At the threshing floor: Sex, reader response, and a hermeneutic of survival

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ABSTRACT

Although the Book of Ruth is often thought of as an idyllic tale, it in fact confronts readers with the reality of women’s suffering bodies. This paper intertwines scholarly readings of Ruth with readings by ‘ordinary’ women from various cultural contexts in the United States, Asia, and Africa, with the goal of illuminating the seriousness of women’s suffering in the story. The story is often used by Christian leaders (usually male) to undergird traditional social structures that are restrictive for women and that may set women against each other. Thus reader response to the text is quite varied: the story arouses strong emotions in women, both positively and negatively, depending on their personal and cultural backgrounds and areas of conscientisation or lack thereof. With specific attention to chapter 3, it is argued that the suffering of economic deprivation leads to the suffering of bodily humiliation as Ruth goes to the threshing floor. That Boaz eventually marries Ruth should not cause Ruth’s suffering to go unrecognised.

The overall theme of this OTSSA conference, suffering bodies, calls to mind immediately a certain range of Old Testament narratives. The story of the unnamed Levite’s concubine (Jdg 19), with its aftermath of killing of the women of the tribe of Benjamin and the men of Jabesh-Gilead, and then the kidnapping of the young women of the village of Shiloh is among the most egregious examples of women’s suffering. The story of the slave-woman Hagar (Gn 16 and 21) and the rape of King David’s daughter Tamar by her brother Amnon (2 Sm 12) are others, and a long list of other named and unnamed women might easily be added. Yet the story of Ruth does not so readily come to mind as an example of women’s suffering. Rather, it is traditionally viewed as an idyllic tale, a story of women’s courage and initiative, a story that comes out well due to upright living by the key characters, both female and male.

Versions of this traditional approach do appear in women’s readings of the story; but alongside these interpretations are analyses that view the story quite negatively, as simply a reinscribing and reinforcing of ancient patriarchal values. Thus the story of Ruth is both problematic and potentially deceptive — is it a story
that is good for women’s health, or is it dangerous to women’s well-being? In this paper I will focus in particular on chapter 3 of Ruth, the scene at the threshing floor, in an attempt to highlight the theme of women’s suffering in a context where suffering and survival are intimately intertwined. Methodologically, I will interrelate the readings of Biblical scholars, male and female, with those of so-called ‘ordinary’ readers, predominantly female, to demonstrate the variety of reader responses and to seek to create a conversation among them.

A review of chapter 3 in the larger context of the story sets the stage for our inquiry. Naomi reiterates her concern for Ruth’s ‘security’ (3:1), a concern that she first expressed when she urged her daughters-in-law to return to their own families rather than accompany her to Bethlehem (1:9). She proposes that Ruth should prepare herself both by bodily cleansing and by her manner of dress, and then approach Boaz when he lies down for the night at the threshing floor. Already this summary of the introductory verses bristles with issues pertinent to our topic. What is Naomi’s own expectation for the outcome of the proposed encounter? The narrative leaves this question quite unanswered. Naomi says only ‘He [Boaz] will tell you what to do’ (v 4). What is the nature of the preparations that Naomi advises and Ruth agrees to? The Hebrew words are not self-evident and commentators disagree. Is Ruth to engage in ordinary bathing or to use specially perfumed oils? (How would a poor woman have access to such oils?) Does her change of clothing indicate merely donning something clean or is it a removal of widow’s garments in order to indicate her availability for marriage? (Bush 1996:152.) Or might the vocabulary used here for bathing and changing carry connotations of a bride’s preparation for her wedding? (Hertzberg 1959:274.) From a scholarly perspective, the proposals connecting the terminology for bathing, anointing, and clothing to cultural symbolism related either to mourning or to marriage are intriguing, but my own analysis of the available evidence does not sustain either theory. It seems more probable that the goal is simply to make Ruth as physically attractive as possible for her encounter with Boaz.

I recall vividly telling this part of the story to a group of twelfth year high school girls in a Christian hostel in a boarding school in northern India. The girls were nearly all from small villages where the tradition of threshing the rice and guarding the harvest against thieves was part of their own context. I had been asked to teach them an Old Testament story, and was summarising the plot of Ruth with one of the girls serving as translator for the others. When I reached this part about Naomi’s instructions, the girls with one accord began tittering. I didn’t need
any translation help to understand their reaction. The girls imagined Ruth fixing herself up to entice Boaz in a situation that they had been taught should be avoided at all costs by any self-respecting woman. Boys and girls should not meet in the dark. They were sure Ruth ought not to be putting herself forward to a man in the night in this way, even though their teenage hormones made them quite interested in observing the boys' hostel from afar. It is fair to say that the reaction of those Indian teenagers set me on the road to this paper. I began to realise that I had subconsciously protected a traditional version of Ruth's 'morality' that excused on various scholarly pretexts her approach to Boaz. I had not faced up sufficiently to the reality of what Ruth was doing.

Why does Naomi send Ruth off to Boaz in the middle of the night, rather than approach him herself to suggest whatever arrangement she has ultimately in mind for Ruth's security? Such an approach would make the plot much less interesting, of course, and perhaps that is reason enough for the story we have. Yet we should not assume that such a direct approach to Boaz was a realistic option. Fewell and Gunn (1990:50-51, 78) understand Naomi's plan as a deliberate attempt to force Boaz into a marriage by entrapment. Sexual intercourse will compromise his honour. Whether or not Naomi's motive is so deliberate, such besmirching of Boaz's honour could be the result if the tryst became known. Fewell and Gunn do not speak of Ruth's honour, but of course Ruth's honour will be compromised as well. It seems probable to me that Naomi is choosing and Ruth is accepting the one possibility realistically available to them, and thus that the village girls in India got it right what Ruth was doing was not appropriate behaviour in her culture any more than it would have been in modern rural India.

As we move into the night-time scene at the threshing floor itself, we find that the Hebrew is loaded with terminology that may have ordinary meanings or may have sexual overtones, depending upon the context. Indeed, some of this vocabulary is anticipated in Naomi's instructions in the previous scene. The presence of such vocabulary has been noted by numerous commentators; Edward F Campbell's summary (Campbell 1975:131-132) is particularly complete. Among the more conspicuous terms are the nouns 'legs (NRSV feet)' (3:7, 8, 14), and the verbs 'to uncover' (3:6, 7), 'to lie down' (8x in 3:4-14), 'to know' (3:3, 4, 10, 14, 18), and 'to come (toward) / go (in to)' (3:4, 7, 14). Although many of these instances obviously have something other than sexual activity in view, their frequency in a context that is fraught with the possibility of sexual intercourse is
surely not accidental. Campbell (1975:130) points to the ‘mystery’ of the time at the threshing floor. The two protagonists, man and woman, are alone in the dark, and the possibility of intercourse is real. The narrator does not specify whether sexual intimacy is consummated or not, and commentators must decide the question based on their understanding of the story as a whole.\(^2\)

As Campbell observes (1975:132) this scene with all its ambiguity is not included in order to provide the readers/hearers with some sexual excitement, as in some popular modern novels that use such material to keep the readers’ attention. The unfolding purpose is rather to place a choice before Boaz. Ruth does not follow Naomi’s instruction to do whatever Boaz says, but rather she takes the initiative, speaking words that are in effect a marriage proposal (cf Ezk 16:8; Dt 22:30 [Heb 23:1]; 27:20). Her words further impress Boaz with her uprightness; he agrees to see the matter through properly and then has her spend the remainder of the night and she lies down at his legs. The Hebrew concerning her pre-dawn departure and Boaz’s reasoning concerning her departure is difficult and many emendations have been proposed. Whatever direction one takes the textual problems, the central concern is that it should not be known that Ruth and Boaz had been together during the night.

Because we know how the story ends in chapter 4, we may all too easily overlook the enormity of the risk to Ruth in these events of chapter 3. Trible (1978:181) rightly titles this chapter ‘Salvation by courage alone.’ If all that was needed was a common sense conversation with Boaz, the encounter could have taken place in daylight and without special preparations. Although Naomi may have imagined that her proposal would place Boaz in a compromising situation that would force his hand, surely the far greater risk was taken by Ruth. As the upstanding leader of the village (2:1), Boaz had only to speak a castigating word to others in Bethlehem, and this Moabite woman, probably already viewed as an outsider and therefore an easy mark for those who might want to molest her (2:9), would be pushed even further to the margins of village life. Or Boaz might have her spend the night, have sexual relations with her, and then act as if nothing had happened. Barring pregnancy (which would seem unlikely after ten years of barren marriage in Moab), her private humiliation would go unknown. Or he might turn her away and keep silent about the incident. This might be the least terrible for Ruth of these three possibilities, but it would still mean an end to any hope for the economic security of a marriage relationship. Once again, my point is that Ruth’s
risk in this situation is far greater than we usually think. The ending of the story must not blind us to the danger she faces. The circumstances that cause her and others like her in every age to enter into such danger must be recognised as oppression. A societal structure that positions women so that they must take such risks in order to ensure their economic survival is one that must be challenged, not romanticised. The level of suffering from economic insecurity that leads to taking such a risk must be named, not glossed over. And the risk-taking action itself must be named as a form of suffering as well as a moment of courage. Even if there was no sexual intercourse at the threshing floor, which is my own assessment of the narrator’s intent, Ruth’s very act of going to the threshing floor at night involves both courage and suffering.

Some reflections on this story from additional ordinary readers will help to underscore this perspective on Ruth at the threshing floor. I asked several groups of Theological students to try to approach the narrative with a sense of imagination to fill in the gaps left by the narrator. In this exercise, it was not my intention to undercut what they had been taught about exegesis and careful reading of the text. Rather, the intention was to encourage them to notice what the text did not say, to read it more closely, recognising that readers are always filling in gaps, but all too often are not conscious of the process. One can make out the case, of course, that North American Theological students (or perhaps any Theological students) are not ordinary readers, but were only being asked to pose as ordinary readers for this exercise. I place their work first in the sequence, however, because their very existence reminds us that lines between scholarly and ordinary readers are blurry, that one’s place in a continuum of readers is a matter of degree and self-perception. Four separate groups of students worked simultaneously to prepare a more detailed script of the scene. The first group presented a story of Naomi and Ruth scheming together to entrap the hapless Boaz; the two women were enjoying themselves and Boaz seemed only a pawn in their project to get rich quick. Another team produced a highly charged romantic encounter in the style of an American soap opera Ruth and Boaz had each been secretly attracted to the other and now suddenly were giving expression to their desire with expressions of endearment and with physical intimacy. A third group told a story of Ruth’s fear, sadness, desperation, and determination. For the sake of Naomi’s security, more than her own, Ruth in this version tried to focus her mind elsewhere as she approached the pot-bellied, ugly, snaggle-toothed, imperious, elderly (but rich)
Boaz. Of course one could find some grounds in the larger narrative, and even within chapter 3, for questioning aspects of each of these imaginative retellings of the story, even as one could also find some basis for their realism. And one could also take the text of my presentation up to this point and find hints of all three versions. Perhaps if the person who wrote down the story of Ruth were here, he (or she) would say that none of these versions is recognisable as the author’s intention.

The fourth of my student groups produced nothing at all. Their own minds were apparently held captive by their inability to be certain what that original author really meant. When I began my vocation in Biblical studies some thirty-five years ago, I would have applauded this last group as most faithful to the Biblical witness when one isn’t sure, one should say nothing. But as you are all well aware, interpretive methods in our discipline have changed greatly over these decades. Literary theory even among secular interpreters of the Bible recognises that texts are multivalent, with many possible meanings discerned out of the cultural cues brought to the texts by their various readers. Ancient cultural cues, in the form of socio-cultural data, may inform, challenge, or correct our modern readings, but the interaction between the ancient world of the text and the contemporary world of the readers is always bi-directional. Theologically and ethically, this change is for the good, in my view, as it has supported so-called advocacy readings of the Biblical text, readings that expose its dangers for undergirding many kinds of injustice as well as its possibilities for promoting a vision of justice and peace.

My principal access to perspectives of African readers of the story has been through the Doctor of Ministry thesis of Doctor Musimbi Kanyoro. Kanyoro argues that the story is used by men in many contexts in Africa to reinscribe traditional patriarchal values, a theme that we will see permeates its use by Asian men as well. She suggests further that western women’s readings, whether feminist or womanist, overlook the role of the community, an element that is critically important to African women’s reading. In 1996 Kanyoro returned to her remote village (Bware) in western Kenya and was asked to lead a three-day retreat for 150 rural women of all ages. The group voted to focus on women characters in the Book of Ruth. Kanyoro served as a reference person for five sub-groups as they prepared presentations on aspects of the story. Like the American students, some of these African women pictured Boaz as an ugly old man. In their interpretation,
Ruth was forced to marry Boaz by the pressure of Naomi and other older women in the Bethlehem community. Similarities to some African versions of levirate marriage were observed, and women spoke of the difficulties faced by their acquaintances who were not willing to conform to traditional practices. Cultural parallels of poor girls being married off to rich men in contemporary Africa, and debates about this practice, engendered considerable debate as well (Kanyoro 1998:56-74).

I have had the privilege of engaging in conversations about the story of Ruth with women in a variety of contexts across numerous countries in Asia. In retrospect, it is notable how little attention they chose to give to this threshing floor episode in chapter 3. Their interest most often has focused on the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. In many parts of northeast Asia, the story of Ruth and Naomi is used by male Christian pastors and church leaders to reinforce the traditional cultural expectation that the primary responsibility of a daughter-in-law is to care for her husband’s parents, and especially her mother-in-law. A long tradition of mistreatment of daughters-in-law is associated with this cultural custom. I am told that in the Korean language a word for ‘slave’ is used as a synonym for ‘daughter-in-law’.

In response to this cultural reality, and in reaction to the effort of many male-dominated Asian churches to perpetuate the custom based on the story of Ruth, ordinary Asian Christian women readers have engaged in a variety of responses. One approach emphasises that the relationship between Ruth and Naomi is much more positive and mutually caring than that in most Asian families. The story is read as one that challenges mothers-in-law to a different kind of relationship with their daughters-in-law. Indeed, one woman reported that she had begun a ‘Naomi’ Bible study class. Its membership was restricted to mothers-in-law, and its stated goal was to learn from Naomi’s story how to be more kind to their daughters-in-law.

A second approach has been to express a level of rage (the word is not too strong) about the story and particularly about the section in chapter 4 where the women of the village rejoice that ‘a son is born to Naomi’, and the child is placed in Naomi’s arms. Members of the ‘But I Say’ women’s Bible study group recalled their grief as young mothers when their children were taken from their care and placed in the care of their mothers-in-law. These women as mothers ate with the household servants while the children ate with their grandmother; these mothers...
simply did the household work alongside the family servants, and had no opportunity to participate in the upbringing of their children. For members of this study group, a Biblical text that so reinscribed their pain had simply to be rejected as not ‘word of God’.

Still other women argued that the story of Ruth and Naomi could not properly be used as guidance for their own context because the circumstances were so vastly different. Most fundamentally, Naomi and Ruth were two widows, not part of a complete family system. Furthermore, they represented two different ethnic groups; and finally, they were economically destitute. The recognition that the situation of Naomi and Ruth would not have been regarded as normal or desirable even in ancient Israel opens the door for women to look more at their context of suffering rather than just at their behaviour in relationship to each other.

As women read the story in this light, attention to women’s suffering has focused primarily on the economic marginalisation of women who are cut off by the death of their husbands from a male-headed familial support system. I should note that this focus does not mean that there is not suffering from grinding poverty in families where men are present, either in ancient Israel or in our contemporary world. But the situation in Israel and in many contemporary situations is especially acute for women who have no adult males in the household sphere. Phyllis Bird’s analysis (1997:67-78) of Biblical vocabulary for the poor from a gendered perspective reveals that most of the vocabulary for the poor applies to landed citizens. Those who have no male protector are identified as a separate category: the widows, the orphans (the term appearing only in masculine form) and the aliens (again with the term appearing only in masculine form). Yet even within this subclass, as the terminology reveals, the poverty of women is mostly invisible and is viewed culturally from a male perspective.

We cannot know with certainty why Ruth insisted on accompanying Naomi to Bethlehem, rather than returning to her own Moabite family. Scholars as well as ordinary readers have debated whether Ruth’s decision was a sign of her great altruism and devotion to Naomi, or whether she was choosing a better option for herself because Moabite custom and/or her personal circumstances made returning to her family impossible. In any case, once the two women arrive in Bethlehem, their economic plight is made clear by Ruth’s going out to glean. It should be noted that Israel’s system of land tenure and inheritance made economic stability next to impossible for the widow, orphan, or alien. In Israel’s patrilineal and
patriarchal inheritance system, land was handed down from father to sons (Nm 26; cf. Naboth’s vineyard, 1 Ki 21). Even when daughters inherited because there were no sons (Nm 27), their land was to be turned over to their husbands as soon as they married (Nm 36). Naomi’s deep spiritual and emotional suffering, expressed in her cry to the women of the village, ‘no longer call me Naomi, but call me Mara’, her sense of abandonment by God with the deaths of the men of her family, expresses not just her sense of loss of loved ones, but also her loss of the basic human security and economic viability that was associated with being married and a mother, rather than widowed and childless. Ruth of course is also widowed and childless, with the additional burden of being an outsider, potentially unwelcome in the Bethlehemite community.

Gleaning was Israel’s version of an economic ‘safety net’ for those poorest of the poor, among whom Ruth and Naomi now found themselves. Unfortunately, the Biblical record does not provide sufficient information to allow us to make a detailed assessment of the overall effectiveness of the gleaning system in sustaining the life of those for whom it is intended in Israelite law. Certainly the number of widows, orphans, and aliens in a given village area would vary, and the story of Ruth itself indicates that the thoroughness of those gathering the sheaves ahead of the gleaners would also vary. Ruth 2:17 states that Ruth had gathered about an ephah of barley at the end of her first day in the field. John Hamlin (1996:35) has calculated that this amount of grain would be enough to feed two people for about five to seven days, and the story tells us that Ruth achieved this unusually large amount because Boaz instructed the field workers to leave extra grain deliberately in her path. Even with different crops harvested in succession, it would be next to impossible for gleaners to gather enough surplus to carry them through to another harvest season. For women on their own, the situation is impossible. And it is out of this impossibility that Naomi sends Ruth to Boaz by night in an effort to ‘seek security’.

This economic reality out of which Ruth approaches Boaz is the foundation of yet another Asian woman’s interpretation of the story. A fourteen year old girl from a remote rural village in the Philippines came to talk with her woman pastor. The girl was from a family that literally could not put enough food on the table to keep everyone alive. The girl had been approached by a ‘recruiter’ who had come through the village looking for young girls who would like to leave, or whose families would want them to leave. The girl told her pastor that she had decided
to accept the recruiter’s invitation to travel to a wealthy foreign country to work as a ‘dancer’. Whether this child knew that she would in the end not work as a dancer but as a prostituted child was not clear. Her pastor tried to dissuade her, but the child replied: ‘I remember the story of Ruth. Ruth put herself forward attractively to a wealthy foreign man in hopes that he would marry her and take care of her. I hope that a wealthy man will marry me and take care of my family. God took care of Ruth and worked it out for her; God will take care of me too.’ This story is true. I do not know how this young girl came to make the connection between her life and the story of Ruth. Although the Philippines is basically a Christian culture, it seemed unlikely to me that the girl had thought of that connection herself. Perhaps the recruiter had proposed it, or perhaps someone in her own family. Perhaps it had been spreading like a grapevine across the villages of the region, with its source no longer identifiable. I do not know whether the girl finally accepted the recruiter’s invitation. I do know that poverty in which women and girls suffer among the economically destitute has led tens and even hundreds of thousands of young girls into forced prostitution world-wide.  

What should we make of such an interpretation of the story of Ruth? I have put this question to women across Asia and in other contexts, asking them how they thought her pastor could have responded. The first response, and appropriately so, is usually silence. The shock of first hearing such an unexpected use of this Biblical story is profound; I find myself still shocked, even after knowing the story for a long time. Then as a rule both ordinary readers and readers with some theological training have sought responses from the Biblical tradition by which to correct the reading of the Filipino girl. For those with some technical background, the Old Testament levirate laws often come to mind. Ruth, it is suggested, was relating to a man who was next-of-kin, and whom she and Naomi therefore believed had a legal obligation to marry Ruth; the women were just hurrying matters along. Knowledge of this ancient cultural custom of producing offspring for a dead man by impregnating his widow is used to distinguish the intent of the Biblical story from the interpretation of the Filipino child. Now of all the technical topics for discussion in relation to the Book of Ruth, more ink has been spilt on the question of levirate marriage than on any other. Frederic Bush in his commentary (1996:155-159, 199-239) devotes nearly fifty pages just to summarising the ongoing debate and the major arguments for and against the relevance of the institution of levirate marriage for this story. My own perspective
concurs finally with Bush’s analysis that levirate marriage is not in fact pertinent. But my focus here is not the decision about that debate, but rather that levirate marriage is so often used to explain the situation and therefore to make Ruth’s actions appear ordinary, or unexceptional. Both Ruth’s own circumstance that led to her action and the dire circumstances of the Filipino girl are somehow rationalised or covered up by this approach.

Even ordinary readers who know nothing of levirate marriage often respond by invoking a general category of cultural distance: it was all right in ancient Israel for Ruth to do what she did, but it is not all right for the Filipino girl. Ruth is held in such high esteem that it seems impossible to imagine that she may have done something unacceptable. Others suggest that sex outside of marriage is categorically wrong; it didn’t happen between Ruth and Boaz at the threshing floor, but it will happen to the Filipino girl. Therefore the Filipino pastor should counsel the girl to reject the recruiter’s invitation. Finally, both ordinary and trained readers sometimes turn to other Biblical texts as corrective, particularly Genesis 1. If the pastor can help the young girl to understand herself as created in God’s image, the girl can learn to honour her own body by refusing to go. This last suggestion holds the most positive potential for the life of the Filipino girl. Yet even this view does not address the existential question faced by that girl and also by Ruth — economic survival.

In short, I am suggesting that rather than focus on the distance between Ruth and this Filipino girl, we should focus on the similarity. The suffering of economic deprivation causes each to be willing to take desperate measures for human survival of self and loved ones. Let us step back from romanticising Ruth’s action at the threshing floor just because the story has an apparently happy ending or because Boaz was a relative or had acted kindly towards her at some earlier point of contact. No woman should have to do something so socially unacceptable in Israelite culture as to approach a man in the dark of night, at risk of discovery and public humiliation, and possibly severe legal penalties in order to put food on her family’s table for the longer term. This is not a slightly adventurous tryst. It is a desperate act by a desperate person. Yes, it is courageous. But that does not mean no suffering is involved.

Ruth is a woman whose story suggests both physical and emotional suffering. She ‘makes a way out of no way’, to use a traditional African-American expression, but at what cost? In her we can see women of every generation and every
culture who are shoved to the margins of society and the bottom of the economy by the traditional patterns of male-oriented social structures. In concluding this presentation I would like briefly to tie this view of Ruth to the writings of two more scholars: American womanist theologian Delores Williams and German feminist theologian Dorothee Soelle.

Delores Williams’s groundbreaking work *Sisters in the wilderness: The challenge of womanist God-talk* centres on the story of Hagar (Gn 16, 21) to develop a ‘theology of survival’. In contradistinction to the ‘liberation theology’ focus of many white feminists, African-American male theologians, Latin-American theologians, and even some other womanist theologians, Williams speaks of God at work in the context of women’s survival (1993:193). Of Hagar she writes, ‘[she] is always powerless and never able to take care of [her] own business or set [her] own agenda for [her] life’ (1993:182). I suggest that reading the story of Ruth in the light of Williams’s approach to the story of Hagar can serve as a wise corrective to usual views of Ruth as an independent agent. I must speak carefully here. The point of the comparison is not to diminish the evil of the servitude of Hagar or the evil of the way she was treated by Sarah. Rather, the emphasis is on stepping back from inappropriate imagining that Ruth had a high level of autonomy and choice in her situation. No, Ruth was a survivor in the midst of suffering.

If we view Ruth’s actions from the perspective of a hermeneutic of survival, we can find space to deal with the ending of the book, which (as many women have noted) does nothing to change the patriarchal structure of the society within which Ruth and Naomi must make their choices. Ruth was not in a position to ‘change the system’, as would be the goal of a ‘liberation hermeneutic’. Rather, she did what she could to keep herself and her mother-in-law alive. Her story reminds me to respect and indeed to honour those suffering women who do what they can for survival within the traditional structures of the society in which they find themselves. I should not critique the Filipino girl who goes to a rich country hoping for the survival of her family any more than I should critique Ruth for approaching Boaz. For those of us who have more choices, the call is to work in various ways to change those systemic structures which force women to consider the options chosen by Ruth and that Filipino child.

Finally, a word about suffering. Dorothee Soelle (1975:68–74) writes of three phases of suffering. She distinguishes between lack of any action in a context of
powerlessness, conquest within existing structures, and finally behaviour in solidarity to produce changed structures. As I read the story of Ruth through Soelle’s lenses, the threshing floor is a stage two story, one in which Ruth seeks to overcome suffering within existing structures. The story does not move to stage three, seeking to change structures. That is probably how life really was for most women of ancient Israel, if indeed they were able to move as far with their suffering as did Ruth. It is surely how life really is for most economically marginalised women of our twenty-first century. Sadly, for Ruth, the available means of overcoming the suffering of economic marginalisation required taking on another kind of suffering—the use of her body to gain a platform for using her voice to ask for change. Yes, let us commend her cleverness in using her voice; yes, let us see that her economic marginalisation was overcome. But let us not gloss over the reality that she had to use her body (even if that use did not end up in intercourse at the threshing floor). Let us not gloss over the fact that the option of persuading a wealthy man to enter a marriage is not an option available to most of the world’s economically marginalised women, then or now. Let us not gloss over the fact that the structures in ancient Israel did not change.

In my previous writing about the story of Ruth, I have suggested that the conclusion of the book can be read as an eschatological vision of a ‘peaceable community’ (Sakenfeld 1999a; 1999b:87). I still believe that it is appropriate and indeed important to look beyond Israel’s specific androcentric societal structures to basic themes visible in the picture of Bethlehem at the end of the story, themes such as ethnic inclusion, valuing of both young and old, valuing women as well as men, orderly change rather than fighting and bloodshed, leaving no one lonely and isolated, and economic sustenance for all. But that vision must not cause us to lose sight of the suffering of Ruth. Israel’s achievement of that vision was surely limited and incomplete, as we look back on it now. But our very criticism of the Biblical story should serve to remind us of how incomplete is our own achievement of such a vision. So long as there are Ruths in our world, God calls any who are able to work for change.

NOTES

1 This paper was presented at the meeting of the Old Testament Society of South Africa, September 2001, while the author was a guest lecturer attached to the Old Testament Department at the University of South Africa (UNISA). The author expresses her gratitude for the generous hospitality of the Department and the University.

2 Campbell (1975:138) illustrates the line of argumentation against sexual intimacy in this
scene; Bledstein (1993:125) takes the opposite view.

3 Several scholars have suggested the possibility that the Book of Ruth either was written by a woman or at least records a story in a version handed down primarily in women’s circles. See especially Goitein (1988), Bledstein (1993), and Van Dijk-Hemmes (1993), and Brenner (1993).

4 For an example of this in published format, see Chiu (1997).

5 For a study of many aspects of this problem with particular focus on the Asian scene and the United States, see Brock & Thistlethwaite (1996).

6 Note that Williams and Soelle are using the terminology of ‘powerlessness’ slightly differently. For Williams, it means that Hagar ‘cannot set [her] own agenda’, not that she can take no action at all. For Soelle, powerlessness means that a person is emotionally paralysed by suffering, unable to name it or to take any action at all.

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