

The Acts of רָאַתְּ in Ruth 3:10 as Acts of Situational Strength

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The Ruth story has traditionally been cast as a bucolic one about magnanimous folk doing marvelous things for what would be, by and large, philanthropic and charitable reasons only. For example, Naomi would be cast as an exemplar of the selfless mother-in-law deeply concerned for her daughters-in-law while Ruth's concern for Naomi would be seen as equally meritorious.¹ All this began to change in the 1980's when, for example, Fewell and Gunn would construe the narrative as being one that was centered instead on Naomi as the bad mother-in-law, who saw herself as having "a Moabite albatross around her neck, whom she does not really want. Self-centered, resentful and prejudiced," they continued, "she tells Ruth when she discerns an opening, namely that Ruth has caught Boaz's attention, that she will go into action, but then only by risking Ruth, not herself. She will employ entrapment at the threshing floor, but she will send Ruth to do it."²

¹ See, for example, Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1978).

² Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "'A Son is Born to Naomi!' : Literary Allusions and Interpretation in the Book of Ruth," *JSOT* 40 (1988), 100.

Acknowledging that real humans have real feelings and resolutely refusing to bowdlerize a text about assumably real persons, this brief essay declines to assume the main protagonists in the Book of Ruth to be paragons of virtue. An exegetical approach that refuses to embrace this would, contrariwise, be untrue to the human condition and thus irrelevant to real people. Hence, in what follows, any and all human failures and foibles common to humankind, from desperation and racism to lust and envy, may be unapologetically imputed to the *dramatis personæ*.

Quite apart from this consideration, there is an unrelated reason for rejecting the traditional approach in that it usually involves a default translation of **חֵדֶשׁ** *hesed* as "covenant loyalty/loving-kindness."³ This point is critical because *hesed* is crucial to the story: it was in the Judges period when society saw a descent into lawlessness that Ruth the Moabitess would appear in the Land and it would be through her acts of *hesed* that David would eventually come, who to lead Israel in an ascent to kingdom glory. Ziegler argues that Ruth is a paradigm of *hesed*:

Ruth's journey to Bethlehem is indeed a "return"; it represents the closing of the circle begun with Lot's abandonment of Abraham in Genesis 13. That event leads to the creation of the nations of Ammon and Moab, the spiritual heirs of Sodom, who are steeped in cruelty and immorality. Lot's descendant, Ruth the Moabite, returns to the path of Abraham and becomes a paradigm of *hesed*... Ruth produces the Davidic dynasty, which is the vehicle for the nation's return to the path of Abraham.⁴

Still, as is customary, Ziegler assumes that *hesed* means covenant loyalty. By contrast, this essay argues that "strength" may be a better

³ See, for example, "hesed" in *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 283. The term *hesed* is used three times in the book of Ruth, once about **נָתַן** (1:8), once about Boaz (2:20) and once about Ruth (3:10).

⁴ See Yael Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2015), 16. Others also place *hesed* as one of the main themes of the book of Ruth, including Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "Introduction," in *JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, eds. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), xv; see also, Jacqueline Lapsley, "Seeing the Older Woman: Naomi in High Definition," in *Engaging the Bible In a Gendered World*, eds. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 10.

reading for *hesed*, with Ruth's acts of strength impelling the narrative forward. With these two caveats in mind—that the text must be read in ways that are honestly real to life and that *hesed* is better read as strength—the structure of Ruth 3 is first canvassed. Then what Boaz called Ruth's two acts of *hesed* in Ruth 3:10 will be examined one after the other.⁵ In discussing the second act of *hesed*, an excursus is made into how, historically-speaking, the term *hesed* was made to take on, erroneously it is argued, the default meaning of covenant loyalty. The case that the meaning of *hesed* as situational strength is argued for and then applied to Ruth's second act of *hesed*. A discussion of the findings of the overall examination follows and two political implications of those findings for the present time are suggested. Finally, a very brief conclusion is offered.

I. THE STRUCTURE OF RUTH 3

In the Book of Ruth, two widows, Ruth the Moabitess and Naomi, her Israelite mother-in-law, were compelled by a famine in Moab to make their way back to Israel where there was food. The impoverished widow Ruth went to glean and was providentially led to do so in the fields of a relative of Naomi by the name of Boaz, who was quickly attracted to Ruth. When the matriarch became aware of this, she would make the morally repugnant decision to order Ruth to essentially entrap an inebriated Boaz, in the dead of the night, on the threshing floor, a place known for prostitution during harvest times. (The word בְּקַשׁ which can hint at sexual intercourse, is used seven times.) Boaz promised conditionally to marry Ruth and, the following day, the wily fox that

⁵ For instance, Campbell assumes away what the first act of *hesed* on Ruth's part might have been based on the implicit assumption *hesed* is covenant loving-kindness so he looks only to ask: "In 3:10, Ruth will be given the accolade of having done two *hesed* acts. She does one for her mother-in-law, along with Orpah, but she has the staying power to resist Naomi's advice to go home—one continuous practice of *hesed* that takes her to Judah and into the position of initiating, assertive benefactor. What, then, is the latter *hesed-act* Boaz refers to? For whose benefit was it done?"; see Edward F. Campbell Jr., "Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth: *Hesed* and Change," *Austin Seminary Bulletin* 105 (1990):66.

he turned out to be, Boaz managed to turn the proceedings at the city gate around to secure the approbation of the elders for him to marry the Moabitess, all putatively in the patriarchal⁶ interest of preserving in Israel the name of Elimelech, the late husband of Naomi, as it was put so magnanimously. Still, יְהֹוָה would look upon the coupling with favor, the child who was born out of that union being Obed, who would go on to be the grandfather of King David.

Specifically, Ruth 2:1 begins with וְלֹא נָעַמֵּי indicating that what follows is a disjunctive clause, which signals that a new event is being narrated, i.e., that of Ruth taking leave of Naomi to glean in the fields of Judah. This comes after the narrative in Ruth 1 that tells of the widows leaving Moab for and arriving at Bethlehem, Judah. By contrast, the *wayiqqtol* אָמַר beginning Ruth 3:1 suggests that this narrative is merely a continuation of what went before in Ruth 2, though the context would suggest that some time must have elapsed.

Within the chiastic structure of Ruth 3, the central episode (3:6-13) is that upon which the whole story pivots.⁷ This periscope involves the

⁶ According to *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd. ed., unabridged, "patriarchy" is "a state or stage of social development characterized by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family in both domestic and religious functions, the legal dependence of wife, or wives, and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line."

⁷ A. Boyd Luter & Richard O. Rigsby, "An Adjusted Symmetrical Structuring of Ruth," *JETS* 39 (1996): 23.

- A (3:1-2) Naomi's objective of Boaz serving as Ruth's kinsman-redeemer
- B (3:3-5) Naomi's plan for Ruth secretly to lie at Boaz' feet
- C (3:6-9) Ruth carries out Naomi's plan, lies down, then proposes levirate marriage to a startled Boaz
- D (3:10) Boaz admiringly notes Ruth's previous restraint concerning marital security
- D' (3:11) Boaz admiringly notes Ruth's earned reputation as a woman of excellence
- C' (3:12-13) Boaz agrees to Naomi's objective, (tells of) a closer kinsman, then tells her to lie down
- B' (3:14-16) Naomi's inquiry about Boaz [*sic*] has chosen to keep Ruth's presence at his feet a secret
- A' (3:17-18) Ruth's report and Naomi's response about Boaz' choice to be kinsman-redeemer

following: Ruth agreed to do as Naomi urged,⁸ Boaz awoke apparently bewildered to find Ruth lying next to him on the threshing floor, Ruth asked allusively for marriage and Boaz agreed, albeit conditionally, after which he said to Ruth the somewhat enigmatic words as follow:¹⁰ **וַיֹּאמֶר בָּרוּךְהָ אָתָּה לֵיהְנוּ בְּתִי הַיּוֹם סְפָקָךְ הַאֲקָרֶב מַן־הָרָאשׁוֹן לְבָלָתִים**: That is: And he said, "May **יְהֹוָה** bless you, my daughter. You have done an even greater act of *hesed* that exceeds the first by not going after young men, whether poor or rich."⁹ What Boaz might have meant by these two acts of *hesed* will now be examined in turn below.

II. RUTH'S FIRST ACT OF **חֶסֶד** *hesed*

It is generally assumed—given the default translation of *hesed* as "covenant loyalty/loving-kindness"— that what Boaz must have meant by Ruth's first act of *hesed* would have been her willingness to follow

⁸ Even Bush who argues that Naomi's motivations for that night were noble agrees that her plan put Ruth at great risks; see Frederic Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, World Bible Commentary, vol. 9 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1996), 157. Jones concurs: "Ruth is willing to put her reputation and her safety on the line, whereas Naomi is willing to allow her to assume all the risk for their provision... So risky is the plan, and risqué, that Ruth would hardly need a warning, but Naomi's question reveals the true extent of her ambivalence toward Ruth's safety. Not only does she send Ruth alone into the night, but her question in earnest the next morning, 'Who are you, my daughter?' betrays her at sunrise that Ruth came back at all;" see Edward Allen Jones III, "Who Are You My Daughter? A Reassessment of Ruth and Naomi in Ruth 3," *CBQ* 76 (2014):664.

⁹ **וַיֹּאמֶר בָּרוּךְהָ אָתָּה לֵיהְנוּ בְּתִי הַיּוֹם סְפָקָךְ הַאֲקָרֶב מַן־הָרָאשׁוֹן לְבָלָתִים אָמֵן** **כֹּל אָמֵשָׁה:**

Naomi back to Judah.¹⁰ That is, given that the marriage covenant between her and Mahlon, Naomi's first-born son—and by extension also a covenantal relationship with Mahlon's parents, siblings and extended family—ended at the man's death, Ruth was free to return to Moab. Indeed, Naomi urged her to return to Moab for "if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband" according to Romans 7:2-3, which the apostle Paul based presumably on the law of the husband (Deut. 24:1-4).¹¹

But if that covenant had ceased to exist for Ruth after Mahlon's death, two living parties to a covenant being necessary, then Ruth would not have had any duty or been able to do an act of covenant loyalty/loving-kindness for Naomi. She could have been kind to Naomi but any magnanimous act on Ruth's part could not have been construed as an act of *hesed* taken as covenant loyalty, given that there was no longer any covenant in force. If so, Boaz's lauding of Ruth's free will "return" to Judah as an act of *hesed* would seem misconstrued. This suggests that Boaz might well have meant by *hesed* something other than covenantal loyalty.

¹⁰ In English translations, **רָאֵן** is rendered variously as "kindness," "love," "steadfast love," "loyalty," "favor," "devotion," and "mercy." In the Septuagint, the Greek word for "mercy" is its usual translation but "righteousness," "grace," "glory," and "hope" are also used. In the Tanakh, **רָאֵן** refers to, first, interpersonal relationships between individuals/groups or, secondly, the Almighty's relationship with Creation, including humans. The former may involve family (Gen. 20:13) or friends (1 Sam. 20:8, 14) or between guest and host (Gen. 19:19), or subject and king (2 Sam. 2:5). Sometimes, a covenant is explicitly in view such as that between David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 20:8, 14). Often there is none but, either way, the loyalty or kindness that is said to characterize these relationships always involves action: the cupbearer recalling Joseph who was still incarcerated and recommending him to Pharaoh (Gen. 40:14), or Rebekah's father giving her away to marry Isaac whom he had never seen in person (Gen. 24:49-51) and so on. With regard to the Almighty's **רָאֵן** relationship with his creation, He is also often described as "doing" **רָאֵן** for His people who call upon him, e.g., Gen. 24:12 :**בְּנֵי אַבְרָהָם אַתָּה שְׁאֵל וְאַתָּה תְּשִׁלֵּחַ** "and show **רָאֵן** to my master Abraham". [All quotes of the Hebrew text in this study come from the BHS and all quotes in English from the ESV.] His people implore Him to do **רָאֵן** on their behalf (e.g., Ps. 6:4, 44:26) and they can depend on Him "because His **רָאֵן** endures forever," as Psalm 136 repeats many times over. Although He may threaten them on occasion with the loss of His **רָאֵן** (e.g., 2 Sam. 7:15; Jer. 16:5), His covenant with them commits Him to an enduring **רָאֵן** for His people. In response, His people are to recall His **רָאֵן** (e.g., Ps. 106:7), hope (e.g., Ps. 33:18) and trust (e.g., Ps. 13:5) in it as well as sing about (e.g., Ps. 59:16-17) and rejoice in it (e.g., Ps. 31:7).

¹¹ Rom. 7:2 "For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law concerning the husband."

Indeed, in a number of instances, rendering *hesed* as "covenant loyalty/loving-kindness" makes little sense. Specifically, there are verses where *hesed* is better translated as "might" or "bounty" or "strength"¹² including, I propose, situational strength which arises in virtue of one's circumstances and situation. This concept of situational strength I derive from an ethnographic study that Scott did among farmers in rural Malaysia who, being geographically dispersed and politically underorganized, deployed subtle forms of "every day resistance" to domination by their social superiors and the state. This meant the dominated resorting to set ways of speaking—including "rumor, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, anonymity"—and prescribed ways of behaving—including "foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander and sabotage"—towards the dominating. These methods...allow "a veiled discourse of dignity and

¹² These verses include the following: (i) The KJV translates נְשָׁקָר כִּי־כַּיְץ כַּלְבָּד as "the flower of the field" at Isa. 40:6 as "[all flesh is grass] and all the goodness thereof [is] as the flower of the field" while the ESV reads: "and all its beauty is like the flower of the field." By contrast, the Septuagint renders δόξα ἀνθρώπου—the glory of man—which the Syriac, Old Latin and Vulgate follow. However, Targum Jonathan reads נְשָׁקָר at Isa. 40:6 as תְּקִרְבָּה—their strength—instead. Since Isa. 40:6-8 serve to contrast the impermanence of the flesh with the immutability of His Word, then what it says about the flower of the field ought to be as much like the former as it is unlike the latter. If so, then נְשָׁקָר could be better rendered as "strength" (or actually its lack thereof, in this particular instance, of course). At the very least, its "nature"—lacking strength or durability or permanence, in this instance—may fit the context better rather than "covenant loyalty" or "loveliness". (ii) The KJV translates Ps. 59:11 כִּי־חָסָר יְהָוָה בְּשָׁרֵבִים אֶלְךָ אָלָךְ as "The G-d of my mercy shall prevent me: G-d shall let me see my desire upon mine enemies" while ESV has it as "My G-d in his steadfast love will meet me; G-d will let me look in triumph on my enemies." But the two preceding verses read "But you, O הָנָה, laugh at them; you hold all the nations in derision. O אַלְךָ my Strength, I will watch for you, for you, O G-d, are אֲשָׁרְבָּי my fortress". In parallel with "my Strength", rendering נְשָׁקָר at v.11 with the force of strength accords with the context better than either mercy or steadfast love (in a covenantal setting). Likewise, at Ps. 94:18 אִם־אַמְּרָתִי אַלְתָּה רָגַל סְסָרָה—If I say, My foot slips, Your *hesed*, הָנָה, holds me up—"thy mercy" (KJV) or "steadfast love" (ESV) for *hesed* cannot be naturally construed to hold up a slipping foot, unlike "strength". It is a strong one who can hold up a slipping one. (iii) The KJV translates Ps. 143:12 פָּזָרְתִּי אֶלְךָ נְשָׁקָרִי וְאֶלְךָ עֲזָרָה וְאֶלְךָ כָּלִיל־צָרָה as: "And of thy mercy cut off mine enemies, and destroy all them that afflict my soul: for I am thy servant" while ESV has it as: "And in your steadfast love you will cut off my enemies, and you will destroy all the adversaries of my soul, for I am your servant." But both thy mercy" and "your steadfast love" make for a jarring reading as would "covenant loyalty" as well. It makes better sense if translated: "in your strength/might/wrath, cut off mine enemies" for instance. (iv) The KJV translates Ps. 44:27

self-assertion (in) public... in which ideological resistance is disguised, muted and veiled for safety's sake."¹³ In Ruth 3, the protagonist as an

¹³ See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 137.

impoverished widow who was thus positionally weak in society may be seen to be deploying linguistic tricks, metaphors and euphemisms as well as evasion, feigned ignorance and so on, which helped her become situationally strong when it mattered most.

Sakenfeld concurs that an act of *hesed* was being carried out by Ruth as one who was situationally strong although she alludes to a slightly different reason for this, arguing that Ruth's second act of *hesed* was carried out to fulfil the levirate law in Mahlon's interests, someone who could no longer act for himself, which was why Ruth was "situationally superior".¹⁴ Be that as it may, what Boaz might have meant by Ruth's first act of *hesed* could have been that, although there would have been no expectation of her accompanying Naomi back to Judah, being situationally stronger than Naomi in that she was younger and therefore, as it turned out, able to glean and get remarried to a man who could provide for her, she nevertheless took it upon herself to be encumbered by Naomi while looking for a way of making ends meet in the days ahead. That is, the situation was such that she was physically stronger. Thus, Ruth's first act of *hesed* was, in this construal, that of an able-bodied younger woman who was naturally stronger and more vigorous physically-speaking vis-à-vis an older one. In this sense, she would have been quite literally a strong woman—a woman of חֶלְלָה—as Boaz calls her in v.11 following.

But that would have been a little too obvious. Instead, Boaz had made his acquaintance with and become quite attracted to that young woman in the light of day. He might have gone to bed thinking or fantasizing about her and was then awoken in the dead of the night by that very female. The proximal events of that day involving this very woman were fresh in his mind. These events had seen Ruth risking her physical safety to glean among the young male harvesters in a time

¹⁴ See Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching & Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 43.

when everyone was a law unto himself.¹⁵ Boaz had solicitously and repeatedly expressed concern for Ruth's safety, seeing that she was cast among a horde of young male harvesters in his field. Accordingly, Boaz had taken great pains to warn Ruth not once but twice (2:9, 16-17) to keep away from the young men and to stay with the young women.

If this was the case, then by Ruth's first act of *hesed*, Boaz might well have been describing his admiration for but also apprehension about her ability to gird the loins of her mind, as it were, to put herself at risk in venturing forth to glean in the fields of barley among potentially lawless young males. Equally, he might have also seen in Ruth a woman more ethical than Naomi, the mother-in-law who was apparently up to making the trip back from Moab but declined to go glean in the fields, letting the younger woman do it instead, even if it meant putting her in harm's way.¹⁶ Boaz would have also been aware that Naomi was likely to have been somewhat ashamed that her sons had married Moabitesses¹⁷ in life, so Ruth was socially a millstone around her neck but one whom she was depending upon to procure a means of living, nevertheless. Despite all this, Ruth was still willing to

¹⁵ Judg. 21: 25 "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." (ESV)

¹⁶ Naomi might have been somewhat ashamed of Ruth's Moabite origins. In her devious instructions to Ruth to lie with an inebriated man a generation older than her, Naomi would have Ruth, in effect, imitate Lot's daughters, her ancestresses who laid with their father. On the age difference, seemingly indicated by Boaz's statement that Ruth could have married younger men instead; see Campbell, *Ruth*, 110-11, 154.

¹⁷ Gen. 19: 30-38 tell of the incestuous origins of the people of Moab as a result of what the daughters of Lot did to him after they escaped the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The result of Israelite men consorting with Moabitesses in Shittim was recounted at Num. 25:1-4 where they were led into idolatry of Baal of Peor "and the **נָזְרָא**," said to Moses, "Take all the chiefs of the people and hang them in the sun before the **נָזְרָא**..." Such couplings were forbidden at Deut. 23:3 "No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the **נָזְרָא**. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the **נָזְרָא** forever." That it was scandalous for an Israelite to marry a Moabitess was well established. For Naomi, it was a double whammy: both her sons had done so and both had died without children. In post-exilic days, Nehemiah tried to enforce this commandment at Neh. 13:1, 25 thus: "... no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of G-d... In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab... I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in the name of G-d, saying, 'You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.'"

be the pauper/widow to go to glean for herself and for Naomi. If this were his frame of mind, Boaz would have been correct to characterize the acts of this woman of **חֶסֶד** (v.11) as being those of *hesed*.

III. RUTH'S SECOND ACT OF **חֶסֶד** *hesed*

To turn now to Ruth's second act of *hesed*—which Boaz called "this last **חֶסֶד**"— the question is how *hesed* may also be construed as situational strength here. Clearly, the meaning of this act, as Boaz explicitly noted, had to do only with Ruth, though a free agent to marry a younger man, nevertheless, choosing an older man, that is, Boaz himself. Incidentally, the fact that she was a free agent in her marriageability showed that Ruth was not under some levirate rule for, strictly speaking, that rule would have applied only to "her husband's brother (where) brothers dwell together".¹⁸ However, Boaz was, first, of Elimelech's generation, not Mahlon's; secondly, he did not dwell with Elimelech or Mahlon; and, thirdly, he was assuredly no brother of Elimelech for, why, even Mr So-and-So [**כלֹנִי אֶלְמָנִי**] was a closer relative.¹⁹ In addition, while it is the widow at Deuteronomy 25:9 who was supposed to remove the sandal, at Ruth 4:7, by contrast, it was the male kinsman who removed it (even if it is not obvious grammatically whether it was Boaz or the **כלֹנִי אֶלְמָנִי** who did the removing) and handed it to the other male kinsman. Hence, whatever the custom might have been, the Ruth-Boaz coupling did not appear to comport

¹⁸ Campbell, for example, limits the levirate law to immediate family; see Edward. F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 133.

¹⁹ Driver argued that theirs was not of a levirate marriage, Boaz not being Mahlon's brother, which was why he had to pay for the land from Naomi (Ruth 4:3, 10); see S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1895), 285. The reference to Tamar in Ruth 4:12, contrary to those who would argue that it proves the Boaz-Ruth marriage to be a levirate one for otherwise its very mention would be meaningless, it is usually claimed, actually shows it was not one since Judah fathered Perez and Zerah with Tamar though he was the father and not the brother of Shelah, the levir that Tamar rightly, whom Judah had to promise to her.

with the levirate arrangement as commanded in Deuteronomy²⁰, which would have had to flow from her marriage covenant with the deceased Mahlon in life. Thus, Ruth's second act of *hesed* could not strictly have had anything to do with covenant loyalty or loving-kindness as well.

Nevertheless, according to Boaz, the young widow's choosing to marry an older man was to be construed as an act of *hesed*. But this could not have been one arising from covenant loyalty, since there was no covenant in sight, the marriage covenant having ended at Mahlon's death. If so, perhaps Boaz also meant that it was an act of Ruth arising from her being in a position of situational strength too. But before this can be shown, an excursus will be necessary to examine the original context from which the default translation of *hesed* as "covenant loving-kindness" came to be, to show why that translation was faulty, and demonstrate how the meaning of "strength", including situational strength, would fit that original context as well.

This default translation is some 90 years old, when a study in the German language first settled on it, arguing that *hesed* "can be practised only between persons in an ethically binding relationship...of rights and duties to one another."²¹ The author of that study, Nelson Glueck, grounded his thesis in the account at 1 Kings 20 where king Ahab of Israel let Benhadad, king of Aram off. When all was lost, Benhadad's courtiers advised him to beg Ahab for his life—*כִּי מֶלֶךְ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-מֶלֶךְ חַסְד*— "since we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are *merciful kings*" (ESV; also KJV). Thus *מלך חסד* is read as merciful kings: the kings of Israel were supposedly reputed to be kings who practiced mercy when it involved parties who had a claim to it because of a covenant relationship of rights and duties existed between a subservient one and his superior.

²⁰ It is common to make the erroneous connection between Ruth and Deuteronomy; see, for example, A. Phillips, *Deuteronomy*, Cambridge Bible Commentaries on the Old Testament (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 169. This error arises when the commentator conflates the sandal as a representation of property right transfer in Ruth as well as the kinsman's levirate obligation in Deuteronomy. If the two distinctives are kept apart, then the putative link between Ruth and Deuteronomy may be seen to be an imaginary one.

²¹ Nelson Glueck, *Das Wort Hesed im alttestamentliche sprachgebrauche* (BZAW 47, Giessen 1927); Nelson Glueck, *HESED in the Bible*, trans. Alfred Gottschalk (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967), 37.

Glueck argued: "The usual procedure would have been to have Benhadad slain and this was what was expected by the zealots in Ahab's camp. But the king generously granted the plea and with political astuteness declared his readiness to establish a hesed relationship by answering them: 'Does he still live? He is my brother.' Humanitarian considerations alone would scarcely have prompted Ahab to save Benhadad from death. Since the latter had submitted himself to him, Ahab was in the position to show him hesed. He concluded a pact with him and gave him unconditional freedom".²²

Glueck stressed that in submitting to Ahab, Benhadad had, in effect, struck a covenant with Ahab as vassal with ruler. Thus it became obligatory for Ahab to show mercy to Benhadad as a result of that covenant. This notion is a cornerstone in Glueck's thesis. However, at the point his courtiers were urging Benhadad to beg for mercy, no treaty making was contemplated, suggested or even hinted at. Instead it was clear to all that Benhadad had been completely vanquished: they made that clear also in urging him to dress in such a way as to make his utter subjection to Ahab obvious and "Perhaps he will let your soul live" (v. 32a).

Moreover, Ahab's courtiers were taken aback at their king's letting his captive off, which would be strange if it was also clear to them that Ahab was obliged to show Benhadad kindness given his submission (vv. 32c-33a) which, Gueck argued, established a covenantal relationship. It does not escape one's attention that nowhere did Ahab offer a covenant at all either. Gueck read too much into and drew too much from the story. It seems wholly arguable that humanitarian considerations alone could have accounted for Ahab's largesse, fostered perhaps by a sense of noblesse oblige. This would certainly accord well with the words recorded as being Ahab's regarding Benhadad: "Is he still alive? He is my brother." (v. 32c) In sum, תְּרוּמָה מלְכִי may be read as kings of noblesse oblige, something that would have no covenantal connotation at all.

²² Glueck, *HESED in the Bible*, 51-52.

The story's denouement also serves to show that *hesed* is morally neutral on its own in that, while what Ahab did would generally be lauded, it is instead shown to have transgressed יהוה's *hêrem* commandment (vv 35-43a). Up to this point, the narrative impels the reader to see Ahab as a good king but, at the very end, it becomes clear why this good king was denounced at the very beginning of the pericope as the worst king in Israel's history (1 Kings 16.29-34). His *hesed* in letting Benhadad off was a reproach to יהוה. He had transgressed the Almighty's law. In the same manner, king Saul before him—also called מֶלֶךְ־יִשְׂרָאֵל—was also found wanting for transgressing the *hêrem* commandment against the House of Amalek because he spared the vanquished king Agag (1 Sam. 15).

The upshot is that Glueck did not realize the import of this story was that *hesed* may, among others, point to "disgrace" or "shame" or "reproach", making the term something morally neutral on its own. That is, *hesed* could be ethically good or bad, depending on usage. Perhaps what was implied was an indulgence from a position of strength or advantage or opportunity, something that may shade off into extravagance if overly much and, when so, an object of reproach or shame.²³ Broadly then, not only does *hesed* have little intrinsically to do with covenant, it also seems to be morally neutral so that its ethical connotations are dependent on context and perspective. It seems to

²³ This may be seen in the following verses: (i) KJV renders Lev. 20:17 as "if a man shall take his sister, his father's daughter, or his mother's daughter, and see her nakedness, and she see his nakedness; it is a wicked thing; and they shall be cut off" while ESV has "disgrace". Here *hesed* or indulgence in one's sexual appetites because of the mutual availability of sexual partners shades off into disgrace or reproach. (ii) At Prov. 25:9-10, the ESV has it as: "Argue your case with your neighbor himself, and do not reveal another's secret, כִּי־בְּשָׁמָךְ לֹא תַּגְּבַּע שְׁame תְּגַנְּבֵנָה" lest he who hears you bring shame upon you, and your ill repute have no end." Again *hesed* refers to something shameful, perhaps an over-indulgence in the base things of life from a position of strength or opportunity or availability. (iii) So also at Prov. 14:34 תְּהִנֵּה־בְּרָאָתֶךָ לֹא־בְּרָאָתֶךָ which ESV renders as "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to peoples." If sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4), then sin is breaking the Law, which is His will for His people. Breaking the Law involves the sinner asserting his right to live his life the way he wants instead of that which the Almighty wants. So sin is the asserting of our own rights from a position of strength in the erroneous belief that we have the right to live as we want to without accountability to Him. This wrongful action from a position of imagined strength is sin, which is a reproach to Him, so sin is *hesed*.

involve largesse, generosity or even indulgence, perhaps from a position of situational strength or advantage or opportunity that could shade off into extravagance, if overly much.

This contextual and perspectival picture of *hesed* may now be applied to Ruth's second act of *hesed* that Boaz characterized as Ruth not going after young men, rich or poor, though she was free to do so. How is that possible? In androphilic/gynephilic terms, the young Ruth was in a position of situational strength vis-à-vis Boaz: she could have had the pick of young men around her. If she had indulged too wantonly in that strength, it could have brought her disgrace, a situation that would not have been helped by the fact that she was a Moabitess, as is said repeatedly in the book, one in the land of the Jews, to boot. By comparison, Boaz was far weaker on the androphilic/gynephilic spectrum in regard to the young women around him, whose parents would presumably have preferred to see married off to their male peers, all things being equal.²⁴

She was thus the strong young woman who took matters into her own hands—albeit at the behest of a conniving older Naomi—to boldly place herself at risk in coming in the dead of the night to lie/sleep קָרְבָּלָה next to/with a man (3:4) who had, at the end of a long, hard day of harvesting, feasted and drunk unto inebriation.²⁵ She asked Boaz to "spread his kanap" over her.²⁶ The allusive language suggests

²⁴ Androphilia is sexual attraction to males while gynephilia is that to females; see M Diamond, "Sexual orientation and gender identity," in *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology*, vol. 4, 4th edition, eds., IB Weiner and EW Craighead EW (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2010), 1578.

²⁵ Boaz is inebriated in Campbell, *Ruth*, 121-22; also: "Ruth's gesture in lying down and uncovering Boaz's feet is to the end that he will put her on as his new footwear. She is to be his sandal, an object which in most cultures is used suggestively of the female genitals, and becomes symbolic of a woman"; see C. M. Carmichael, "A Ceremonial Crux: Removing a Man's Sandal as a Female Gesture of Contempt," *JBL* 96 (1977):321-36.

²⁶ "Boaz is challenged to make good with action his earlier profession of pious well-wishing: 'May Yahweh recompense you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by Yahweh, the God of Israel, under whose *kānāpīm* (wings) you have come to take refuge!' (2.12). Ruth, in a sense, calls him on his earlier speech—'You have talked of my *hesed*, now show me yours!'; see Danna Nolan Fewell & David M. Gunn, Boaz, "Pillar of Society: Measures of Worth in the Book of Ruth," *JSOT* 45 [1989], 50.

that Ruth had offered herself to this man who could have taken her for a harlot (cf. Hos. 9:1 "You have loved a prostitute's wages on all threshing floors"); or, a maidservant, one with whom he might have sex for that one and only time; or, a concubine, if he was already married; or, a wife, if he was unmarried.²⁷ That this was an indulgently risky move is further shown by the cagey remark that Boaz made in urging Ruth to return to Naomi before morning light (3:14) so that it may not come to the knowledge of others that she had spent the night with him. Furthermore, she should not have made the move given that there was a nearer kinsman, Boaz implied. Happily, Boaz would be able to work the proceedings at the city gates to his advantage such that the פָלָנִי אֶלְמַנִּי would willingly reassign his property transfer rights to him (Boaz) instead.

This was a greater act of *hesed* in the sense of a woman indulging in even greater risks from her position of situational sexual power, greater than even her first act of *hesed* which took place in broad daylight when the source of danger was young men who could be reined in by a definitive directive from Boaz. If all this gel together then, once again, Boaz rightly called it an act of *hesed* (v.10) by Ruth, a woman of חיל (v.11).

IV. DISCUSSION

At Naomi's behest, an intrepid Ruth makes a nocturnal trip to Boaz's stomping ground (3:1-2). In polite Christian reading, no salacious motives are ever in view, surely not with David's great-grandmother or her scheming mother-in-law as well. However, a plain reading of the text surely does not disallow the likelihood that seduction might well have been in mind. Indeed, that would have been what

²⁷ "The sexual symbolism in ch.3, partly no doubt a reflection of the universal phenomenon of a preference for the allusive and the cryptic in such matters...The verb "to uncover" (*pi'el*, *glh*) is used because of its connotation of uncovering nakedness"; see Carmichael, *Treading in the Book of Ruth*, 258.

others in that very culture would have imputed to the rendezvous, which was likely why Boaz was so solicitous that no one else might come to know about it (3:14). Surely, the tenor of Naomi's instructions to Ruth does not dissuade one from making such a deduction at all: Ruth was to shed off her widow's garments, wash herself and even have a whiff of perfume about her. She was to hide from view until an inebriated Boaz had fallen asleep, and then proceed to lie down surreptitiously next to him. Finally, she was to "uncover his feet", likely alluding to the genitals, which would awaken Boaz, "and he will tell you what to do" (3:3-4).²⁸ All this suggests entrapment.

Awoken from his alcohol-induced stupor in the dead of the night, Boaz was discombobulated to find the presumably attractive Ruth lying "at his feet". He had already formed a favorable opinion of this woman as one blessed with physical, mental, ethical and sexual strength. Now, she was immediately available! Thus at v.8, Boaz trembled (וַיַּחֲרַב) at the prospect and asked perhaps rhetorically, "Who are you"? (מִי-אַתָּה).

There is an interesting parallel at Genesis 27, where the aged and blind Isaac asked Esau, "Who are you [מִי]?" (v. 32) and started to tremble (וַיַּחֲרַב) when it dawned upon him that it was Jacob masquerading as Esau (vv. 33, 35) who had tricked him earlier into conferring the firstborn blessings on his second born. Jones notes that "each narrative describes a type of deception", adding that "of the 39 times that חֲרַב occurs... 37 cases connote trembling, usually of persons, in the face of potential harm and/or overwhelming inferiority.

²⁸ These few elements in 3:3-4 make for "the pronounced sexual symbolism in Ruth 3"; see Campbell, Jr., *Ruth*, 131-32; "What Ruth is to uncover is *margəlōt*, a term that occurs only elsewhere in Dan. 10.6 where it must mean something like 'legs', though the usual term for legs (or feet) would be the word from the same root (*rgl*) *ragəlim/raglayim* (plural/dual)"; see Campbell, *Ruth*, 131. Carmichael concurs: "The repetition in [Ruth 3] of the words 'to lie down', 'to know', and 'to come (toward), to go into' is intended to reinforce their double meaning and direct attention to the sexual domain. In particular, the uncovering of the man's feet or legs is also an allusion to his genital region. 'Feet' in Hebrew is frequently employed in this way, the context determining whether the non-literal sense also, or only, applies"; see Calum Carmichael, "Treading in the Book of Ruth," *ZAW* 92 (1980): 248.

The only two places where an element of fear is lacking are...Genesis 27:33 and Ruth 3:9 (with both having) the shorter clauses יְהִי + personal pronoun."²⁹

Yet it may be argued that Isaac was overcome with fear and desperation at the realization that his life-long assumption his first born, Esau, would receive his primogeniture rights as a matter of course, was now shattered. Likewise, Boaz may have been trembling in fear that he might give in to the delicious prospect of Ruth becoming his woman that very night which was, however, consorting with a Moabitess, something the Law of Moses frowned upon, which would likely jeopardize his public standing as a pillar of society.

In daylight, Boaz had made sure she had enough to eat when the harvesters stopped at meal-times. He had also ensured that she gleaned enough for her and Naomi—thus their *goel*. Now, under cover of darkness and in return for his favors, Ruth requested for protection—"Spread you *kanap* over your handmaiden"—deploying the very word Boaz had used for protection. The term *kanap* can mean "wing" (e.g. Isa. 10:14; Exod.19:4), or "skirt/edge/sleeve of a garment" (e.g. 1 Sam. 15:27; 24.5ff.), or a man's wife, alluding to the male genitalia (Deut. 23:1, 27:20).³⁰ In this was embedded a hint of marriage, which Boaz recognized in his reply that she had acted in *hesed* in not going after young men, presumably for marriage. Though marriage was not overtly mentioned, Boaz quickly recovered his wits, comprehended what Ruth was proposing and proceeded to promise to marry her, which he eventually did.

²⁹ Jones, *Who Are You, My Daughter?* 660, 658.

³⁰ Boaz had used the term in 2:12 in describing Ruth as seeking shelter under the wings קְרַנְבָּרִים יְהִי of the κέρατον της γυναικός while Ruth asked him at 3:9 to קְרַנְבָּרְךָ וְעַל־אֶת־יְלִלָּתֶךָ "Spread your skirt/wing(s) over your handmaiden". The kethiv in the BHS has the noun in the singular noun but the qere has the dual, thus "wings" and not "skirt". So while the Masoretes did not take this to be a proposal of marriage, the Targum reads it as "Let your name be called over your maidservant in marriage" which takes *kanap* to mean "skirt"; see D.R.G. Beattie, "Ruth III," *JSOT* 5 (1978): 42, who argues that "to spread the skirt" was a Hebrew idiom for "to marry".

Now all this Ruth was able to achieve in the unaccommodating context of a patriarchal system within an agrarian economy in a foreign culture, to boot. That surely speaks unambiguously to a venturesome woman who faced the existential challenges facing her and her (ex) mother-in-law head-on. In an almost devil-may-care manner, the insurrectionist in her ably subverted the hegemonic discourse in which women were chattel, managing to maneuver Boaz, the one described as אֲישׁ גָּבָר תְּגִיל into doing her bidding. She took great risks in doing so, and admirably achieved what she set out to do, eventuating in: וַיַּבְאֵא אֶלְيָה וַיַּעֲשֵׂה יְהוָה לְהָרְיוֹן וַתָּלֶד בָּבָן: (4:13).

In this story, the Torah injunction for men of Israel against consorting with Moabitesses seemed to have been held in abeyance for the Boaz-Ruth coupling, which clearly led to no adverse consequences. Perhaps that was because Ruth was grafted into the commonwealth of Israel by her declaration of faith in יְהוָה, the Mighty One of Israel: "Your people shall be my people, and your G-d my G-d." (1:16). This is acceptable according to Isaiah 56:6-7 for "foreigners who bind themselves to יְהוָה, to serve him, to love the name of יְהוָה, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." From of old, the Law and the Prophets did provide for such foreigners.³¹

More than that, Ruth even became the progenitrix of the Davidic dynasty. This tough woman did not permit the unpropitious circumstances to overwhelm her. Instead she took definitive action even if it meant placing herself at physical and reputational risks in what was a lawless patriarchy. Prepared to undermine prevailing social norms,

³¹ Ex. 23:9; Lev. 19:10, 33-34; 24:22; Deut. 10:18-19; 24:17-18; 27:19; Ezek. 22:7, 9; 47:21-23; Mal. 3:5.

the tenacious woman's derring-do at the threshing floor, the hinge upon which the whole narrative turns, was rightly called an act of *hesed*, i.e., the act of a strong woman who was able to work the system to her benefit that eventually led to a much greater good.

Finally, if there be any lessons in all this for today, it might be that, first, יְהֻנָּה would seem to be pleased with the energetic efforts of women who, finding themselves in socially weak positions, nevertheless use their situational strength to work to smash the patriarchal structures that immure them. If He approves, should we not? However, the results of the 2016 US presidential elections in which over 80 percent of white evangelicals voted for Donald J. Trump³² rather than Hilary Trump may suggest that they are not too troubled by the glass ceiling that still exists for women in this society. They should.

Secondly, Boaz's actions bring to mind the commandment in the Law and the Prophets that the believer is to show the foreigner kindness.³³ Again, the 2016 elections for the White House, which the anti-immigration candidate won, powered by white evangelicals, may suggest that the later assign little importance to that commandment. It behooves this group to remember that Christ would have that "until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 5:18-19). If being kind to foreigners is the littlest of the commandments, it behooves Christians to treat aliens among them with kindness.

³² Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "White evangelicals voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, exit polls show," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2016.

³³ See fn. 31.

V. CONCLUSION

Ruth's two acts of *hesed*, rather than emanating from covenantal loving-kindness, may more accurately be described as having flowed from a position of situational strength. Read as a story about blood-and-flesh people, the text suggests that Ruth was a woman of fortitude, who unabashedly used all her womanly appeal to work around prevailing social norms and found a way through the thickets of a patriarchy in a foreign culture, to boot, where her personal interests were not necessarily paramount to those around her, Naomi included. In the end, with Boaz playing ball, so to speak, things did work out for this resolute woman. With all this in mind, it may be fairly said that Boaz's characterization of the acts of this dauntless נָשָׁת חַיִל as being those of *hesed* would seem to have been quite apposite.

ABSTRACT

The Ruth story has traditionally been cast as a bucolic one about magnanimous folk doing marvelous things for what would be, by and large, philanthropic and charitable reasons only. Acknowledging that real humans have real feelings and resolutely refusing to bowdlerize a text about assumably real persons, I decline to assume the main protagonists in the Book of Ruth to be paragons of virtue. Moreover, I argue that the default meaning of the term **חֶסֶד** *hesed* as covenant loyalty is erroneous, which I argue is better defined as "situational strength." Ruth's two acts of *hesed*, rather than emanating from covenantal loving-kindness, may more accurately be described as having flowed from a position of situational strength. Read as a story about flesh-and-blood people, the text suggests that Ruth was a woman of fortitude, who unabashedly used all her womanly appeal to work around prevailing social norms and found a way through the thickets of a patriarchy in a foreign culture, to boot, where her personal interests were not necessarily paramount to those around her, Naomi included. In the end, with Boaz playing ball, so to speak, things did work out well for this resolute woman. Therefore, Boaz's characterization of the acts of this dauntless נָשָׁת חַיִל as being those of *hesed* would seem to have been quite apposite.

攝 要

路得的故事傳統上被描繪成一個田園式的故事，講述一個是寬宏大量的為了慈善做了許多了不起的事情。我承認真實的人有真實的情感，並堅決拒絕貶低一個假設的真實人物的文本。因此我拒絕假設路得記的主角是美德的典範。此外，我認為 *hesed* 一詞作為盟約忠誠的預設含義是錯誤的，我認為最好將其定義為「情境力量」。路得的兩次 *hesed* 行為，與其說是源於盟約中的慈愛，不如說是源於情境中的力量更為準確。作為一個關於真實人物的故事，經文表明路得是一個堅韌的女人，她毫不掩飾地利用她所有的女性魅力來繞過現行的社會規範，並在異國文化的父權制叢中找到一條出路。她的個人利益對她周圍的人來說不一定是最重要的，拿俄米也包括在內。最終，在波阿斯的幫助下，這個剛毅的女人得到了很好的結果。因此，波阿斯將這個無畏的 *אִשָּׁת־חַיל* 的行為描述為 *hesed* 的行為似乎是非常恰當的。