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The Hebrew Short Story:
A Study of Ruth

For a Hebrew literary production of a mere four chapters and eighty-five verses, the state of whose text is quite sound and the vocabulary of which is fairly simple, the book of Ruth nevertheless contains a striking set of engrossing problems. While accorded relatively little space in studies of Old Testament theology or in the comprehensive literary introductions, it has called forth a volume of special study which appears disproportionate to its importance. As a part of the Old Testament canon, it is in some ways unique; like a lost maverick, it wanders around in the canonical order of the Old Testament looking for its proper niche, whether after Judges, or at the beginning of the Kethubim, or in any one of the first six positions in that grouping, or even in the tenth position of the eleven. No consensus has been reached as to its date of composition or, indeed, as to whether one should properly speak of a single date of composition. Now that the popular handbooks have rather commonly hit upon the post-exilic period, three prestigious German commentaries have appeared recently (Hertzberg, Gerleman, and Rudolph)[1] all of which place it in the pre-exilic period. On another front, there is a broad range of disagreement concerning the historical value of the data it presents, and a veritable mare's nest of criteria, both valid and invalid, has been assembled which claim to pertain to both date and authenticity. To add to the catalog, one notes the oft-cited observation that, set, as it claims to be, in the period of the Judges, it displays a tranquillity of scene which contrasts with the turbulence described in the book of Judges. Then again, it is noted that the proper names in the narrative can be shown to be genuinely Israelite and many pre-Israelite, but

the question remains whether the story now employs them out of deference to historical tradition or in some clever allegorical sense.

When it comes to the content of the story, a new crop of queries arises: Why do the legal affairs, so vitally and carefully portrayed in the book, not accord more directly with laws and customs described in the Deuteronomic and Holiness codes? Why, if Naomi seems so specifically to understand the principle of levirate marriage (as her words in 1: 11–12 indicate), does she take so long to hit upon the thought of a possible marriage for Ruth in Bethlehem? And then, how does the story want us to understand what is portrayed at the threshing floor? What is the connection, then, between the law of levirate marriage and the law of land redemption? How many different senses of the term *gô'êl/ge'ullah* are there in the narrative after all? Where, by the way, did Naomi come by the field she now wishes to sell at the beginning of chapter 4? There has been no previous mention of it, and one might be led to wonder why the two widows are so desperately poor if Naomi holds title to some land. Should Ruth have to glean elsewhere in that case? Where did Boaz learn about Naomi's plan to sell the field so as to be able to use it as the "counter in the game" played out at the city gate? If Naomi knew Boaz was a kinsman, why did she not know about the closer kinsman? Surely she knew her husband's relatives in a little place like Bethlehem. Even if she was not sure of the matter, one pleasant afternoon spent with that talkative gaggle of women who met her at her homecoming would have brought her up to date, would it not? And why do these neighborhood women apparently function as the ones to bestow the name Obed on Ruth's child—a name that does not even fit the carefully prepared context—when in all other instances in the Old Testament it is the parents who name their children?

There are more such questions, and, as is perfectly well known, there are adequate answers to many of them, ingenious suggestions available for others. What would seem to be a prior set of questions to all these content questions, and a prior set of questions pertinent to some of those dealing with date, canonical placement, historical value, is just what kind of a writing is this, how did it come into being and what is its aim.

It is here that one senses the importance of some of the materials of the newer literary criticism which is making itself felt in the study of biblical literature, especially in the area of the artistic prose of the *Gattungen* known as the *novelle*, the anecdote, and the tale. In a very real sense, the task is one begun and left somewhat unfulfilled by Hermann Gunkel, but now considerably sharpened by literary comparisons to materials relatively far afield from Near Eastern comparative texts. A milestone is surely Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, especially its first chapter; another landmark study is that of Ben Edwin Perry on *The Ancient Romances*, published in 1967. Useful from another angle is A. B. Lord's fascinating *The Singer of Tales* (1960). James Muilenberg has explored several facets of the issue; for Ruth itself, key studies are those of L. Alonso-Schökel,[2] Werner Dommershausen,[3] and Stephen Bertmann.[4] Also not to be forgotten is Paul Humbert's artistic article from 1938.[5]

Gunkel's judgments in his long Ruth article, included in *Reden und Aufsätze* (1913), are the basis for his entry on the book of Ruth in the first edition of the *RGG*, and are changed in only one important way—to which we shall return—in the second (1930) edition of *RGG*.[6] For him, the Ruth story was almost the perfect example of an artistic tale, a poetic popular saga, a *novelle*. As such, its primary—and really its sole—aim was to entertain. In this he was strongly seconded by Hugh Gressmann,[7] who placed special stress on the non-historical character of the story. Both men were following the lead of Goethe's classic description of the book as a fine little idyll; they heard Goethe's insistence that the story be taken as a whole and, further, that it be taken within its wider context in the overall framework of biblical religion. Gunkel's excellent description of the book's careful structure into four discrete scenes with transitional interludes has become more or less standard, as have many of his observations about the internal artistry of the scenes. Less binding upon subsequent scholarship but nevertheless still impressive in its conviction is his insistence that there is no clearly discernible *Tendenz* which would allow the book to find its *Sitz im Leben* somewhere in Israelite culture as a protest paper or a propaganda document, but, at least among the most recent commentaries, that claim has reasserted itself.

In two directions, however, Gunkel's papers led into more controversial areas. The first was his attempt to rank the Ruth story on the basis of some rather intangible factors into a chronological scheme. Thus the very quality of the art was seen as a mark of lateness; only a person with a deep *Seelenleben* could produce it, and that meant relative lateness and growing sophistication. The poetic features for Gunkel, here as elsewhere in his writings, meant late and developed artistry. Only after these factors were cited, did linguistic considerations augment the argument, together with attention to the antiquarian note in 4: 7. On the other hand, there were marks of personal naïveté in the depiction, and that, combined with certain customs relatable to the history of Israelite law, kept him from moving so late as into the time when Tobit or the other Apocryphal narratives were composed. Indeed, the lack of self-consciousness about Ruth's foreign origins joined these psychological and cultural historical factors to lead Gunkel in 1913 to a seventh-century date. There is something quite important about the

combination of factors he employed to arrive at his conclusion, and probably also something quite suggestive in the fact that in his 1930 article he dropped any attempt to assign a date.

This leads to the other problematic area. Bound closely to Gunkel's assessment of the date and place in the literary development was a brief treatment of the literary pre-history of the book. Here he listed Genesis 38 as in some sense a precursor, predictably noting that the Tamar-Judah story, while offering related, and even in some ways identical, circumstances, was a much rougher and coarser story and therefore of course earlier. Going further afield, and without drawing chronological conclusions, Gunkel brought in as a literary precursor the Egyptian Isis-Osiris story, noticing certain motif resemblances. He pursued that even further, back into the *Brüdermärchen* of Egypt. The final judgment of Gunkel's lengthy treatment in *Reden und Aufsätze* was, then, that the Israelite story had recast an ancient *Märchen*, in which wizardry and magic played a dominant role, by substituting the human institution of levirate marriage as the means by which an Israelite would overcome a similar set of problems. Israel's appropriation of an old and hoary motif was accomplished by the application of the dictates of her own high and pure religion, which would expel certain elements in story material derived from polytheistic cultures.

A most interesting development in Gunkel's 1930 *RGG* article, and the one major change from the earlier article, is his sketching in of an analysis of stages of development in the story which eventually became the Ruth story. In the back of one's mind one finds the question whether the need for time for these developments to take place is one reason why Gunkel gave up his attempt to assign a date to the finished product. In 1930 Gunkel could adopt the hypothesis that there existed a stage in the story when Naomi was the sole feminine protagonist and that this stage was the one which offered the transition from the old *Märchen* motif to the Israelite adaptation. It was Naomi who bore a child to carry on her dead husband's name, and she did this by inveigling a relative to sire the child. A later stage placed Ruth beside Naomi, so that the motif of the wise, old, crafty woman could make its appearance and Ruth could become the type of the young, obedient, and faithful woman. Again, Gunkel's notion of development obtrudes, from a simple to a more complex plot, and we have in the earlier stage something much closer to the Genesis 38 narrative.

I have taken this long to summarize what may be quite familiar to many because I suspect it stands at the fountainhead of streams which have run off in all directions. Thus, in carrying out motif research, a spate of what in many instances are bizarre conjectures have beclouded Ruth research. Two of the most striking are those of W. E. Staples (followed up by Herbert Gordon May)[8] and of Margaret Crook.[9] The first of these finds a Bethlehem cult legend behind the Ruth story, and leads into a miasma of fertility cult, ritual prostitution, and game playing with the allegorical meanings of names which makes one's head swim and, more important, bids fair to make of biblical material in general a literature which would cause the exegete to throw up his hands in despair. Miss Crook's proposal is more down-to-earth, but is almost completely uncontrolled by hard evidence, since it divides into two stages (the Old Story and the Second Telling) the fundamental ingredients of the book in a quite arbitrary way, and then finds a convenient polemic use for the Second Telling in the occasion of Athaliah's accession, since Athaliah is "everything that Ruth is not." I do not want to stir forgotten memories of a rejected past here, but only to raise the first inklings of a rather fundamental question: Do we in fact have any justification for assuming that stories in ancient Israel must have a ladderlike set of pre-final-form stages which will link the stories to all their possible predecessor ingredients? Be it noticed that such an assumption has a great deal to say about the elements of creativity and the control exercised by tradition, two factors about whose balance we need to be a great deal more careful than we have often been, whether in the study of biblical stories like Ruth or in the much more central study of such matters as the growth of the Pentateuch.

Let us, then, turn to a far more sober and attractive attempt to explore the question of antecedents in relation to Ruth. When Jacob Myers published his important study, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth*, in 1955, he succeeded, at least in the early part of the book, in keeping two things in balance—namely, his appreciation for the extremely fine prose form of the book, and his observation of the poetic character of much of its contents, not only in the conversations and speeches of the book but also in the idiom of the prose itself. The isolation of the poetry, however, led to a further set of conclusions which opened the door to speculation about a process of literary development. A poetic nucleus was assumed and therefore a poetic precursor, and a new chain of development was posited which proposes that Ruth was perhaps an old nursery table passed on for a long period of time in oral form and "finally reduced to writing shortly after the exile."[10] The oral form was poetry, and the written form was prose, with poetic remnants protruding through the final prose form. It would seem, however, that Myers' conclusion abandoned an earlier affirmation—namely, that the prose is classic and fine in its style and, indeed, that it sounds most like the kind of prose in which the J and E Pentateuchal narratives appear. One fears, then, that somehow the prose is nothing but the end, the fixing point of a long oral poetic process. Perhaps sensing the problem, George

Glanzman[11] proposed some nuances to Myers' thesis that began by adding another stage in the literary activity. First, there was a poetic tale, probably of non-Israelite origin, borrowed by the Israelites, perhaps from the Canaanites. (It is worth noting that this first of Glanzman's stages has at least two substages.) Glanzman, then, has this oral poetic tale put into prose, further "Israelitized" with the law and custom of the times, in the ninth or eighth century. The final stage is a post-exilic refurbishing which puts it into its final form. Glanzman's conjecture concerning the oldest form of the story is that it was an entertaining story of human devotion of daughter-in-law for mother-in-law, with the subsequent reward of finding a loving husband. A footnote suggests Glanzman's tentative approval of the idea that the original story ended at the threshing floor with the consummation of marriage. It is interesting to see how the ingredients of Glanzman's first stage are really the core of the story as we have it, so that subsequent stages call only for embellishments, expansion by greater precision of detail, and the particular application of Israelite theological terminology to already present motifs. This is a long distance separated from the proposal of Staples and quite different from that of Gunkel.

But it leaves a signal question unanswered: Why was the story "reduced" to prose? The shift away from the position of late-nineteenth-century scholarship, which saw poetry as a sophisticated and late product of a developing culture, to the twentieth-century position, which sees it as the early and dominant form of oral transmission of traditional material, has placed the study of poetry in the forefront. Studies such as that of Robert C. Culley,[12] building on the work of Parry and Lord, have shown even more dramatically than before how stock poetic formulas can make for ease of memory across long periods of time. But the result should not be to leave prose an undesirable end product, the unhappy result of the need to write things down. Baldly stated, it can simply be asked why poetry, when it came time to write down oral tradition, would not be written as poetry. So we still have to account for prose narrative of the kind we have in Ruth, and it does not seem to me satisfactory to claim that it became prose only upon writing.

This is where the lead of Ben Edwin Perry is worth following. Perry is working with a particular literary form—that of the ancient Greek romance— a literary form noteworthy not so much for quality of style or content but, rather, for its difference in style and purpose from other literary material of its own time and the period just before it. While the romance contains many familiar motifs of both myth and history, it is usually somewhat maudlin and sentimental; indeed, Perry is wry enough to note that many a student of classical literature would be struck by its giving an impression

of modernity, since the genre reads like the text for a modern historical novel being prepared for a movie treatment.

Perry claims to have begun on his studies of the romances by attempting to explain their existence and origin on the basis of antecedents in previous classic literature and to make use of motif research in charting the development of the new literary form. The operative assumption, which he describes as dominating the field at least in the first half of the twentieth century, was that a series of successive stages would link various genres of literature in which the same motifs, events, personages, and even formulas appear. The conclusions Perry comes to, however, embody quite a different stance, one, by the way, with which he now claims most classical literary critics would agree in principle if not always in practice. I believe they should become more operative in biblical literary criticism as well, although there too they may be agreed to in principle. Perry confesses to having failed "to understand what the real forces are that create new literary forms. Such forms, I am convinced, never come into being as the result of an evolutionary process taking place on the purely literary plane, but only as the willful creations of men made in accordance with a conscious purpose . . . to satisfy the new spiritual or intellectual needs and tastes that have arisen in a large part of society in a given period of cultural history."[13] So to speak, new occasions teach new duties and develop new forms. To quote Perry once more: "One form does not give birth to another . . . . Historiography, for example, cannot become romance without passing through zero, that is, through the negation of its own *raison d'être*, the thing which defines it as historiography."[14] This does not mean of course that motifs do not persist and exercise effect, but it clearly warns that the presence of a fairy-tale, or mythic, or epic motif in a story will say very little about intermediate stages in transition from one type of literature to another; indeed, the very existence of intermediate stages is called seriously into doubt. What purports to be historical or looks to be an authentic historical datum in a romance cannot be judged one way or the other as to authenticity on the basis of its presence in the new form, but will have to be tested by some external evidence. Let me close this conversation with Perry's thesis with one summary quote: "The analogy of biological evolution is false and misleading in the realm of literary history, because it ignores the human will and capacity to create new forms at frequent intervals in response to its own spiritual or intellectual needs."[15] Notice here the emphasis upon the special creativity of the author of the new form. This would seem to be a very important help in resolving the question of why poetic epic would become prose story in biblical materials, and an excellent corrective on much *Gattungsforschung* and even more on Redactions-criticism in contemporary biblical study.

Lest all this seem old hat, I at least note that, for Myers, it was possible to write in his conclusion to the study of the literary form of Ruth that, in its final form, it was the "work of an exilic or early post-exilic writer . . . [who] in a sense was a literary editor; in no sense may his story be regarded as a new artistic creation any more than that the stories and poems of JE, Joshua, Judges, and Samuel were the creation of the men who first wrote them down."[16] Far as this insistence goes to protect the essential integrity of the process of oral transmission, I feel it does not properly account for the truly remarkable *prose* artistry which such literary creations as the book of Ruth display, and it has to be rethought in some rather fundamental ways.

Now let it be admitted that we have in the Old Testament at least two major instances in which we possess both poetic and prose presentations of the same event: in Judges 4 and 5, and in Exodus 14 and 15. It would be beyond the scope of this study to enter into comparison between poetry and prose in these two instances so as to see how well the prose version or versions succeed in reflecting the poetic predecessor. There are some rather important differences, however, in content, emphasis, and purpose. But it is not at all clear that one can make a transfer from those two cases to the instances of Ruth and its literary confreres. The Exodus and Judges examples cited relate to key and crucial events in the catalog of *magnalia Dei* in Israelite literature, for one thing, while Ruth does not. Neither does another excellent example of the same literary genre as Ruth—namely, the prose narrative of the book of Job. As Myers has for Ruth, so Nahum Sarna has for Job[17] posited an epic-poem substratum which belongs to an earlier stage of the present narrative. Both these instances—Ruth and Job—display remarkable and exceedingly attractive literary style and structure much as they stand, and should be accounted for, in my opinion, differently.

Here it is proposed, then, with others including Albright and Cassuto,[18] that there existed in Israel a style of artistic prose which was not the stepchild of any other style, and was used to express literary forms which were not the stepchildren of any other forms. The Hebrew short story is a distinct and discrete form, with its own ground rules, its own pupuses, its own range of content (which could be quite varied, by the way, and could include much valuable historical information), and its own style. Included in it were rhythmic elements which are characteristic of the style and probably at least partially mnemonic in purpose. As examples we can include a number of the patriarchal narratives, especially Genesis 24 and 38; the Joseph story; a number of the Judges narratives, including, for example, Judges 3: 15–29 (the Ehud-Eglon episode) and Judges 4; Ruth (minus only

its last five verses); and the Job prose story. Quite probably these stories in rhythmic prose had an oral period in that style, and their writing down came not at the end of a process of poetic transmission but at the end of a period of oral transmission in more or less their present rhythmic prose style. Their content, while varied, includes a combination of a certain kind of concern about rather typical people doing rather mundane things which nevertheless turn out to have rather significant results. Their purpose is both entertaining and edifying; it seems too that such narratives are peculiarly Israelite in that the scene of human life where very ordinary human events and figures function is also the scene where God works. And so, while the stories can have all the fun and delight and pathos and violence of common human existence, they also have the dimension of seriousness.[19]

The form of the Israelite short narrative story had a long history. Aage Bentzen,[20] who could find only Esther and Judith as comparative writings to Ruth, at least succeeded in pointing to two exemplars of the end of its period of existence, and he might have added Tobit and Susanna. Here I tread softly because legendary themes are very prominent in Tobit especially, and any distinctions between the group I am seeking to isolate and the legend may begin to disappear here. For that matter, it is difficult to decide where to put the story of Jonah in all this.

Now in bringing Perry's work into the discussion, I did not intend to equate ancient Greek romance and the Israelite short story. Certain features of Perry's analysis have quite general application, and a few are specifically pertinent. The biggest problem I see remaining would seem to be to find an occasion when new demand combined with new creative impulse to produce the new form.

Gerhard von Rad has proposed that the Joseph narrative be considered a *novelle*, and a quite sophisticated one at that; he has placed it in the tenth century and linked it to the wisdom movement.[21] Interestingly enough, von Rad has gotten himself caught on some of the same problems that Myers and Sarna have, except that he has the thoroughly grounded documentary hypothesis with which to contend. I believe R. N. Whybray[22] has succeeded in placing von Rad in a very tight position by challenging him to resolve two things in his theory: one, that the Joseph story is a carefully crafted, magnificently worked-out whole; and the other that it has J and E components. Whybray feels that von Rad makes a better case for the creativity and uniqueness of the story than he does for the existence of J and E ingredients, the seams between which have been so smoothly caulked as to have virtually disappeared from sight. The problem here is quite analogous to our problem with the literary pre-history of Ruth, and persuades me that the issue of posited pre-histories is by no means a closed one.

I would propose that the new occasion for the development of the Israelite short story is the early monarchic period, and that the new need was compounded of a relatively sophisticated nation, rapidly growing in its sophistication, wanting a somewhat less austere type of instruction and edification than the sort of thing going on in the court, where emergent institutions of kingship and prophecy demanded heady theologizing about Davidic covenant and charismatic messenger from the great king. Wisdom appears also to have been a courtly phenomenon for the most part, and only if wisdom as a movement can become more popular than it is usually described as being, could it be the locus for the edifying Israelite short story. The material of our genre is popular—it is folksy. It concerns the commonplace and God's relation to the commonplace. Following the lead of several other commentators, I suspect it often included in its earlier stages a theology of the working of God from the shadows, such as characterizes the Joseph narrative, Ruth, and, in its rather special way, the prose narrative of Job. Indeed, it would not surprise me if the genre got its start a little earlier, in the Judges period, at a time when several recent studies have proposed that the patriarchal narratives took their form. For Ruth itself, I see little difficulty in positing a tenth-century date for its present form in all essential aspects minus only the last five verses. That is where Gerleman places it on the basis of a quite different line of argument,[23] and it is not totally incompatible with the reasoning of Rudolph[24] and Hertzberg.[25]

It will be necessary further, however, to posit a Hebrew "singer of tales,"[26] and for him we have little evidence beyond the existence of his product. It is striking that we know as little about Israelite common life—village life, let us say—as we do, but Ruth itself may be an indicator of the context in which the tale teller functioned. His it was to entertain and edify at the village gate; his it was to portray in popular terms the critical issues of the day—for example, international affairs. His it was to bring the court to the people, even perhaps to tell them of their king's humble origins. If I can have Jonah back, his it was to portray what a prophet is (here with a bow to Martin Buber, who gives the tale of Jonah a far more important role to play than simply a propaganda white paper addressed to post-exilic nationalism).[27] Such a function may suggest the existence of *Tendenzen* in the short rhythmic stories, but the propaganda element is really very light, if it is present at all. If *Tendenz* there exists in Ruth, it may possibly be the old one Goethe first suggested with a slight twist—namely, that of giving David an interesting and impressive set of forebears one of whom, amazingly enough, was a foreigner. The sooner *that* is said, the better; in this connection, perhaps the story shares with the Court History of David in its openness, candor, and unabashedness.

It will not have escaped attention that I have rather badly blurred the distinction between historical narrative and the short narrative tale. That cannot be avoided. The prose style is really very similar. And from what has been said, the presence of a varying amount of historically accurate information in one of the short stories is entirely possible—indeed, in Israel, very likely; however, the proportion cannot be decided by any fixed rule. In Judges 4, the proportion is probably quite high. In Ruth, the proportion is probably higher than sometimes maintained, certainly higher than Gressmann would have allowed. The point has often been made that a purely fictional story is hardly likely to succeed in giving David a Moabite great-grandmother if he did not indeed have one. For that reason, I see no cogency to Eissfeldt's argument to remove 4:17b from the original story as a late addition.[28] In fact, I rather doubt that we can draw a clean and clear line between historical narrative and the short story genre here proposed. If the date I have proposed can possibly be sustained, I would even hazard the observation that there is not that much difference between this genre and that of what most agree is the first great piece of Israelite historical writing—namely, the Court History of David. I suggest that the major difference is not so much a matter of form or style but of audience. The story was for popular consumption, and was crafted to reach that audience.

Let me now turn to exploring the craft of the book of Ruth more closely to demonstrate two things: that it is a highly creative literary masterpiece, even as Goethe and Gunkel claimed it to be; and also that it has a purpose of combining just those issues I mentioned earlier, of the joy and pathos of Israelite common life with the serious purpose of God, who governs from the shadows. Indeed, for the purposes of Old Testament theology, I would maintain that the author uses his artistry—in this case, by employing key words—to correlate God's will and human action so inextricably as to make each of the main protagonists the servant of God to the other.

L. Alonso-Schökel[29] has done a most interesting job of lining out the artistry of the Israelite storyteller in an analysis of two episodes in the prose of Judges. He has noted, in studies of the Ehud-Eglon story in Judges 3 and of the Deborah-Baraq-Yael story in Judges 4, the various ways in which even such subtle matters as the rhythm and pace of the story carry the action forward or retard it. He notes that inversion of the order of events can serve to delay an action and maintain suspense. Contemporaneity of action can occur so that the hearer or reader can sense how important it is that several things are happening concurrently to prepare for a critical climax. These factors all relate to the special kind of time and tempo that belongs to good storytelling, and such sensitivity to timing can be abundantly illustrated in the Ruth narrative. The very structure which Gunkel described so well

—whereby swift strokes of the brush establish the situation in the introduction and in the transitions, while the main scenes move at a much more leisurely pace—is a comprehensive indicator. No words are used that are unnecessary in the introduction, precisely because the pace is so fast, and therefore the hearer of the tale must take cognizance of such an apparently unimportant group of four Hebrew words as "and they dwelt there about ten years." These are ten years of childless marriage, and ten years when property ownership back in Bethlehem can become scrambled, and ten years during which Naomi can reach the age when she can have no more children. But these are ten years which do not require ten words to describe, because that is not where the action must lie.

On the other hand, the scene at the threshing floor and the scene at the city gate need some protraction, for they are full of good-hearted and rather robust suspense. The storyteller gets Ruth to the threshing floor in 3: 6, but must have her wait, as it were, while Boaz eats and drinks and has his heart get merry and goes to lie down in the corner of the threshing floor. The hearer is waiting with her; this maneuver is no joke, and it has to be brought off correctly. Likewise, the scene at the city gate is one which is suspenseful. As a whole, this scene, as well as the previous surprise announcement that there even exists a nearer kinsman, is an example of the familiar retarding motif of good storytelling; but, even within that scene at the gate, the lengthy style of the speeches of Boaz serves to draw out the tension.

However, the storyteller is not toying with us. It is important that Boaz get right to this business. While Ruth is talking with her mother-in-law at the end of chapter 3, the storyteller signals a quick pace to Boaz's action by using contemporaneity. I take the beginning of 4: 1, *ûbōʻaz ʻālâ*, as indicative by its word order not only of a change in subject but of a corresponding action to Ruth's departure from the threshing floor.

The timing and tempo of the story, then, are striking evidence of its artistry. Alonso-Schökel also calls attention to the way in which precision of detail and color makes for vividness at those moments when vividness is required. Again, there is more to such parts of an Israelite story than just the barely necessary words. Several examples suggest themselves as places where the story's camera eye rests languidly on a momentary vignette. Thus the scene of the leave-taking in Moab where twice the women stop to weep and much must be made of the argument to persuade at least Orpah to stay at home. Thus the splendid portrayal of the little meal at the midday break in the fields, where Ruth is asked to join the others and to dip her morsel in the *homeṣ*—whatever that really is—and receives the special heap of parched grain which is sufficient not only for herself but also for a supply to be taken home to her mother-in-law. There is purpose to all

this, as the storyteller evokes the character of the personages and binds them together, but there is just good storytelling also. Consider as another example here the detail of 3: 3, where Naomi instructs Ruth in the preparations for her visit to the threshing floor, "Wash yourself, and anoint yourself, and put on your raiment."[30]

Vividness and color are employed where they are most needed, and it is interesting to contrast the instances cited (to which must be added the vivid scene at the city gate) with what might after all be thought of as the whole point of the book—namely, the birth of the baby. Five swift syntactical units and the whole business is over: "And Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her, and Yahweh gave her conception, and she bore a son." That's all! This may be the point of all that has gone before, but the fun, the tension, the pathos, the excitement have been in getting the hearer or reader there! And besides that, the storyteller needs to get on to wrap up one more important matter which is yet to come.

The storytelling techniques so far described have hinted at another technique of immense importance both in the book of Ruth and in the prose style of Hebrew tales in general. It is the technique of repetition and, most especially, of the repetition of key words. This technique operates in two ways, both short-range and long-range. Muilenberg got a good start on this rhetorical device in 1953,[31] but he confined his examples almost exclusively to poetry per se. He wrote of repetition as a style technique: "It serves, for one thing, to center the thought, to rescue it from disparateness and diffuseness. . . . Repetition serves, too, to give continuity to the writer's thought; the repeated word or phrase is often strategically located, thus providing a clue to the movement and stress of the poem."[32] This judgment can be transferred to the artistic prose which confronts us. Hertzberg, in his *ATD* commentary, had already pointed out how the verb *šûb* dominates the first chapter of the book with its twelve occurrences.[33] Now Werner Dommershausen,[34] of the Catholic theological faculty at Tübingen, has pointed out an entire series of *Leitworte* which bind each of the scenes in the Ruth book together. With some ingenuity but also a good deal of sagacity, he has shown that oftentimes these key words take strategic position so as to emphasize certain points. In chapter 1, for example, *šûb* manages, by its pattern of appearance, to underscore the basic tension; who will return whence? Orpah and Ruth to their country, Naomi to hers? By the time we reach verse 22 and Ruth is returning with Naomi, the question of the significance of Ruth's leaving Moab and returning to Judah has become quite an important issue. For chapter 2, Dommershausen establishes the verb *lqṭ*, "to glean," as a binding key word; and also the reminder that Ruth is a Moabitess, which occurs three times; and the phrase "to

find favor in the eyes of someone," which appears in Ruth's hope in verse 2, her bewilderment in verse 10, and her expression of gratitude in verse 13. His analysis suggests a carefully worked-out structure to all this, so that Ruth's discovery of favor from Boaz grows as her success in gleaning grows, while all the time one is reminded that this is a foreigner to which this is happening. The high spot of that emphasis is the neat stylistic device of the word play in 2: 10: "Why do I find favor in your eyes?" *lᵉhakkîrēnî wᵉʾānōkî nokrîyāh.*

For chapter 3, one key term is *gōren,* "threshing floor," but it, like *lqṭ* in the preceding chapter, really only sets the stage. For Dommershausen, the chapter depends on the repetition of *škb* in the first half of the chapter and of *gʾl* in the second half. Here the rhetorical effect is heightened by the double implication of the verb *škb,* since it can mean "to prostrate one-self at the feet of one in a gesture of petition," and it can mean "to sleep with," "to have sexual intercourse." Apparently Dommershausen was not inclined to follow up on the rather too frequent appearance of the verb *ydʿ,* "to know," and its derivatives or the potentially dangerous meaning of the term "to uncover the feet," which occurs in verses 4 and 7. But I have meant to be emphasizing that our author knew what he was doing with his story, and a combination of terms like this must be taken with the utmost seriousness. Entertainment and edification in Hebrew storytelling, especially when closely bound to the common life of real, if typical, men and women, do not turn squeamish at the last minute. The situation at the threshing floor is told as it is, precisely because it would have had a quite different outcome with different people from this remarkable three-some with whom the story is dealing. Every bit of the suspense is intended. But the audience has been led to realize that in chapter 2 Boaz and Naomi both have Ruth's best interest very much at heart and that both approve of her modesty and fidelity. Now the storyteller presents the conditions for the acid test. It is hard to believe that his propensity to entertain and edify would not include his compelling his hearer to participate in a decision bound up in the suspense at the threshing floor. And with the decision quickly made, the drama of the story shifts from a focus upon sleeping to a focus upon redeeming.

In chapter 4, Dommershausen sees the key words as *gʾl* and *qnh,* and they carry the action to its climax until, in one master stroke in 4: 14–15, the author has the *gōʾēl* born to Ruth become the means of returning (restoring) the soul of Naomi (using the hiphil of the prominent word of chapter 1, the verb *šûb*).

Nevertheless, Dommershausen has by no means exhausted the impor-tance of the key-word technique in the style and structure of Ruth. There

is another group of terms which stand out not because of their frequency but precisely because of their infrequency and yet their appearance at ab-solutely crucial points. It is surprising how rarely they have been noticed and used for interpretation of the purpose of the Ruth book.[35] They occur exclusively in the speeches of the protagonists, and especially in blessings, sentences expressing approval, and sentences designing strategy. Perhaps the most striking is the word *kānāp.* At the peak of the scene in the field in chapter 2, when Ruth has prostrated herself in wonder at Boaz's feet and asked why he would take notice of her, a mere foreigner, he explains that he has heard of her faithfulness in leaving home to accompany her mother-in-law. He then expresses the ceremonial wish for her: "May Yahweh recompense your deed and may your payment be in full from Yahweh the God of Israel under whose wings you have come to seek refuge." The picture of Yahweh's wings has had sufficient ventilation to be familiar, but it is striking to find another meaning for that same term appear in 3: 9, when Ruth, upon identifying herself at the threshing floor, then im-plores Boaz to "spread your wings over your handmaid." Yahweh's wings, Boaz's wings. Boaz is to fulfill for Ruth, by marriage, what the hope in chapter 2 had related to Yahweh.

Similarly with the term *mᵉnûḥāh* in 1: 9. Naomi wishes for her two daugh-ters-in-law that they find rest in the house of a new husband. But when we reach 3: 1, by which time the artful mother-in-law has seen a plan de-veloping, her question is, "Have I not been seeking for you rest (*mānôaḥ*) which will serve you well?" In this case also, the wish connected to Yah-weh's activity becomes fulfilled by the human protagonist.

A similar pattern revolves around the use of the term *ḥesed.* In 1: 8, again as a part of Naomi's blessing to the two girls, she wishes for them: "May Yahweh do with you *ḥesed* just as you have done with the dead and with me." Already here *ḥesed* is a two-way street. Then, in 2: 20 occurs a verse with a slight residue of ambiguity in it, as Naomi expresses a blessing on Boaz when she learns of the largesse with which Ruth has come home from her first day of gleaning: "Blessed be he before Yahweh who has not abandoned his *ḥesed* with the living and the dead." Nelson Glueck, in his word study of *ḥesed,*[36] hazarded the claim that the relative clause refers here to Boaz and not to Yahweh, calling upon 2 Samuel 2: 25 for support for the syntax. That would be almost too good to be true for my thesis here, but, frankly, I doubt its validity. *Ḥesed* here is probably Yahweh's work. But in 3: 10, Boaz blesses Ruth before Yahweh because she has made her latter *ḥesed* even better than her former in not going after younger men.

There is yet another. In the sad and angry lament of Naomi in the last verses of chapter 1, when she finds a sympathetic audience and pours out

her indictment against God and tells her erstwhile colleagues to call her *Mara* from now on, she wails, "I went off full but Yahweh has brought me back empty (*rêqām*)." In Ruth, the mood is not simply idyllic and tranquil, for here is one of our protagonists giving vent to one of the most characteristic of the possible stances of man before God in the Old Testament. God is the one who has brought her back empty, and the hearer of the story will hardly have forgotten that wail when he comes upon 3: 17: "These six measures of barley he has given me because he said to me you must not return *rêqām* to your mother-in-law."

These leading and guiding terms cannot be there by accident. Every one of them relates a key theological theme to the action of God and to the action of the human figures who dominate the story. For Wilhelm Rudolph, it is important, as it has been for other commentators, to insist that the key figure in the story of Ruth is not Ruth, or Naomi, or Boaz, but God.[37] God is there quietly guiding the course of events, seeing to it that "by chance" Ruth comes to Boaz's field, that on just that day Boaz pays a visit to the field, that after ten years of barrenness in Moab, Yahweh at once grants Ruth conception of a son in Bethlehem. Rudolph's emphasis is important so far as it goes, but it is not all that the storyteller wants to portray. He also wants to have his hearer explore the interpenetration of divine *ḥesed* and human *ḥesed*, of divinely granted *rest* and the *rest* a scheming old lady and a nicely perfumed young woman can bring about with a little strategy. He wants us to realize that refuge under God's wings is connected to the perpetuation of the name of a dead and childless husband by marriage to a kinsman. In a way, for our storyteller, the analogy between men's activity and God's activity runs counter to the way most of us would want to speak of the major themes in Old Testament theology. It is more or less axiomatic to assert that one understands Old Testament God talk by running the analogy from the best of human behavior to a description of how God acts. But oddly, for our book, the analogy runs the other way. Men and women here are to act after the analogy of how God acts. Theological terms of special power, especially the term *ḥesed*, have become so charged theologically that they can become normative for human behavior with new and extra expectations beyond what normal human behavior might call for. In the book of Ruth, normal, sensible, good human behavior is exercised quite well by Orpah and by the unnamed relative, who could do a lot but could not take on too much. In the final analysis, Humbert, in the essay cited in note 5, may have had the most important thing to say about all this—that the book of Ruth is a book about *ḥesed*, especially if that term is understood with all the fullness and power it really has in

Old Testament thought, that it is more than what is to be expected in the normal contractual relation.

Let me try to summarize the working room I have sought to create for the book of Ruth. It is proposed that it is an exemplar of a particular literary form in Israel, and a classic example at that. Indeed, it is virtually the only example which has not had at least some tampering done with it which has sought to build it into another unity, or to break it open for a new and different purpose (such as presumably happened to Job), or to broaden its impact by adding another *Gattung* (as presumably happened to Jonah).[38] This literary form has a special artistic prose which has much in common with certain straight poetic features; it shares this special Hebraic prose, however, with other literary *Gattungen*. This prose was memorable, and may well have had a period of oral transmission. As a new literary form, it shows its own high level of distinctive creativity, and the motifs or names or vignettes or historical information which it may have borrowed are transformed in the new genre, not simply developed along evolutionary lines.[39] Let me be clear, now, that such a description does not preclude the entire onomasticon coming from the Late Bronze age; in Ruth and Job, the majority of the names doubtless do, as a matter of fact. Nor does it preclude old customs from being included as a part of the story. But the author was a creative teller of tales, making his own way. I have had to call for a hypothetical guild of such storytellers operating probably outside the main city centers and engaged in both entertainment and edification on the popular level. I have claimed that these storytellers were masters of their art, or at least those were whose works have come down to us. They structured their works beautifully with certain memorable features which not only impressed their audience but made their stories maintain their structure through sometimes long periods of time. With the examples of their art which survived, various things could be done, by the Deuteronomic historian, by the poet of Job, and, in the case of Ruth, by some late annalist who felt he needed to add a genealogy. But in Ruth, we have one of the most pristine examples of one of the most delightful forms the Old Testament knows.

NOTES

[1] H. W. Hertzberg, *ATD*, 9 (1953), 255 ff; Gillis Gerleman, *BKAT* XVIII/1 (1960); Wilhelm Rudolph, *KAT²*, XVII/1 (1962).

[2] L. Alonso-Schökel, "Erzählkunst im Buche der Richter," *Bibl* 42 (1961), 143–72.

[3] Werner Dommershausen, "Leitwortstil in der Ruthrolle," *Theologie im Wandel: Festschrift zum 150-jährigen Bestehen der katholisch-theologischen Fakultät an der Universität Tübingen, 1817–1967* (Munich and Freiburg, 1967), pp. 394–407.

[4] Stephen Bertmann, "Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth," *JBL* 84 (1965), 165–68.

[5] Paul Humbert, "Art et leçon de l'histoire de Ruth," *RTP*, NS 26 (1938), 257–86.

[6] *RGG¹*, Vol. V, cols. 106–8; *RGG²*, Vol. IV, cols. 2180–82.

[7] Hugo Gressmann, *Die Anfänge Israels* (*Die Schriften des Alten Testaments*, I.2) (1914), pp. 284–87.

[8] W. E. Staples, "The Book of Ruth," *AJSL* 53 (1937), 145–57; Herbert G. May, "Ruth's Visit to the High Place at Bethlehem," *JRAS* (1939), 75–78.

[9] Margaret B. Crook, "The Book of Ruth: A New Solution," *JBR* 16 (1948), 155–60.

[10] Jacob M. Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth* (Leiden, 1955), p. 43.

[11] George S. Glanzman, "The Origin and Date of the Book of Ruth," *CBQ* 21 (1959), 201–7.

[12] Robert C. Culley, *Oral Formulaic Language in the Biblical Psalms* (Toronto, 1967).

[13] Ben Edwin Perry, *The Ancient Romances* (Berkeley, 1967), pp. 9 f.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[16] Myers, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

[17] Nahum M. Sarna, "Epic Substratum in the Prose of Job," *JBL* 76 (1957), 13–25.

[18] W. F. Albright, *ARI⁵* (Anchor Edition), 21 f; U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* I (1961), 7–17, esp. p. 11, although the argument here applies to the style of Genesis 1 particularly. See also Hermann Gunkel, "Genesis" *HKAT*, 8th ed., 1969), pp. xxvii f, translated in *The Legends of Genesis* (New York, 1964), pp. 37 f.

[19] It is delightful to note that theological writing about joy or play can observe that seriousness and joy are not opposites but in some sense correlative. See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston, 1955), pp. 44–45, for example, where the opposite of play and joy is earnestness, which takes itself too seriously—a trap the Bible rarely falls into!

[20] Aage Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament* I (1952), 240.

[21] Gerhard von Rad, "The Joseph Narrative and Ancient Wisdom," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York, 1966), pp. 292–300.

[22] R. N. Whybray, "The Joseph Story and Pentateuchal Criticism," *VT* 18 (1968), 522–28.

[23] Gerleman, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

[24] Rudolph, *op. cit.*, pp. 26 ff.

[25] Hertzberg, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

[26] Cf Gunkel, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

[27] Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (Harper Torch edition: New York, 1960), p. 104.

[28] Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York and Evanston, 1965), pp. 479 f; but see "Wahrheit und Dichtung in der Ruth-Erzählung," *Sitzungsberichte der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaft zu Leipzig, Phil.-hist. Kl.*, 110, 4 (1965), 23–28.

[29] *Op. cit.*, note 2 above.

[30] The Lucianic group of Septuagint manuscripts adds here "rub with unguent"; while this may simply be a variant which found its way from the margin into a conflate text, there are a few hints of genuine readings from a slightly fuller alternate textual tradition in the Septuagint and Old Latin of the book of Ruth. Discussion of this issue will have to await the volume on Ruth in the Anchor Bible series.

[31] James Muilenberg, "A Study in Hebrew Rhetoric: Repetition and Style," *VT(S)* 1 (1953), 97–111.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 99.

[33] *Op. cit.*, p. 263.

[34] *Op. cit.*, note 3 above.

[35] This study was substantially complete when D. F. Rauber independently pointed to several of these devices in an article which calls for the same kind of reevaluation which this paper advocates. Apparently, Rauber sensed many of the stylistic devices without resort to Hebrew, which underscores their obvious character. See his "Literary Values in the Bible: The Book of Ruth," *JBL* 89 (1970), 27–37.

[36] Nelson Glueck, *Ḥeṣed in the Bible* (Cincinnati, 1967), pp. 41 f.

[37] *Op. cit.*, p. 33.

[38] See recently George M. Landes, "The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah," *Interp* 21 (1967), 3–31.

[39] Albright uses the word "transform" in *ARI⁵*, p. 21, a term which is in accord with the thesis here propounded and would, I suspect, please Perry.