his dead relatives by taking care of Ruth, and, according to the narrator, Yahweh also demonstrated *ḥesed* by arranging the "chance" encounter of Ruth and Boaz (2,3).

The final blessing appears in 3,10 after Boaz woke up in the middle of night and saw Ruth on his lap. Ruth asked Boaz to protect her and he gave her this blessing: "Blessed be you to Yahweh, my daughter, you have made your *ḥesed* more pleasing in this instance than in the former by not going after the virile (*habbaḥûrîm*) whether poor or rich." Most likely Boaz implies that Ruth acted selflessly in seeking him since it could have been more

40. Typological interpretations are also common in which Boaz represents Christ while Ruth typifies the gentile church (Fischer 2001:107-108).

41. Tribble 1978: 166-69 and Gottwald 1985:555.

42. The "blessings" in this chapter function as prayers (Miller 1994:291-293).

43. Hubbard 1998:179.

44. Rebera 1985:317-327.

45. Joüon, §145; Holmstedt 2001:1-16; and Holmstedt 2010:141-142.

difficult for an older man to impregnate her.⁴⁶ Boaz's response is intended to catch the reader off guard as Pressler observes: "Boaz views Ruth's sexual advance as loyalty. Her scandalous behavior is actually faithfulness, not offense."⁴⁷

The three blessings reveal that both Ruth and Boaz serve as examples of *hesed* and when viewed theologically the two characters provide an analogy of how Yahweh acts in *hesed* toward his people. Since Boaz was related to Elimelech, Naomi's late husband, he had a responsibility to care for his decedents even after Elimelech had died. However, Boaz expands this obligation further than the strict legal boundaries and social expectations demanded or even found palatable.⁴⁸ Ruth was not directly related to Naomi and when Ruth's husband died the connection between these two women died with him. This is why Naomi told her daughters-in-law to go back to their own families where they belonged. Ruth decided to stay with Naomi but Boaz was not required to care for her since, according to protocol, support for Ruth was a matter for Ruth's genetic family once her husband died.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Boaz married Ruth even though he knew that she was a Moabite and in spite of the fact that this might be viewed as a Torah violation.⁵⁰ Also, Boaz displayed grace toward Ruth when she threw herself upon him at the threshing floor. Boaz blessed Ruth by highlighting her *hesed* instead of cursing her for acting the part of a whore. Finally, Boaz takes action to fix a broken situation bringing a sweet sense of security to Naomi and a tranquil place of rest to Ruth. Interpreters have often seen Boaz as a model of various aspects of God's character but modern commentators have rarely done the same with Ruth.⁵¹

As with Boaz, Ruth's actions in chapter 3 present a deep and textured portrait of *hesed* that provides an analogy for YHWH's relationship with his people. Ruth broke from her family, her national/tribal affiliation—even her religious associations—in order to keep fidelity with Naomi. Naomi's "bitter" disposition certainly did not make this easy for Ruth. In spite of this, Ruth showed her grace and once the two women reached Naomi's homeland Ruth engaged in manual labor to provide for herself and her mother-in-law

46. Duguid 2005:173. According to Midrashic tradition Boaz was 80 years old at this time (Lacocque 2004:100).

47. Pressler 2002:290.

48. Boaz fulfilled his familial duties in contrast to the unnamed relative who did not; see Amir 1976:187-99.

49. Scharbert 1994:13.

50. Deut 23,3; Neh 13,1. Blenkinsopp presents Nehemiah's stance toward intermarriage as merely a politically motivated act that was in direct opposition to Boaz's acceptance of Ruth (2009:142-145). However, a reading centered upon love (Jacobs 2001) or trust (Hays 2005:190-201) would likely yield a more complex and satisfying interpretation.

51. It was more common to focus upon Ruth within pre-critical interpretation as seen in *Ruth Rabbah* which saw Ruth as a type of the Messiah; see Tkacz 2004:281-314.

while, presumably, Naomi stayed home and did nothing.⁵² However, the most striking example of *hesed* that Ruth demonstrates is her acquiescence to Naomi's indecent proposal. Even though Naomi's plan included physical danger and a potential loss of reputation and thereby an inability to marry in the future, Ruth agreed to selflessly follow the direction of her mother-in-law (while Naomi remained safely insulated from these dangers). Not only did Ruth display *hesed* toward Naomi, but she also acted in fidelity toward Boaz when she decided to identify herself and her motives in order to give Boaz a choice instead of manipulating him. To be sure, Ruth exposed herself to great risk as she tried to act faithfully toward both Naomi and Boaz; this is what *hesed* is--being willing to take extreme measures for the sake of others. Furthermore, this facet of *hesed* is muted when interpreters suppress the provocative nature of the threshing floor encounter.

Conclusion

The author/editor of the Book of Ruth presents several examples of *hesed* through various characters, however, throughout the entire story Ruth remains the central figure and she is the subject of two out of the three *hesed*-blessings in the book. Furthermore, Ruth is the means by which Naomi obtains her replacement son. While the supporting characters are important, theological reflection upon this book should center on Ruth. Additionally, theological observations should focus upon Ruth's active character as she exhibits *hesed* at the threshing floor since this scene is the apex of the book. The narrative underscores the fact that Ruth does not remain passive as Naomi instructed but took the initiative by shaping an imperfect situation in order to produce *hesed* toward both Naomi and Boaz. This is similar to the way the Jewish and Christian scriptures often portray the actions of YHWH toward his people. The Book of Ruth is a short yet complex story. The characters are deep and multifaceted, the scenes are filled with tension and surprise, and the theological presentations are rich and textured. As such the Book of Ruth and the character of Ruth herself should figure more prominently in Old Testament theologies.⁵³

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52. Possibly Naomi was advanced in years and not able to work but the silence regarding Naomi's contribution to the relationship—both financial and emotional—is deafening.

53. Amazingly, the Book of Ruth is virtually or even entirely ignored in many Old Testament theologies. For example, the Scripture indexes of von Rad's *Old Testament Theology* (2005) and Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (1997) do not contain even one reference to the Book of Ruth and Christopher J. H. Wright cites Ruth only twice merely in passing in *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (2006).

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