Intersectionality in the Book of Ruth: Constructing Ruth’s Identity in Ancient Israel

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INTERSECTIONALITY IN THE BOOK OF RUTH:
CONSTRUCTING RUTH’S IDENTITY
IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

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INTRODUCTION

Ruth the Moabite is most widely known as the great-grandmother to the greatest king of Israel, King David. Like Tamar before her, explaining the presence of Ruth within the lineage of Israel’s royal dynasty is a difficult one. Of all of the neighboring ethnic groups, Ruth is a part of one of Israel’s most detested. For an Israelite audience, listening to the short story of Ruth would have immediately brought to mind the bitter and pernicious history that lay between their nation and the character Ruth. Even in light of, or despite, Ruth’s display of fidelity to Naomi, she remains only an agent to Naomi’s mobility through the birth of a son. Furthermore, the author parodies the irony of her existence among the Israelites through the constant reiteration of her true origins, “Ruth the Moabite.” The author will not let his audience forget this fact. This is what makes Ruth’s “ethnic identification and national affiliation…central to the story.”1 As a result, Ruth remains a complex character. She embodies the other in Israeli society. A הָאָרְבָּא (foreigner) and נְכֹלָה (widow), her ethnicity and gender detail two of the most prominent aspects of her identity.

Often times the “characters in a story are positioned to fulfill particular socially recognizable roles.”2 These facets of a character’s identity are essential in so far as they tell

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1 Johnny Miles, Constructing the Other in Ancient Israel and the USA (Sheffield Phoenix Press Ltd, 2011), 158.

something about the “persons behind the voices.”

Ruth remains a composite, a “public construction” which cannot fully display any real historical accuracy in our quest for insight into the Moabites or this particular Moabite. As Saul Olyan makes clear,

The very act of writing for an audience produces a public construction of a subject’s emotional life that is not at all the equivalent of that life. In comparison with the inner life of an individual, a textual representation is far less complex and interesting, given all that must by definition be left out due to the limits of linguistic representation, the constraints on the writer’s own self knowledge and memory, and whatever audience-oriented motivations the writer might have.

In acknowledging the then difficult task of knowing Ruth, we are left only with brief characterizations of her identity to begin to tell us how the Israelites understood her and the Moabites. This paper will focus on the overlapping of these social locations and the inequality that stems from them. While the storyteller is more direct in his appropriation of Ruth’s ethnic identity by repeatedly calling her הָרֻתְוָה הָוֶּבֶּה (“Ruth the Moabite”) (Ruth 1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10), he has also acknowledged dimensions of Ruth’s intersecting identity in the way in which he has constructed her dialogue. It is in her speech that we are able to examine the way in which different aspects of ones identity was postured during this time period and how that is used to construct her otherness. The usage of specific lexical terms on the part of the storyteller, Ruth, and on the part of Naomi and Boaz reveal how a widowed, foreign woman was perceived and received by an Israelite audience.

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.
My examination of the dimensions of Ruth’s identity will be twofold. At the outset, this thesis will try to construct Ruth’s identity by investigating acquired and birth-ascribed stratification that impact her characterization. This will provide a background for her characterization and show the intersectionality of identity. The paper will then focus on the actions and speech of Ruth as well as those around her who address her.

In the context of “the ancient Near East, familiar household relationships, born of personal ties of kinship and master-slave association, provided the local rules for all social interactions.”6 This type of status and ranking is relevant to most all societies, and in particular the Israelite society which is composed of “tangible and intangible factors such as citizenship, wealth, age, family position, as well as gender, [which] combine in often subtle and unexamined ways to produce an individual’s standing in the law as a ‘legal subject.’”7 Since the law “embodies aspects of social relationships,”8 it is within the law that each aspect of one’s identity becomes a matter of stratification within the society.9 As a result, “interpersonal interaction becomes the vehicle for expression of hierarchy: for asserting, testing, validating, or rejecting claims to status.”10 This is why the dialogue in Ruth is so central to our examination of her


10 Ibid., 13:401.
identity, because it is here we see how the author has othered Ruth in the stratified system she has entered.

**Methodology**

While it is not my intention to apply foreign models to the book of Ruth, I believe that in order to adequately explore the nature of Ruth’s intersectional identity, it is important that integration of other disciplines take place in this paper. Many scholars have acknowledged the existence of “artificially constructed scholarly boundaries.”

Broadly, scholars often embark in their study of the Hebrew Bible to “investigate for diverse questions relating to life, image, status and behavior” for men and women alike in ancient Israel. All the while they will stay away from other disciplines whether they are other social and natural sciences, or divergent hermeneutical frameworks. Some scholars view the move toward interdisciplinary modes as “trendy.” Despite this perspective, these interdisciplinary modes, especially in the study of gender and ethnicity, are essential to our inquiry, as one of many “academic domains whose work and thought they are nevertheless relevant.”

More recently, most disciplines have engaged in the use of a “full range of historical, sociological, textual, and archaeological

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methods in a reconstructive effort.”¹⁴ The inter-textual nature of the Hebrew Bible, and particularly the book of Ruth¹⁵ necessitate various hermeneutical frameworks in addition to examination of various scholarly disciplines. The characterization of Ruth makes evident that “no single dimension of overall inequality can adequately describe the full structure of multiple, intersecting, and conflicting dimensions of inequality.”¹⁶ Ruth’s experience is unique and while scholarship has tended toward collapsing the category of ethnicity into gender when speaking of non-Israelite women in the biblical narrative, this paper will instead, highlight why it is important to see Ruth as particularly remarkable because of what her construction as a character tells us about how the Israelites conceived of the “self.” It is in this conception of “self” that inequality is then laid to bear.

In this paper I will use sociology, feminist criticism, postcolonial biblical criticism, the historical critical method, and archaeology to help construct the identity of Ruth. This will provide a fuller picture of what her character embodies and help conceive of how we might re-approach her. The use of sociological terms and concepts will uncover the prominence of stratification within the text, while postcolonial biblical criticism and feminist criticism will help deconstruct and reconstruct¹⁷ Ruth, and re-appropriate the significance of how the self becomes


described in the context of *Other*.\textsuperscript{18} This examination will not be exhaustive, and may only highlight particular details, but the hope is that the interdisciplinary nature of this paper will provide a fuller picture of Ruth.

\textsuperscript{18} Miles, *Constructing the Other in Ancient Israel and the USA*, 139.
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

As a character, Ruth is unique in the Hebrew Bible particularly because aspects that stratify her within Israelite society also define her. Stratification is something that appears in all societies and it takes the form of division by both class and status. In many societies “gender, ethnicity, and age, have all been frequent bases for status division.” In Israelite society, the most obvious examples of status division are in the biblical text itself. Ruth enters into a society that has realized inherited inequality in both legal matters and is illustrated in its narrative. Male and female fall under a binary pair found in legal texts. The Hebrew Bible “presupposes a form of social organization that is […] hierarchical when it comes to gender relationships.” The biblical text is also ethnocentric in its portrayal of other neighboring groups. The emphasis on these distinctions creates an atmosphere whereby stratification becomes “the articulation of power into horizontal structures based in inequalities of resources.”

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20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.


24 Miles, *Constructing the Other in Ancient Israel and the USA*, 159.

For Ruth, as a female Moabite, this stratification is birth-ascribed and therefore immutable.\textsuperscript{26} Having possessed these binary characteristics since birth, they “cannot be changed.”\textsuperscript{27} As a result, Ruth’s birth-ascribed status will have impact on her “opportunities, rewards, and social roles.”\textsuperscript{28} While there is little to no mobility affiliated with one’s birth-ascribed status, acquired status does afford the opportunity for agency and mobility. Acquired status allows for an individual to “change status legitimately within the system through fortune, misfortune, or individual family efforts.”\textsuperscript{29} In Ruth’s case, her status changes from the fortune of marriage to the misfortune of widowhood. Moreover, as a “socially constructed” category,\textsuperscript{30} her status as a widow puts her in a position of vulnerability to poverty. All of these aspects of Ruth’s identity show the lack of power she has to control the stratification that is dictated by the law. Ruth becomes an actor whose “choice is constrained by the resources that others are able to bring to bear in influencing them.”\textsuperscript{31}

As we know, Ruth’s situation is not helpless. Naomi and Ruth have the opportunity to be reintegrated through Ruth’s fertility. While upward mobility is difficult, Boaz’s status as an elite\textsuperscript{32} in Israelite society, and as the ֶדֶשׁ (redeemer) to Naomi’s family, gives him the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Berreman, “Race, Caste, and Other Invidious Distinctions in Social Stratification,” 13:388.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 13:386.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 13:399.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Matthews, Levinson, and Frymer-Kensky, \textit{Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East}, 174.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Scott, “Power, Domination and Stratification: Towards a Conceptual Synthesis,” 25.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 27.
\end{itemize}
opportunity to redeem both Naomi and Ruth. While redemption takes on both a theological and legal dimension in the context of the ancient Near East, here it is also used to acknowledge the sociological impact in the matter of class status. Lastly, Ruth’s age is also an aspect of acquired status. Ruth’s youth almost guarantees her to be someone in the process of movement toward upward mobility.³³ Ruth’s age plays a vital role in her ability to procreate. Naomi’s elderliness did not afford her the same opportunity (Ruth 1:12). Nevertheless, Naomi’s elderly age does afford her honor (Leviticus 19:32), and in a culture heavily based in public displays of honor, Naomi knew she could expect this from Ruth.

**Ethnically Separate: Ethnogenesis and the Ethnic Identity of Israel**

More recently, biblical archaeologists have understood and defined ethnicity as two distinct theories: primordial/circumstantial approach and circumstantial/situational approach.³⁴ Ethnicity that is defined in terms of primordial/circumstantial origins is based significantly upon birth and blood ties, genetically based explanation, ancestry, and historical depth “supported by rhetorical, mythical or religious language.”³⁵ Ethnicity that is defined in terms of a circumstantial/situational approach is based on “economic or political rather than genetic or kinship,” and as a result it has more “flexibility to changing circumstances.”³⁶ While the former

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³⁵ Ibid., 9.

³⁶ Ibid.
places emphasis on kinship and genetics, the latter presents more fluid and flexible group boundaries. Separately, neither of these approaches entirely explains the Israelites, which is why some have argued for a “more fluid middle ground” between the two.\textsuperscript{37} As a result ethnicity is understood as a “dynamic ongoing process of interaction or \textit{ethnogenesis} that can take place on many levels.”\textsuperscript{38}

\textit{Ethnogenesis} becomes the vehicle through which the Israelites conceive of their ethnic identity. Quoting Austrian historian Herwig Wolfram, Killebrew defines \textit{ethnogenesis} as “a process that forms the core ideology of a group.”\textsuperscript{39} In the case of the Israelites, this process consists of three characteristic features:

(1) a story or stories of primordial deed, which can include the crossing of a sea or river, an impressive victory against all odds over an enemy, or combination of similar “miraculous” stories (e.g., the exodus); (2) a group that undergoes a religious experience or change in cult as a result of the primordial deed (e.g., reception of the Ten Commandments and worship of Yahweh); and (3) the existence of an ancestral enemy or enemies that cement group cohesion.\textsuperscript{40}

Each of these features help to create the collective identity of the Israelites in ethnic terms, and they act as a monumentally important backdrop to the book of Ruth.\textsuperscript{41} Ruth cannot share in this identity making because her birth-ascribed status as a Moabite prevents her inclusion. As a

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 149.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Liss and Oeming, \textit{Literary Construction of Identity in the Ancient World} (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 3.
result Ruth cannot just assimilate, like some scholars might argue, through fidelity to Naomi or through exchanged belief in one deity for another. Furthermore, Ruth’s *otherness* becomes apparent in her ancestors’ role as one of the Israelite’s premier enemies. Ruth’s ancestral group helped to bring the Israelites together.

As an example of someone who is ethnically *other* Ruth would have encountered a high-level of nationalism among the Israelites. They regarded the myth of origin of the Moabites as devious and contemptible (Deuteronomy 23:2). This myth reveals that ethnic stratification did exist among the Israelites as they continue to perceive the Moabites as inferior. Moabites would be banned from the assembly of YHWH, the sacred community, for up to ten generations as a result of their being “linked to a concept of differential intrinsic worth.”

Out of the many characteristics involved in identity construction, there are three that are most significant in the context of an Israelite audience: religion, language, and national origin. Religious affiliation and national origin are two of the more prominent forms a Moabite might be *othered*. An investigation of language will show that though the Israelites might conceive of the Moabites as ethnically different, their languages share many similarities.

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43 This myth was probably created by the Israelites to further polemicize the Moabites.

Religion: The People of Chemosh

As a Moabite, Ruth was a part of 'נֵבֶם ħêmôshî' (the “People of Chemosh”).\(^{45}\) Chemosh was the principle god of the Moabites (1 Kings 11:7). Judges 10:6 suggests that Chemosh was not their only god, but it is unclear whether in appearing in this list among other nations that the author is actually using a literary device. Nevertheless, Numbers 25:1 confirms the presence of multiple deities among the Moabites including בֶּלַי בָּאָל Baal of Peor, which may suggest that the Moabites were henotheists. Interestingly, it does not appear as though the Moabites had an organized religious system before Arameans entered the land.\(^{46}\) It is quite possible that the Arameans actually “introduced Chemosh as their guiding god to the Moabites.”\(^{47}\)

Other biblical references to the god Chemosh show the ongoing concern of the pollution of the Moabite god among the Israelites. The writer of Kings does not interpret King Solomon’s marriages to women from neighboring nations as political alliances, but instead as motivated by love (1 Kings 11:1-2). As a result of this love for נְשָׂה נֶצַּר (foreign women), of which the Moabites were among them, Solomon erected a high place for Chemosh. Described by the author of Kings as “the abomination of Moab,” Chemosh was worshipped and sacrificed to by the Moabite wives of Solomon, in the midst of the Israelites, on a mountain east of Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:8). King Josiah would later destroy this altar (2 Kings 3:5). In a prophetic oracle given

\(^{45}\) Jeremiah 48:46


\(^{47}\) Piotr Bienkowski and P. M. Michele Daviau, Studies on Iron Age Moab and Neighbouring Areas in Honour of Michele Daviau (Ancient Near Eastern Studies. 29; Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 52.
in the book of Jeremiah, Chemosh is paired with Moab in several parallelisms (Jeremiah 48:7, 13, 46) demonstrating the synonymous relationship that existed between Moab and its god Chemosh (at least in the eyes of the Israelites). This relationship to Chemosh is substantiated in the Mesha Inscription, a memorial stela attributed to Mesha the King of Moab from 845 B.C.E.\textsuperscript{48} In the stela, Mesha proclaims that Chemosh is in every town he has conquered, especially “in those settlements which had belonged to Israel and where Yahweh had been worshipped.”\textsuperscript{49} This showed the level of animosity that existed between Chemosh and YHWH. Due to the fact that the political and religious dimensions were not considered separate categories during this time period, the importance of one’s god ruling over others was symbolically suggestive because it displayed the power of the people themselves. Simon B. Parker, in his article “Ammonite, Edomite, and Moabite,” reflects further on what these texts reveal:

Aside from the grammatical distinctions…[the texts are] strikingly similar in language and even style to classical Hebrew prose. The beliefs and institutions it reveals are also strikingly similar. Thus its view of the relations among the land of Moab, its king, and the monarchy’s deity (Chemosh) were more or less the same as the relations among land, king, and national deity in Judah (and presumably Israel), and the two monarchies seemed to have shared such institutions as the hrm, the vow, and the dedication of booty to the deity in his temple, the provision of an adequate water supply in fortified cities, and the building of cities, temples, and a royal palace with associated defenses.\textsuperscript{50}

In the book of Ruth, Chemosh is not mentioned by name, and neither are any other Moabite gods. In fact, Ruth’s relationship to a deity is only displayed in her words to Naomi where she states that Naomi’s god would be שִׁמְשַׁנ (“my god”). This declaration might be better

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 50.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 49.

\textsuperscript{50} Steven L McKenzie and John Kaltner, Beyond Babel: a Handbook for Biblical Hebrew and Related Languages (Brill, 2002), 51.
understood as an act of henotheism instead of strict monotheism. Ruth’s “Gentile origins may also explain her general lack of reference to God.” Even so Ruth repeats back a similar phrase used by Naomi earlier (Ruth 1:8), that יְהֹוָה יְשַׁעְיָהוּ (“YHWH would do”) to Ruth what he does to Naomi (Ruth 1:17).

Language Differences & Similarities

Language is a characteristic that significantly impacts division among ethnic groups, revealing natural in-group and out-group distinctions because of the inability to communicate adequately with one another. The Israelites had a concept for this division as Genesis 10:5 states that each of the nations have their own language. Despite being a Moabite, Ruth does not suffer from impaired speech. In actuality Ruth’s command of Hebrew is good, but a bit uneven. The primary reason for this is that the intended audience of the book of Ruth was the Israelites, and the author was an Israelite as well. The scant Moabite texts in existence, while limited, reveal quite a few common features between the languages. Many scholars hold the “common view that Moabite is not different from Hebrew” and that “Hebrew and Moabite could communicate without undue difficulty.” Broadly, Hebrew and Moabite are both a part of the family of West Semitic languages. Both languages exhibit the following linguistic characteristics: two genders

51 Newsom and Ringe, Women’s Bible Commentary, 85.


53 Ibid.
(male and female), three numbers (singular, dual, and plural), and independent personal pronouns.\textsuperscript{54}

In the book of Ruth, the setting of Bethlehem is not just significant because it is the birthplace of David (1 Samuel 16:1), but also because of its proximity to Moab. Moab was separated from Judah by few geographical barriers such as the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. As a result of their close proximity the Moabites and Judahites share many common linguistic features. The Moabites “initially used the same form of the script as that used by the Israelites and Judahites.”\textsuperscript{55} The Moabites share in the use of the relative pronoun \textsuperscript{נֶאֶפֶד}, the accusative marker \textsuperscript{טָא}, and “the apocopation of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} weak verb in the wayyiqtol form.”\textsuperscript{56} Like Hebrew, Moabite also uses the definite article \textsuperscript{נְי}.\textsuperscript{57} It is easy to imagine how “neither of the two Moabite women found it hard to understand their Judean relatives.”\textsuperscript{58} In understanding the similarities between Hebrew and Moabite it might be more correct to suppose that Ruth and Orpah probably spoke a dialectal variation from Hebrew rather than a discrete language.\textsuperscript{59}


\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 48.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 49.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.


National Origins: The Power of Myth

In the ancient Near East, national origin is one of the principle forms of identity construction. The memory and myths of a nation become the primary vehicles through which collective identity is fostered both for the in-group and the out-group. Memory is also powerful because it has the ability to foster greater fidelity among the people. Without memory and myth, the Law would not have the amount of power it could potentially possess.\(^{60}\) It is through memory that the Law is then able to “constitute a script or blueprint of the new identity.”\(^{61}\) Both the Law and narrative are the basis of \emph{ethnogenesis} for the Israelites, and as a result a collective identity is birthed.

For the Israelites, the experience of the Exodus is what gives them such a deep sense of collective identity. It is through the Exodus that a highly religious organized system devoted to YHWH emerges. Moreover, the story of the Exodus fostered in the minds of the Israelites a memory based in “\emph{chosenness}.”\(^{62}\) These Hebrew slaves were chosen by YHWH, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and delivered from the hands of their enemies. This \emph{chosenness} acts as a form of propaganda and provides the group with a sense of mission.\(^{63}\) Part of their mission is to become a great nation (Genesis 12:2; Deuteronomy 30:9). The Israelites understood that in order to fulfill this mission they must be devoted to YHWH by being set apart (Leviticus 20:26).

\(^{60}\) Liss and Oeming, \textit{Literary Construction of Identity in the Ancient World}, 14.

\(^{61}\) Ibid.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 8.

\(^{63}\) Ibid., 14.
Unlike the Israelites, the Moabites did not appear to be centrally religiously organized.\textsuperscript{64} Nevertheless, the Moabites remained conceived of as \textit{other} through their worship of other god(s) and as a result, threatened the mission of the Israelites. The Holiness Codes use religious terms, but because of the synonymous nature that a nation has with their god(s), those nations are conceived of in ethnic terms as well.

This collective identity making is not solely the Israelites reflecting on themselves. The construction of self and other does not occur alone, but always in tandem. There are many ways in which a nation can conceive of their enemies. In the process, this has the potential to \textit{other} that group because the narrative of the out-group is dictated by the values, customs, and myth of the identity of the in-group. The Moabites threaten Israelite identity because of their god(s), values and customs. Moreover, the Israelites had their own conception of the \textit{ethnogenesis} of the Moabites and this plays a key role in how the Israelites constructed their identity against the Moabites.

According to Genesis 19, the nation of Moab came into being as the result of incest between Lot and his daughter. Lot’s wife had been killed (Genesis 19:26) and Lot’s son-in-laws, who apparently never had sex with Lot’s daughters (Genesis 19:8), did not listen to Lot and as a result perished (Genesis 19:14). It is unclear whether or not Lot was lying about the state of his daughters’ sexuality, regardless neither the younger nor the elder had children. In promoting their god, the Israelites made clear in the narrative that it was YHWH who saved Lot (Genesis 19:29). After moving into a cave with his daughters, the daughters realized their father was old, and having no options decided to get their father drunk and sleep with him in order to preserve

\textsuperscript{64} Bienkowski and Daviau, \textit{Studies on Iron Age Moab and Neighbouring Areas in Honour of Michele Daviau}, 141.
their offspring (Genesis 19:32, 34). It is in their sexual engagement with Lot that the narrative makes clear it condemns the women and not Lot, as he remained unaware of their sexual tryst. It is from this sexual union that בָּאוָב (Moab) is born (literally meaning “from father”).

This story serves two purposes for the Israelites in their identity construction of the Moabites. First, it legitimizes the Holiness Code’s prohibition against incest. In prohibiting this union, the Law judges the Moabites and perverts their ancestry making them appear pejoratively. Secondly, this narrative others the Moabites because the genesis of the Moabite nation was the result of sexual perversion. This portrayal of the Moabites as sexually perverse appears again in Numbers 25 becoming a leitmotif.

Genesis 19 conceives of the relationship between the Israelites and the Moabites as distinct, but related, through Lot’s relationship to the patriarch Abraham. Though Lot and Abraham are related, the act between Lot and his daughter severs the offspring of Lot from their relationship to Abraham. While Abraham’s relationship with his other nephew Bethuel continues through Isaac’s marriage to Rebekah, it is only now through Ruth that the kinship relationship between Abraham and Lot is reunited.65 The relationship becomes even closer through Boaz’ affiliation to Judah.66


66 Ibid.
Gender

Gender and its Relationship to Ethnicity in the Hebrew Bible

Gender and ethnicity have a complicated relationship in the Hebrew Bible. For the Israelites, the issue of ethnic identity is a gendered issue because the command to remain ethnically separate is the responsibility of the men. The laws are explicit that Israelite men should not marry women who come from foreign nations (Exodus 34; Deuteronomy 7). In Exodus 34, if an Israelite male makes covenant with any of the nations he is about to conquer, the consequences will end in taking wives from their daughters for their sons. Deuteronomy uses similar language. Fidelity to YHWH means not making covenant or showing these nations mercy (Deuteronomy 7:3). It is the Deuteronomist that states both not to יָרַע (intermarry) and not to יָשָׁה (take) wives, making a more explicit demand than in Exodus. While Exodus 34 is concerned with the sons of Israelites engaging with these foreign women, Deuteronomy 7:2 states that neither Israelite daughters nor sons may be given in marriage to these foreign nations. The only permission given for exogamy is if a male desires to marry a beautiful woman among the captives (Deuteronomy 21:11-14). In these commands ethnic purity relies upon the man to remain endogamous.

While it appears few, if any, Israelite women married non-Israelite men, there are many examples in the biblical narrative that show Israelite men engaged in exogamy. The Hebrew Bible only introduces us to examples where Israelite men marry outside their group. Esau marries Hittite women at the despair of his mother, Moses marries Zipporah, in the New Testament Salmon is said to have married Rahab, Boaz marries Ruth, and Solomon marries
multiple wives from various nations. Aside from Esther, Bathsheva’s brief marriage to Uriah the Hittite, and Abigail (2 Samuel 17:25/1 Chronicles 2:17), there are few if any examples of Israelite women marrying non-Israelite men.67

The Moabites have the most complicated and consequential relationship between gender and ethnicity of all the neighboring groups to the Israelites. In addition to their myth of national origin in Genesis 19, Numbers 25 continues the *leitmotif* of the Moabites as sexually deviant. Numbers 25 cements the perspective that this particular ethnic group has women who are perverted and as a result are threatening to the Israelites. While the Israelites had set up camp among the Moabites they began to have sexual relations with the “daughters of Moab” (Numbers 25:1). As a result of the Israelites’ physical prostitution with these foreign women they begin to religiously prostitute themselves to the gods of the Moabites. This prostitution led to the whole congregation being punished. The narrative places foreign women at the center of the cause for, and genesis of, idolatry among the Israelites. This motif of women engaging with gods besides YHWH is not new. Major Israelite female figures involve themselves with idols. Rachel revered as a matriarch, in Genesis 31, and Michal in 1 Samuel 19 used and had access to idols. Ironically Rachel suffers as a result of her involvement with the teraphim, and Michal would never have children. Both experience tragedies, one more explicit than the other in terms of how it related to other gods. For the Israelites, collectively, Numbers 25 is a realization of the myth of apostasy specifically through foreign women. The narrative gives weight to the prohibitions in the law against marriage with foreign women in Exodus 34 and Deuteronomy 7. The law is

67 Even Abigail as an example is problematic, because she is said to have been both the daughter of Nahash king of Ammon, and also a daughter of Jesse.
no longer an abstract or hypothetical scenario, Numbers 25 brings it to life as a memory within the myths of Israel. Deuteronomy 4:7 is then able to act as a call to remembrance, reminding the Israelites of the consequences for their prostitution.

Within the narrative itself, the consequences upon other foreign women are immediate. While the Israelites are still mourning the loss of those who gravely sinned through their worship of Baal of Peor, Zimri son of Salu marries a Midianite woman, Cozbi daughter of Zur (Numbers 25:6). Their marriage prolongs the plague that had fallen upon the congregation. They would die at the hands of a Levite priest who kills them in an act of fidelity to YHWH. This murder happens despite the fact that Moses himself is married to a Midianite woman. Religion is tied up with ethnicity, and the Israelites become suspicious of all groups as a result. While Cozbi’s death is tragic for the Midianites, it does not fully shape Midianite women in a mythic way. For Moabite women, the opposite can be said as their situation is compounded in the examples present in the Hebrew Bible.

Both the Genesis 19 and Numbers 25 myths play into the dialogue and presence of Ruth among the Israelites in the book of Ruth. In the narrative she does not pose a threat to the Israelites because she assumes fidelity to YHWH. As an outsider within Israel, it is more beneficial for her to gain inclusion by taking YHWH as her primary deity. We do not know what role she or Orpah may have played in introducing the gods of the Moabites to Mahlon or Chilon while in Moab. One could speculate that since Elimelech’s family resided in Moab like the Israelites at Shittim, they would have been exposed to the gods of Moab by dwelling among them for a period of ten years (Ruth 1:4). Nevertheless, while Ruth does not threaten the

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Israelites with her gods, her actions in the narrative do suggest a Moabite identity through her sexual deviance. The Israelites would have picked up on the portrayal of Ruth as sexually deviant through her engagement with Boaz. Though she does so at the behest of Naomi, her willingness to subject herself to this sexual act displays her *otherness* and ethnic identity. In an ironic twist to the “daughters of Moab” introduced in Numbers 25, one of Ruth’s most common appellation given by Naomi and Boaz throughout the book of Ruth is “daughter” and “Moabite.” The intermingling of gender and ethnicity and their ability to *other* irrefutably plays itself out in the person of Ruth through the collective memories of Israel.

**Gender and its Relationship to Widowhood**

Ruth’s gender is also important in so far as her character’s situation depends on her being a widow to an Israeliite man. First, you cannot separate widowhood from gender. The term אָלְמָה (widow) only takes on the feminine form. Widow most often appears with the feminine lexical terms בת (daughter) (Leviticus 22:13, Deuteronomy 16:11, 14) and אישה (wife) (Exodus 22:24; Leviticus 21:14; 2 Samuel 14:5; 1 Kings 7:14; 1 Kings 11:26; 1 Kings 17:9-10; Jeremiah 18:21; Ezekiel 44:22; Psalm 109:9). This coincides with the broader application of widow among the other Semitic languages, which suggests that widow appeared “originally as an adjective not a substantive.”

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Widowhood in Israel is a “matter of acquired status rather than birth-ascription.”

This achieved status results from the death of one’s husband (2 Samuel 14:5). These points suggest that widowhood is a feminine and therefore gendered phenomenon in Israel, of which men are excluded. As a result, widowhood and ethnicity become othering dimensions within the Israelite context. Both related to gender, they become feminized attributes. A married woman who becomes a widow undergoes a class change through her misfortune. She becomes dependent upon the community who bear the responsibility to care and aid for her. A part of this would be fulfilled in the act of leaving those crops that had not been fully gleaned (Leviticus 19:9; Deuteronomy 24:21). The Deuteronomistic Historian is particularly concerned with this loss in status, as the widow consistently appears in a list also known as “the quartet of the vulnerable” (Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17, 19-21; 26:12-13; 27:19).

This list consists of both acquired (orphan, widow, poor) and birth-ascribed status (alien).

In Deuteronomy, widowhood expresses an “economic and social relationship.” As the book of Ruth will illustrate, women’s “fates are determined by men: their husbands and sons and the town elders.” A woman was understood to be a widow if she “has been divested of her

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74 Berreman, “Race, Caste, and Other Invidious Distinctions in Social Stratification,” 13:386.
75 Matthews, Levinson, and Frymer-Kensky, Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East, 98.
76 Newsom and Ringe, Women’s Bible Commentary, 84.
male protector (husband, sons, often also brothers).” Nevertheless, women generally had three options to change their circumstances: remarry, remain unmarried but take up a profession, or “return to her father’s house.” The book of Ruth shows these as options for both Ruth and Naomi. Ruth’s youth provided her with the opportunity to remarry, though Naomi initially suggests she go back to her people. While Ruth’s work in the field is not necessarily the work of a skilled professional, it does show her ability to remain productive despite remaining unmarried (for the time being).

While men, too, could possibly lose their partner, they do not undergo a status change because as men they are responsible for their own livelihood. Unlike widowers, the social constraints placed upon widows make them susceptible and fragile to status change. Unable to own property, women relied upon their husbands. For women in the ancient Near East this equates in “paternalism and dependence.”

Fortunately, the Levirate law existed to benefit someone in Ruth’s circumstances (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). This law stood to “improve the legal and economic position of a widowed woman in a special case of undivided property of her deceased husband, a


78 Ibid., I:290.

79 Ibid.


81 Berreman, “Race, Caste, and Other Invidious Distinctions in Social Stratification,” 13:405.
circumstance that made her especially vulnerable. The widow would pull off his sandal, spit in his face, and pronounce the shame he brought upon his family for not fulfilling his obligation to her. Even though the levirate law was intended to protect women, “the local court was not entitled to enforce the fulfillment of a levirate obligation.” In Ruth and Naomi’s case, the land went to a (redeemer) literally named “so-and-so” who would not fulfill it (Ruth 4:6). As a result, Elimelech’s land remained undivided, and Naomi and Ruth would remain unredeemed until Boaz acted as the redeemer.

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82 Matthews, Levinson, and Frymer-Kensky, *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East*, 139.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.
CASE STUDY: CONSTRUCTING RUTH

Ethnicity

“Ruth the Moabite”

The most obvious literary device in the book of Ruth denoting difference in ethnicity is the repeated reference to Ruth’s Moabite origin. Employed by the storyteller, Moabite appears seven out of the thirteen times Ruth is mentioned. As an adjective, Moabite becomes the main descriptor of Ruth. In the context of an Israelite society, “membership of kinship group may be reflected in a person’s name.” This appellation is also the primary literary device used to other Ruth, highlighting her foreignness in a context that sees ethnicity as a way to “define itself and its other.”

Besides the narrator, Boaz is the only character who refers to Ruth as a Moabite. When first confronting “so-and-so” to fulfill his role as the redeemer, Boaz only mentions the acquiring of the land of Elimelech. Here the man replies that he will dutifully acquire it. Boaz continues on, saying that in acquiring the land he also acquires Ruth. For “so-and-so” this would result in the loss of his inheritance. Boaz himself is willing to forgo this loss, but uses this fact to his advantage. Campbell in his commentary on Ruth suggests that the reason why the kinsman did

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86 Ruth 1:4, 14, 16, 22; 2:2, 6, 8, 21, 22; 3:9; 4:5, 4:10, 13.

87 The other descriptors come from the narrator who refers to her as “daughter-in-law” (1:22, 2:22), and Boaz who states that she is a “widow” and “wife of Mahlon” (Ruth 4:5,10).


not take up his responsibility is because the kinsman probably has a family and children of his own. Yet, the narrative itself is silent in this regard. While this is certainly worth considering as an option, an alternative reading should be suggested. It is possible that Boaz uses Moabite as a way to identify Ruth among other women, and also as a way to dissuade “so-and-so” from fulfilling his obligations. Boaz does not just remind the kinsman of a widow he would have to redeem, instead Boaz also reminds him of her ethnicity. At every point Moabite is used to describe Ruth, Campbell makes no remarks in his commentary about its significance or relevance within the narrative. If the storyteller is using this appellation as a way to signal her foreignness, why would he deviate from this type of use in his construction of Boaz’s speech?

Ultimately, the storyteller’s purpose is the same throughout the narrative, that the term Moabite serves as a reminder of Ruth’s foreignness. The principle way of othering Ruth’s character is then manifested through Boaz’s reference to her as a Moabite. Since legal issues are dealt with at the gate, Boaz’s repetition of Ruth’s ethnic identity would have been done in front of the town in a very public fashion, adding an extra dimension to the kinsman’s decision to fulfill his obligation to Ruth. Finally, the acknowledgement by the elders and the kinsman of their recognition of Ruth through the appellation of her ethnicity points to the reality that Ruth was identified by all those around her primarily through her ethnicity. This is also substantiated by the fact that, when introducing her to Boaz, his servant refers to her as “the Moabite who came back with Naomi” (Ruth 2:6). All of these examples show the significance of the storyteller’s use of Moabite to describe Ruth within the context of an Israelite society.

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91 Ibid.
“Your People, Your God”

The words of Ruth in 1:16 are extraordinary and considered an act of filial fidelity. What is most significant in Ruth’s proclamation to Naomi is her decision to leave all that she knows and live as an outsider among the Israelites. Some scholars argue that Ruth’s decision to come back to Israel with Naomi is an act of “reaffiliation.”\(^92\) This is true, insofar as one recognizes her decision as a result of the \(b\ell\) (love) (4:15) and affection (1:17) she has for Naomi that is also undergirded by a self-preserving dimension to her decisions because of her current status.

In “The Determination of Social Identity in the Story of Ruth,” Victor H. Matthews argues that Ruth’s words show a determination by Ruth to transfer her social identity. As Matthews understands it, based on Ruth’s profession to Naomi, “Ruth is treated as an uprooted person who imposes on herself an expunging of her Moabite heritage, creating a cultural tabula rasa upon which Israelite social values then can be written”\(^93\) making it then possible for her to assume a new identity. Yet, Matthews fails to identify the nature and implications that birth-ascribed status has upon Ruth in an Israelite context. No one can become a “cultural tabula rasa,” neither can Ruth expunge her Moabite heritage by this profession to Naomi, as the storyteller makes clear in his use of Moabite to describe Ruth throughout the narrative. Ruth’s words, constructed by the storyteller, suggest an understanding of the importance of people and deity in the construction of identity. While Ruth’s words may be perceived as an act of desire to identify and assimilate as an Israelite, it is impossible. The marriage of non-Israelite women to

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\(^93\) Ibid., 18.
Israelite men does not necessarily make them Israelite. In fact, though we would expect that marriage, making the women a part of the kin of her husband, we find that, especially in the postexilic context, non-Israelite women who are married to Israelite men continue to be understood as נשים נבריות (foreign wives/women). This shows that foreign women cannot assume a different ethnicity through marriage. Additionally, the biblical narrative consistently chooses to preserve the ethnicity of these non-Israelite women in their records, with the ethnicity of the women often identified. While their children go on to be understood as Israelite, the mothers remain other and affiliated to their own father’s ethnicity, despite fidelity to YHWH or their following of the law. Moreover, fidelity to YHWH cannot make one, ethnically Israelite, because infidelity to YHWH by the Israelites did not make one less Israelite. King Solomon was not less of an Israelite because he prostituted himself to other gods, and married foreign women. It only made him an idolater. Finally, even גרים (foreign resident aliens), who are always assumed to be male, and follow the Law, are affected by Israelite/alien polarity.94

Ruth’s words should be presumed as constructed by someone sympathetic to the views of the Deuteronomistic Historian. Her declaration is reminiscent of Deuteronomy in her use of “your God” and “your people,” which are common phrases used by the Deuteronomist to describe the relationship the people of Israel have with YHWH.95 Furthermore, the use of pronominal suffixes with these terms make them distinctively Deuteronomistic.96 Nevertheless,

94 Olyan, *Rites and Rank: Hierarchy in Biblical Representations of Cult*, 64.


96 Ibid.
Ruth does not mention Israel, and her mention of YHWH in the following verse is not necessarily a religious declaration, at least not in the way Naomi and Boaz embody religious fidelity to YHWH in their speech.\textsuperscript{97}

Ruth’s desire to return with Naomi’s people is emphasized by the repetition appearing in verses 1:10 and 16. Ruth and Orpah express a desire to return, but only Ruth follows through, becoming more emphatic in her declaration. The use of נָּא (people) by Ruth and Orpah is significant because in West Semitic נָּא (people) can “denote an eponymous ancestor.”\textsuperscript{98}

Moreover, its use in a covenant formula, like this one, was prevalent throughout the ancient Near East.\textsuperscript{99} Originally נָּא (people) was understood, not as a nationality the way גוי (nation) might suggest, but rather “as agnate or blood relative…as a newly established kinship relationship.”\textsuperscript{100}

However, the context of נָּא (people) evolved and “the notion of religious and cultic dependence and ties won the upper hand.”\textsuperscript{101} As a covenant formula, Ruth 1:16 should be understood as the former.\textsuperscript{102} This might suggest that rather than understand her appeal as a desire to be an Israelite, Ruth was making an appeal to be a part of Naomi’s family. This is underscored by Ruth’s oath

\textsuperscript{97} Both mention YHWH heavily: Naomi 1:8, 9, 13; 2:20; Boaz: 2:12; 3:10, 13.


\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., XI:172.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., XI:176.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., XI:172.
to Naomi in 1:17: “Where you die, I will die- there I will be buried” (NRSV).\textsuperscript{103} As Campbell notes:

Burial practices in Palestine in biblical times show how it can be said that people are not separated even by death. Family tombs were the dominant feature, and after decomposition of the flesh was complete, bones were gathered in a common repository in the tomb… a body might be placed in the tomb to decompose, or, if the family member died at some distance from home, the body could be interred at the distant spot and then the bones gathered up several months later for transport to the family tomb and deposit in the repository (cf. II Samuel 21:10-14)\textsuperscript{104}

Her desire to remain a part of Naomi’s family is expressed in terms of “human loyalty and self-renouncing fidelity.”\textsuperscript{105} The use of an oath in this way is significant, because it is the only time in the Hebrew Bible that this particular optative formula is used by a woman in relation to another woman. The oath shows resoluteness on Ruth’s part. Ruth’s desire to remain with Naomi is displayed most simply in Ruth’s act of clinging to her, an outward gesture of her love for Naomi. Furthermore, Ruth’s appeal to Naomi through the use of the word \textit{עם} in this way cannot be more than what is suggested because:

outside Israel the concept of a “people” is totally absent from the ancient Near East. Groups of human beings are distinguished by their dwelling places, geographical regions and social classes, as well as their various languages, a distinction that sometimes results in different groupings.\textsuperscript{106}

This concept of \textit{עם} (people) conveys the striking distinction Israelites had regarding their self-identity as contrasted with neighboring nations. Additionally, from the perspective of an

\textsuperscript{103} Paul Jouon and T. Muraoka, \textit{A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew} (Subsidia Biblica 27; Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006), 618.

\textsuperscript{104} Edward Campbell Jr, \textit{Ruth}, 7:75.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 7:80.

Israelite constructing this narrative, Ruth’s example of leaving her people may have been a common phenomenon on the part of neighboring nations, and an Israelite author may have tried to make sense of this through his construction of Ruth’s speech.

It is not entirely obvious why Ruth chose to remain with Naomi while Orpah went home. Naomi’s use of נִּהְיָה (“house of the mother”) as opposed to the customary נִּהְיָה (“house of the father) may suggest that Orpah and Ruth are actually fatherless. Since נִהְיָה (“house of the father) is a customary phrase used to describe a family in ancient Israel, it is peculiar that Naomi, who would have been familiar with this phrase, would have referred to נ (mother) as opposed to נ (father). While Campbell would disagree with this assessment citing the presence of “two fatherless families [as] a bit of a coincidence,” it remains an uncertainty. A widow in the context of the ancient Near East would benefit from her daughter’s marriage to a husband. This may have been the situation Orpah and Ruth’s mothers found themselves in. Moreover, while the Israelites were not authorized to engage in exogamy, one might also ask why the two Moabite women would engage in this practice. In what way would it benefit them to seek marriage outside their kin?

**Gender**

The matter of ethnicity was generally portrayed in the biblical narrative in gender rather than kinship related terms. Though kinship certainly aids in identifying individuals’ ancestral

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origins, the pejorative connotations regarding ethnicity were conceived of through the use of gender. Since the Israelite identity being constructed is that of an Israelite male identity,\textsuperscript{108} the use of gender to speak of ethnicity appears to be logical since both aspects are other and “enhance ingroup identity”\textsuperscript{109} among males. The intersectionality of ethnicity and gender is amplified in the narrative of Ruth through her discourse with Boaz. Ruth’s use of הָרִיקָנ (foreigner) to describe herself is a powerful display of Ruth’s self-knowledge as other within their context. Ruth’s actions before Boaz on the threshing floor conjure up thoughts of her Moabite identity as well. Moreover, both examples point to Ruth’s sexuality as a means of identifying her ethnicity.

“I am a foreigner”

The storyteller’s use of הָרִיקָנ (foreigner) to describe Ruth serves two purposes. First, in using הָרִיקָנ the storyteller is able to highlight this homonymous root by using it in both forms: “to recognize” and also “be foreign.”\textsuperscript{110} This assonance in Ruth’s speech ends in the question of why she has found favor in Boaz’s sight since she is a foreigner. In trying to make sense of Ruth’s use of this term, Matthews argues that the audience (ie: Israelites) do not know that Ruth


actually considers herself a נַעֲרָא (foreign resident alien) privately.\textsuperscript{111} Unfortunately, this cannot be the case. Ruth’s motivations cannot disagree with that of the storyteller’s who constructed her words. The storyteller’s use of נָבִיא (foreigner) instead of נַעֲרָא (foreign resident alien) has much more significance because of its implications upon her relationship to Moab, its deviant beginnings, the episode in the book of Numbers, and the general impression of foreign women being foreign based on their sexuality.

The term נָבִיא (foreigner) is noteworthy in the context of Israel. Using this term other’s Ruth from the women around her because it is exactly the term used to stigmatize married women who either engage in adultery, are foreign, or a prostitute. The prohibition in Proverbs against engaging with a נָבִיא (foreigner) sets a sexual standard of ethics in a worldview heavily influenced by honor and shame. The sexuality of the woman is not her own, instead it is the property of her husband. Deviating from this standard of sexual ethics within Israelite society threatens male identity. This is why the use of נָבִיא (foreigner) is powerful. The ambiguity in Proverbs allows the Strange Woman to take on “a variety of forms of strangeness mix, match, and reinforce each other making it available for deployment by writers with a possible range of agendas.”\textsuperscript{112} Foreignness is then not just understood in ethnic terms, but sexuality, allowing “the warning…to apply to a neighbor’s wife, a foreign woman, and a prostitute.”\textsuperscript{113}


\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 307.

\textsuperscript{113} Lang, “Theological dictionary of the Old Testament,” IX:428.
Ruth’s use of נזר (foreigner) reminds the audience of this reality. Social norms reinforce in-group identity, and help coerce women to remain within the standard of sexual ethics lest they be considered other through the use of נזר (foreigner). One might argue that this implies “a woman who ostracized herself by committing adultery was perhaps treated like a foreign woman.”¹¹⁴ To be called נזר (foreigner) is the equivalence of a racial epithet meant to both guard men from interacting with these “polluted” women, and imposed on women to constraint their sexuality. Ruth becomes a pejorative trope, נישים זרים (foreign wives/women).¹¹⁵ With this sort of representation, Ruth experiences a greater amount of inequality among women. This intersectionality is the most prominent aspect of her identity and this perception places her in one of the lowest classes in Israelite society. This can be seen in the privileges the גר (foreign resident alien) experiences (Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:21, 29) but the זר (foreigner) does not (Deuteronomy 15:3; 23:20-21).

Nevertheless, the גר (foreign resident alien) is only “semi-assimilated,”¹¹⁶ this despite the fact that a גר (foreign resident alien) is often described as either voluntarily submitting to the Law, or commanded to do so. The גר (foreign resident alien) symbolizes a sort of permanence as a resident alien while זר (foreigner) is most often used to signify a foreigner not currently in

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Used to describe “foreign women”: 1 Kings 11:1, 8; Ezra 10:2, 10, 11, 14, 17, 18, 44 Nehemiah 13:26, 27.

the land, not a permanent resident (2 Chronicles 6:32, 2 Chronicles 6:33). This definition of נֵרָא (foreigner) as a person not considered a permanent resident is what makes Ruth’s use of נֵרָא (foreigner) peculiar, and is probably why Matthews struggles to make sense of why Ruth does not use בָּרָא (foreign resident alien) instead. As Saul Olyan points out in “Generating “Self” and “Other”: The Polarity Israelite/Alien,” בָּרָא (foreign resident alien) is understood only in masculine terms, and therefore this term cannot be applied to Ruth’s situation because she is female.117

What becomes more problematic in the understanding of alien assimilation among the Israelites is the polarity that is present between the בָּרָא (foreign resident alien) and בָּרָא (native). These terms create a binary paring between the Israelite “native” and the “alien.”118 The בָּרָא (foreign resident alien) can be understood in two ways. First, the בָּרָא (foreign resident alien) can be understood as an Israelite who is residing in a foreign land. Elimelech and his family would have been understood in this way, בָּרָא (foreign resident alien) in the land of Moab. Secondly, and more important to this discussion is the understanding of בָּרָא as a resident foreign alien. That is to say, the בָּרָא is “a long-term, foreign, male resident in Israel who is by definition outside of the lineage-patrimony system and therefore potentially in a position of dependency on an Israelite

117 While many commentaries have cited the fact that Ruth benefits from the Law in Leviticus 19:9, Deuteronomy 24:21 because she is a בָּרָא (resident foreign alien), I argue that בָּרָא cannot be applied to her. Nevertheless, Ruth does constitute as a poor individual (Leviticus 19:9) and a widow (Deuteronomy 24:21), and so she can still benefits from these laws.

118 Olyan, Rites and Rank: Hierarchy in Biblical Representations of Cult, 64.
The הָרְעָנִי (foreign resident alien) remains an “outsiders” through the use of the term, especially as it appears alongside הָנַחַל (native), which aids in denoting difference, or the existence of difference between the two. Many scholars assume that through the following of the Law and fidelity to YHWH an alien is then fully assimilated into the congregation of Israel as an Israelite. Yet, “a number of texts suggest that status as a resident outsider is inherited from generation to generation, so that the newcomer’s children and their descendants are also classed as resident outsiders.”120 This leads to perpetual alienness/otherness of foreigners among the Israelites. While the Holiness Source is more explicit in its use of this binary pairing, the Deuteronomistic Historian is more complex.121 Nevertheless, both make a distinction between הָרְעָנִי (foreign resident alien) and הַנַּחַל (native).

There are several stipulations for the הָרְעָנִי (foreign resident alien) as he dwells in Israel. Unlike the הָנַח (foreigner), the הָרְעָנִי (foreign resident alien) is described as a foreign resident alien who either chooses to be “receptive to the religion of YHWH” or is commanded to fulfill certain obligations.122 For example, it is important for a הָרְעָנִי (foreign resident alien) to become circumcised because the foreskin acts as “an emblem of otherness.”123 If a הָרְעָנִי (foreign resident alien) becomes circumcised, he is considered a חַיָה (living) and gains full rights as a member of the Israelite congregation.


120 Ibid.

121 Ibid., 69.


alien) remains uncircumcised he is banned from the cultic life of YHWH.\textsuperscript{124} For many of the neighboring nations, circumcision is already practice and therefore not really an issue.\textsuperscript{125} It is in the Holiness material that this paring is used to show that “the totality of the community is subject to covenant stipulations.”\textsuperscript{126} As a result, “every male who is counted as member of the community fits into either the native category or the (foreign) resident outsider category.”\textsuperscript{127}

While Ruth should probably be understood as a resident foreign alien because of Naomi’s decision to return and remain a permanent resident among the Israelites, this designation seems, ironically, foreign, because women are never described as גיר (foreign resident alien). Instead, foreign women can only refer to themselves in one way, גיר (foreigner), which is generally understood as pejorative and unwelcoming. As an examination of these terms has shown:

Though the main agenda of the text employing the opposition is to argue for the inclusion of the resident outsider of foreign heritage in the community, the distinction between native and resident outsider is nonetheless maintained by the binary strategy of the text.\textsuperscript{128}

With the גיר (foreign resident alien) remaining “an entity distinct from native,”\textsuperscript{129} one could assume that foreign women who are conceived of as threatening would also remain entities distinct from the native. A level of inclusion occurs for foreigners, but distinctions remain. Arguing for full assimilation and no distinctions may in fact be a modern conception influenced

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 79.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 70.
by the modern notions of citizenship where we might expect something like that of assimilation. Nevertheless, hierarchy and *otherness*, at least as socially constructed, existed among the people living in the land of Canaan even with the foreigners inclusion into the religious life of YHWH.

“All that you tell me I will do”

The scene between Ruth and Boaz at the threshing floor acts as a literary device weaving in the story of Ruth’s ancestral origins to the narrative. Many scholars have commented on the parallels that exist between Boaz and Lot and how this particular scene continues the series of “episodes in the history of a single family.”

Again we see the use of myth to subtly remind the audience of Ruth’s difference. Ruth’s portrayal in this scene reinforces this perspective of her as deviant as well as her status as נזר (foreigner).

Boaz is decidedly unmarried in the narrative. This is peculiar for several reasons. First, Boaz is introduced as a לוי נזר (mighty “rich” man) (2:1). Used twice elsewhere by the Chronicler (1 Chronicles 5:24; 8:40), this description is meant as a sign of honor and prestige among the Israelites. What is more, Boaz is portrayed as much older than Ruth. The use of the nun paragogicum by Boaz (Ruth 2:8, 2:9) acts as a literary device “to make Boaz speak as the aged.”

Where one would expect an aged man of such honor would be married and have children, this description of Boaz’s life is either entirely absent or non-existent. As an unmarried man, Boaz would have suffered from no children and therefore the continuation of name would

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have been at stake. This is why in Boaz’s marriage to Ruth, though he undergoes the loss of his inheritance because of the preservation of Mahlon’s name, at this point in the narrative, Boaz would have been at a loss regardless. This fact might also be another reason why Boaz is willing to marry a foreigner, something that has been attributed more to the perception of Boaz as embodying the Deuteronomistic Historian’s concern for the marginalized.

Boaz and Lot suffer from the same issue of continuing their lineage. While Lot is described as being יְבָשָׁם (old), Boaz’s constant refrain of describing the gleaners as younger (זָעַר and נָעַר) especially in relation to himself (Ruth 3:10), including his use of an archaizing Hebrew form, parallel these men as advanced in age. While Boaz would not be acting for himself but Mahlon, it is Boaz whose name is remembered in the genealogy of David (1Chronicles 2:12). In this way, Ruth mirrors Lot’s daughters in the concern for the preservation of the line (Genesis 19:32, 34). Additionally, all these women suffered from the loss of their husbands. They are widows who, despite having been married, have no children to account for. While both Ruth and Lot’s daughters are fertile in their engagement with Lot and Boaz, for some reason they are not with their original husbands. Another subtle parallel between Boaz and Lot is their state during the sexual advancement of the women. Lot’s daughters collude to get him drunk, while Naomi instructs Ruth to wait until Boaz has eaten and drunk, probably anticipating him to be in “a state of sufficient drunkenness to make bad decisions.”

It is in Ruth’s willingness to do all that Naomi says that would have been a reminder of the foreignness of Moabite women. This is an integral aspect of the ethnogenesis of their ethnic

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group even brought out in the meaning behind Lot’s name, literally “covering” (to which his daughters “uncover”). Naomi’s suggestion to Ruth of sexual deviance is an act of desperation on the part of Naomi, who knew that the future of her family and her own name lay on the shoulders of Ruth. Like Lot’s older daughter to the younger, Naomi instructs Ruth taking advantage of her and subjecting her to possible disgrace. Naomi puts Ruth in an uncompromising position, seen in the fact that Boaz instructs her to stay until the morning (3:14). Ruth’s position as a young woman who is unmarried, an immigrant, and a dependent to Naomi shows an enormous amount of vulnerability for someone like Ruth in this society. While Naomi states that she would like to obtain security for Ruth, the security she is securing is her own.

Naomi’s instructions to Ruth were culturally inappropriate. Nevertheless, this episode reinforces the memory and myth of Moabite women as sexually depraved. In the story of Lot it is the women who are perverted in their relationship with Lot because the narrative makes clear that Lot remains unaware of their sexual encounters. Nameless in the narrative, the women come to represent Moab and Ammon, foreign nations to Israel. In placing culpability with the daughters and not with Lot, the Israelites can continue to conceive of Lot, the nephew of Abraham as pure. Like Genesis 19, Numbers 25 makes clear that the perversion then lies with the women. This episode at the threshing floor reinforces foreignness as understood as a gendered phenomenon, and also Ruth as other.

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CONCLUSION

Non-Israelite women have posed a difficult problem for scholars because of their presence within the Davidic line, and their fairly regular presence as wives to Israelite men throughout the biblical narrative. There are a number of laws that are prohibitive and “refer to the danger of apostasy provoked by the exchange of daughters or by the religious influence of foreign women.”  The law, though important, was not followed fully. The ban upon the Moabites (Deuteronomy 23:3-4) constructed by the Deuteronomistic Historian, and the book of Ruth, which is suggested to have been written by the a sympathizer of this perspective, make it unclear as to why the storyteller would undermine his own emphasis upon following the law.

Furthermore, while scholars argue that kinship boundaries were fluid in early Israel, and the biblical narrative testifies to this reality, this still does not address the contradiction presented by these texts. In fact, “the fluidity of the boundaries resulting in variations of classification does not invalidate the argument that various units were sorted out into a hierarchy of categories at any particular time.”

So, while Ruth is certainly integrated, she is not integrated in the way one might expect. Since women were not “lineage bearers,” this may account for the prevalence of intermarriage with non-Israelite women. Though a prohibition against intermarriage existed among the Israelites, it could have been disregarded because of this fact. For the Israelites, it is “the father

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136 Ibid.
137 Olyan, Rites and Rank: Hierarchy in Biblical Representations of Cult, 86.
[that] provides the son’s link to his patrimony and to his primary kin group.” If this is the case, then does this play a role in the way the Israelites understood themselves in relation to foreign women? This would mean that foreign women who are kin to foreign nations are ultimately tied to their father despite their marriage and entrance into the “house” of their husband. So, while Ruth’s child will go on to be included among the Israelite-identity, Ruth will always remain a Moabite and therefore othered in the nation of Israel.

In addition, the fact that the יִד (resident foreign alien) continues to be mentioned alongside the “native” of Israel is significant. Despite the יִד (resident foreign alien) following the law, they are never fully assimilated into Israel. This is the result of their inability to obtain land and be kin with the Israelites. In that way, one is fully assimilated. Ruth and other foreign women are in an even more difficult position. While יִד (resident foreign alien) are not demonized, נֶגֶר (foreigner), the term that Ruth uses, are. Appearing most frequently as an adjective rather than a substantive, נֶגֶר (foreigner) becomes synonymous with women. Ethnicity for the Israelites then becomes primarily wrapped up in women. Additionally, this term is also a harkening to their gods as נֶגֶר (foreigner) used synonymously to describe foreign gods. The term becomes a reminder that foreign women are those who bring about infidelity to YHWH. Women bear the weight of otherness through ethnicity, and they are the primary example of ethnicity in the Hebrew Bible.

Some scholars suggest that the last time Ruth’s name appears in the narrative it does not mention her as a Moabite, and that, therefore, she is fully assimilated as an “Israelite.” This, too,

138 Ibid.
cannot be the case because the storyteller only gives the appellation “Moabite” half the times Ruth is mentioned. It is not significant that the last introduction to Ruth leaves out her ethnicity, in as much as it is not peculiar the other times he chooses to leave it out. This argument is not compelling. What is more compelling is what the storyteller makes of the marriage between Boaz and Ruth. Instead of the women calling Ruth blessed, it is Naomi that the storyteller highlights as being blessed by the other women. Naomi is also the one who literally “takes” the child and weans him. This culminates in the women chanting, “a son has been born to Naomi.” It is Naomi who is the one most honored at the end of this story.

It is hard to conclude whether the storyteller praises and honors Ruth as a “worthy woman” because of her positive actions, or because of her preservation of the line of Judah through her marriage to Boaz (3:11). A positive portrayal of Ruth, if apologetic in nature, suggests an audience environment that viewed foreign women negatively. While Ruth does receive 707 (loving kindness), the reasons for this should be explored. In the end, Ruth is compared to Tamar. A Canaanite, she had become “the heroine of the story because she preserved Judah’s line.”\(^{139}\) This is where the weight of who Ruth is becomes important. Ruth becomes the vehicle through which the line of David is preserved. The survival of an Israelite male’s line through a woman’s biological reproduction is the most significant function a woman can provide.

Maybe more significant than whether or not Ruth is considered assimilated as an Israelite, is that Ruth remains a character referred to as Moabite, and therefore preserving her otherness. In fact, it does not appear as though the Moabites are perceived any more favorably

\(^{139}\) Frevel, “Introduction: The Discourse on Intermarriage in the Hebrew Bible,” 139.
after this, especially in light of the Ezra-Nehemiah restrictions. Ruth’s acceptance is not related to assimilation in the sense of ethnicity. The retelling of David’s genealogy and specific reference to Tamar may have been a reminder to the Israelites of a characteristic of the tribe of Judah. Ruth’s inclusion, not assimilation, would have been no surprise, as this tribe had a reputation for exogamous marriages. This is the legacy left by the tribe of Judah whereby “a mixed marriage is foundational to the very beginnings of the tribe’s development.”

This reality may highlight the tribe’s geography as it bordered other non-Israelite nations. Moreover:

…a close reading of the lineages of Judah reveals that mixed marriages are an integral part of the tribe’s long-term ethnogenesis. That intermarriage is not incidental to the life of the tribe as a whole can be seen from the fact that the genealogy begins with an instance of intermarriage.

Interestingly, Ruth forever remains a part of her אב בית (“house of the father”) (at least in how her ethnicity is understood). Her presence acts as a reminder to the covenant fidelity to YHWH portrayed by foreigners despite the human distinctions and hierarchy that remain. The “foreign wives of Israelite men among the populace of Israel” remains a category of distinction. While Ruth is pious, this piety does not result in a transaction of ethnic identity. Women are “as far as group identity goes… kin yet not kin, for patrilineal Israel is a family of men.” While Ruth becomes a part of the community of the Israelites, she will forever be remembered as a Moabite. Her future role is marginal and not the “Israelite matriarch” that

140 Scholars continue to disagree over whether the book of Ruth should be dated before or after the time of Ezra-Nehemiah. This author assumes the more traditional reading that it was written before EN.


142 Ibid.

143 Olyan, Rites and Rank: Hierarchy in Biblical Representations of Cult, 63.

some may suggest.\textsuperscript{145} Here we see that ethnicity is not collapsed into gender the way some scholars might argue happens through marriage to an Israelite male. This shows the liminal space that foreign women existed in. Finally, there is no mention of her in the Chronicler’s genealogy probably because of the xenophobia that existed during the time. Foreign women continue to be presented as the main cause for corruption among the Israelites.

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