


# Exploring Ruth 1:16–18 in the context of mother and daughter-in-law relationships in Igboland

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This article read Ruth 1:16–18 in the context of mother and daughter-in-law relationships in Igboland. Literary analysis was adopted in this study. The literary construct of Ruth 1:16–18 was ranked amongst the *Locus Classicus* of Old Testament. This pericope celebrated Ruth's vehement resolution to remain with Naomi, her mother-in-law, despite Naomi's present hopelessness and slim prospect of the future. Ruth understood that by entering into marriage bond with Naomi's son, she has also accepted to love and care for her and adopted her husband's people as her own. The traditional Igbo society had similar cultural norms and values of respecting and caring for their elders. The finding of this study, however, disclosed that the wind of westernisation and modernity has negatively affected the extended family system that was the bedrock of mother and daughter-in-law relationships in Igboland. This article argued that the hermeneutical relevance of Ruth 1:16–18 will help in strengthening mother and daughter-in-law relationships in the modern Igbo society.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The literary construct of Ruth 1:16–18 was ranked amongst the *Locus Classicus* of Old Testament. This pericope celebrated Ruth's love and determination to remain with Naomi, her mother-in-law. The text of Ruth 1:16–18 was studied in the context of mother and daughter-in-law relationships in modern Igboland. Disciplines implicated were Old Testament exegesis and contextual biblical hermeneutics.

**Keywords:** Ruth 1:16–18; mother-in-law; sister-in-law; norm; cultural value; modernity; Igboland; modern Igboland.

## Introduction

The literary construct of Ruth is noted for its fascinating flame of persuasive articulation. The pericope of Ruth 1:16–18 contains the heroine's passionate appeal to Naomi, her mother-in-law, soliciting that the latter stops urging her to sever her relationship with her. Ruth's eloquent utterance to Naomi is undoubtedly a *Locus Classicus* of Old Testament. A juxtaposed survey of Naomi and Ruth's speeches shows that they are instrumental in triggering the plot of the entire narrative. It is apparent that all the subsequent events of the story stem from Naomi's failure to convince Ruth and Ruth's success in convincing Naomi (Michael 2015:161). The most astonishing aspect of the story is that Naomi told Ruth three different times to return to her people, but Ruth was determined to accompany her. When she realised that Ruth was determined and committed to go with her, she stopped urging her (Sewakpo 2013:206; Unger 1981:349). Of a truth, Naomi's endorsement of Ruth's resolution not to turn back from following her was stimulated by Ruth's exhibition of caring and selflessness towards her mother-in-law despite Naomi's present hopelessness and pessimism.

However, it is unfortunate that in the present contemporary society, this kind of caring and love that existed between Naomi and Ruth is rare to find between mothers and daughters-in-law in Igboland. The aim of this study, therefore, is to examine the hermeneutical relevance of Ruth 1:16–18 for mothers and daughters-in-law relationships in the modern Igbo society. The methodology employed in this study is literary analysis. Literary analysis is a synchronic approach that studies a biblical text as it appears in its final shape (Mbonu 2013:107; Mundele 2012:11; Obiorah 2015b:90; Steck 1995:21). This article is organised into six parts. The first part is an overview of the book of Ruth. This is followed by the social setting of the literary construct of Ruth. The third unit is literary context and delimitation of the pericope of Ruth 1:16–18. The fourth part is an exegetical analysis of Ruth 1:16–18, whilst the next part is an examination of the Igbo culture *vis-à-vis* mother and daughter-in-law relationships. The last part is reading Ruth 1:16–18 in the context of mother and daughter-in-law relationships in modern Igboland.

**Note:** Special Collection: African Hermeneutics.

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## Overview of the book of Ruth

The book of Ruth belongs to a class of Old Testament identified as *Ketubim*, which means 'writings' in English (Odo 2019:4). Ruth is a literary composition of four chapters. A close observation of Ruth discloses that it is written in a narrative form with, perhaps, the exception of 1:16–17 and 1:20–21, which are written in poetic styles. Buttressing this thought, Linafelt (2010:117) avers that the book of Ruth is a narrative, but there are two passages that are marked in poetry – Ruth's speech (1:16–17) to Naomi and Naomi's speech (1:20–21) to the women of Bethlehem. Ruth's literary composition is an artistic and didactic novella (Berquist 1993:23; Fischer 2007:141). The book of Ruth is noted for its emotive and gorgeous persuasive embellishment. Glover (2009:309) explained that 'the book of Ruth is a story about the welcome of a Moabite, but strong hints of inter-ethnic conflict lurk beneath the text without being explicitly expressed'. Undoubtedly, the book of Ruth underscores implicitly an inter-ethnic conflict that a heroine and poignant Moabite woman wrestled with. In fact, Ruth made an onerous sacrifice as she left her family, her people, her land and the religious ambience, which had formed her character, to share the uncertain and unpromising future of her widowed mother-in-law in a land where she knew no one, had no rights and would have to become accustomed to the forms of worship associated with a strange god (Hunter 1981:435).

Apparently, the theological intentionality of the author of Ruth is to encourage the people of Israel to demonstrate a strong faith in God whose loving-kindness combined with his sovereignty results in abundant provision for his faithful people (Thomas 2002:157). It is difficult to determine with precision the date of Ruth's composition or its author, for this is not mentioned in the text. For Bush (1996):

The writer of the book of Ruth must have lived no earlier than the transitional period between the Standard Biblical Hebrew (SBH) phases of the language, i.e., the late pre-exilic to the beginning of the post exilic era. He endeavoured to write his narrative using the classical language of SBH, and has been eminently successful both in grammar and vocabulary as is evidenced by the number of features that accord with SBH. But inevitably he could not avoid using several of the more subtle linguistic features of his own era. (p. 30)

It is quite probable that the book of Ruth was written in the post-exilic period to teach the post-Israelite Jews that the loving-kindness of God also extends to the foreigners who demonstrate faith in God.

### *Sitz Im Leben* of Ruth

The social setting of Ruth is encoded on its theological intentionality. A careful reading of the book has disclosed that the social reality that prompted the author of Ruth to compose this literary piece was to offer a theological elucidation that God's loving-kindness is not exclusive to the people of Israel but that it also extends to foreigners. It is obvious that the author of Ruth knew of the exclusive theological intention expressed in the book of Nehemiah

against the inclusivity of foreigners or their acceptance and entering into marriages with them.

Refuting this theological position, the author of Ruth writes this classic piece to counter the theological standpoint expressed in the book of Nehemiah as he demonstrates the heroic Moabite woman becoming a member of God's people and a loyal and faithful Yahwist (Laffey 2000:553). The book of Ruth was written as a polemic against the non-inclusivity of foreigners in Nehemiah (Embry 2016:33; Glover 2009:309). Mangrum (2011:63) explicated that a literary reading of Ruth is indicative that the narrative's *Sitz im Leben* of the book was an early post-exilic Judean community concerned with identity crises. Arguably, it was during this intense and challenging moment when the returned exiles faced hostilities from neighbouring people, the difficulties of building a new life out of ruins and the humility of continuous subjection to other nations, when Ruth was written (Thomas 2002:157). This was to encourage the post-exilic Israelite Jews to understand that the loving-kindness of God also extends to non-Israelite foreigners who show faith in God; it is not exclusive to the Jews alone.

### Context and delimitation of Ruth 1:16–18

Context and delimitation of a literary unit are very significant in biblical scholarship. Delimitation of a biblical text is actually a starting point of exegetical exploration of a text. It is one of the distinguishing functions of a literary analysis (Odo 2013:49). A literary unit is a biblical passage that has significance in itself (Mundele 2012:33). A close reading of the pericope has shown that its remote literary context is found in 1:4–5. This affirmation holds true judging from the fact that if Naomi's two sons did not enter into marriage with the two Moabite women, Naomi could not have had any relationship with them as mother and daughters-in-law. What this entails is that the marriage bond that Naomi had with Orpah and Ruth had united her with them.

The immediate literary context of the pericope is traced from verses 6 to 15. This segment expresses a continuous flow of thought between Naomi and her two daughters-in-law on her persuasive intentionality to circumvent them from accompanying her back to Judah. Arguably, the immediate literary context of this text could be segmented into two parts. In its first phase, verses 6–14, Naomi employs a series of emotive utterances to convince Orpah and Ruth to return to their people and not to go with her to Bethlehem. Naomi succeeds in stopping Orpah from going to Judah with her, but the poignant Ruth clings onto her. Following Orpah's departure and return to her people, Naomi concentrates on Ruth in verse 15, urging her to follow the example of Orpah, her sister-in-law, and return to her people and religion. It is Naomi's statement in verse 15 that instantaneously triggered the explosion of Ruth's artistic utterances in verses 16–17 as she solicits Naomi to stop pressing her from following her.

## Text of Ruth 1:16–18<sup>1</sup>

16. ותאמר רות אל־תפגעני בִּי לְעֹזְבֶךָ לְשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרַיִךְ כִּי אֶל־אֲשֶׁר  
תֵּלֵךְ אֵלַי וּבְאֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵינִי אֵלָיו עִמָּךְ עָמִי וְאִלֹהֶיךָ אֵלֹהֵי:  
17. בְּאֲשֶׁר תִּמּוּתִי אֲמוֹת וְשֵׁם אֲבָבֶךָ כֹּה יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה לִי וְכֹה יִסְיֵךְ בִּי  
הַיָּמֹת וּפְרִיִי בֵינִי וּבֵינֶךָ:  
18. וְתֵרָא מִתְאַמְצֶתֶכִּי הִיא לְלֶכֶת אִתָּה וּמִחֲדָל לְדַבֵּר אֵלַיָּה:

## English translation of Ruth 1:16–18<sup>2</sup>

16. But Ruth said, do not press me to leave you  
Or to turn back from following you,  
Where you go, I will go,  
Where you lodge, I will lodge;  
Your people shall be my people  
And your God my God.  
17. Where you die, I will die  
there will I be buried  
May the Lord do thus and so to me  
and more as well,  
If even death parts me from you!  
18. when Naomi saw that she was determined to go  
with her, she said no more to her.

## Close reading of Ruth 1:16–18

The first Hebrew word 'ותאמר' [but she said] that kicks off verse 16 is a qal verb, which is in the third person feminine singular and in *waw* consecutive. Ordinarily, this verb ought to be understood as an imperfect and thus be rendered as 'but she will say'. However, a close survey of its appearance in this verse shows that its translation has been transposed to a perfect 'but she said' because it is in *waw* consecutive. Lambdin (1973:108) and Jouon and Muraoka (1993:14) rightly affirmed that *waw* consecutive is an inverted future. The Hebrew words 'אל־תפגעני בִּי' could be rendered [do not urge me]. The word 'תפגעני' is a qal verb and in second person feminine singular. Standing alone, it could be translated as entreat, urge or press. The expression 'do not urge me' is an imperative. Imperative in Hebrew is the volitive mood of the second person (Jouon & Muraoka 1993:374).

In addition, the word 'מֵאַחֲרַיִךְ' [from after you] is a combination of three Hebrew words written together as one word. The word 'מֵ' is a Hebrew inseparable preposition; this in English means 'from'. The next word 'אַחֲרַיִךְ' is an independent preposition, which means 'after,' whilst 'יך' appended after the 'אַחֲרַיִךְ' is a pronominal suffix that stands for a second person feminine singular 'you'. Therefore, 'מֵאַחֲרַיִךְ' reads 'from after you'. The word standing with 'לְעֹזְבֶךָ לְשׁוּב' [to leave or to turn back] could be rendered as 'to leave you or turn back from after you'. Understood in this light, the utterance 'ותאמר רות אל־תפגעני בִּי לְעֹזְבֶךָ לְשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרַיִךְ' is translated and thus

1.The Hebrew text used here is from Schenker (1997).

2.This translation is from the New Standard Revised Version: Catholic Edition (2008).

do not urge me to leave you or to turn back from after you. Clines (2001:276) wrote that the word 'שוב' means 'go back, return to a place of one's land of origin, ancestral land'. Brown, Driver and Briggs (2005:997) concurred that the Hebrew word 'שוב' means return especially from foreign lands.

Fewell and Gunn (1988) argued that Naomi's motivation for dismissing her daughters-in-law to return to their mother's house is to circumvent the embarrassment her sons' intermarriages with the pagan Moabite daughters would cause her. However, Naomi's moral duress failed to evoke in Ruth a desire to leave Naomi and return to her land and people (Fewell 2015:83–84). The presence of 'שוב' [return] undergirds a return motif that pervades the narrative. This Hebrew word 'שוב' also carries a connotation of restoration and the return of fullness, Isaiah 58:12 (Holladay 1972:362). It is interesting to observe that the apogee of Ruth's performance emerges in a plurality of her unrestrained expressions, employing different verbs, in a poetic repetition of the non-perfective verbal conjugation framed by the pattern of the second to first person (Waltke & O'Connor 1990:496). Employing the inevitability of both women passing away in the future, Ruth underlines her willingness to remain with Naomi with a solemn oath that nothing but death will make them part (Michael 2015:158). For Smith (2007:225), Ruth's declaration in verses 16–17 represents the covenant relationship across family lines that have been affected by the death of her husband who had linked her and Naomi. Smith's postulation coheres with Hunter (1981:428) that Ruth's use of 'people' and 'god' in verse 16 in relation to one another is covenant in nature. Glover (2009:296) posited that Ruth's words 'your people/my people' may constitute an impassioned lunge at Israelite ethnicity. Arguably, by adopting Naomi's people and claiming the God of Israel, Ruth intends to say to Naomi thus (Fewell & Gunn 2009):

If you are worried that to continue association with a foreign woman with a foreign gods is to invite further disaster, then do not worry, for I can fix that; I will change people-your people will be my people!-and I will change gods as well-your god will be my god. (p. 96)

It is quite probable that what Ruth is really saying is that I am your daughter and I remain your daughter. I am now part of your people; your God is my God (Sewakpo 2013:211). Coxon (1989:26) rationalised that Ruth's impassioned speech thoroughly Judaizes her. In fact, 'by one simple statement of God's name, Ruth joins Naomi, her people and her religion' (Rashkow 1993:32). It is really impressive that Ruth's demonstration of persuasive acumen enabled her to convince her mother-in-law to follow her back to Judah.

In contrast, Siquans (2009:443–452) and Embry (2016:33) expostulated that Ruth's speech to Naomi adopting her people and her God is for her to secure a legal manner in which a poor foreign woman to be integrated into Israel. This position seems astonishing. However, I do not subscribe to this view. Meanwhile, Ruth's determination not to part or to

severe her relationship with Naomi emanated from her sincere love and caring for her mother-in-law. Writing in support of this thought, Sewakpo (2013:206) maintained that despite Naomi's hopelessness, Ruth was still determined to follow her and even worshipped her God. Substantiating this view, Thomas (2002:159) asserted that Ruth's speech to Naomi is an affirmation of unrestrained proclamation of her loyalty and decision to follow Naomi, adopting the people and God of Israel. Employing the utterance *כִּי אֶל-אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֶךְ אֲלֶיךָ וּבְאֲשֶׁר יֵלֶךְ* [where you go, I will go and where you lodge, I will lodge] in verse 16, the author implanted a literary technique of synonymous parallelism to communicate Ruth's poignant resolution to go with Naomi. Synonymous parallelism is expressed in Hebrew when an idea raised in the first line is repeated in the second line using a slightly different phrase or words (Crosely 2002:470; Obiorah 2015a:47–48; Okwueze 2013:240; Odo 2019:100; Odo, Uwaegbute & Eze 2020:433).

The expression 'wherever you go, I will go' became heightened or intensified in the second line with Ruth's words 'and wherever you lodge, I will lodge'. This kind of parallelism is what Alter (2000:19) referred to as a device of heightening or intensification.

A close reading of Ruth's expression in verse 16 underscores a literary technique of *inclusio*. The device of *inclusio* is highlighted in a literary construct when the significance of a later passage is enhanced by the deliberate use of a word or notion from an earlier passage (Campbell 1975:13; Obiorah 2015a:53; Uwaegbute & Odo 2018:342). Admittedly, Naomi's utterance to Ruth in verse 15 'your sister's-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god' and Ruth's declaration in verse 16 'your people shall be my people and your God my God' underscore the literary device of *inclusio* (Hunter 1981:434). It appears that Ruth's demonstration of persuasive prowess in verses 16–17 overwhelmed Naomi and incapacitated her. This view holds true judging from the author's expression in verse 18 and thus *וַתִּדְבֹר וַתִּתְקַדַּל* [and she stopped speaking to her]. It is really impressive that Naomi who had been urging Ruth to follow the example of Orpah – her sister-in-law – and thus return back to her people, now instantaneously ceases her effort and assented to Ruth's resolution (Glenna 1994:68–73; Laffey 2000:555). Benson (2001) explicated that the reason why Naomi ceases her urging and allows Ruth to go with her is because she has obtained a satisfactory point that Ruth's covenant fidelity is genuine and, therefore, could not desire further confirmation of it than that solemn protestation that Ruth had just exhibited. It is important to note that the author's expression in verse 18 thus *וַתִּדְבֹר וַתִּתְקַדַּל* [and she stops speaking to her] does not mean that Naomi did not speak to Ruth anymore but simply that she stopped urging her to return to Moab (Glenna 1994:68–73; LaCocque 2004:54; Waard & Nida 1992:19).

## Igbo culture *vis-à-vis* mother and daughter-in-law relationships

The Igbo people occupy an area of southern Nigeria between latitude 5–7 degrees north and longitude 6–8 degrees east.

This region covers about 15 800 square miles, of which a major part falls within the equatorial rain forest region. The Igbo have a common boundary with the Igala and the Idoma in the north, the Ijaw and the Ogoni in the south, the Yako and Ibibio of the eastern boundary and the Bini and the Warri of the west (Ekwunife 1990:2). Ozigbo (1999:117) and Abanuka (2003:28) wrote that Igbo people inhabit Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia and Abonyi States. Whilst agreeing with Ozigbo and Abanuka, we acknowledge that some of the Igbo people inhabit the Niger Delta region. In this study, I concentrate on the Igbo people who inhabit the present five south eastern states referred to above by Ozigbo and Abanuka. Igbo people have been described as one of the largest three ethnic groups in Nigeria. They are found in all parts of the country and outside Nigeria (Echeta & Eze 2017; Onunwa 2005).

In the traditional Igbo society, the relationship that exists between mother and daughter-in-law is enshrined on the extended family cultural practice. Ekeopara (2012:263) explained that the extended family is ranked amongst the cultural institutions that help in teaching its members the correct customs and tradition or *omenala* of the society in order to become good and obedient citizens of the society. The pristine Igbo society with the aid of its extended family system imparts values such as respect for elders, diligence, loyalty, honesty and other values to the children. In this manner, the female individuals are taught sociocultural and ethical principles early in life that would guide them to accord respect to the elders and have a good relationship with their mothers-in-law. Of a truth, extended family is one of the valuable Igbo structures that helps in preparing and equipping the female children with acceptable norms of the society. The daughter-in-law who is referred to as the wife of one's son was duty bound in traditional Igbo society to respect and extend a helping hand to their mother-in-law. In fact, it was their culture to honour and look after their aged people collectively, both at the community and family levels (Echeta & Ibenwa 2018:108). This postulation coheres with Ejiofor's (1981:87; Ekeopara 2012:264) view that the ethical principles and moral demands in the pristine Igbo society are inculcated on its members in the family. In point of fact, when a daughter-in-law is introduced into her husband's village, she resides in her mother-in-law's hut and is placed under her authority (Schwimmer 2003:n.p.).

The mother and daughter-in-law relationship in the Igbo society is expected to be mutual. Both the mother and daughter-in-law have a significant role to play. The daughter-in-law cares for her mother-in-law and assists her with the household chores, whilst the latter provides advisory functions to the former (Agbasiere 2000:115–128; Ekwuru 1999:65; eds. Lorimer & Lechner 1995:340). In other words, it is a cultural norm in the Igbo society for a daughter-in-law to cherish and honour her mother-in-law and help her with domestic work. The mother-in-law reciprocates the gesture by offering good counsel to her daughter-in-law.

Sharing this line of view, Ufearoh (2010:101) averred aptly that there is a kind of reciprocal assistance pattern

in Igbo-extended cultural practice. This, in other words, is explained as a network of relationships involving reciprocal obligations and duties (Ada 1976:157). Arguably, the bond that exists between a mother and daughter-in-law in the Igbo society is encoded in the network and interlocking functions of reciprocities of the members of the extended family (Obasi & Nnamani 2015:257; Obiorah & Okafor 2020:92). Showing respect to elders is one of the high values that one internalises in the family as the primary agent of socialisation (Ugwu 1991:39–49; cited in Magesa 1997:49; Ugwu 2004:293).

Traditional Igbo society had firm moral structures that informed and ensured conformity to the accepted norms (Eboh 1994:13; Okwueze 2004:241). Children in the traditional Igbo society are taught to be obedient and respectful to their parents and older people in the society (Ifesieh 1989:30; Ochiagha 1996:45). These cherished cultural values aid in nurturing good and acceptable human relationships into the cultural web of the Igbo people who discourage self-seeking relationism in moral considerations (Kanu 2004:87). In this connection, arguably, these values implicitly helped in strengthening the cordial relationship between mother and daughter-in-law in the traditional Igbo society. This position seems plausible because caring for one another was the essence of living, whilst mutual reciprocity, interpersonal contact, functional interdependence and cooperation marked the Igbo extended family (Isidienu 2015:126; Ozigbo 1999:117).

It is quite unfortunate to note that in the modern Igbo society, the wave of civilisation and modernity has negatively affected the cherished extended family structure that was the bedrock of mother and daughter-in-law relationships in the Igbo society. Onunwa (1990:31) lamented bitterly that a new social order is emerging partly out of the old and partly as a response to the new contact with powerful external change agents. Supporting this line of thought, Ekeopara (2012:266) wrote that the rise of the nuclear family system in Igboland, which is of western cultural origin, has dealt a severe blow to the extended family system in Igboland. Arising from this, some of the mothers-in-law exhibit lack of concern or do not offer good counsel to their daughters-in-law, especially in their challenging moments. This lack of concern has led to an ugly scenario in the Igbo society of what Nwala (1985:239) refers to as a society in which the individual is morally free and responsible to none but self. The implication of this observation is that the daughters-in-law in modern Igboland no longer hold high the Igbo cultural values and norms such as caring and respecting the elders especially the mothers-in-law, who were the hallmark of the Igbo-extended family.

## Ruth 1:16–18 in the context of modern Igboland

The exegetical exploration of this pericope underscores an unbreakable bond and cordial relationship that exist between the mother and daughter-in-law (Naomi and Ruth). It is quite astonishing that despite Naomi's present hopelessness and slim prospect of better future, Ruth exhibited a poignant

resolution to live with her mother-in-law and never to sever the relationship with her. This demonstration of commitment and selflessness to one's mother-in-law has hermeneutical implications for mother and daughter-in-law relationships in the present Igbo society where its contact and interaction with westernisation and modernity have dealt a heavy blow to her rich cultural values such as caring and showing love to elders. It is worth observing that the bond that existed between Naomi and Ruth was mutual. Naomi's concern for the welfare of her daughters-in-law prompted her to counsel them each to return to one's own mother's house where she (Naomi) believes that their prospect of securing new husbands would be more tenable. This has relevance for the mothers-in-law in the present Igbo society who make life miserable for their daughters-in-law as it instructively challenges them to learn from Naomi's advisory role to her daughters-in-law and do likewise periodically to their own daughters-in-law especially at the time of difficult situations that confront them.

In addition, Ruth's proclamation to Naomi that 'your people will be my people' has implications for mother and daughter-in-law relationships in modern Igboland. This unrestrained utterance emanating from the tongue of an indispensable personage of our study text teaches implicitly that the bond of marriage does not only unite a man and a woman but also unites a woman and integrates her fully into her husband's family and his people. Understood against this sociocultural lens, Ruth became encouraged and determined to accompany Naomi, her mother-in-law, back to Bethlehem and to be united with them because, by the virtue of her marriage with Naomi's son, she has adopted their people and God as hers. It is quite discouraging on the contrary that some of the daughters-in-law in the present Igbo society show no regard neither to their mothers-in-law nor to their husband's people. Obviously, they fail to understand that marriage is not a matter of the man and woman alone; it concerns the close kin too. Ighele (2019) laments that:

Before some ladies get married, they have already drawn the battle line with their future in-laws, especially their mothers-in-law. It is not uncommon to hear a lady say, 'You better be careful with in-laws. If you do not put them where they belong, they can control your marriage. I will not take nonsense from anybody'. (n.p.)

The above observation of Ighele speaks volumes of the unhealthy relationship that exists between some mothers and daughters-in-law in the present society. Ruth's demonstration of love and caring for her mother-in-law and her firm decision to be united to her husband's people in verses 16–17 should, therefore, be a challenge to the daughters-in-law in the modern Igbo society who have no concern or care for their mothers-in-law and their husbands' people to borrow a leaf from Ruth's didactic teaching in which its sociological implication underscores the fact that entering into marriage with a man entails that a woman has accepted to adopt her husband's mother and people as her own.

## Conclusion

Ruth 1:16–18 is ranked as one of the *Locus Classicus* texts of the Old Testament. This literary unit celebrates Ruth's firm determination not to sever her relationship with Naomi – her mother-in-law. She understands that by entering into marriage with Naomi's son, she has also accepted to care for Naomi and adopt her and her people as her own. The traditional Igbo society had similar cherished cultural values of respect and caring for their elders. It is quite unfortunate, however, that in the present Igbo society, westernisation and modernity have negatively affected the extended family system that is the bedrock of mother and daughter-in-law relationships in Igboland. It is worth observing that the bond which existed between Naomi and Ruth was mutual. Naomi's concern for the welfare of her daughters-in-law prompted her to counsel both of them to return to their own mother's house where she (Naomi) believes that their prospect of securing new husbands would be more tenable. This article, therefore, challenges the mothers-in-law in the present Igbo society who make life miserable for their daughters-in-law to learn from Naomi's advisory role to her daughters-in-law and do likewise periodically to their own daughters-in-law, especially during challenging situations that confront them. This will encourage them to cherish and take good care of their mothers-in-law. Ruth's resolution to remain with Naomi was stimulated by genuine love and caring for her. This article instructively argues that borrowing a leaf from both Naomi's advisory role to her daughters-in-law and Ruth's demonstration of respect and caring to her mother-in-law will no doubt strengthen the bond between a mother and daughter-in-law in the modern Igbo society.

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### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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