ABSTRACT

In narrative therapy, as invented and developed by Michael White and David Epston, people are encouraged to challenge the stories that are told to – and about – them by the ‘empowered’ society. Less empowered people in society are led to believe a lot of lies about themselves, told by the controlling and dominating part of society. We call those lies ‘grand narratives’. The grand narrative should be challenged and replaced by a more balanced and complete version of people’s lives. The Ruth narrative could help a lot with such a process. We could describe it as ‘pastoral storytelling’ (Eugene Peterson), whereby people get the chance to identify with certain role-players in – or outside – the narrative and thus be stimulated to rewrite their own narratives. In this study the readers’ responses of two groups of traumatised women are compared to the responses of two groups of traumatised men. How do these different types of people react to the Ruth narrative, and what help do they get from this narrative to challenge the grand narratives enforced on them by the dominant society? There are several possible perspectives from which the book can be read, as well as different angles from the viewpoint of the characters in the story. These are all used as pointers according to which the reader can respond to the text of Ruth.

A  INTRODUCTION

In narrative therapy, as invented and developed by Michael White and David Epston, people are encouraged to challenge the stories that are told to, and about, them by the ‘empowered’ society. Less empowered people in society are led to believe a lot of lies about themselves, told by the controlling and dominating part of society. We call those lies ‘grand narratives’. The grand narrative should be challenged and replaced by a more balanced and complete version of people’s lives.

The Ruth narrative could help a lot with such a process. We could describe it as ‘pastoral storytelling’ (Eugene Peterson), whereby people get the chance to identify with certain role-players in – or outside – the narrative and thus be stimulated to rewrite their own narratives.
There are many examples of women readers’ responses to Ruth. But do we know how men respond to Ruth? I’m not speaking of theological ‘professional’ men who over centuries dictated how Ruth and her co-role-players should be acting, interpreted and made relevant in the modern context. I’m talking about men without theological empowerment, theologically not ‘qualified’ to prescribe to Ruth and her colleagues what their motives and viewpoints should be.

In this study the readers’ responses of two groups of traumatized women are compared to the responses of two groups of traumatized men. How do these different types of people react to the Ruth narrative, and what help do they get from this narrative to challenge the grand narratives enforced on them by the dominant society?

B PASTORAL STORYTELLING

Because the book Ruth is written in an incomplete and elusive way, the story can be read and responded to in various different ways. There are many gaps in this narrative that have to be filled in by the reader. This quality of the book, as well as the fact that the characters in this narrative find themselves in dead ends, make Ruth ideally suited as a therapeutic instrument by which people can find new hope for themselves. The fact that it is normally women that find themselves in such desperate situations, adds to the value of the book Ruth for liberating therapy. In the research here we can see that Ruth can be read in a variety of ways, thus offering deliverance in various difficult situations.

1 Bible narratives as point of departure for ‘pastoral storytelling’

When people find themselves in a desperate situation, new possibilities of life can become a reality if these people are exposed to other narratives of hope. Eugene Peterson argues that the pastor should make more use of biblical narratives to expand people’s life potential and give them consolation and direction in a crisis. He calls it ‘pastoral storytelling’ (1980:87). Pastoral storytelling consists of the pastor, together with the client, exposing a biblical narrative to the pastoral situation. During that exposure the client is encouraged to reinterpret the biblical narrative in the light of his/her situation and to try and find new life potential and solutions.

2 ‘Pastoral storytelling’ as a strategy of narrative therapy

In his explanation of what ‘pastoral storytelling’ is, Peterson actually conveys the principles of narrative therapy. The biblical material stimulates the client on the one hand to identify with certain circumstances or certain role-players in the Bible narrative so that he/she can start writing a new salvation story. On the other hand, the biblical material presents the pastor with a chance to become a
'skilled collaborator' for the client helping with the rewriting process (Peterson 1980:97). It is the pastor’s task to become involved in the client’s life story, ‘... always maintaining a stance of curiosity, and always asking questions to which you genuinely do not know the answers’ (Morgan 2000:2).

In narrative therapy the main objective is to challenge the ‘grand narrative’ that is usually a dominant and oppressive interpretation of the client’s life, and to put an alternative story with unique outcomes in its place. The ‘grand narrative’ or the ‘dominant narratives of our culture’ (Freedman & Combs 1996:39) or, as Foucault puts it, ‘grand abstractions’ (Freedman & Combs 1996:39), or ‘culture as story’ and ‘grand designs’ (White 1995:16-18) are all terminology that are part of the ‘politics of power’ (Freedman & Combs 1996:37) against which the therapist should enable and empower the client to construct his/her own life story. A ‘grand narrative’ is the viewpoint / perceptions / opinions that the dominant section of society forces onto the marginalized part of society.

An important principle of narrative therapy is the principle of externalizing, separating the problem from the client: ‘The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem’ (Carey & Russell 2002:1). Along with externalizing, the technique of deconstruction is of vital importance, because it helps the client to knock over the myths that society imposes on them (White 1995:19-26). Carey & Russell (2002:2) put it as follows: ‘When it is understood that people’s relationships with problems are shaped by history and culture, it is possible to explore how gender, race, culture, sexuality, class and other relations of power have influenced the construction of the problem.’ Only then it becomes possible that a new salvation story can be written for the client, as well as by the client. It is in this process that the Bible narratives become an important catalyst.

The Bible narratives also give an opportunity to the client to identify with one or more of the role-players in the story as a type of role model. Bible narratives can also help the client to recognize other role-players in the story that could just as well have been part of the client’s own unique life story. This identification and recognition can, in the first place, be an instrument to deconstruct the unfriendly ‘grand narrative’ in a person’s life and put it in perspective, and secondly it can help to discover unique outcomes in a client’s life that have previously been neglected or ignored.

Unique outcomes are those episodes in a person’s life proving that the ‘grand narrative’ of his/her life, or the dominant, problem filled story concerning the client’s life is not true. Unique outcomes are the client’s proof that there are other options for his/her life. White uses the term ‘multi-storied’ life to make the therapist notice all the sub-stories in a person’s life that differ from the dominant ‘grand narrative’ that has been invented by society (White...
The therapist should try to find those sub-stories to empower the client to construct a new life story.

3 The Ruth narrative as ‘narrative of liberation’ for oppressed people

The Ruth narrative can easily be seen as an insignificant Bible story because of its petite role-players. It is, however, exactly these petite and insignificant role-players that make it possible for marginalized people to identify with this narrative. Ruth, the Moabite woman, for example, finds herself on the periphery of society, not knowing whether she belongs in the covenant community or not. Nevertheless, she becomes the great grandmother of King David. Further, we see Naomi that complains in the same way as Job of old. At the end, however, she discovers that the Lord has provided her with a redeemer. Naomi and Ruth, finding themselves defenceless against overpowering odds, eventually show the way to liberation.

The scenario mentioned above fits in with women finding themselves trapped in chauvinistic societies where they have become victims of their societies’ ‘grand narratives’ concerning women. In the light of new legislation, however, it can happen that men also find themselves in feeble situations where they get stuck in dead ends. Men can just as easily become victims of a chauvinistic society.

C INTERPRETATION POSSIBILITIES BY THE READER’S PERSPECTIVES OF THE RUTH NARRATIVE

Van Dyk’s (2002:209–224) four different methods of reading Ruth are being used here as point of departure. A fifth and sixth reading method are also added as possibilities of interpretation (cf. C 5 and C 6 below). Van Dyk’s reading methods have been chosen as basis for this research, because they were easy to understand and simple to differentiate by the groups that were part of this project. The following reading methods will all be illustrated by examples from present-day literature.

1 Reading Ruth with the grain of the text

This is Van Dyk’s (2002:215–217) first reading method. It has a ‘problem-less’ perspective on society and supposes that the rights of women are adequately protected by the laws and customs of society. With a little bit of creativity and courage Ruth manages to convince the citizens to care for her needs. Van Dyk applies this method of reading as ‘a positive message of self-empowerment’.

This method can also be described as a method that asks no questions to or against the text. A typical example is that of Nina Smit, *Vroue soos Jy* (1995), presenting Ruth as the ideal woman never questioning her circumstances or the
society causing her particular circumstances. The risks that she has to take in order to survive are totally ignored. The following translated passage demonstrates it well:

Ruth is willing to work hard when she arrives in Bethlehem. Do the housewife chores sometimes become too much to you? The Lord expects you to see these chores as a delight … Ruth is delightfully obedient when Naomi gives her a strange command. She does not make excuses, but obediently does what is expected of her. Are you willing to obey God unconditionally? (Smit 1995:118).

2 Reading Ruth with a romantic perspective

This second reading method of Van Dyk (2002:217-218) implies that the reader takes the most positive and ‘polished’ view of the text possible. Then we see a Biblical ‘Cinderella love story’ where Ruth and Boaz fall madly in love with each other. This interpretation is not cynical of life and Van Dyk applies it as ‘the need to work positively towards solutions’.

According to the romantic method all the emphasis is on Ruth and Boaz. They become victims of their feelings for each other – so much so that Ruth cannot prevent herself from exposing herself to Boaz on the threshing floor. Boaz likewise cannot contain his feelings for Ruth and becomes a silly old fool declaring his love for the young woman.

Alicia Ostriker (1994:90) demonstrates the romantic view of the Ruth narrative by telling Ruth’s experience as follows:

Sparks fly upward from the bonfires. I am at the edges of the circles, walking swiftly. I uncover the landowner’s body in the threshing house. He wakes, bewildered. Straw in his hair. A large thick body one must admire for its lingering strength, through which sadness courses like brine. Kindly eyes in their network of wrinkles. Rich, honest, gentle, childless man. I am like the sheaves, filled with nourishment, lying at his feet. Do I know that I am beautiful? Yes, naturally, my beauty is my language; with it I converse with Boaz. Generous middle-aged Boaz will possess my youth …

3 Reading Ruth with a feminist perspective

The third reading method of Ruth by Van Dyk (2002:218) supposes that the laws of the community are corrupt and should be opposed. Ruth then becomes the figure resisting society, thus initiating liberation from her predicament.

Sannie Reimer Torn, for example, draws attention to Ruth’s daring and, according to male opinion, offensive behaviour. Torn reasons that the Bible has been written exclusively by men for men. She objects against the assumption
by the male church that Ruth was a very virtuous woman, and concludes as follows (Torn 1994:346):

Courageous thrusts into the forbidden were never encouraged, since inner completion and self-empowerment were never valued. The permission to reach for both is something most women have only come to as adults, long after the Book of Ruth has been closed and nearly forgotten (my italics).

But it is not only Ruth, necessarily, that becomes the ‘freedom fighter’ for the captive of the grand narrative. It can also be Orpah who decides to rebel against the system by escaping from the narrative at an early stage. By her escape from the narrative she makes it clear that she is not willing to collaborate with the oppressor (cf. E 1[1] and E 2[3] below).

4 Reading Ruth with a ‘The end justifies the means’ perspective

The fourth reading method Van Dyk calls ‘The end justifies the means’ perspective and describes it as ‘a man, trapped by two sly women’ (2002:218-219). It is a pragmatic method encouraging women to make use of people in authoritative positions and to manipulate them to their own advantage. This interpretation can be understood from a man’s point of view on the one hand, or from a woman’s point of view on the other hand.

A more male oriented perspective is that of Loader (1987:109) sympathizing with the man whose power is abused by the two women:

A clear erotic aspect emerges: cosmetics, secrecy, a drop of alcohol, darkness, and even a daring bed scene. All happens according to Naomi’s delicately planned scheme to catch a man for Ruth (my translation).

Sakenfeld is, on the other hand, an example of this reading method from a woman’s point of view. She calls it a ‘theology of survival’ (2002:175). She quotes the story of Hagar in Genesis 16 en 21 and the story of Ruth as examples of women that were helplessly exploited by society, but nonetheless made use of the system for their own survival:

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 honor those suffering women who do what they can for survival within the traditional structures of the society in which they find themselves (Sakenfeld 2002:175).
5 Reading Ruth with a very religious perspective on God’s omnipotence

According to this perspective God is almighty and in control of everything. Female 1, one of my group members during my group research in 2003, puts this method in perspective:

God provides for Ruth and Naomi, and they walk their way with explicit faith, the way that they know God has chosen for them. Their actions are motivated by a deep-rooted faith in their God, the God of Israel.

This method assumes that role-players’ emotions and decisions are irrelevant, because it is God in his omnipotence that provides for everything. Accordingly Vosloo (1986:65) reckons that the story of Ruth reminds the people of Yahweh of the fact that it was he who planned everything and gave the Moabite woman a place in the covenant. The God of Israel has a big heart, and just as he has called Abraham from the gentile world, he still calls gentile people into his covenant.

6 Reading Ruth as a tragedy

During the therapy sessions this reading method was suggested by Female 2. She presented the tragedy as her personal view of the Ruth narrative. This reading method calls all the attention to Orpah that vanishes very rapidly from the story, because she had lost her beloved Kilion and then was rejected by Naomi afterwards.

The tragic perspective can be compared to a Greek tragedy or Italian opera where everything delightful and hopeful is wrenches out of the hero’s life in an absurd way. Female 2 describes this reading method as:

‘So much pain that time and again has to be covered up’ (October 2003).

The difference between the feministic and tragic method is that the feminist wants Orpah to decide for herself that she does not want to go with Naomi, thus liberating herself, while the tragic viewpoint gives Orpah no choice: She has to leave Naomi and vanish from the story to continue her own life in a senseless and lonely way.

The worth of this perspective probably lies in the catharsis ensuing from the pain-stricken woman identifying with the tragic figure in the narrative.
UNRAVELLING THE PLOT IN THE RUTH NARRATIVE THROUGH THE VIEWPOINT OF THE VARIOUS CHARACTERS / ROLE-PLAYERS IN THE NARRATIVE

It is not only through the reading method that this narrative can be interpreted, but also through the perspectives of the different role-players in the narrative itself. The reader of the Ruth narrative would probably find it easier to identify with certain characters than with some of the others. There will be different emotions involved with the different characters in the narrative. These emotions will establish with which of the role-players the reader can identify or which character the reader can respond to. Especially if the narrative gets a grasp on the reader it becomes difficult not to get involved with the characters in the narrative. Peterson (1980:97-105) argues that the pastoral value of the Ruth narrative increases the moment you try to understand the plot from the various viewpoints of the different characters in the narrative.

This approach requires that the following two questions be answered: (a) Is there a character in the Ruth narrative drawing so near to you that she/he becomes a role model for your own life? (b) Which other role-players in the Ruth narrative remind you of people playing an important role in your life?

You don’t have to confine yourself to the main role-players. Sometimes it is the marginalized people in the story that addresses the reader because of her/his own marginalizing situation.

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH, FOCUSING ON ORPAH AS ROLE MODEL

Most likely, Orpah is one of the most marginalized persons in the Ruth narrative, because along with Elimelech and his sons she disappears from the narrative within the first chapter. In this research I met with two groups of traumatized / marginalized women (9 altogether) and two groups of traumatized / marginalized men (11 altogether). I am a full-time pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church working mainly with privileged people of the Afrikaans-speaking society. Therefore the four groups consisted of traumatized / marginalized people within the Afrikaans-speaking society.

We followed a reading program of the Ruth narrative over a period of six meetings per group. During those reading meetings we not only read through the narrative, but also discussed the legal and socio-political predicaments of women at the time of the judges. We discussed the different reading methods as well the different possibilities of identifying with characters in the Ruth narrative as role models or identifying them as role-players in the narrative of one’s own life. After these group meetings I met each member individually to evaluate their participation in the Ruth narrative.
Sometimes participants identified with more than one character as role model. For the sake of this paper I will simplify the results and then focus on Orpah as role model.

Of the nine women participating in this project, three participants identified mainly with Ruth as role model, two with Orpah, two with Naomi, one with Boaz and one with Obed. Of the eleven men participating in this project, one participant did not associate with the Ruth narrative at all. He found the plot and its characters too weak and fragile for readers to identify with. He would rather identify with an action hero like James Bond (007) or The Saint (Roger Moore) and a plot where things get sorted out by physical and intellectual superiority by the main role model. Of the remaining ten participating men two identified mainly with Ruth as role model, four with Orpah, two with Naomi, one with Boaz and one with Elimelech.

Interestingly enough, although Orpah was identified as a role model in six out of twenty cases, she has never been identified as another role-player in someone’s life. I think the reason for that is that she was so marginalized in the narrative that even the readers (all 20 of them!) did not notice her!

1 The two women as Orpah

The two women, Female 1 and Female 2, identifying with Orpah, did it in two different ways. Female 1 interpreted the role of Ruth as that of a freedom fighter, whereas Female 2 identified with Orpah in a tragic way. This correlates with their divergent methods of reading the Ruth narrative. The ‘freedom fighter’ read Ruth with a feministic perspective, whereas the ‘tragic figure’ read Ruth with a tragic perspective. Here follows an exposition of their reading experiences with Orpah in the Ruth narrative.

1 The big escape – Female 1

| Method of reading: | Feministic. |
| Angle of incidence: | Escape. |
| Role model: | Orpah. |
| Other role-players: | Ruth, as the other types of women, manipulating men. |
| Outcome: | Self understanding. A catharsis of feelings of desolation and disappointment. She could legalize herself as a woman of a strange beauty and could break the hold of the community’s grand narrative on her life. |
Female 1 told me that previously she had read Ruth with a romantic perspective. She now realizes that the Bible is a complex book that can be read more critically. She does not see Ruth as the hero anymore. She understands Ruth as a namby-pamby woman manipulating men to her own benefit. Female 1 differs from her: She is the more critical and creative woman who does not fit in with the grand narrative of the chauvinistic world. She does not want to play games on their terms. That’s why it was important to deconstruct their grand narrative as power-play against women, as well as power-play amongst women competing for the approval of the ‘empowered’ society.

Female 1 rewrote the Ruth narrative, and called it ‘Orpah’. Her retold story speaks for itself.

In the region of Moab there was a woman Orpah and a lass Ruth. Both of them were part of their respective patriarchal households, Orpah as the eldest in her household, and Ruth as the youngest in hers.

Machlon and Kilion came with their parents, Elimelech and Naomi, from Bethlehem into this land with its foreign gods, to seek a living for themselves. Awful droughts, pests and misery struck them in their homeland. It was the month when the leaves fell off the trees.

Machlon and Kilion were not vigorous and healthy men …

Ruth was a beautiful lass, someone with a delicate beauty, a frailty that made any man feel like a knight on a white horse. She knew how to use it to her own advantage. It became her manipulative weapon! To the sons from Bethlehem she became a goddess! She enchanted them. Machlon, the firstborn, had the right to ask first.

Clan wars hit the Moabite region severely. Ruth had no choice. Marriageable men were scarce. Here was a man with strong family ties. He could look after her. Rather him than nothing.

Orpah, her friend, was a woman with a different type of beauty. Hers was a beauty that did not appeal so much, a beauty that asked too many questions and could not conform. She was a beauty not on the ordinary man’s to-do-list. Orpah was the eldest daughter, and her time to get married was running out. As Kilion’s second choice, she saw a chance to escape the patriarch’s moaning and groaning, an escape from the patriarch’s wife attempting to cover up everything that is wrong in their household!

Orpah became Kilion’s second best …

Ruth, on the other hand, flourished! Machlon and Kilion worshipped her. Naomi accepted her as the daughter she never had.
Orpah became the water-carrier to the ‘big happy family’ and became all the more quiet.

Orpah kept her passions a secret. She had to, because passion in a woman was unthinkable. Her questions about being a woman, being a human, to be someone, Orpah kept to herself. Only where God could see and hear, did she dare to shout it out aloud: ‘Why do you give life to a woman who is allowed only to breathe, but not live life fully? God of Israel, they say you are a God of love. No! You are a cruel God!’

Ruth laughed softly and womanly. Orpah eventually became silent.

Kilion’s hands on her body were short-lived … his passionate thoughts were with Ruth … his passion for Ruth dumped in Orpah … another bucket of water carried by her from the well … breathing only for survival … living, out of the question!

In Moab the descendants of Elimelech prayed for rain and prosperity; Orpah prayed for freedom and life. The God of Israel listened, he answered in a strange way … God also does not conform!

The sons of Elimelech died tragically after a short but severe sickbed: a virus infection. Naomi was devastated, and Ruth played the role of the mournful widow intensely. But not Orpah. Orpah had a glitter in the eye and a subtle bounce in her stride!

‘Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.’ That was Ruth’s choice, a reflection of her namby-pamby life. Naomi will look after her!

Erratically Orpah began to breathe and felt the life rushing through her veins. She spread her purple cloak over her shoulders, her hair plaited with beads, and with the rhythm of ancient drums she began dancing barefoot through the meadows …

Pain – Female 2

Method of reading: Tragic.
Angle of incidence: Pain and rejection.
Role model: Orpah.
Other role-players: Naomi, as her parents.
Kilion, as her deceased fiancé and lover.

Outcome: A catharsis of tragic events in her life. Her husband (Male 1, nr 3 below) understands her emotions and vulnerability by her manipulative family.

Female 2 absolutely identifies with Orpah as role model, but in a tragic way. Things have happened in her past that took the meaning of life from her. In a time of need her mother pushed her aside and she had to cope on her own with her dilemma. By identifying with Orpah she could experience the catharsis of telling her sad story. Suddenly it was not solely her own problem, but she had someone, Orpah, to share it with and compare it with. She describes her situation as follows:

Ruth is a tragic tale. There is so much pain that continually has to be covered up. Orpah that is sent back. Orpah really wanted to go with Ruth and Naomi, but they did not allow her to. She accepted her misfortune, turned around and continued her day-to-day life. But it is a life without meaning.

Naomi is full of plans, Ruth has Boaz and her feelings are on high, but Orpah shares no emotions with them. Naomi and Ruth are each other’s ‘band aid’. Naomi’s ‘band aid’ was Orpah and Ruth. Ruth’s ‘band aid’ was Boaz. Orpah, who thought that Naomi was her ‘band aid’, suddenly discovers that her ‘band aid’ has been pulled off. She is now on her own. Was she strong enough to be on her own? She no longer attracts the attention, nobody notices her anymore. I also feel like that …

The paintings below depict her feelings of loneliness and despair.
2 The four men as Orpah

In a man-oriented world one would expect most men to perceive the world as a place where they are happy and in control of things. During the Ruth reading project with the two groups of traumatized men, however, this did not seem to be true. Of the four men identifying with Orpah as role model, only one did it in a feministic way, thus empowering himself to break loose from the grand narrative imposed on him by society and his family (cf. Male 1, nr. 3 below). The remaining three men identified themselves with Orpah as a tragic figure. By that, though, they did not depict themselves as men without power, struggling with life in a dead-end situation.

3 Orpah empowers herself! – Male 1

| Method of reading: | Romantic and Feministic. |
| Angle of incidence: | I know I can. |
| Role model: | Orpah ← In Male 1’s eyes. |
| | Son of Naomi. ← In the eyes of the community / family. |
| Other role-players: | Naomi, as his parents-in-law. |
| | Ruth, as his wife, being controlled by her parents. |
| | Naomi, as his wife, trying to control Male 1. |
| | Boaz, as Male 1’s mother, someone to count on. |
| | Elimelech, as Male 1’s father, very religious. |
| Outcome: | Understanding of own situation. Deconstruction of the community’s perspective of Male 1. Learned from Orpah to break away and not to allow the in-laws to manipulate him any more. |

On the one hand Male 1 reads the Ruth narrative with a romantic perspective: The two main characters are Ruth and Boaz. Within 24 hours after they have met, Ruth gave herself to Boaz. The romanticism is further emphasized by the fact that Boaz could not resist Ruth, even though he was wealthy and needed nobody to survive in life. All indications are that they were very happy and had many more children.
‘To choose a role model means that I must decide who I am,’ says Male 1. Other readers with big traumas would probably find it easier to identify with a role model in Ruth. Male 1’s role model, Orpah, is only partly a representation of his characteristics. He can identify with her, because:

Orpah had stayed with her mother-in-law for a long time, she had done what her mother-in-law told her to do, regardless of the consequences.

Then one day she decided to follow her heart and break away. She went back to her own people. And she got on very well amongst her own people! It was a familiar environment and well-known circumstances. Although it was Naomi that eventually told her to go home, it was Orpah herself that decided to do exactly that long ago.

Orpah then married a romantic, wealthy and sexy man. Nobody condemned her for the decision she made. On the contrary, they complimented her for her independent decision to leave Naomi and determine her own future.

Another role model in the Ruth narrative, being identified with Male 1, are the two sons of Naomi. Male 1 himself does not want to identify with them as role models, but the grand narrative of the society and of his family forces him into that role. They see him as the weakling that could not achieve much. He is not very social either. Therefore it is not worthwhile to say much about Naomi’s two sons. Accordingly they disappear from the story very rapidly.

Very important here is that Male 1 does not see himself as Naomi’s sons. The grand narrative does that. Male 1 believes himself to be Orpah.

His reading method of Ruth is feministic, because Orpah has to free herself from the role that the empowered society allots to her. In the same manner white males in South-Africa find themselves more and more in Orpah’s helpless situation. Although society wants her (them) to be helpless, she does not have to be helpless.

Other role-players in the Ruth narrative that represent role-players in his life, are his parents-in-law that are identified with Naomi. Like Naomi they manipulate their family only for their own benefit. Male 1’s own wife plays two roles: On the one hand she is Ruth, being manipulated and misused by her parents. On the other hand she becomes Naomi herself, manipulating her husband in a similar way than her parents manipulate her and she tries to manipulate him. In this regard Male 1 has become Orpah that does not allow his in-laws or his wife to manipulate him anymore.

In a positive way Male 1 has rediscovered his parents in the roles of Boaz, Male 1’s mother, and Elimelech, his father. Boaz, his mother, is always some-
one to reckon on. Elimelech, his father, is a God-fearing person and someone to look up to.

The outcome of the reading project for Male 1 was that he found a new identity and learned from Orpah to break away and not to allow the in-laws to manipulate him any more.

4

The Ruth narrative as seen by myself – Male 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of reading:</th>
<th>Tragic.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angle of incidence:</td>
<td>Rejection.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role model:</td>
<td>Orpah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other role-players:</td>
<td>Ruth, as his brothers.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Naomi, as his parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome:</td>
<td>Self-understanding and a new future. Reconciliation between him and his parents, as well as a better understanding and repentance by his parents.</td>
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Male 2 not only identifies with Orpah, but he actually even has an admiration for her. She interests him the most. He describes her position as follows:

Orpah was exuberant and loved Naomi intensely. She wanted to be available to Naomi and be with her. She already knew pain because of the loss of her husband, although, because of their two different worlds, she probably did not have a very satisfying marriage. Her pain continued because Orpah never was part of Naomi’s plans. Ruth was part of it, maybe because she had more potential of worth to Naomi.

To his parents Male 2 was like Orpah. He was the eldest and experienced the pressure of great expectations by them. He felt misused like a slave. While at school, they told him that they loved him and that they believed in his potential to make it to the top. The pain was that they never demonstrated their love. After he left school he made a fiasco of his studies and his parents turned against him. They told him he was a problem child. Where did their love disappear to? They ignored him and put all their energy into his brother Dewald. Nonetheless he still loved his brothers Dewald and Pieter a lot. Male 2 applies his situation to a new version of the Ruth narrative:

Orpah and Ruth also loved each other. They could not make choices
of their own. Choices were made on their behalf. Naomi thought only of herself. Even when it came to Ruth, Naomi was still thinking only of herself!

Likewise, although his parents boasted of his school marks, awards and achievements, they did it on their own behalf. Male 2 continues with his own version of the Ruth narrative:

Orpah was very sad, but nonetheless decided to turn back to Moab. Back to her own people, life, love and ambitions. I believe that Orpah and Ruth had contact all the time. Orpah, the exuberant one, knew that God never sleeps and therefore supported and loved Ruth all the way.

In the same manner he looked forward and left his pain behind his back, because he knew God would rectify his situation. Male 2 will use his ambitions, dreams and intelligence to reach the top.

Naomi used Ruth as a pawn. A pawn is the piece in chess with the least value, but becomes a queen when it reaches the backline. Likewise Ruth became a queen because the greatest king of all time was born from her offspring.

Dewald made a success of his life and the Lord gave him a wonderful wife to support him. His life is a living testimony of God’s grace.

Male 2 lost his parents’ love, and was in the process of loosing his wife as well.

After a very big accident that should have left him dead, his parents realized their mistake when his brother Dewald talked to them about Male 2’s real pain. God opened their eyes. He nevertheless still experienced pain and anger towards his parents. It was the Ruth narrative that opened his eyes for the possibility to be healed from that pain and anger. Male 2 continues his Ruth narrative in a positive tone:

Ruth and Orpah are rejoicing today. Naomi discovered what she had been doing all the time. She tried to put things right and, so I believe, returned to Orpah. Together they discovered a renewed future.

Naomi never reckoned with the true love that existed between Boas and Ruth. She also did not reckon with the inner power and perseverance that existed within Orpah. Naomi also did not take into account that God had a plan through all this. In the meanwhile Orpah had married and found a wonderful companion, the same as Ruth. Orpah is happy and has forgotten the pain of the past.
Together these role-players look back into their past and realize that God is the biggest planter of barley and the biggest kinsman-redeemer. God is the one who bought Naomi’s piece of land, as well as the land of Male 2’s household and family. Today, after much sorrow and misfortune, they are closer to each other. It has already started to change after his car accident, but it was the Ruth narrative, and especially Orpah as his role model, that made Male 2 realize his problem, as well as the new possibilities, and brought the big difference.

5

Doing my own thing – Male 3

Method of reading: Tragic.

Angle of incidence: I don’t outstay my welcome.

Role model: Orpah.

Other role-players: Naomi, as his mother.

Ruth as Chris, his younger brother.

Outcome: Self-understanding. Can determine his childhood as the foundation for who and what he is today.

Male 3 is Orpah. Like Orpah he does not force himself onto people. He will rather pull back. His mother is like Naomi, because she has lost four husbands in all. She is the improviser that makes plans to help them survive. He does not trust anybody. He will never outstay his welcome. Just like Orpah:

Orpah had been told to go home, to her own people. That was a shock, because she thought she was part of Naomi’s people! After she had been asked to go for the second time, she told Naomi: ‘OK, I’ll go as you wish.’

He sees his childhood in the Ruth narrative. He was small when his father died. As the eldest he had to help raise the children. His stepfather died 3 years later, leaving a twin behind: completely Male 3’s responsibility. Nobody looked after him; he had to look after everyone. Through that he learned to cope on his own.

Orpah did not neglect her duty towards Naomi. She only respected Naomi’s request to vanish from her life. She separated from Naomi to relieve her mother-in-law from responsibilities. Orpah is not as intrusive as Ruth. Probably Naomi had a greater love for Ruth. Orpah respected it as such.

The outcome of Male 3’s identification with Orpah is that he has a better un-
derstanding of his situation and of himself. He also realizes the effect of his childhood on his role as adult person.

Chris, his younger brother, is Ruth. He always pursues his goals and presses for what is due to him. Ruth clings to Naomi for her own sake, while Orpah would rather sacrifice herself for the other two.

Male 3’s reading method is basically tragic. There is, however, also a hint of a feminist reading by him:

Orpah is a victim of a hostile system that does not want to accommodate her. Eventually, however, it is her own decision to remove herself from the scene. She accepts the responsibility for her own life. Orpah has not really been kicked out; she decided on her own not to overstay her welcome. She managed to get on with her life and reach the top on her own.

### Naomi – Male 4

| Method of reading: | Tragic and ‘The end justifies the means’ perspective. |
| Angle of incidence: | Not wanted. Feel lonely. |
| Role model: | Orpah, who was thrown away. |
| | Ruth, who was used. |
| Other role-players: | Naomi, as his mother & father, in the main role as manipulators. |
| | Boaz, as his brother. |
| Outcome: | Self-understanding. Peace in his mind that the fault was not his, after all. He does not know yet what the future holds in stock for him. |

Male 4 identifies with two role models in the Ruth narrative. He mainly perceives himself as Orpah who was thrown away. In a lesser sense he has played the role of Ruth as well, the one who was manipulated and misused by Naomi. Naomi, his mother and father, have the main role in his narrative. As a child he was the naughty boy who had been scolded continually. He was the one to do all the dirty jobs. His older brother, playing the role of Boaz in Male 4’s narrative, was the only person who came to his rescue.

Male 4’s version of the Ruth narrative speaks for itself. He entitles it as
‘Naomi’, because the manipulator plays the main role in his previous life. It is only Part 1, because he is still unsure of what the future holds in stock for him. He feels very lonely, and wants to finish Part 2 of this narrative in the company of a friend.


This book’s name should have been Naomi, because Ruth was only used to bring comfort to Naomi.

The story does not tell how old Naomi, Elimelech and her two sons Machlon and Kilion were, or how old Elimelech was when he died. I assume that the two sons had not married because Elimelech was faithful to his belief in Yahweh. When he died, it was Naomi, not such a loyal believer in Yahweh, who encouraged her sons to marry Moabite women. She did this solely to ensure that she would have a kinsman-redeemer in her old age. Thus they married Orpah and Ruth, two Moabite women selected by Naomi. After ten years of married life there still was no kinsman-redeemer for Naomi. Then Machlon en Kilion died.

As a result Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem. She decided to return because she had heard that the Lord had provided food for her people. But Naomi had no land to farm on. Why would she return then? She already had a plan with Boaz, her kinsman. It would not amaze me if she had something to do with the death of Elimelech, her late husband. It was he who forbid his sons to marry Moabite women. It would also not be a shock to me if it was Naomi who was responsible for the death of her two sons, because after ten years they could not supply redeemers to her.

I think they had a tough time in Moab and saw an opportunity to return to Bethlehem. She had already planned how to use Boaz to her own advantage. When she told her daughters-in-law to return to their respective homes, she already connived with Ruth not to listen to her instructions. Ruth was beautiful and attractive, and Naomi knew that Boaz would fall for her. It is so ironic that Naomi blessed her daughters with God’s blessing to give them good husbands and homes, but in the meanwhile she accused God of turning against her.

I think Ruth was the first one to cry, and not by chance. She did it on purpose to affect Orpah to become fragile and an easy target for Naomi’s plan. Ruth conspired with Naomi in this matter. Naomi told them that she wouldn’t be able to give them new husbands, just to get rid of Orpah. She knew there would be no redeemer for her if she did not arrange with Ruth to go with her. Who would otherwise look after her in her old age? Orpah realized she would not win
Naomi over to her side. Ruth played her role brilliantly. The part where Naomi tried to persuade Ruth to do the same as Orpah by returning to her own people, was only part of the theatrical effect to deceive Orpah. Ruth played her part so well because Naomi promised her the wealth of Boaz in Judea. The words with which Ruth promised her loyalty to Naomi were taught to her by Naomi, all part of the plan to mislead Orpah.

Eventually Naomi discontinued her plea with Ruth, because Orpah was already gone. They were delighted then, and they sang and danced, because they defeated Orpah. They took the road to Bethlehem.

As they arrived in Bethlehem, Naomi told all the women that she was embittered because the Lord had turned against her. She knew that it was true because she knew that God was angry at her for her share in the deaths of Elimelech and her two sons. She also knew that God was aware of her conspiracy against Orpah.

How did Ruth know where to pick up grain? There were many farmers to choose from. How could she find Boaz’s fields if Naomi did not mention it to her? Although Boaz was a believer, he was seduced by these two women. I assume that Ruth was so beautiful that Naomi could use her against Boaz.

Boaz acknowledged the beauty of Ruth. That’s why he looked after her and gave her permission to pick up as much grain as she wanted to. Ruth flattered him with sweet words and so got his attention. She got a hold on Boaz, something that could not be achieved by other women. Naomi then helped Ruth to catch Boaz and seduce him on the threshing floor.

**CONCLUSION**

The above recorded narratives are the re-authored interpretations of the Ruth narrative by people in the light of their own experiences. These interpretations of Ruth led to the re-authoring of the readers’ own narratives/lives (cf. White 1995).

Personally I could find no difference between the way women interpret the Ruth narrative on the one hand and the way men identified with the narrative on the other hand. Men are just as fragile as women when it comes to relationships. Maybe we should refrain from speaking of women traumatized by the chauvinistic world of men, and rather think in terms of persons (women and men) traumatized by the chauvinistic world of a powerful and bullying society.
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