

# The Role of God in the Book of Ruth

## *On God's Attitude towards Suffering*

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### Abstract

The thesis of this article is that the narrator places the actions of YHWH in strategic places in the Book of Ruth, namely at the beginning (1:6) and at the end (4:13) of the middle section in which the solution to the problems (1:6-4:17): famine and death that were discussed in the exposition (1:1-5), take place. They form the frame of the book. In between, there are a number of blessings. After such a blessing, the reader does not always hear that God does what is asked. It occurs through human action. My interpretation: you can make such a blessing, God does not respond to it, if you yourself are able of doing what is desired. He only reacts when it is beyond human capabilities!

**Keywords:** Old Testament, Ruth, YHWH, Bethlehem, David

In the research<sup>1</sup> on the Book of Ruth, most of the attention is for the three central characters: Naomi,<sup>2</sup> Ruth and Boaz. This is not incomprehensible given their roles in the story. The question that by no means receives less attention is: who is the main character<sup>3</sup>? Taking into consideration the title of the book, one would say that it is Ruth.<sup>4</sup> Others dispute this. They point

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<sup>1</sup> That we are dealing with a beloved book of the Bible is evident from the very extensive list of publications (for my bibliography, see [https://www.nicoriemersma.nl/storage/blog/Literatuurlijst\\_-\\_Ruth\\_update\\_2023-10-29.pdf](https://www.nicoriemersma.nl/storage/blog/Literatuurlijst_-_Ruth_update_2023-10-29.pdf)). The role of God in Ruth is discussed by Ronald M. Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969); W.S. Prinsloo, "The Theology of the Book of Ruth." *Vetus Testamentum* 30 no. 3 (1980): 330-341; Dave Bland, "God's Activity as Reflected in the Books of Ruth and Esther." *Restoration Quarterly* 24 (1981): 129-147; Leif Hongisto, "Literary Structure and Theology in the Book of Ruth." *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23 (1985): 19-28; Pieter M. Venter, "Die teenwoordigheid van God in die Rutverhaal." *Hervormde Teleologiese Studies* 45 no. 4 (1989): 916-932; Marjo C.A. Korpel, "Theodicy in the Book of Ruth." In *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, ed. A. Laato & J.C. de Moor (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 334-350; Kristin Moen Saxegaard, *Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth*. FAT 2/47 (Tübingen: Siebeck Mohr, 2010), 171-195 ('God'); Nathan Tiessen, "A Theology of Ruth: The Dialectic of Countertestimony and Core Testimony." *Direction* 39 no. 2 (2010): 255-264; Jean-Pierre Sonnet & Marc Majà Guiu, "Le Dieu caché du livre de Ruth." *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 133 no. 2 (2011): 177-190; Nico Riemersma, "De krachten gebundeld: Opbouw, motiefwoorden en theologie van het boek Ruth." *Interpretatie* 20 no.3 (2012): 34-37; Brittany N. Melton, *Where is God in the Megilloth? A Dialogue on the Ambiguity of Divine Presence and Absence*. OTS 73 (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Fredrik Lindström, "The Portrayal of Divine and Human in the Book of Ruth." In *God and Humans in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond* (Fs L. Boström), ed. D. Willgren. HBM 85 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2019), 224-247; Agnethe Siquans, "Gottes Wirksamkeit in menschlichem Handeln und Reden: Das Gottesbild in den Büchern Rut und Ester." *Protokolle zur Bibel* 29 no. 1 (2020): 47-63. And then there are studies that address a particular issue, such as a.o. Sabine Van den Eynde, "Blessed by God – Blessed be God." In *Interpreting Translation: Studies on the LXX and Ezekiel* (Fs J. Lust), ed. F. García Martínez & M. Vervenne. BETL 192 (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2005), 415-436. The role of God in the Book of Ruth is also referenced in the commentaries.

<sup>2</sup> I am following the traditional form of 'Naomi' instead of the occasional recent practice of 'Noömi'. It is with the ancient usage that I concur.

<sup>3</sup> By 'the main character' I mean 'the character with the most amount of influence on the plot' (in this case, taking care of the two things the book revolves around: bread and home).

<sup>4</sup> In the Book of Ruth, Ruth is consistently characterised as "the Moabite" (1:22; 2:2,21; 4:5,10). A reader of the Torah has a negative image of Moab on account of the treatment of Moab in the Torah (see e.g. Deut 23:3-6). I get the impression that this narrator wants to paint a much more positive (counter) picture of Moab: as a land where

out that the story – after the exposition (1:1-5) – begins with Naomi (1:6) and also ends with her, when the neighbouring women say, “To Naomi a son is born” (4:17), which leads these interpreters to say that Naomi is the central character. However, recent research, using ‘social network analysis’, concludes that in fact Boaz is the central character.<sup>5</sup> Left unmentioned in this context is a fourth story character: YHWH. This should come as no surprise, as He only once is said to act: “YHWH gave her pregnancy” (4:13). The question I would like to ask is whether a story character can only be called the main character if his/her name occurs most often and he acts the most? In this contribution, I want to demonstrate that although YHWH only performs that one action, this does not mean that he plays only a marginal role. In fact, I am suggesting here that it is the narrator’s aim to bring the reader to the recognition that YHWH is actually the main character. With me, the narrator has succeeded in his aim. Whether I can convince you as a reader of that too, I do not know, but it is my intention.

I begin with an initial exploration of the appearance of God in the Book of Ruth. In doing so, I draw on previous explorations.<sup>6</sup> A second step is to explore the macrostructure in order to discover where the narrator speaks of God. I should discuss each place where God appears, but on account of space constraints, I will concentrate on the role of God in the first and last chapters. I end with a concluding reflection on the role of God in this book, which is necessary on account of the extreme positions that are held in the study of this book.

## An initial exploration of the image of God

(1) The name YHWH occurs in the book of Ruth not once, as might have been suggested by the above, but eighteen times: 1:6,8,9,13,17,21(2x); 2:4(2x),12(2x),20; 3:10,13; 4:11,12, 13,14). This happens in three different ways:

(a) By far the majority of times, as many as sixteen times,<sup>7</sup> the God name occurs in direct speech: 1:8,9,13,17,21(2x); 2:4(2x),12(2x),20; 3:10,13; 4:11,12,13,14: by Naomi (1:8,9,13,21 (2x); 2:20), Ruth (1:17) and Boaz (2:4,12(2x); 3:10,13), but it is also spoken by other story characters: the reapers (2:4), the people in the gate (4:11,12) and the women of Bethlehem (4:14). What stands out in these direct speeches is the role of blessing. In numerous places there are statements by people who utter a benediction in the name of God. For instance, in 2:4 Boaz and the reapers greet each other with a word of blessing. In 2:19, Naomi blesses the man who pays so much attention to her daughter-in-law. Moments later, she blesses Boaz again as the one who has proved faithful to her and her family through YHWH (2:20). Similarly Boaz in 3:10 blesses Ruth when he calls her one blessed by YHWH. At the very end, it is the women who bless YHWH; they do so because He has provided a redeemer (4:14-15). Around these direct speeches we hear from YHWH twice more (1:6 and 4:13).<sup>8</sup> These two phrases frame the book:<sup>9</sup>

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migrants who have had to move because of famine in their own country are allowed to settle, and where people like Orpah and Ruth live, who prove to be faithful to the dead and to the living.

<sup>5</sup> John T. Dekker & Anthony H. Dekker, “Centrality in the Book of Ruth.” *Vetus Testamentum* 68 no. 1 (2018): 49.

<sup>6</sup> Saxegaard, *Character Complexity*, 171-179; Riemersma, “De krachten gebundeld,” 37; Siquans, “Gottes Wirksamkeit,” 48.

<sup>7</sup> Siquans, “Gottes Wirksamkeit,” 48, mistakenly speaks of ‘17 Nennungen’, where, in her diagram on p. 49, she herself points out that in 1:6 it is the narrator who speaks, and not a story character. Thus, she does not make visible in her schema that the two YHWH utterances of the narrator surround the direct speeches.

<sup>8</sup> They are often said to be two places of direct action by God (see, among others, Bland, “God’s Activity,” 132; James A. Loader, “Yahweh’s Wings and the Gods of Ruth.” In “Wer ist wie du, HERR, unter den Göttern?” (Fs O. Kaiser), ed. I. Kottsieper et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 391. Strictly speaking, this is not correct. The first time is an indirect form: Naomi has in fact *heard* of God’s visit (1:6).

<sup>9</sup> So correctly Hals, *The Theology*, 5; Bland, “God’s Activity,” 132; Lindström, “The Portrayal,” 225.

(b) There is one occurrence of an indirect form: “She arose, she and her daughters-in-law, and returned from the fields of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that YHWH had visited his people to give them bread” (1:6).

(c) And once the narrator uses a direct form: “YHWH gave her pregnancy” (4:13).

(2) Apart from the God name itself, the three central narrative characters also refer to God as אלהים. In 1:16, Ruth uses this designation twice: “your God” and “my God”, and in 2:12, Boaz speaks of YHWH as “the God of Israel” to the Moabite Ruth. Again, this appellation comes from the mouth of a story character.

(3) The same is true of the third appellation יָדָו, which at the conclusion of the first section (1:6-22), is used only by Naomi. The appellation she uses, is related to the negative of God: the bitterness/evil he has done to her (1:20,21).<sup>10</sup> It is the designation that is also frequently used by Job (see, among others, Job 5:17; 6:4; 21:20; 23:16; 24:1; 27:2), in a context very reminiscent of Ruth’s, a context of loss.

I will focus here mainly on the God name YHWH.<sup>11</sup> In that context, at the end of this first exploration, we should note a verb that has YHWH as its subject five times: נתן (‘to give’ in 1:6,9; 4:11,13 and ‘to make’ in 4:11), i.e. at the beginning and at the end of the story. It is also striking that the first and last times are about an observation: YHWH who gives (1:6 and 4:13). In between, in 1:9 and 4:11-12 it is about a wish/blessing:<sup>12</sup> “YHWH grant ...”

The thesis with which I want to end this paragraph is that the manner and placing of the God name in the narrative, seems to me to be part of the narrator’s strategy.

## The macrostructure of the Book of Ruth

To make this last plausible, we must first pay attention to the structure of the Book of Ruth.<sup>13</sup> There seems to be growing agreement among interpreters that we are dealing with a chiastic structure: A (1:1-22) - B (2:1-23) - B’ (3:1-18) - A’ (4:1-22).<sup>14</sup> The four chapters of the book correspond to the four units of action,<sup>15</sup> whose main scenes each take place in a different

<sup>10</sup> The appellation is usually translated as ‘Almighty’; however, the meaning is still controversial. I therefore prefer to leave the appellation untranslated, and render it as ‘Shaddai’.

<sup>11</sup> An intertextual approach demonstrates that in the Book of Ruth, God does not speak, nor that people call on Him directly (‘You’/‘Thou’). It is also notable that in the narrative biblical material, God often plays a much larger role than in the Book of Ruth.

<sup>12</sup> It is not, as some exegetes call it, a prayer, in the strict sense, because God is not addressed directly: ‘Thee’ or ‘Thou’.

<sup>13</sup> Many commentators have busied themselves with the structure of the Book of Ruth. See a.o. Ernst R. Wendland, “Structural Symmetry and Its Significance in the Book of Ruth.” In *Issues in Bible Translation*. ed. P.C. Stine (London: United Bible Societies, 1988), 30-63; Murray D. Gow, “The Significance of Literary Structure for the Translation of the Book of Ruth.” *The Bible Translator* 35 no. 3 (1984): 309-320; Reg. Grant, “Literary Structure in the Book of Ruth.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (1991): 424-441; Hongisto, “Literary Structure,” 9-28; Marjo C.A. Korpel, *The Structure of the Book of Ruth*. Pericope 2 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001) (lays out earlier examinations of the macrostructure of Ruth pp. 5-28).

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Bertman, “Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth.”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1965): 165-168; S. Bar Efrat, “Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative.” *Vetus Testamentum* 30 no. 3 (1980): 156-157; A. Boyd. Luter & Richard O. Rigsby, “An Adjusted Symmetrical Structuring of Ruth.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39 (1996): 15-28; Klaas A.D. Smelik, *Ruth*. VHB (Kampen: Kok, 2000), 18; I. Fischer, *Ruth*. HThKAT (Freiburg: Herder, 2001), 24; Jerome T. Walsh, *Style & Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 88-89,129-131, is the most thorough working-out of the structure.

<sup>15</sup> So too Jopie Siebert-Hommes, “Ruth,” In *De Bijbel literair: Opbouw en gedachtegang van de bijbelse geschriften en hun onderlinge relaties*, ed. J. Fokkelman & W. Weren (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum/Kapellen: Pelckmans, 2003), 371.

location.<sup>16</sup> Not only are the middle chapters (ch. 2 and ch. 3) but also the outer chapters (ch. 1 and ch. 4) are in parallel.<sup>17</sup> In the middle chapters, we find two central scenes with encounters between Boaz and Ruth in the field. Two larger scenes precede these with conversations between Ruth and Naomi; the two central scenes are followed by two shorter scenes in which Ruth and Naomi evaluate the situation at home. In the first chapter, Ruth is contrasted with Orpah; in the final chapter, Boaz is contrasted with the unnamed other redeemer. At the end of both chapters, we hear of the women of Bethlehem evaluating Naomi's situation.

However, this structure needs to be completed, as it does not make the tension arc visible. This calls for another format, a division into three parts: A (1:1-5) - B (1:6-4:17) - A' (4:18-22). In Ruth 1:1-5, we are dealing with the exposition for the whole book.<sup>18</sup> In an exposition, the narrator puts together all the 'attributes' of his story: (a) time: "And it happened in the days when the judges ruled", (b) place: from Bethlehem in Judah to the fields of Moab, and (c) the story characters who will play a role in the proceedings: Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion. More happens in this exposition, as it also gives a place to what in narratological terms is called 'the problem'. The exposition consists of two parts (1:1-2 and 1:3-5). In the first, we hear of famine in the land of Israel, resulting in the migration to Moab. A feature of the second part is the death of three of the aforementioned story characters. Thus, we hear of the death of Elimelech, Naomi's husband, immediately followed by the death of both her sons. In short, the narrator immediately outlines a dramatic situation at the beginning of his narrative: people whose livelihoods are affected. The narrator requires the large middle section (1:6-4:17) for the resolution of the problems arising from the return to Bethlehem in Judah: bread and a son.<sup>19</sup>

Above, I have suggested that 4:18-22 (A') is closely related to 1:1-15 (A). That suggestion cannot be thought to be strange when you consider the storyline: In 1:1-5 Naomi loses her husband and sons; in 1:6-4:17 we are told of the birth of a son to Naomi, which eventually leads to David (4:18-22).<sup>20</sup> In my view, this makes it entirely plausible that 4:18-22 has always been part of the narrative.<sup>21</sup>

I should also point here to research on the manuscripts of the Book of Ruth that has been carried out recently. Particular attention was paid to the division of the book. What was found was that the Masoretic pericope division in the manuscripts of Ruth has only 'one major point of division', and that is after 4:17.<sup>22</sup> A separation with great significance: what seemed to be the *narrative* of a family history (1:1-4:17) turns out to be the antecedent history of the dynasty leading up to David (see the *genealogy* in 4:18-22).<sup>23</sup> Therein may well lie the surprising

<sup>16</sup> Fischer, *Ruth*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Smelik, *Ruth*, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Fischer, *Ruth*, 120.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Barbara Green, "The Plot of the Biblical Story of Ruth." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982): 56: '... the story's main intent is to relate the restoration of seed: food in the land, food for Naomi and Ruth, a husband for Ruth, a redeemer for Naomi and an heir (leading to a king) for the whole people', where I would prefer to reduce this to two issues: bread and a son' (see Green, "The Plot," 65!); Also Sonnet & Majà Guiu, "Le Dieu cache," 178, take these two, the famine and the death of the husband and sons as the basis of the plot.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Siebert-Hommes, "Ruth," 373, who additionally points out Boaz's key role as a redeemer.

<sup>21</sup> I. Fischer, "Der Männerstammbaum im Frauenbuch." In »Ihr Völker, klatscht die Hände!« (Fs. E.S. Gerstenberger), ed. R. Kessler et al. *Exegese in unserer Zeit* 3 (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1997), 195-213, lists all the literary-critical arguments against the originality of the genealogy to then subject them to a critical commentary. Her conclusion: 'The genealogy must have belonged to the original stock of the narrative.'

<sup>22</sup> Korpel, *The Structure*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Smelik, *Ruth*, 169. Smelik says too much when he claims that it is the ancestry of a dynasty, the house of David chosen by God to rule over Israel ... The word 'king' does not appear here – in my opinion deliberately – as Matthew will do in his *toledot* of Jesus Christ: "Jesse begot David the king" (Matt 1:6). The narrator does put David on the scene, but that he will be king, he leaves unsaid since "My God is king" (Ruth 1:2).

punchline of the book. For me, it is a second argument for making it unlikely that 4:18-22 is a later addition. We might add that it is no coincidence that the antecedent is placed in Bethlehem in Judah; it is the (birth) place where David will be anointed king (1 Sam 16:1-13)!<sup>24</sup>

Looking now at the role of God in the book, two things stand out:

(1) YHWH's action is right at the beginning (1:6) and at the very end (4:13) of that part of the narrative (1:6-4:17) where we said earlier that the solution of the problems (bread and house) lie.

(2) In 1:1-5, God does not appear or, in other words, does not play a role. It is a fact that has received little attention in the commentaries. Not all interpreters share this view. For instance C.P. Baylis, who distinguishes between 'common values' and 'special values', says that we find the famine of 1:1 at the second level of knowledge, that of the 'Mosaic Covenant', in which the 'special values' that become visible, must be understood.<sup>25</sup> In the Mosaic covenant, famine is related to disobedience (Deut 28) or tribulation (Deut 8:2-6). That the reader should here think of famine as a punishment for disobedience is due to the fact that by speaking of the days of the judges, the narrator evokes images of disobedience. Therefore, according to Baylis, the famine should be seen as a deliberate plan of God. M.C.A. Korpel also claims that the famine was sent by God.<sup>26</sup> She does not provide textual evidence for this view. Her general comment 'Also in ancient Israel, drought and famine were ascribed to God' shows that she too believes that famine is always to be ascribed to God.<sup>27</sup> Neither view does justice to the biblical narrators, who tell of famine without referring to famine as a form of punishment from God (Gen 12:10; 26:1; 41:56; 42:5; 43:1,6; 47:13).<sup>28</sup> When that is the case, the biblical narrator will make that connection explicit (2 Kgs 8:1; Ps 105:16; Ezek 14:13; 36:29,30). And that is not the case here.

The view that God does not appear in 1:1-5 deserves correction, because he does, but is 'hidden' in the name of the first character in the story Elimelech, 'My God is king'. However, that kingship of God is not made manifest here in Moab.

## Ruth 1:1-22

She rose up, she and her daughters-in-law  
and she returned from the fields of Moab,  
for she had heard in the field of Moab  
that YHWH had visited his people by giving them bread.<sup>29</sup> (1:6)

The actual narrative is set in motion with "She rose up".<sup>30</sup> The verb "rise up" often functions in biblical narratives as an indication of the beginning of a new scene.<sup>31</sup> People are often called to "arise" by God: (e.g. in Gen 19:14,15; 21:18; Num 22:20; 1 Kgs 14:12; 17:9; 19:7; 2 Kgs 1:3; Jonah 1:2; 3:2). The initiative here lies with Naomi. Behind this arising however, is an act of

<sup>24</sup> So too Sonnet & Majà Guiu, "Le Dieu caché," 188.

<sup>25</sup> Charles P. Baylis, "Naomi in the Book of Ruth in Light of the Mosaic Covenant." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (2004): 420.

<sup>26</sup> Korpel, "Theodicy," 335, speaks similarly of the death of Elimelech and the sons Mahlon and Chilion (p. 336).

<sup>27</sup> Korpel, "Theodicy," 335.

<sup>28</sup> Also Grant, "Literary Structure," 427, speaks of the famine as 'a "natural" cause of tragedy'; Ellen van Wolde, *Ruth en Noömi: Twee vreemdgangers* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1993), 21: 'In vers 1 had de verteller slechts het kale feit van de hongersnood genoemd zonder enige suggestie dat God daar achter zou zitten (tr. 'In verse 1, the narrator had merely mentioned the bare fact of the famine without any suggestion that God was behind it).

<sup>29</sup> The translations are of my own, based on the Dutch translation of Ruth: *Ruth: Een vertaling om voor te lezen*, Amsterdam: NBG 1974 / Boxtel: KBS 1974.

<sup>30</sup> Sonnet & Majà Guiu, "Le Dieu caché," 178; Smelik, *Ruth*, 39.

<sup>31</sup> Smelik, *Ruth*, 39.

God. Indeed, the narrator reports that Naomi has heard in the fields of Moab that God had visited his people to give them bread. Compared to 1:1, the situation in 1:6 has changed completely. First there was famine in the land, now God has taken the initiative to change that situation (= to give bread). In another respect too, the situation has changed, for Naomi was in Moab with her husband and her two sons, however, she returns without her husband and without her sons.

Interpreters do not always take note that it does not say “for she had heard in the fields of Moab that YHWH had given bread to his people”, but “for she had heard in the fields of Moab that YHWH *had visited* his people to give them bread”.<sup>32</sup> The narrator still leaves open the actual nature of the visit.<sup>33</sup> At the end of the first section (1:23), this becomes clear to the reader, when he hears that they have arrived in Bethlehem (= House of Bread) “at the beginning of the barley harvest”. This harvest – the result of his visit – will provide the bread. Ruth 2 will reveal how they too will share in this harvest.

Ruth 1:1-23, with “returning” as the ‘Stichwort’,<sup>34</sup> consists of three parts: 1:1-5; 1:6-19a and 1:19b-22.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the first chapter, the narrator speaks explicitly of God only once. This does not happen in the first (1:1-5) and third sections (1:19b-22), but it does happen at the beginning of the middle section (1:6-19a). In addition, in this middle section, the characters in the story speak of God. First Naomi, twice (1:8-9 and 1:11-13) and then Ruth (1:16-17). What stands out about Naomi’s speaking, is her positive view of God when it comes to Ruth, and her negative view when it comes to herself. She links this positive view of Ruth to her proven faithfulness: “YHWH grant you faithfulness, as you have proved to the dead and to me,”<sup>36</sup> after which she continues with a second benediction: “YHWH grant that you find a resting place, a woman in her husband’s house.” How different is her view of God when it comes to her own situation: “No, my daughters,” she says at the very end of the conversation with Orpah and Ruth, to indicate that there is no good reason for going with her, indeed it is even so “that the hand of YHWH is gone out against me”<sup>37</sup> (1:13). This “against me” precedes the verb for a reason. What she is doing, is distancing herself from Ruth, where Ruth does the exact opposite when she commits herself to death and the grave with Naomi. Commentators often point out – with good reason – the contrast between Orpah and Ruth, but there is also reason to point to the contrast that Naomi makes with Ruth.<sup>38</sup> What Naomi is doing here, and she will repeat it to the women on arrival in Bethlehem, is blaming God for her situation. Naomi here articulates the feeling of many people, that God is responsible for suffering. The question is whether the

<sup>32</sup> So, for example, Saxegaard, *Character Complexity*, 180; Lindström, “The Portrayal,” 238.

<sup>33</sup> The verb פָּקַד (‘visit’) can have a negative consequence: to visit in order to punish or to repay sins, and a positive consequence, as here (see also Ps 65:10-14): to visit in order to bestow bread on the people.

<sup>34</sup> So too W. Dommershausen, “Leitwortstil in der Ruthrolle.” In *Theologie im Wandel* (Fs. Kath.-Theol. Fakultät an der Universität Tübingen 1817-1967), ed. J. Ratzinger & J. Neumann. TThR 1 (München/Freiburg: Erich Wewel, 1967), 396-398.

<sup>35</sup> Ruth 1:1-5 functions in two ways: as exposition for the whole book, but also as the first scene of chapter 1. We saw above that a new scene begins in 1:6, which ends in 1:19. The third scene begins with an indication of time, that is of their arrival in Bethlehem: ‘And it happened, when they arrived in Bethlehem ...’ (so too Smelik, *Ruth*, 60).

<sup>36</sup> Van Wolde, *Ruth en Noömi*, 23: ‘Noömi veronderstelt en wenst een evenredigheid tussen het handelen van mensen en dat van JHWH. De goedheid van JHWH moet corresponderen met de goedheid van mensen.’ (tr. ‘Noömi assumes and desires proportionality between the actions of people and those of YHWH. YHWH’s goodness must correspond to human goodness.’)

<sup>37</sup> ‘The hand of the Lord is gone out against me ...’, see Deut 2:15; Judg 2:15; 1 Sam 7:13; 12:15; Job 19:21.

<sup>38</sup> T. Linafelt, “Narrative and Poetic Art in the Book of Ruth.” *Interpretation* 64 no. 2 (2010): 128; Baylis, “Naomi,” 424-425, 431.

narrator shares this belief.<sup>39</sup> Several commentators believe that this is indeed the case.<sup>40</sup> Here we are dealing with an essential point of the book. All attention should be paid to how the narrator does and does not talk about God, where he omits the word God, and where he deploys Him in his narrative. Narrative criticism has shown that a distinction must be made between the narrator's point of view and that of the characters in the story.<sup>41</sup> These do not automatically coincide. The narrator does not explicitly mention the word "God" in 1:1-5. The conclusion that the reader should draw from this, seems to me, that both the famine in Israel and the death of Elimelech and the two sons, are due apparently to natural causes. Naomi, however, 'reads' the situation of 1:1-5 differently. She holds God responsible for the situation. She will later even call it "evil" on the part of YHWH (1:21). The narrator does not immediately respond to this, e.g. he does not point out that she has had positive news about YHWH in the fields of Moab, but he will eventually come back to this.<sup>42</sup> What Naomi shows us, is recognisable to the reader: when you are affected by suffering, you often fail to see the positive that you encounter. Here that concerns first of all the news of God's visit, as well as the fact that Naomi has not been abandoned to her misery: Orpah and Ruth go with her (1:7).

In the third scene, the arrival in Bethlehem, Naomi talks to the women only about her situation, and specifically what God has done to her (1:20-21).<sup>43</sup> On the basis of this, she requests a name change: she wants to continue as "Mara", a "bitter" woman from now on.<sup>44</sup> The narrator will not go along with her proposal, as he continues to speak of Naomi. Whether or not the women heed her call, we do not hear.

"Do not call me Naomi,  
call me Mara,  
for Shaddai has made me very bitter.  
I, full I have gone,  
empty has YHWH made me return.  
Why would you call me Naomi,  
for YHWH has testified against me  
and Shaddai has done evil to me?"<sup>45</sup> (1:20-21)

Naomi even gives the impression that she has returned to Bethlehem alone, as she is silent about Ruth's continuing faithfulness. That everything revolves around Naomi is also clear from the fact that she specifically begins with "I" and sees herself as the object ("me") of God's blameworthy deeds.<sup>46</sup> We do not hear of any reaction from the women. Even the reader knows this: what can one say in such a situation?

<sup>39</sup> So too Smelik, *Ruth*, 51.

<sup>40</sup> Hals, *The Theology*, 9; Prinsloo, "The Theology," 334; Bland, "God's Activity," 133, even speaks of 'evidence that the writer also holds the position that God causes disasters' (so too on p. 135).

<sup>41</sup> See too, Saxegaard, *Character Complexity*, 181.

<sup>42</sup> So too Hongisto, "Literary Structure," 26.

<sup>43</sup> Grant, "Literary Structure," 431, refers to these verses 20-22a as 'the nadir of the Ruth narrative'.

<sup>44</sup> Tiessen, "A Theology," 258-260, interprets her words – using W. Brueggemann's concept of 'counter testimony' and 'core testimony' – as 'counter testimony'. However, he says the same of what Naomi says to Orpah and Ruth (1:8-9a), words that I would rather treat as 'core testimony'.

<sup>45</sup> Linafelt, "Narrative and Poetic Art," 123-126, denotes these words as poetry, the most characteristic element of which is parallelism.

<sup>46</sup> Smelik, *Ruth*, 62; Van Wolde, *Ruth en Noömi*, 24,25. It should be noted that in this section, the narrator always uses Naomi's perspective. She is the subject of many of the verbal forms (so, Van Wolde, *Ruth en Noömi*, 28-29).

Looking specifically at what Naomi says about God in her response to what the women say to her on her arrival,<sup>47</sup> we see a chiasmic construction: Shaddai - YHWH - YHWH - Shaddai. The harshest utterances with the words “very bitter” and “evil” fall to Shaddai. This particular designation “Shaddai” for God, is strongly reminiscent of Job. The narrator may well have deliberately used this designation for God from the Book of Job. Finally, Naomi finds herself in a very similar situation to Job. Her words, “for Shaddai has made me very bitter” (1:21) are reminiscent of Job’s words, “Shaddai has made my soul bitter” (Job 27:2). In 1:21a, Naomi evaluates the events from the beginning (1:1) to now (1:19) as “I, full have I gone, empty has YHWH made me return,” where she could also have said that she had gone full, and might now have returned empty, but that she had also heard that YHWH had visited his people to give bread, and that she was glad that Ruth had returned with her.<sup>48</sup> Such an evaluation would have done more justice to her situation. This “returned empty”, I think, refers not only to the fact that she has returned without a husband and sons, but also that she is without bread. And that in Bethlehem, which means House of Bread! Now, in the sequel to the narrative, this tension is finally resolved. In the second chapter, the lack of bread comes to an end. The third chapter even speaks of abundance (3:15-16), so that Ruth does not arrive at her mother-in-law empty-handed (3:17). Ruth 3 – which includes the scene on the threshing floor, seen by various commentators as the thrilling climax – is also the prelude to what we are told in chapter 4: the birth of a son to Naomi.

## Ruth 4:1-18

Ruth 4:13 is the only and also the last place in the book where the narrator reports on an action by God. It occurs in the account of the son’s γενέσις (4:13-17) that forms the conclusion of the narrative; this is followed by a genealogy.

Boaz took Ruth, she was his wife.  
 He came to her, YHWH gave her pregnancy  
 and she gave birth to a son.  
 The women said to Naomi:  
 “Blessed be YHWH  
 who has not left you without a redeemer this day,  
 his name will be called in Israel!  
 He will be for you the returner of your life force (litt. ‘soul’)  
 and a caretaker of your greyness,  
 for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, has given birth to him,  
 she who is better to you than seven sons.”  
 Naomi took the child, put him on her lap  
 and became his nurse.  
 The neighbouring women named him, saying:  
 “A son has been born to Naomi,”  
 they called his name: ‘Obed!’  
 He is the father of Jesse, the father of David. (4:13-17)

<sup>47</sup> The sentence is usually rendered as a question: “Is that Naomi?” More logical than a question, is to assume an exclamation: “That is Naomi!” (B. Jongeling, “HZ’T N’MY (Ruth 1.19).” *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1978): 474-477; Smelik, *Ruth*, 60). Indeed, they recognise her as the same Naomi from ten years ago. Naomi responds that she is definitely not the same.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. OBT 21 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 175: ‘Ruth and the barley harvest are the two signs of life, opposing the death statements of Naomi.’



The peculiarity of this birth story becomes apparent if we account for the classic pattern underlying birth stories:<sup>49</sup>

1. There was a man,  
his name was ... and the name of his wife ...
2. He came to her
3. She became pregnant
4. She gave birth to a son *or* she bore him a son
5. She/he *or* they (pl.) called out his name,
6. 'For ...' (explaining his name).

Two elements require our special attention, because they deviate from the pattern laid out above:

(a) A birth narrative ends with the naming (lit. the utterance of the name, i.e. the proclamation of the role he/she will play in history), which usually immediately follows "she bore a son". That naming is delayed here, for we only hear it completely at the end, and without further explanation ("because ...").<sup>50</sup> Instead, we hear that he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

(b) Where, based on the familiar pattern, the reader would expect to read, "and she became pregnant", as if it were a natural conception, the narrator says, "And YHWH gave her pregnancy." It is both the fulfilment of the blessing by those present in the gate: "Grant YHWH the woman ..." (4:11-12), and also God's response to what Boaz had wished for Ruth in veiled terms: "YHWH repay your deed, and your reward be complete on the part of YHWH, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to shelter" (2:12).<sup>51</sup> Nowhere in the Tanach is a comparable sentence to be found.<sup>52</sup> Many point out, that this is the only time that the narrator tells us that YHWH acts.<sup>53</sup> What the narrator wants to express with this is that this child is above all, a gift from YHWH.<sup>54</sup> That is what the reader is told. And the women of Bethlehem, with their *beracha* ("Blessed be YHWH ..."), express their awareness that it is He who is responsible for the birth of this son.<sup>55</sup> Naomi's response to this is not to concur with this praise; her attention is directed entirely to the child: "Naomi *took* the child, put him on her lap and *became his* nurse," whereas as the reader you would expect Boaz to take the child, thus confirming the opening line: "Boaz *took* Ruth and she *became his* wife." This is by no means to say that there is no response from Naomi to this gift from God: I hold that Naomi's *taking* to be her direct response to YHWH's *giving*.

<sup>49</sup> Klara Butting, *Die Buchstaben werden sich noch wundern: Innerbiblische Kritik als Wegweisung feministischer Hermeneutik* (Berlin: Alektor-Verlag, 1993), 38; F.H. Breukelman, *Bijbelse theologie. Deel III De theologie van de evangelist Mattheüs. Afl. 1 De ouverture van het Evangelie naar Mattheüs. Het verhaal over de γενέσις van Jezus Christus (Mattheüs 1:1-2:23)* (Kampen: Kok, 1984), 33, has mapped out the pattern.

<sup>50</sup> We find a similar delay in Exod 2:1-10, where, only after 2:2a at the conclusion, we are told what he is called.

<sup>51</sup> Smelik, *Ruth*, 160.

<sup>52</sup> Korpel, "Theodicy," 345, to which she adds: 'It was the Lord who gave Ruth conception ... The same God who wielded the power of death when He had taken away her husband Elimelech in Moab.'

<sup>53</sup> So a.o. Karel Deurloo & Kees van Duin, *Beter dan zeven zonen: De feestrol als messiaanse verwijzing* (Baarn : Ten Have, 1996), 107; Sonnet & Majà Guiu, "Le Dieu caché," 189, interprets this sentence as: 'En relevant que c'est Yhwh, et nul autre que lui, qui donna à Ruth de concevoir, le narrateur projette sur tout ce qui précède une lumière décisive: il manifesta que rein ne fut vécu jusque là dans la foi et dans la parole de foi.'

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Prinsloo, "The Theology," 339, draws this conclusion: 'Nevertheless, the word *wayyitten* which is strategically placed shows that there is a limit to human initiative and that human initiative is futile without the divine blessing or action' (the cursive is Prinsloo's) subsequently adding: 'It is in the last instance Yahweh who resolves the problem by causing Ruth to conceive.'

<sup>55</sup> For the relationships between the conversations between Naomi and the women in 1:20-21 and in 4:14-15, see Ellen van Wolde, *Aan de hand van Ruth* (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 24-26. Whereas the women in 1:20-21 do not respond to Naomi's denunciation of God, they do respond to YHWH's gift in 4:14-15.

What we should be no less mindful of, is that the sentence “YHWH gave her pregnancy” has actually been inserted very casually between: “Boaz took Ruth, she was his wife, and he came to her” and “and she gave birth to a son”, as if it shouldn’t get any attention at all, when after all, this is the only act of God that is recounted by the narrator! You would think that there is every reason for that phrase not to sound so casual. And all the more so when you consider how differently God was spoken of at the beginning, upon their arrival in Bethlehem. Naomi did not stop at saying how badly she had been treated by God. We saw that the women offered no defence to her accusation. Nor did the accused himself respond. Not then, the reader must now conclude. His response follows here, in the form of a gift to Naomi, a gift that she gladly accepts. The reader might say that it does take a very long time for Him to respond to the charge. But you could also say that God’s response is based firstly on the actions of people, for that is what we hear of in 2:1-4:13a. What is characteristic of those human deeds is the faithfulness/loyalty (חסד) that people demonstrate to one another (1:8; 2:20; 3:10).<sup>56</sup> If the reader is familiar with the books surrounding Ruth, he will know that in this faithfulness/loyalty we are dealing with a basic attribute of God (see e.g. Exod 34:6-7; 1 Sam 20:14; Ps 33:5; 89:2; 103:17; Isa 63:7; Lam 3:22; Jonah 4:2).

## Concluding remarks

In this investigation of the role of God in the Book of Ruth, two views are diametrically opposed. Some commentators<sup>57</sup> see in Him the major actor, while others<sup>58</sup> believe that God hardly acts in the book.<sup>59</sup> A group of commentators in between, sees God’s actions as (deliberately) camouflaged; it is found when men and women form bonds with each other.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Maria de Groot et al., “Naar een idiolekte vertaling.” *Rondom het Woord* 12 no. 4 (1970): 413-414; Edward F. Campbell, “Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth: *Hesed* (חסד) and Change.” *Austin Seminary Bulletin* 105 (1990): 64-74; Aleida G. van Daalen, “Ruth: Associaties en verwijzingen.” In *Broeder Jehosjoea: Opstellen voor Ben Hemelsoet bij zijn afscheid als hoogleraar in de exegese van het Nieuwe Testament van de Katholieke Theologische Universiteit te Utrecht*, ed. D. Akerboom et al. (Kampen: Kok, 1994), 47-54.

<sup>57</sup> Grant, “Literary Structure,” 440, speaks of ‘showing that He is a master of history’; Bland, “God’s Activity,” 129, regards the presentation of God’s actions in man’s daily life to be the theme of the book; Korpel, *The Structure*, 229-230: ‘God is the real Actor whose acts may seem capricious and incomprehensible to human beings, because his plans do not fit into a human framework.’

<sup>58</sup> Linafelt, “Narrative and Poetic Art,” 128-129; Prinsloo, “The Theology,” 340-341, is of the opinion that the emphasis is not on direct supernatural intervention by God. Rather, God’s actions are suggested; the emphasis is on man as God’s collaborator, and on human initiative.

<sup>59</sup> Jennifer L. Koosed, *Gleaning Ruth: A Biblical Heroine and Her Afterlives*. Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 77-84, who considers God to be almost entirely absent, only two actions are attributed to Him; Frederick W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*. WBC 9 (Dallas TX: James Nelson, 1996), 46, does not consider God to be a ‘character’, even though he is present, to reach the remarkable conclusion at the end of his reflection: ‘The world is fully and uniformly under the control of an all-powerful and all-knowing God’, a conclusion that seems curious after what has been previously said.

<sup>60</sup> Venter, “Die teenwoordigheid van God,” 916-932; Sonnet & Majà Guiu, “Le Dieu cache,” 177-190; Siquans, “Gottes Wirksamkeit,” 47-54; Saxegaard, *Character Complexity*, 195; H. Debel, “‘Uw volk is mijn volk, uw God is mijn God’ (Ruth 1,16).” *Collationes* 46 (2016): 131, speaks of ‘a God at work below the waterline’. In addition he speaks of the book’s paradox: it simultaneously presents God as infinitely distant and unimaginably close; Lindström, “The Portrayal,” 244, speaks of ‘the presentation of YHWH as working through the good deeds of the main characters, Ruth and Boaz’; cf. K.H. Miskotte, *Het gewone leven: In den spiegel van het boek Ruth*, Amsterdam 1938, ‘Het [boek] bepaalt zich namelijk bij het handelen van mensen met en aan elkaar in het gewone, dagelijkse leven; het is een beschrijving van wat de mensen doorstrijden en doorlijden in een wereld, waarin geen wonderen meer lijken te gebeuren, waarin men zelfs de indruk krijgt dat wordt afgezien van elk direct ingrijpen Gods.’ (p. 16) ‘In Ruth is niet te vinden de onmiddellijke neerslag van de Openbaring: “zoo spreekt de Heere”’; God is hier méér dan elders verborgen, verhuld, of liever niet méér openbaar dan in uw en mijn leven.’ (pp. 26-27)

These positions do not always reflect the fact that the issue at stake here is God's attitude towards the suffering that befalls the people.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, that is how the book begins, with misery befalling Naomi: famine in the land of Israel and death in the fields of Moab (1:1-5). God plays no part in this, the narrator informs us. The kingship of God – Elimelech, “my God is king” – does not manifest itself in Moab. The rest of the narrative (1:6-4:22) can be seen as God's response to this misery. This is evident right at the beginning, when we too as readers hear that YHWH has visited his people to *give* them bread (1:6), a visit of which the reader sees the result at the conclusion of the first section: the barley harvest (1:22). It is his direct response to the famine. At the very end, the reader hears of a response by YHWH to the death of Elimelech and the two sons, when the narrator says: “YHWH *gave* her (= Ruth who had become Naomi's partner<sup>62</sup>) pregnancy”, enabling her to bear a son. In my view, what the narrator wants the reader to hear is that God is not the giver of famine and death, as Naomi claims, but that He is the one who seeks to put an end to misery, here in Bethlehem (‘House of Bread’) by *giving* Naomi and Ruth the beginning of a future: with the beginning of the barley harvest and the beginning of a house.<sup>63</sup> It is up to them to respond to this.

I return to my initial question: is YHWH perhaps the main character of the book? In any case, He is – to use the words from Deutero-Isaiah (41:4; 44:6; 48:12) – the first and the last to respond to all the misery that has befallen Naomi, and Ruth too, for that matter.

Those commentators who take the middle position will add that God also secretly acts between 1:6 and 4:13. Rather than deny that, I would want to interpret the relationship between the blessings in 1:8,9; 2:12; 4:11 and the subsequent human actions differently. After such a blessing, the reader does not hear that God does what is asked. It occurs through human action. I interpret that as: you can make such a blessing, God does not respond to it, if you yourself are able of doing what is desired.<sup>64</sup> He only reacts when it is beyond human capabilities!<sup>65</sup>

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(tr. ‘Indeed, the book defines itself by the actions of people with and to each other in ordinary, everyday life; it is a description of what people struggle and suffer through in a world in which miracles no longer seem to happen, in which one even gets the impression that any direct intervention of God has been dispensed with’ (p. 16); ‘In Ruth is not to be found the immediate repercussion of Revelation: “thus saith the Lord”; God is more hidden, veiled, or rather not more public here than elsewhere in your and my life.’ (pp. 26-27)

<sup>61</sup> Those who do pay attention to this are Korpel, “Theodicy,” 334-350; R.G. Branch, “Handling a crisis via a combination of human initiative and godly direction: Insights from the Book of Ruth.” *In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi* 46/2 (2012), art. 110, 1-11. Common genre typifications like ‘novella’ and ‘idyll’ for the Book of Ruth therefore do little justice to the point this narrative seeks to make: the place of God in relation to the misery that befalls any human being (so too Korpel, “Theodicy,” 334, although afterwards [p. 350] she says; ‘The Book of Ruth is a programmatic pamphlet in the guise of a captivating idyll’). Tiessen, “A Theology,” 262, holds the credibility of God to be the central question of the book; his conclusion: ‘... the book leaves the question of Yahweh's trustworthiness unresolved.’

<sup>62</sup> Is it too much said to speak here of representation (Dutch: plaatsbekleding) - and not of substitution (Dutch: plaatsvervanging)?

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Fischer, *Ruth*, 252: ‘Die beide Grundprobleme, Hunger und Kinderlosigkeit, die das Rutbuch anspricht und die thematische Spannungsbögen durch das ganze Buch bilden, sind nun gelöst.’

<sup>64</sup> So too Renate Jost, *Freundin in der Fremde: Rut und Noomi* (Stuttgart: Evangelischer Verlag, 1992), 70: ‘An keiner Stelle wird davon geredet, daß Gott handelt, wenn Frauen und Männer in der Lage sind, selbst etwas zu tun. Nur dort, wo menschliches Handeln an seine Grenzen stößt, kommt Gott ins Spiel: beim Ende einer Hungersnot, beim Werden eines Menschen.’

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Lindström, “The Portrayal,” 227: ‘... that the narrative explicitly mentions God's activity only twice (1:6 and 4:13) and that takes place precisely where human activity has reached its natural boundaries (fertility); and Fischer, *Rut*, 41: ‘Er (= God, *NAR*) ist der Geber der Fruchtbarkeit, die Menschen nicht erzwingen können.’

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