



'I will marry Ruth so that the name of the dead will not be blotted out': Exploring חסד (*hesed*) in Ruth 4:1–13

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The literary construct of Ruth 4:1–13, which borders on the marriage union of Boaz and Ruth, is underscored with the loving-kindness of God. Boaz was not obligated under any legal requirement to marry Ruth. However, following the kinsman-redeemer's abdication of his right of inheritance, Boaz declared in an unrestrained utterance before the elders of the Israelite society his intention to marry Ruth (the Moabite woman and the wife of the dead Mahlon) in order to perpetuate the name of Mahlon. It was considered a great misfortune in ancient Israel for a man to die without having a son to continue the family name. This decision of Boaz in accepting to take the responsibility of a redeemer for Ruth is arguably a demonstration of kindness, for this gesture surpasses the call of required responsibility. This study adopted a literary approach to read the text of Ruth 4:1–13 against the sociological lens of ethnic exclusion.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The pericope of Ruth 4:1–13 celebrated Boaz's marriage with Ruth in order to perpetuate the name of the dead amongst his clan in Israelite society. Boaz truly understood the threat of family extinction that weighed upon Naomi and Ruth, and hence, he was stimulated to take the responsibility of a redeemer for Ruth so that Elimelech's family would not be blotted out amongst his people. Disciplines implicated were Old Testament exegesis and sociology.

Keywords: Ruth 4:1–13; *hesed*; marriage; closest relative; right of inheritance; abdication.

Introduction

The literary composition of Ruth belongs to a class of Old Testament books referred to as 'Writings'. It has been observed that the social reality of Ruth is encoded in its theological intentionality (Odo 2021:2). This article argues that Ruth's marriage proposal to Boaz in Ruth 3:9–18 and the later declaration before the elders of the Israelite society in 4:7–13 to marry the Moabite woman are acts of kindness. Boaz was not required under any law in Israel to marry Ruth. However, interestingly, when the closest relative abdicated his right of inheritance, Boaz in an unrestrained proclamation expressed his decision to marry Ruth in order to perpetuate the name of the dead amongst his clan in Israel. The pericope of Ruth 4:1–13 celebrates the marriage union and inheritance between Boaz and Ruth. This implicitly underscores the loving-kindness of God, which the author of Ruth's novella employed to demonstrate that the ethnic wall of exclusivity that forbade the Israelite from entering into a marriage relationship with the Moabite had been broken.

Speaking in this astonishing line of thought, Levinson (2008:35) opines that the literary composition of Ruth constitutes something closer to a counter-narrative to the text of Deuteronomy 23:4 – '[n]o Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord' – as it seeks to revise the exclusion of the Moabites into the assembly of Israel. It is quite heroic that the Moabite woman not only becomes a member of Israelite society but also performs a male role in requesting Boaz's hand in marriage in order to solve a crisis in which there are no men to fulfill typical roles so that Elimelech's family will not go into extinction (Fewell & Gunn 1990). Ruth understands the agony and devastating effect which the death of Naomi's husband and only two sons has caused her, for it was considered a great misfortune in ancient Israel for a man to die without a son (Davies 1981:140). Ruth employs a covenant language to swear an oath of faithfulness to Naomi, binding herself to her (Campbell 1975:31; Smith 2007:242–258) as she embraces the onerous task of saving her husband's family from the threat of family extinction. Berquist (1993:24) refers to this as a dedifferentiation, by which persons respond to a crisis through adding roles, including roles that would be socially inappropriate in normal times. This

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article adopted a literary approach to read the text of Ruth 4:1–13 against the sociological lens of ethnic exclusion. Literary analysis is a synchronic approach that studies a biblical text as it appears in its final shape (Gorman 2005:13; Mbonu 2013:107; Mundele 2012:11; Murphy 1981: 83–96; Obiorah 2015:90, 2020:39; Steck 1995:21). The study is organised into four parts. The first segment is an overview of the book of Ruth. This is followed by an examination of the social reality that led to the composition of Ruth. The third unit borders on the delimitation of Ruth 4:1–13, whilst the fourth part is a close study of Ruth 4:1–13.

Overview of the book of Ruth

Ruth is a didactic novella consisting of four chapters (Berquist 1993:23; Fischer 2007:141). This ancient Jewish literary exposition is written in a narrative form, with the exception of 1:16–17 and 1:20–21, which are fashioned in poetic styles (Linafelt 2010:117). Odo (2021:2) describes the book as an emotive and gorgeous literary construct that is difficult to establish with any degree of precision its date of composition or the author, as this is not mentioned in the text.

In his own contribution, Bush (1996) writes:

The writer of the book of Ruth might 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 endeavours 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 most probable that the book of Ruth was composed in the post-exilic era to address the ethnic exclusivity crisis and threat of family extinction. Substantiating this view, De Villiers (2021:1) reveals that the book of Ruth was written in the post-exilic era to address the issue of identity crisis.

Social setting of Ruth

The book of Ruth underscores that the crises of ethnic exclusivity and family extinction were the two major social realities that confronted the ancient Israelite society at the time when this book was written. Ethnic exclusion is a social ideology that is inclined to exclude certain groups, tribes or ethnic groups from full participation in a society (DFID 2005:3; Macias 1996:142). The ancient Israelite society repudiated the assembly of foreigners. Arising from this backdrop, the people of Israel exclude the Moabites or those entering into a marriage union with them. Responding to the crisis of ethnic exclusivity, the author of Ruth wrote this didactic short story to demonstrate that the loving-kindness of God has revised and broken this ethnic exclusivity. This, arguably, is the theological cynosure which the author intends to transmit to the reader. Stone (2013:192) aptly writes that God's kindness is not restricted to the Jews alone but also extends to the foreigners.

Literary context and delimitation of Ruth 4:1–13

Text delimitation is a departing point of exegetical analysis of a literary unit. Mundele (2012:33) aptly explains that a pericope is a biblical passage that has significance in itself. A survey of Ruth 4:1–13 discloses that its remote literary context is found in Ruth 2. This segment records the first encounter of Ruth and Boaz in the presence of his workers in the field. With Boaz's meal invitation to Ruth, the narrator symbolically underscores God's loving-kindness of including the Moabites into the community of Israel, in contrast to the exclusion of Moabites in Deuteronomy 23:4–5 (Lau Peter 2011:60–64; Sakenfeld 1999:45). It is in this unit that Ruth and Boaz were acquitted.

The immediate literary context of Ruth 4:1–13 is located in 3:9–18. The literary unit of Ruth 3:9–18 is encased in the heroic initiative of Ruth's marriage proposal to Boaz in order to provide a seed from Boaz for Naomi. Sasson (1978:55) explains that Ruth's decision to marry Boaz is interpreted by the latter as an unselfish attempt at finding a *goel* to resolve her mother-in-law's difficulty as worthier than her self-serving hope to acquire a husband. It is arguable that Ruth's decision in requesting Boaz to marry her is observed as an act of kindness. Ruth's concern towards her mother-in-law stimulated her to ask Boaz to marry her so that she could give an heir to Naomi. Substantiating this thought, Hubbard (1988:215) writes that Ruth's marriage request to Boaz was not influenced by a concern for her own security or by any romantic attraction to Boaz but motivated by her poignant commitment to Naomi - her mother-in-law. Stone (2013:196) avers that Ruth's request to Boaz at the threshing floor is a *hesed*-motivated application of a levirate marriage, revealing that she is there to acquire a seed from Boaz for Naomi. A critical survey of Stone's view above underscores that Ruth's intention of seeking a seed from Boaz is to fill Naomi with happiness, after the death of her husband and two sons has made her existence bitter and sorrowful. This request of Ruth in 3:9–18 gives rise to the composition of Ruth 4, which highlights the apogee of the loving-kindness of God as Boaz marries Ruth so that the family name of Elimelech will not be blotted out amongst his clan. This view seems valid because the marriage union between Boaz and Ruth in chapter 4 could not have been tenable if not for Ruth's unrestrained and spontaneous marriage request to Boaz (3:9–18).

Close reading of Ruth 4:1–13

The literary unit of Ruth 4:1–13, which borders on Boaz's marriage with Ruth, could be segmented into three parts. An objective study of this text shows that neither Ruth nor Boaz is subject to any legal requirement or obligation to marry each other (Eskenazi & Frymer-Kensky 2011:xxxvii; Stone 2013:195) but were voluntarily motivated to do so (Table 1).

The first unit of this pericope covers verses 1–4, which is entitled 'Boaz summons Naomi's closest relative before the elders of Israel'. The first two lines that begin verse 1 of this pericope

TABLE 1: Hebrew text of Ruth 4:1–13 and English translation of Ruth 4:1–13.

Hebrew text of Ruth 4:1–13 ¹	English translation of Ruth 4:1–13 ²
v. 1 עוֹבֵד עֵלָה הַשְּׂעִיר וַיֵּשֶׁב שָׁם וְהָיָה הַגָּאֵל עֹבֵר אֲשֶׁר דָּבָר־בְּעֵינַי וַיֹּאמֶר סוּרָה פֹּה פְלִיגֵי אֶלְמַנִּי וְיָסֵר וַיֵּשֶׁב:	v. 1 No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next of kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, 'Come over, friend; sit down here.' And he went over and sat down.
v. 2 וַיִּקַּח עֶשְׂרֵה אַנְשִׁים מִזְקֵנֵי הָעִיר וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁבוּרָה פֹּה וַיֵּשֶׁבוּ:	v. 2 Then Boaz took 10 men of the elders of the city and said, 'Sit down here'; so they sat down.
v. 3 וַיֹּאמֶר לַגָּאֵל הַחֲלֹקֶת הַשָּׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר לֹאֵלִי מִלְּךְ מִכְרָה נַעֲמִי הַשְּׂכֵבָה מִשְׁנָה מוֹאָבִי:	v. 3 He then said to the next of kin, 'Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech
v. 4 וְאֲנִי אֲמַרְתִּי לְךָ אֲנֹכִי לֹא אוֹכֵל לְאֹמֶר קָנִיחָה נְגִיד הַיִּשְׁבִּיִם וְנָגִיד זְקֵנֵי עַמִּי אִם־תִּבְטָאֵל גְּאֹל וְאִם־לֹא יִגְאֹל הַגֵּיזִיהָ לִּי (וְאָדַע) [וְאָדַעָה] כִּי אִין וְזִלְתָּ לְגֹאֵל וְאִבִּי אֲתָרִיד וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי אֶגְאֹל:	v. 4 So I thought I would tell you of it and say: buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you.' So he said, 'I will redeem it.'
v. 5 וַיֹּאמֶר בְּעֵינַי כְּיוֹם־קִנְיֹנְךָ הַשָּׂדֶה מִיַּד נַעֲמִי וְיִמְאֵת רוּת (סוּרָה) [קְנִיחָה] הַמּוֹאֲבִיָּה אֲשֶׁת־הַמֵּת לְהֵקִים שֵׁם־הַמֵּת עַל־נַחֲלֹתָי:	v. 5 Then Boaz said, 'The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance.'
v. 6 וַיֹּאמֶר הַגָּאֵל לֹא אוֹכֵל (לְגֹאֵל־) [לְגֹאֵל־] לִי כִּי־אֶשְׁחִי אֶת־נַחֲלֹתַי גְּאֹל־לֶךְ אֶת־נַחֲלֹתַי גְּאֹל־לֶךְ אֶת־נַחֲלֹתַי לְגֹאֵל:	v. 6 At this, the next of kin said, 'I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.'
v. 7 וְזֹאת לְפָנִים כִּי־שָׂרָאֵל עַל־הַגְּאֹלָה וְעַל־הַתְּמִירָה לְקַיֵּם כִּי־דָבָר שְׁלֹשׁ אִישׁ נִשְׁלַח וְנָתַן לְרַעְיָהּ וְנָתַן הַתְּעוּזָה כִּי־שָׂרָאֵל:	v. 7 Now this was the custom in the former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel.
v. 8 וַיֹּאמֶר הַגָּאֵל לְבֵעֵי קִנְיֹנְךָ יְהוֹדֶה וַיִּשְׁלַח נַעֲלוֹ:	v. 8 So when the next of kin said to Boaz, 'Acquire it for yourself,' he took off his sandal.
v. 9 וַיֹּאמֶר בְּעֵינַי לְזִקְנֵיכֶם וְכָל־הָעָם עֵדִים אֲתֵּם הַיּוֹם כִּי קִנִּיתִי אֶת־כִּלְיֵי אֲשֶׁר לֹאֵלִי מִלְּךְ מִכְרָה וְאֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר לְכִלְיָו וּמִחֲלֹלָה מִיַּד נַעֲמִי:	v. 9 Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, 'Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon.
v. 10 וְנָם אֲתֵּרִיד הַמּוֹאֲבִיָּה אֲשֶׁת־מַחֲלוֹן קְנִיחָה לִּי לְאִשָּׁה לְהֵקִים שֵׁם־הַמֵּת עַל־נַחֲלֹתָיו וְלֹא־יִכָּרֵת שֵׁם־הַמֵּת מֵעַם אֲרָזָיו וּמִשְׁעַר מִקְוָם עֵדִים אֲתֵּם הַיּוֹם:	v. 10 I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses.'
v. 11 וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר־בְּשַׁעַר וְהַזְּקֵנִים עֵדִים יְהוָה יִתֵּן יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׂדֶה הַבָּאָה אֵלֶיךָ בֵּיתְךָ כְּרָחֵל וְכִלְיָהּ אֲשֶׁר בְּנֵי שְׂתֵימָיִם אֶת־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעֵשָׂה־תֵּיִל בְּאֶפְרַתָּה וּמְרָאִים־שָׁם בְּבֵית לֶחֶם:	v. 11 Then all the people who were at the gate along with the elders said, 'We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem;
v. 12 וַיְהִי בֵּיתָהּ כְּבֵית פְּרִזִּי אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָה תָמָר לְיִזְחָבָה מִדִּיהוּדָה מִדֵּינַרְעֵ אֲשֶׁר וְתָם וְיָתָה לֶךְ מִדֵּינַרְעֵהָ וְנָתַת:	v. 12 and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.'
v. 13 וַיִּקַּח בְּעֵינַי אֶת־רוּת וַתְּהַיְוָה לְאִשָּׁה וַיָּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ וַיִּפְּנוּ יַתְּנָה לָהּ מִרְיֹן וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן:	v. 13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son.

read thus in Hebrew: וַיֵּבֶע עֵלָה הַשְּׂעִיר וַיֵּשֶׁב שָׁם וְהָיָה הַגָּאֵל עֹבֵר אֲשֶׁר דָּבָר־בְּעֵינַי וַיֹּאמֶר סוּרָה פֹּה וְיָסֵר וַיֵּשֶׁב ('and Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there, and behold, the closest relative of whom Boaz has spoken about was passing'). A careful survey of the Hebrew word *וַיֵּשֶׁב* in

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

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

verse 1 shows that this word is in *waw*-consecutive, which is an inverted future (Jouon & Muraoka 1993:14; Lambdin 2010:108). Understood in this perspective, the word *וַיֵּשֶׁב* is translated in this context as 'and he sat down', because its futuristic connotation 'and he will sit down' has been transposed to a perfect tense. The word *עֹבֵר* is a *qal* active participle, which is in third person masculine singular. This word is rendered in English as 'passing'. An examination of the above Hebrew construct entails that Boaz had gone to the city gate and was already sitting down when he looked up and saw the closest relative of Naomi *עֹבֵר* [passing], and he said to him *סוּרָה פֹּה* [turn aside and sit down here], and he turned aside and sat down here'. The two Hebrew words *סוּרָה פֹּה* [turn aside and sit down here'] are fashioned in jussive. Lambdin (2010:118) explains that the third person imperative in Hebrew is called jussive. Reading between the lines of verse 2 discloses that Boaz commands an outstanding respect and honour in Israelite society. The text says that he took 10 elders of the city and commanded them *וַיִּשְׁבוּ* [sit down here, and they sat down']. The use of imperative utterances by Boaz in this segment no doubt underscores this astonishing rationalism. This claim, arguably, holds true; otherwise Boaz's command to the elders of Israel to sit down would not have been heeded if he were not a man of high social status and held in great esteem in the Israelite society.

Turning to Naomi's closest redeemer, the narrator records Boaz's words thus: וַיֹּאמֶר לַגָּאֵל הַחֲלֹקֶת הַשָּׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר לֹאֵלִי מִלְּךְ מִכְרָה נַעֲמִי הַשְּׂכֵבָה מִשְׁנָה מוֹאָב "Naomi, who has returned from Moab, has to sell a piece of field (land) of our brother Elimelech". The word *וַיֹּאמֶר* is in *waw*-consecutive. Consequently, it is translated 'and he said'. The word *מִכְרָה* is a *qal* perfect verb and in second person feminine singular. Its English translation could be rendered as 'she sold or she has to sell'. Boaz explains to the closest relative that Naomi has to sell the *חֲלֹקֶת הַשָּׂדֶה* ['the piece of land or field'] of their brother Elimelech. It means that Naomi's late husband Elimelech was a member of their clan but the *גָּאֵל* which means the closest relative to Elimelech was the most appropriate person to purchase the said piece of land and inherit his possessions, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead amongst his people. LaCocque (1990:101–102) argues that the Hebrew word *גָּאֵל* [redeemer] means one who restores an object to its primal condition. Supporting this line of articulation, Glover (2009:304) writes that Boaz fulfils this role of restoring an object (Ruth) to its primal condition, which is marriage. For Fewell and Gunn (1989:50–51), the introduction of redemption in this context connotes marriage. In addition, the Hebrew word *הַשְּׂכֵבָה* is a *qal* active participle and feminine singular in form. A cursory observation of this word shows that it is used in this verse attributively. Hence, it is translated as 'she-Naomi who has returned'. Boaz's strenuous concern in summoning Naomi's *גָּאֵל* [closest relative] and *זְקֵנֵי הָעִיר* ['the elders or old men of the city'] vis-à-vis Elimelech's inheritance is undoubtedly an act of kindness towards Naomi and Ruth. In truth, Boaz was not obliged or duty-bound to perform this task of summoning Naomi's closest relative. Responding to Boaz's presentation, the closest relative expresses his readiness to purchase the piece of land from Naomi. A

subjective evaluation of the closest relative's affirmation that he would acquire the land from Naomi seems to indicate that he was familiar with the ancient Israelite custom with regards to the issue to redemption. Speaking in this line of thought, Sasson (1978:54) explains that Naomi's redeemer was ready to intercede on behalf of Naomi by purchasing Elimelech's land because he was familiar with Israel's culture with regard to acquiring land. However, an objective reading of the second segment of the pericope uncovers a fact to the contrary, as is showcased below.

The second unit of Ruth 4:1–13 (vv. 5–6) speaks of Boaz's elucidation to the closest relative of the import of his proclamation that he would redeem the piece of land from Naomi and the אָל instantaneous reversal of his utterance in verse 4. Boaz discloses to him that בְּיוֹם־קְנוֹתְךָ֙ הַשְּׂדֵה֙ מִיַּד־נָעֲמִי ['at the day you acquired the field from Naomi's hand'] he acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of the dead, to perpetuate the name of the dead upon his possession. The presence of the two Hebrew words קָנִיתָ [you acquire] and אֲקַנֶּה־י [I acquire] observed in this section poses difficulty to scholars and commentators on the most appropriate reading to be adopted. The word קָנִיתָ is a combination of *qal* perfect, which stands for the third person masculine singular and pronominal suffix for common gender singular 'I'. Taken together, it means 'I acquire'. The second word (אֲקַנֶּה־י) is also a *qal* verb that is in second person masculine singular, which means 'you acquire'. Against this background, scholarly interpretations of this verse often vary. Beattie (1978:41) adopted the reading of the *qethibh* (קָנִיתָ) as he argues that what Boaz actually says to the anonymous nearer redeemer is that 'the day you acquire the field from Naomi's hand, I acquire Ruth the Moabite as my wife'. Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky (2011:xxxvi–xxxvii) express the uncertainty of the interpretation of the Hebrew words in verse 4:5. A close survey of Boaz's words to the closest relative shows that the latter did not understand clearly what his proclamation in verse 4 entails. This affirmation seems plausible because as soon as Boaz made the meaning known to him, the closest relative renounces his earlier proclamation saying אֶתֶּה אֶת־נַאֲלָתִי אֲצַל־לְךָ֙ לֹא־אֹכֵל ['I cannot redeem it; you redeem my redemption']. In his own contribution, Embry (2016:44) posits that a survey of Zelophehad's regulation in Number 27:1–4 may perhaps offer the reader of Ruth the motivation for the unnamed closest relative's abdication of his right of redemption. He expresses that under the principle of Zelophehad's regulation, any union with Ruth is expected to provide an heir to Elimelech. Contributing further, Embry explains that should the closest relative have had no heir at this time, his child with Ruth would belong to the line of Elimelech. Understood in this light, the closest relative's abdication of his right of redemption then makes sense, for he does not want to risk his own name or impair his own inheritance. It is ironic, however, that Boaz's name has been preserved in the story, whereas the closest relative remains unnamed.

The last part of the pericope covers verses 7–13. This unit records Boaz's marriage with a Moabite woman - the widow

of Mahlon – and inheritance, after the nearer kinsman with a prior right to discharge this duty has renounced it in favour of Boaz (Weiser 1964:303). Following the abdication of the closest relative's right of inheritance, Boaz acquires Ruth as his wife in the presence of the elders of Israel in order 'to keep alive Mahlon's name' (Laffey 2000:557). It is significant to note that Boaz's marriage with Ruth is performed in public and is witnessed by the זְקֵנֵי הָעִיר ['the elders of the city'] of Israel who pray that the family of Boaz be like the home of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the offspring which the Lord shall give him by Ruth (Rt 4:12). Bernstein (1991) writes that:

[A]fter the kinsman has handed his rights to Ruth over to Boaz, and Boaz has declared that he will marry Ruth, the townspeople at the gate solemnly witness the event and address a blessing to the new couple. (p. 20)

An objective survey of the fertility wished for Boaz and Ruth by the people at the city gate underscores the loving-kindness of God towards the couple who, according to Bernstein (1991:21), 'are unlikely to have children since Boaz is advanced in years, and Ruth has not born a child in an earlier marriage'. This postulation seems astonishing because of Ruth's long period of barrenness (Campbell 1975:151) in her first marriage with Mahlon before his death. A close reading of the narrator's utterances in verse 13 shows that the prayer of the people for Boaz and Ruth was efficacious, for God heeded their request and gave Ruth הָרִיוּן [conception] when Boaz went in to her. The reference to Perez 'whom Tamar bore to Judah' provides authoritative historical precedence for the inclusion of the foreigner into the community of Israel, for Tamar is generally considered to be a Canaanite (Mangrum 2011:76). The elders at the city assembly who endorsed and witnessed Boaz and Ruth's marriage are the custodians of the culture and tradition of the society. The elders at the city gate did not object to Boaz's explanation to the closest relative that consenting to redeem the land for Naomi entails also inheriting the wife of the dead, which shows that Boaz did not invent the tradition to rob the אָל of his right of redemption. Substantiating this view, Davies (1983:231) writes that Boaz's requirement could not have been something imposed by him quite arbitrarily, as the elders in the assembly would surely have objected to his demand, and the closest relative would have insisted on his right to redeem the land without marrying the widow. Put in other words, it could be argued that if there was any acceptable way in which the closest relative could have separated the two customs, he would no doubt have availed himself of the opportunity to do so. The seeming absence of objection from either the unnamed man or the elders of the city following Boaz's comments that the unnamed closest relative must marry Ruth shows that Boaz did not fabricate the custom but rather spoke in accordance with an ancient Israelite sociological and cultural practice of right of redemption and marrying the widow (Embry 2016:36). Gottwald (1979:340) expresses that Boaz's decision to marry Ruth was voluntarily motivated and not on the basis of any legal requirement.

This article argues that Boaz's decision in accepting to embrace the responsibility of a redeemer for Ruth in order to

perpetuate the name of the dead is an act of kindness. He truly understands the agony of family extinction that threatens Naomi and Ruth, and this perhaps stimulated his declaration to acquire Ruth as his wife so that through this union, the family of Elimelech would not be blotted out amongst his clan. The thought of Davies (1981:140) coheres with this position, as he avers that the marriage union between Boaz and Ruth was fashioned in the first instance to ensure the continuation of the line of Ruth's deceased husband by providing her with male offspring. Supporting this line of view, both Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky (2011:xlvi) and Bush (1996:171) posited that Boaz's decision to marry Ruth is an act that is not obligated but rather one which a person does out of kindness and generosity that surpasses the call of required responsibility. It is quite fascinating that the author of the Ruth narrative employs Boaz's marriage with a Moabite woman to show that the ethnic wall of exclusivity that existed between the Jews and Moabites has been broken. This is obviously the loving-kindness of God which has reversed the prohibitive context of the code of Deuteronomy 23:4–5 that forbids the Israelites from entering into marriage relationships with the Moabites (Bovell 2003:183; Irwin 2008:336).

Synthesis: a critical survey of the literary unit of Ruth 4:1–13, which focuses on the marriage union of Boaz and Ruth, is underscored with *hesed*. Boaz's unrestrained declaration before the elders of Israelite society at the city gate to marry Ruth following the closest relative's abdication of his right of inheritance is arguably a demonstration of *hesed*. Boaz's decision is not an obligation or responsibility but rather one which a person does out of kindness and generosity that surpasses the call of required responsibility.

Conclusion

The literary construct of Ruth 4:1–13 is encoded with an ancient Israelite sociological and cultural practice of right inheritance and marrying a widow. The pericope celebrates Boaz's marriage with Ruth and inheritance in order to perpetuate the name of the dead amongst his clan in Israel. An objective survey of the literary composition of Ruth underscores that the loving-kindness of God extends to foreigners, widows and barren women. It was seen as a great misfortune in ancient Israelite society for a man to die without having a son. Boaz's decision in accepting to marry Ruth in 4:7–13 underscores *hesed*, and this has an interface with Ruth's astonishing demonstration of kindness in Ruth 3:9–18 as she requests Boaz to marry her in order to acquire a seed from him for Naomi so that Elimelech's family will not be blotted out.

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