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# Ruth and the David–Bathsheba Story: Allusions and Contrasts

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## Abstract

Numerous scholars maintain that the book of Ruth alludes to the Judah–Tamar narrative in order to provide a contrasting, wholesome portrait of the ancestry of David. This study argues that the book also alludes to the related narrative of David and Bathsheba, casting David's conduct in that episode as a departure from the favorable qualities of the blood-line modeled by Ruth and Boaz. The latter half of the book of Ruth contains three subtle features, each of which bears a unique resemblance to a feature of the Bathsheba tale; and in all three instances, it is proposed that the author of Ruth seeks to underscore a contrast between the characters in the two respective stories.

**Keywords:** Inner-biblical allusion, intertextuality, Ruth, Samuel, David, Bathsheba, kingship.

The literary artistry in the book of Ruth is among the most impressive in the biblical corpus. In this compact composition, scholars have identified a strikingly broad array of techniques, skillfully employed to cut beneath the surface of the narrative and produce meaning that both sharpens and transcends the basic storyline.<sup>1</sup>

1. The most expansive literary commentary on Ruth is Irmtraud Fischer's *Rut* (Freiburg: Herder, 2001). Among many other works, see Tod Linafelt, *Ruth* (Collegeville, MN:

Among these techniques is the author's allusion to other biblical texts, most prominently the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38.<sup>2</sup> The similarities between the experiences of Ruth and Tamar have invited a fair amount of discussion, occasionally within broader treatments of intertextuality in the Bible.<sup>3</sup> In the opinion of many scholars, the parallels

Liturgical Press, 1999); Hans-Georg Wünc, *Buch Rut* (Neuhausen: Hänssler, 1998); Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997); Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1996); Murray D. Gow, *The Book of Ruth: Its Structure, Theme, and Purpose* (Leicester: Apollo, 1992); and Yair Zakovitch, *Ruth: Introduction and Commentary* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990 [Hebrew]; and in German, *Das Buch Ruth: Ein Jüdischer Kommentar* [Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1999]). My references to Zakovitch are to the Hebrew version of the book.

2. See, e.g., Zakovitch, *Ruth*, pp. 26-27; Ellen von Wolde, 'Texts in Dialogue with Texts: Intertextuality in the Ruth and Tamar Narratives', *BibInt* 5 (1997), pp. 8-12; and Zipora (Zipi) Yavin, 'Ruth, the Fifth Mother: A Study in the Scroll of Ruth (The Semantic Field as a Ground of Confrontation between Two Giants—The Judaic [*sic*; = Judean] Writer and the Israeli [*sic*; = Ephraimite] Writer)', *Jewish Studies* 44 (2007), pp. 168-79 (Hebrew). The following parallels have been noted: Both stories begin with a prominent Judean figure leaving his home or family. Both involve marriages to foreign women and the death of two sons. In both cases, a daughter-in-law is left without a third son to marry: in the case of Tamar, Judah's son Shelah is said to be too young; in the case of Ruth, it is said that a hypothetical, prospective third son would be too young. (In this connection, the phrase *עד יגדל שלה בני* ['until my son Shelah matures'] in Gen. 38.11 parallels *עד אשר יגדלו* ['until they mature'] in Ruth 1.13.) Judah tells Tamar, 'Remain as a widow in the house of your father' (Gen. 38.11); Naomi tells Ruth and Orpah, 'Go and return, each woman to the house of her mother' (Ruth 1.8). Both Ruth and Tamar, each in her own way, nonetheless return to their parents-in-law. In both stories, a plan is set into motion for the daughter-in-law to seduce an older male family member so that she might restore her rightful place in the family, ultimately to bear children who will continue the bloodline. In both cases this is to be carried out by clandestine action, and by enticement of the man without the woman initially revealing her identity. In both cases the seduction calls for a change of clothing. Both Tamar and Ruth, in one form or another, achieve success. A blessing is explicitly given for the household of Ruth and Boaz to be like that of 'Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah' (Ruth 4.12); and both stories end with the birth of Davidic ancestors—Perez in the case of Tamar, and the line from Perez to David in the case of Ruth.

3. See van Wolde, 'Texts in Dialogue with Texts'. Articulating an essential difference between uses of the term intertextuality (as have many others), von Wolde distinguishes between (1) an author's purposeful allusions to earlier texts, and (2) a reader's perception of similarities between two or more texts viewed synchronically. Her own analysis operates within the latter definition, not concerning itself with authorial intent. The present study, like numerous others, seeks to illuminate the author's literary artistry and his or her subtle efforts to produce meaning. Compare, e.g., Nielsen, *Ruth*, pp. 11-12: 'The fact that

between these two figures ultimately draw attention to some essential contrasts between the book of Ruth and the Judah–Tamar episode. The author of Ruth, according to this view, sought to provide a portrait of the Davidic ancestry that would offset any unfavorable associations generated by the morally suspect encounter between Judah and Tamar that produced the royal bloodline. The restraint displayed by Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor, followed by their legal, wholesome union, not only transforms the seductive plot of Naomi, but redeems the entire lineage of the unbecoming deed committed by its earliest forebears.<sup>4</sup>

the author is anonymous and absent...does not mean that the author has been unable to help the reader follow the intentions he or she has had during composition... In spite of the stress in recent years on the absence of the author and the text's lack of unambiguity we must therefore assert that communication is possible.'

4. A number of studies place equal or greater emphasis on allusions to the illicit relationship between Lot and his daughters in Gen. 19, which produces Ruth's (and thus David's) ancestor Moab. I shall briefly discuss this Lot connection, which I (like several others) consider to be secondary to the Ruth–Tamar parallel, near the end of my analysis. The following is a list of citations of treatments that support the general approach I have taken: (1) Harold Fisch, 'Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History', *VT* 32 (1982), pp. 425–37 (436): 'The Ruth–Boaz story is a means of "redeeming" the entire corpus [consisting of the stories of Lot and of Tamar] and inserting it into the pattern of *Heilsgeschichte*'. (2) Haim Chertok, 'The Book of Ruth—Complexities Within Simplicity', *Judaism* 35 (1986), p. 294: 'Not having relations with Ruth on the threshing floor is the displacement and fulfillment of Judah's [repentance]. This working-out of the original covenant *must* transpire before David may be born of the seed of Judah' (emphasis in the original—I thank Ms Rachel Friedman for this reference). (3) Ramona F. West, 'Ruth: A Retelling of Genesis 38?' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987), p. 167: 'When Ruth is read alongside Genesis 38, the positive picture of the characters and situations of the Ruth narrative "redeem" the negative aspects of Genesis 38'. (4) Zakovitch, *Ruth*, p. 28 (translation mine): 'The book that tells about the house that will be established from the union of these two families [Moab and Judah]—the house of David—prompts us to compare Ruth and Boaz to the daughters of Lot and their father and to Judah and Tamar. And the characters in [Ruth] emerge superior'. (5) Gow, *Book of Ruth*, p. 137: 'I would suggest that the positive light in which the story of Ruth stands in relation to the two stories in Genesis 19 and 38 reflects the role of the book of Ruth as a Davidic apologetic'. (6) Nielsen, *Ruth*, p. 15: 'In a situation where the link with Tamar is seen as a disqualification for the family of David, the author of Ruth returns to the positive features in the Tamar tradition, thereby creating his own picture of the ancestresses of David'. (7) André Wenin, 'La Stratégie Déjouée de Noémi en Rt 3', *EstBib* 56 (1998), pp. 179–99 (179): '[Naomi's] plan, the strategy for realizing it, and its partial failure are the main key that permits us to fix the intertextual relation between the account in Ruth 3 and the two episodes of seduction narrated in Genesis: the incest of Lot's daughters and that of Tamar with [Judah]'. (8) Yavin, 'Ruth, the Fifth Mother',

My objective is to extend this line of argument beyond these allusions to the book of Genesis. Yair Zakovitch and others have proposed that the book of Ruth functions as a transition between the stories of internal strife at the end of Judges and the emergence of the monarchy in Samuel, and they have drawn some suggestive parallels between Ruth and the story of the concubine at Gibeah in Judges 19–22.<sup>5</sup> These parallels, like those involving Genesis 38, highlight important contrasts that serve to portray David's close ancestors—the forebears of the monarchy—in a comparatively favorable light. Carrying further this link to the Former Prophets, I wish to open the case for a direct literary connection between the book of Ruth and the David–Bathsheba story in 2 Samuel 11.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, I suggest that the author of Ruth sought to cast the troubling depiction of David in the Bathsheba affair—an episode often seen as linked to the

p. 176 (translation mine): 'The scroll of Ruth serves to fix what became broken in the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 and to strengthen anew the tribe of Judah'. For a recent synchronic intertextual reading that pointedly departs from this approach, see Nehama Aschkenasy, 'Reading Ruth through a Bakhtinian Lens: The Carnavalesque in a Biblical Tale', *JBL* 126 (2007), pp. 437–53. Paul R. Noble, 'Esau, Tamar, and Joseph: Criteria for Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions', *VT* 52 (2002), pp. 219–52, addresses the Ruth–Tamar connection peripherally (pp. 231–32) and appears to question its validity. Noble, however, cites only van Wolde's synchronic, non-intentionalist treatment, and it is unclear if his judgment takes into account the argument that the author of Ruth intentionally generated these connections for apologetic purposes. On the whole, the correlation would appear to meet Noble's criteria for intentionality, which require that alleged parallels involve details of some importance that move steadily through each storyline, and that any emerging contrasts contribute to our understanding of the intertext in a specific and meaningful way.

5. See Zakovitch, *Ruth*, pp. 14–15, and Fischer, *Rut*, pp. 109–10, who draw an additional connection to the story of Hannah that opens the book of Samuel. For still more parallels to the book of Samuel, see Amnon Bazak, 'The Influence of the Idea of Loving Kindness in the Book of Ruth on the Kingship of David', *Megadim* 40 (2004), pp. 49–61 (Hebrew), and in revised form in Bazak, *Parallels Meet: Literary Parallels in the Book of Samuel* (Alon Shevut, Israel: Tevunot, 2006 [Hebrew]), pp. 131–43. On the function of the book of Ruth as a transition between Judges and Samuel, see also David Jobling, 'Ruth Finds a Home: Canon, Politics, Method', in J. Cheryl Exum and David M. Clines (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup, 143; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 125–39; and Yavin, 'Ruth, the Fifth Mother', p. 211.

6. Others have noted a more general connection; see, e.g., Athalya Brenner, 'Naomi and Ruth', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 70–84 (81): 'Indeed, the three stories [of Lot, Tamar, and Ruth] anticipate David's foreign connections and his weakness for women by overtly claiming that these two things were in the king's blood'.

Judah–Tamar narrative<sup>7</sup>—as a departure from the authentic, unblemished character of the Judean royal lineage. In support of this, I will argue that some subtle and highly distinctive literary motifs that serve to emphasize the king’s failings in 2 Samuel 11 appear likewise in Ruth, where they underscore the pointedly more favorable character of both Ruth and Boaz.<sup>8</sup> If correct, this conclusion casts into sharper relief the correlations between the stories of Tamar, Bathsheba and Ruth, three women who play essential roles in the Bible’s portrait of the royal bloodline.

I begin with a brief consideration of 2 Samuel 11, which will enable a proper appreciation of the portion of the story that is critical to my argument.

### 1. For Want of Empathy: The Tragic Flaw of David in 2 Samuel 11

The central flaw that emerges from David’s conduct in ch. 11 is his lack of empathy, borne of the distance he has placed between himself and his subjects. This is the unmistakable theme of the king’s unwitting condemnation of himself in the following chapter—the rich man in Nathan’s parable ‘did not show compassion’ (2 Sam. 12.6)—and the text emphasizes this failing repeatedly and consistently throughout the chapter. When ‘kings’ normally go to war, this king stays home and sends all his subjects to fight; and while strolling on the roof after an afternoon nap, he becomes attracted to Bathsheba and sends for her (11.1–4). When David, in an effort to deflect responsibility for Bathsheba’s pregnancy, tries to induce her husband to go home to her, Uriah declines to do so and sharply

7. See, e.g., Craig Y.S. Ho, ‘The Stories of the Family Troubles of Judah and David: A Study of their Literary Links’, *VT* 49 (1999), pp. 514–31, and the literature cited there. In his important critique of the methodology of Ho and others, Noble (‘Inner-Biblical Allusions’) maintains that similarities between the Judah–Tamar story and the Succession Narrative are most likely coincidental. While my argument does not depend on the intentionality of those similarities, it does stand to reason, in my opinion, that the correlations between the Bathsheba story in particular—which concerns a pivotal sexual indiscretion on the part of the first Judean king—and the account of Judah’s own questionable deed are likely to be purposeful. The parallel does produce a sharp and meaningful contrast: both men face a moral challenge either to confess on the one hand, or to kill and cover up on the other; and whereas Judah comes clean and halts the execution of Tamar, David fatefully departs from his ancestor’s precedent when he chooses to conceal his own wrongdoing by means of sending Uriah to his death.

8. In a forthcoming companion study (‘Ruth and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Case of 1 Samuel 25’, to be published in *JBL* 128 [2009]), I make a similar argument concerning Ruth and the David–Abigail story, lending further support to the basis of my claim here.

condemns precisely the sort of non-empathetic conduct that David has been displaying:

The Ark and Israel and Judah are located at Succoth, and my master Joab and Your Majesty's men are camped in the open; how can I go home and eat and drink and sleep with my wife? As you live, by your very life, I will not do this! (11.11).<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, the king sends Uriah to carry his very own death sentence to the general in the field (11.14-15). Upon learning of its implementation, David provides no comfort to the mourning 'wife of Uriah'; he rather waits for the end of the mourning period, and sends others to bring the widow abruptly to his home where she will bear her ill-fated child (11.26-27).

It is worth noting that the text's account of David's initial encounter with Bathsheba is strikingly fast-paced. With the exception of a brief parenthetical clause indicating that Bathsheba had just cleansed herself of her impurity, we read of the following events in rapid succession: David sent for her, he took her, she came, he slept with her, she left, she conceived, and she notified him of the pregnancy (11.4-5). This stands in sharp contrast to the drawn-out description near the beginning of the chapter of David's leisurely activities while at home that *prompted* his transgression, and to the rich sequence of dialogue between Uriah and the anxious king later on. In those latter instances, the text employs this more expansive style in order to give expression to the king's flawed attitude, which leads him to yield to desire and eventually to arrange for the death of Uriah. The actual encounter with Bathsheba, on the other hand—a one-time indiscretion—contributes comparatively little to the *characterization* of David that is the central focus of the narrative, and the text devotes to it only enough space to convey the necessary information.<sup>10</sup>

At first glance, therefore, it is remarkable that the author devotes nearly one-third of the chapter to an apparently tangential matter—the report to the king that Uriah has indeed been killed in battle. In this stretch of eight

9. I make extensive use of the NIPS Bible translation.

10. Note also that nothing in Nathan's parable signifies adultery *per se*, nor does the prophet mention David's initial deed with Bathsheba in his subsequent condemnation of the king. For an alternative explanation of the fast pace of the text's description of David's deed, see Richard M. Davidson, 'Did King David Rape Bathsheba? A Case Study in Narrative Theology', *Journal of the Adventist Theological Seminary* 17 (2006), pp. 81-95 (87), and his citation of Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 148.

elaborate verses, we read of Joab's detailed instructions to the messenger, which include a lengthy prediction of how the king will react; then the messenger's actual report to David; and finally the king's response:

Joab sent a message, relaying to David all the matters of the war. He instructed the messenger as follows: 'When you finish telling the king all the matters of the war, the king may get angry and say to you, "Why did you come so close to the city to attack it? Didn't you know that they would shoot from the wall? Who struck down Abimelech son of Jerubesheth? Was it not a woman who dropped an upper millstone on him from the wall at Thebez, from which he died? Why did you come so close to the wall?"' Then say: "Your servant Uriah the Hittite also died".' So the messenger set out, and he came and told David all that Joab had sent him to tell. The messenger said to David, 'First the men prevailed against us and sallied out against us into the open; then we drove them back up to the entrance to the gate. But the archers shot at your men from the wall and some of Your Majesty's men died; your servant Uriah the Hittite also died.' Whereupon David said to the messenger, 'Give Joab this message: "Don't be upset over the matter, for the sword devours this way and that. Press your attack on the city and destroy it!" Encourage him!' (11.18-25).

What is it, we may reasonably ask, that justifies such a long-winded account? How does all this elaboration contribute to the disapproving portrait of the king on which the text otherwise concentrates so steadily?

Most likely, what appears extraneous in this selection is in fact essential to setting up David's reaction to the report, which might plausibly be seen—from an attitudinal standpoint—as the moral low point of his kingship.<sup>11</sup> Uriah has been killed along with numerous other soldiers, and at the beginning of the segment, Joab envisions the king responding with intense anger. In this anticipated reaction laid out by the general, David—employing sarcasm and redundancy—will display sincere outrage over the fate of his warriors ('Why did you come so close...? Didn't you know that they would shoot from the wall?... Why did you come so close to the wall?'). Only after hearing such a response from the king is the messenger to tell of the fate of Uriah—in whose death David has an apparent interest—and thereby neutralize the anger that Joab fears.

The messenger, however, fails badly at following Joab's instructions, and presents the news of Uriah's death in his *initial* report—together with the news of the unexpected casualties ('...some of Your Majesty's men died; your servant Uriah the Hittite also died'). And yet, contrary to the

11. Compare Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 278: 'David's cynicism reaches its culmination here, even as the story reaches its culmination'.



general's expectations, this mixed message elicits no stern response at all from the king. So focused is David on the one bit of information that serves his purpose that he dismisses the tragic deaths of his fighters with a wave of the hand: 'Tell Joab as follows: "Don't be upset over the matter, for the sword devours this way and that..."' The critical character flaw of David displayed repeatedly in the chapter thus reaches its peak: empathy—together with loyalty and responsibility—has given way to the personal agenda of a king for whom avoidable deaths among his subjects are no longer the least bit disquieting.<sup>12</sup>

We will fail to do full justice to the artistry of the text, however, if our attention to its dialogical richness diverts us from the small but significant role played by the narrator in this section of the story—a role that shall prove vital to the argument in favor of a literary connection between the David–Bathsheba episode and the book of Ruth.

## **2. Reader Expectation and Irony in the Bathsheba Narrative and in Ruth**

### **a. Thwarted Expectations in 2 Samuel 11**

Apart from indicating who is conversing with whom, the narrator speaks in only two of the eight verses in our selection. The first one appears at the very outset: 'Joab sent a message, relaying to David all the matters of the war'. As far as the reader knows, 'all the matters' include the numerous war casualties, as well as the death of Uriah specifically. This is, after all, what the general *should* be telling the king. In the quotation that appears subsequently, Joab likewise indicates that the messenger must relate 'all the matters of the war', and he describes in detail the unforgiving reaction that he dreads. In the reader's eyes, the messenger will by then have told David that Uriah is dead, and the response that Joab fears the king will provide comes across as especially noble: *despite* the welcome news about the death of Uriah, the general anticipates that David will focus sternly on the avoidable deaths of his warriors, as would any responsible and empathetic leader.

Abruptly, however, we learn that Joab's perception of the king is actually far less flattering. It is only when the king completes his indignant, long-winded response to 'all the matters of the war' that the messenger is to say, with almost mocking brevity, 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite

12. Compare this reading to Moshe Garsiel, 'The Story of David and Bathsheba: A Different Approach', *CBQ* 55 (1993), pp. 244–62 (261).

also died'. With this phrase, it becomes clear that when the text spoke of the general relaying to David 'all' that transpired on the battlefield, it meant—ironically—to exclude the matter most important to the king: the death of Uriah.<sup>13</sup> That information was rather to be saved for later, for the purpose of deflating the king's anger. Thus, the favorable view of David suggested to the reader by the heated speech that Joab foresees suddenly undergoes dramatic revision. The general indeed fears that David will react harshly to a mixed message, but the particular tirade he envisions would result from news of the soldiers' deaths conveyed independently. More important, it may be expected that news of Uriah's death would then drain away the fury of the king, whom Joab rightly understands to have one principal agenda in mind.

And then the narrator teases us once again. 'So the messenger set out', we read, 'and he came and told David all that Joab sent him to tell'. Technically, of course, the messenger did just that. Yet the inescapable force of this narratorial interjection is that the messenger followed his instructions faithfully. In reality, however, as we have seen, the messenger fails to isolate the news of Uriah's death as Joab had wished.<sup>14</sup> Once again, the phrase 'your servant Uriah the Hittite also died', this time prematurely uttered by the messenger, prompts us to revise our reading of an introductory comment of the narrator in a critical way. Had the messenger fulfilled his mandate, as the narrator seemed to say he did, the news of Uriah's death—presented to David separately—would have functioned to subdue the king's anger. But once the messenger fails to convey the message properly, our expectations must undergo a sharp reversal: without the isolation of the 'good' news, there remains nothing to temper the harsh reaction that the king will likely provide. The dismissive remarks that follow thus hit us with unanticipated force: as far as David is concerned, as long as Uriah is dead, nothing else matters. After all, the sword devours this way and that.

The narrator's contributions thus artfully guide our diminishing conception of how David will react to a military tragedy. First, through Joab's eyes, we imagine that even a mixed message containing 'all' the news will generate the king's appropriately severe response. Only later does it become clear that the bad news presented alone is what the general

13. The basic point is noted in J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel. I. King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), p. 65.

14. An alternative treatment of this irony appears in Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 216–17.

believes will trigger so strong a reaction, while the longed-for news of Uriah's death will neutralize the king's wrath. Finally, the messenger's failure—despite what the narrator seemed to imply—to isolate the news about Uriah upends the reader's expectations without warning, prompting the powerful sense that David will not be successfully mollified. At this point, with great effect, the lack of empathy displayed in the king's unperturbed response depicts a leader at the utter low point of his moral trajectory.<sup>15</sup>

### **b. Thwarted Expectations in Ruth 3**

In only one other story in the Bible, the text teasingly suggests that an individual carried out—or will carry out—'all' of his or her mandate, only to set up an immediate, ironic revision of the reader's perception. I refer to Ruth 3, where I wish to argue that—in one form or another—this technique appears multiple times, much as it appears twice in the David–Bathsheba narrative.

**(1) Ruth's Departure from Naomi's Instructions.** The most central example appears after the elaborate instructions that Naomi provides to Ruth at the beginning of the chapter. With the Tamar parallel already established, the reader's expectations are directed toward the successful implementation of Naomi's plan: Ruth will cunningly invite Boaz's advance, and the relationship will be consummated at the point when, as Naomi tantalizingly predicts, 'he will tell you what you are to do' (3.4). As many have noted, several key terms enhance the expectation of a sexual encounter, including *בא*, *שכב*, *גלה*, *ידע*, *בנה*, and *רגל*.<sup>16</sup> And

15. As I argue in an as-yet unpublished study ('On Patterning in the Book of Samuel: "News of Death" and the Kingship of David'), the bungling of death reports becomes a repeated motif in the Succession Narrative, adding to the argument for its importance here. In this chapter, the messenger's failure to isolate the news of Uriah's death sets up a response that highlights the king's apathy; in ch. 12, the servants' fear of telling David about the death of his son underscores the unexpectedly selfless reaction that he ultimately displays; and in chs. 13 and 18, respectively, inaccurate and incomplete reports regarding the deaths of Amnon and Absalom serve to play mercilessly with the king's emotions.

16. See, e.g., Moshe J. Bernstein, 'Two Multivalent Readings in the Ruth Narrative', *JSOT* 50 (1991), pp. 15–26 (18); and van Wolde, 'Intertextuality', p. 22. A minority of scholars seriously question the assumption that Naomi seeks to prompt a sexual encounter; see recently Schadrac Keita and Janet W. Dyk, 'The Scene at the Threshing Floor: Suggestive Readings and Intercultural Considerations', *The Bible Translator* 57 (2006), pp. 17–32.

indeed, Ruth assures her mother-in-law, ‘All that you have said to me I will do’ (3.5). Here, the narrator makes the first of his sporadic appearances, introducing the actual implementation of Naomi’s plan with the parallel affirmation, ‘She went to the threshing floor and did all that her mother-in-law instructed her to do’ (3.6). Both Ruth and the narrator have thus prepared the reader for the full execution of Naomi’s instructions, much as in 2 Samuel 11 both the narrator and Joab indicate that the messenger will report ‘all the matters of the war’ to the king.

And yet, just as ‘all the matters of the war’ turn out not to include a critical piece of ‘peripheral’ information—that is, the death of Uriah—so too in Ruth, ‘all that you have said to me I will do’ and ‘all that her mother-in-law instructed her to do’ do not extend to one crucial, implied component of the plan: seductively prompting Boaz to ‘tell [Ruth] what...to do’. Rather, in what becomes the turning point of the book—and of the Davidic ancestry itself—it is Ruth who tells a startled Boaz what to do, and it is hardly to proceed with a shady affair. To the contrary, when Ruth calls for Boaz to ‘spread his wing over’ her (3.9), this is widely seen in a protective, paternal, and even spiritual sense, paralleling Boaz’s admiring remark in ch. 2 that she has sought refuge ‘under the wing’ of the God of Israel (2.12).<sup>17</sup> When Ruth promptly continues, ‘for you are a redeeming kinsman’ (3.9), it becomes even clearer that, in contrast to the seductive act that Naomi envisioned, the young woman is calling for a legal union, prompted by unselfish concerns—not by passion, but by compassion. Indeed, Boaz immediately characterizes Ruth’s initiative as her greatest kindness yet, not as the cunning act that it was plotted to be. It is only the subsequent wholesome union of Ruth and Boaz that will continue the bloodline, and thereby restore the integrity of the Judean royal ancestry.

**(2) Boaz’s Response to Ruth’s Request.** And yet, might it still be possible to carry out this objective that very night? Might not the literal implication of Ruth’s request—‘you shall spread your wing/garment over

17. See, e.g., Zakovitch, *Ruth*, p. 93 (translation mine): ‘Naomi instructed Ruth to seek guidance from Boaz: “He will tell you what you are to do” (3.4). But Ruth does not wait for Boaz’s instructions but rather makes a request of him—she tells him what to do. Ruth...requests of him to cover her, to spread his wing over her [indicating marriage]... This also hints at Boaz’s words [in 2.12]. Ruth hints that God’s protection of her—as the one who accepted his laws upon herself—should be expressed in Boaz’s acting on her instructions and spreading his wing over her.’

your handmaid’—be arranged immediately, so that Naomi’s plan will indeed find fulfillment, albeit in modified fashion? The reader must seriously consider this possibility, even favor it, when Boaz enthusiastically affirms, ‘...all that you have said to me I will do to/for you’ (3.11).<sup>18</sup> What would prevent Boaz, inspired by the noble goals of redemption and commitment, from actually doing something ‘to’ Ruth that night? Is that not what she ‘said’ to him to do? Have we any indication at this point that a formal ceremony at the gate of the city is a prerequisite? Could that possibly have been Ruth’s intention, after having stealthily crept beside Boaz in the dead of night and uncovered his feet/legs?

Once again, however, our expectations are set up for a sharp reversal. Not only did the phrase ‘she did all that her mother-in-law instructed her to do’ not mean what it seemed—for the character of the union will now be fundamentally altered—but Boaz’s pledge to do ‘all that [Ruth] said’ to him will not yield an immediate consummation of the relationship. In fact, contrary to his affirmation, Boaz might *never* fulfill Ruth’s request! For, as he proceeds to explain, by rule, a closer relative must first be consulted. Accordingly, Naomi’s plan—and Boaz’s intentions—will not be realized that night, if at all. Indeed, the subsequent events of the chapter give expression to the full irony of the transformed situation. The next verse presents a protective Boaz instructing Ruth to remain for the night. Sandwiched between the expressions לִי לַיְלָה (‘stay the night’) and וְשָׁכַב עַד הַבֹּקֶר (‘lie until the morning’) stands Boaz’s assertion that he must wait for the decision of the other kinsman. We are thus assured that the consummation of the relationship will be delayed, and that Naomi’s plan will not come to fruition that night. Rather, we are told—with the ironic reappearance of the terms רַגְלֵי, יָדַע, בָּא, and שָׁכַב in the space of a single sentence—that Ruth *indeed slept* at Boaz’s feet until the morning, but chastely rather than amorously. Moreover, while earlier in the chapter Naomi instructs Ruth to enter the threshing floor surreptitiously in order to enhance her prospects of enticing Boaz (אֵל תּוֹדֵעַי, 3.3), this time, using the same passive form of the verb יָדַע,

18. Boaz’s language here, כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַרְי אֲעֲשֶׂה לָךְ, ironically recalls Ruth’s earlier assurance of Naomi that כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַרְי אֲלִי אֲעֲשֶׂה—‘All that you have said to me I will do’ (3.5)—which alludes to the seductive scheme that Ruth and Boaz have now transformed. In this way, the text emphasizes Boaz’s commitment to pursue the legal union that Ruth envisions, not the act of passion plotted by Naomi. For a useful mapping of this and other terminological correlations in the chapter, see Fischer, *Rut*, p. 196.

Boaz tells Ruth to *leave* surreptitiously—before others might notice (אל יודע כי באה האשה הגרין, 3.14)—lest anyone receive the mistaken impression that something untoward did indeed take place.<sup>19</sup>

**(3) Ruth’s Report to Naomi.** In my opinion, still another example of this technique appears in the chapter, near the very end. In reaction to an eager Naomi’s query about the success of the plan, the narrator—ironically recalling Naomi’s overconfident assertion that in response to Ruth’s seduction, ‘he will tell you what you are to do’ (הוא יגיד לך את אשר, 3.4)—informs us that Ruth ‘told’ Naomi ‘all that the man did to/for her’ (ותגד לה את כל אשר עשה לה האיש, 3.16). Then, oddly, the text presents a direct quotation of Ruth specifying one apparently tangential component of the encounter: ‘And she said, “He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said to me, “Do not return empty to your mother-in-law”’’. Most straightforwardly, the text here wishes to emphasize this remark of Boaz, which clarifies that the gift of barley signifies his commitment to bringing the matter to a successful conclusion and providing his seed. I believe, however, that an important secondary effect is intended—one that suits the theme of transformation that pervades the latter half of the chapter.

Consider Moshe Garsiel’s analysis of Ruth’s report:

The author’s account of how Ruth describes the nocturnal encounter at the threshing floor—and of her evaluation of its results—is highly intriguing. The formulation in the text is as follows: ‘She told her all that the man did to/for her; and she said, ‘He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, ‘Do not return empty to your mother-in-law’’’ (3.16-17). The author alludes to Ruth’s description of all of [Boaz’s] praises, promises and words of appeasement by means of the general, even bland phrase ‘all that the man did to/for her’, whereas...the one detail mentioned explicitly is tangential and unimportant—the gift of six measures of barley. With this technique, the author cleverly imparts that Ruth considers the encounter at the threshing floor to have been a failure: ...six measures of barley—and nothing else! The word ‘empty’... recalls Naomi’s frustration in the first scene: ‘...the Lord brought me back empty’ (1.21).<sup>20</sup>

19. On the emphasis on secrecy in the chapter, see Gow, *Book of Ruth*, p. 75. I have not found an earlier source containing the observation that this form of the verb ידע reappears in order to underscore the transformed situation; but see, e.g., p. 64, where he presents the two phrases as corresponding elements within the chiasmic structure that he proposes for the chapter.

20. Moshe Garsiel, ‘Literary Structure, Plot Development and Authorial Technique in the Book of Ruth’, *Beit Mikra* 23 (1978), pp. 452-53 (Hebrew; the translation is mine).

According to this reading, Ruth's reference to Boaz's gift of barley stands in ironic contrast to the phrase just before it that alludes to his positive intentions. The narrator has affirmed that Ruth told Naomi 'all that the man did to/for her', and both we and Ruth know that while Boaz might be seen to have done much *for* Ruth, he has yet to do anything *to* her. Naomi, however, anticipating news of the union of Ruth and Boaz so that she might no longer be 'empty' of family, is listening for what 'the man' did *to* Ruth. The direct quotation of Ruth that follows—"and she said, 'He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, 'Do not return empty to your mother-in-law' '"—which looks deceptively like an explication of *the full extent of Boaz's reaction to Ruth's initiative*,<sup>21</sup> artfully prompts a re-evaluation of what was meant by 'all that the man did to/for her'. In this case, however, it is not the reader him- or herself who revises a prior conception; it is rather Naomi in the eyes of the reader, as she absorbs the words of Ruth encapsulated by the narrator's tantalizing formulation.<sup>22</sup> What did Ruth tell the hopeful Naomi? All that the man did *to* Ruth—the unrealized deed that might have sparked a restoration of Naomi's family? Emphatically not. Rather, 'all' that Boaz has accomplished so far is to send a load of barley so that the old woman should not remain 'empty'.

The following tables summarize the examples we have seen of the literary device in question, first those in 2 Samuel 11, and then those in Ruth 3:

'Joab sent...to David <i>all</i> the matters of the war'; 'Joab instructed the messenger, "When you complete <i>all</i> the matters of the war..."'	→	Death of Uriah not included
'The messenger...told David <i>all</i> that Joab sent him to tell'	→	Death of Uriah not properly isolated

Garsiel himself attributes to the gift of barley no favorable significance at all, and sees Ruth—who must relay this gift—as the more frustrated party, who must be convinced by Naomi that all is not necessarily lost.

21. Compare this verse to the text's presentation of Ruth's response to Naomi in 2.19: 'She told her mother-in-law with whom she had dealt, and she said, 'The name of the man with whom I dealt today is Boaz''.

22. For an earlier discussion of the Ruth–Naomi–narrator triangle in this verse, see Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 186–87.

‘[Ruth] said, “ <i>All</i> that you have said to me I will do”’; ‘She did <i>all</i> that her mother-in-law instructed her to do’	→	Ruth asks Boaz to proceed with a legal union, rather than enticing him to ‘tell [her] what to do’
‘[Boaz] said... “ <i>All</i> that you have said I will do to/for you”’	→	No consummation that night, if at all
‘[Ruth] told her <i>all</i> that the man did to/for her’	→	The man sent barley to redress Naomi’s emptiness

This highly specific means by which the text frustrates expectations, *unique to these two brief biblical selections*, raises the genuine possibility of some kind of literary relationship. One serious option, I propose, is that the author of Ruth is reacting to the unfavorable portrait of David which the narrator’s deliberately misleading remarks in 2 Samuel 11 help to develop. Indeed, every one of the analogous examples we have seen in this pivotal chapter of Ruth serves to underscore the frustration of Naomi’s seductive plot, in favor of a wholesome union that functions to cleanse the royal bloodline of the associations generated by the story of Judah and Tamar. If David acts in a way that recalls the disturbing conduct of Judah in that episode, we may reasonably suggest that the author of Ruth seeks to offset not only an unfavorable conception of David’s early forebears, but a similarly critical evaluation of the character of this entire bloodline as it is manifest in King David’s own predilections.

With this in mind, then, let us consider some additional evidence that contributes to the argument in favor of a direct connection between the book of Ruth and the narrative of David and Bathsheba.

### 3. Boaz, David, and the ‘Isolation’ Motif

As we have already seen, when Joab sends his battle report to David, he attempts to isolate the news of Uriah’s death in his effort to enhance its soothing effect on the king. Here again, I can find just a single instance in the Bible that parallels Joab’s subtle strategy—that is, *the careful separation of two parts of a communication so as to induce the addressee to reverse his initial response*. I refer once more to the book of Ruth, picking up in ch. 4 after Boaz and Ruth have successfully transformed Naomi’s scheme.<sup>23</sup>

23. The theme of redemption of the bloodline continues in ch. 4 by means of the explicit allusions to Judah, Tamar, and Perez in v. 12; the presentation of the line from Perez to David—through Boaz—in vv. 18–22; and the *Leitwort* לָקַח (‘redeem’), which



At the beginning of Ruth 4, just as in the latter portion of 2 Samuel 11, we encounter an oddly expansive stretch of text containing information that seems curiously peripheral. Apparently, it is not enough for the author just to tell us that the closer relative declined to marry Ruth. Dominating this narrative are Boaz's concerted efforts to ensure the desired outcome, beginning with his brusque instructions to the dutiful relative—and to the similarly obsequious town elders—to be seated near the city gate (4.1-2). Then, when Boaz speaks to the anonymous kinsman, he introduces a puzzling new variable into the discussion—a field that belonged to Elimelech, since sold by Naomi, which demands to be redeemed (4.3-4).

Making no mention of any obligation to marry Ruth, Boaz elicits a positive response from this individual on the matter of purchasing the field (4.4). Only subsequently does he shrewdly call attention to the more serious matter at hand: redemption of the field, declares Boaz, comes with strings attached—marrying the Moabite wife of Elimelech's deceased son (4.5). Concerned about the effect that this will have on his own rights to the land, the unapologetic kinsman replies that this far he cannot go: he will not be the redeemer (4.6). With this response, the desired goal has been achieved precisely in accordance with Boaz's calculation. Had Boaz presented the two matters together, there would have been no way to predict the man's response. By mentioning the field first, however, Boaz prompts the kinsman to allay his conscience by agreeing to the sale, to assume the discussion is over, and even—as some have argued—to look forward to acquiring the new property.<sup>24</sup> Abruptly, then, Boaz's follow-up about the responsibility to marry Ruth—whose children would ultimately gain title on the field—casts the entire matter into a radically different light. Not only was marrying the Moabite widow not in this man's plans, but doing so would undermine the desirability of the field itself. Thus, without delay or hesitation, he turns down the deal. As Nielsen writes,

To bring the matter to a successful conclusion it is important for Boaz to play his cards so as to give the other redeemer the impression that it is only the field that is for sale. Ruth is therefore not mentioned until the second round, when

appears no fewer than ten times in vv. 4 and 6 alone (compare Fisch, 'Structure', pp. 435-36).

24. See, e.g., Ellen van Wolde, *Ruth and Naomi* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1997), p. 98: '...Boaz shows up the kinsman's real concern: profit...'; and Tribble, *Rhetoric*, p. 189: 'It appears that originally, this man agreed to redemption for personal gain, the acquisition of property, rather than for family restoration'.

the redeemer has been offered what is right and reasonable. Just as Jacob gained his elder brother's birthright through trickery, so does Boaz employ a certain cunning to acquire the field to which the closer (i.e. 'older') redeemer has first claim.<sup>25</sup> Again Boaz answers to his name as 'the shrewd one' ... The wise will fool the not so wise and in between we sense the will of God.<sup>26</sup>

Put to positive ends, then, Boaz's clever strategy can only elicit our approval, ensuring that Naomi's family—the forebears of Israelite royalty—will carry on by means of the union of two model personalities.<sup>27</sup> If the isolation motif of which we spoke underscores the failures of the first Judean king, it is the constructive use of this strategy by his close ancestor Boaz—directed toward the noblest of goals—that shapes the authentic character of the royal bloodline. For the author of *Ruth*, Judean kingship is exemplified not by any deeds that compromise the character of Judah and of David, but by the unblemished qualities of Ruth and Boaz, displayed on the threshing floor and beyond.

It must of course be acknowledged that in *Ruth*, David's ancestor *employs* this isolation technique, while David is on the receiving end of the strategy in the book of Samuel. In conjunction with the other evidence

25. Jacob's trickery might well have been on the mind of the author of *Ruth*. Naomi's odd formulation 'Who are you, my daughter?' (3.16) when asking about the success of her cunning plot brings to mind Isaac's query 'Who are you, my son?' (Gen. 27.18) in the context of Jacob's deceitful attainment of the blessing intended for Esau. Perhaps Naomi seeks confirmation that Ruth has become a Jacob-like character in successfully deceiving an older member of the family. (Zakovitch, *Ruth*, p. 98, notes the parallel, without ascribing this implication to it.) Note also that Jacob's wily efforts to supplant his reddish colored twin brother begin when he exits the womb, in a story that presages Perez's success in overtaking his own twin on whom the midwife has affixed a crimson thread. (See, e.g., Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* [New York: W.W. Norton, 1996], p. 223.) If the book of *Ruth* purifies the lineage of Judah, Tamar and their son Perez the 'barrier-breacher' by means of the transformative Ruth–Boaz encounter, it is not far-fetched to suggest that it also alludes, albeit less centrally, to the trickery displayed by Judah's father Jacob in the early stages of his life.

26. Nielsen, *Ruth*, p. 88; see also p. 54 on this interpretation of Boaz's name, and p. 87 regarding her suggestion that Boaz's concern for legality here is meant to stand in contrast to King David's lack of concern 'as to whether the woman he wanted was married or not'. If this latter claim of Nielsen is correct, it supports my contention that the author of *Ruth* had the David–Bathsheba encounter in mind when composing this chapter and sought to provide a comparatively positive portrait of the king's ancestry.

27. There are, to be sure, those who criticize Boaz for—among other things—his failure to initiate a relationship with Ruth. See, e.g., Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "A Son is Born to Naomi!": Literary Allusions and Interpretation in the Book of *Ruth*, *JSOT* 40 (1988), pp. 99–108 (106); and Aschkenazy, 'Reading Ruth', pp. 444–48.

we have seen, however, I find the similarity to be reasonably suggestive, and I believe that the argument in favor of a correlation between the two stories begins to gather some strength. I conclude the analysis with one final connection, one which sends us back to an earlier, more widely discussed component of the David–Bathsheba tale.

#### 4. Ruth, David, and Nocturnal Deception

Of the Genesis narratives to which the book of Ruth alludes, the story of Lot and his daughters in Genesis 19 occupies a place that, for some scholars, rivals the Judah–Tamar episode in its importance.<sup>28</sup> This story too involves the cunning seduction of an older family member, and ends with the birth of Moab, the father of Ruth’s ancestral nation. In keeping with the approach I have endorsed here, I see this parallel as secondary to that of Genesis 38, even as it functions alongside of it. The purification of the Judean royal lineage required a woman from Moab—a nation that from its inception is associated with this precise sort of promiscuous conduct—to join the tribe of Judah and exemplify the utter transformation of such unseemly proclivities.<sup>29</sup>

Of the connections drawn between Ruth and the Lot story, one that stands front and center is the parallel between the intoxication of Lot on the one hand (Gen. 19.33–35), and the drink in which Boaz partakes on the other (Ruth 3.7). In both instances, it is argued, the seductive plot entails loosening up the man with alcohol. To be sure, Lot’s daughters must proactively supply their father with wine so that he becomes drunk to the point of obliviousness, while Ruth, at Naomi’s behest, merely bides her time as Boaz eats and drinks to his own satisfaction. Yet the correlation, with which I do not quarrel, remains widely accepted.

At the same time, I believe that this component of Naomi’s plan more closely resembles an entirely different biblical episode. In only one other instance in the Bible, a character attempts to set up a nocturnal union

28. See the opinions cited above, n. 4, several of which attribute equal significance to the Lot story, and others of which highlight the Tamar story specifically. For extensive lists of parallels between Ruth and Gen. 19, see Zakovitch, *Ruth*, p. 25; and Yavin, ‘Ruth, the Fifth Mother’, pp. 179–81.

29. Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 86–87, writes that ‘[Ruth] “turns her neck” to her archaic tribe by correcting its practices’. In this, Ruth stands in contrast to Orpah, whose name, derived from a term denoting the back of the neck, signifies the turning of her neck to her mother-in-law in favor of returning to Moab.

spurred by the male satiating himself with food *and* drink. And in only one other instance does the effort to bring about such a union *not* succeed as planned. I refer to David's attempt to induce Uriah to go home to Bathsheba, which prompts the dedicated soldier's memorable speech that—knowingly or not—condemns the king for his self-serving conduct. Once more, we witness a unique correlation between 2 Samuel 11 and the latter half of Ruth.

After initially failing to persuade Uriah to go home, David instructs him to remain in town for another night. When the king calls him to dine, the text relates that Uriah 'ate before him and drank—[David] got him drunk—and [Uriah] left in the evening to lie down in his bed with the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house' (2 Sam. 11.13). Now Ruth, in keeping with Naomi's instructions, does 'go down' toward the threshing floor (Ruth 3.6), and waits for the man to finish eating and drinking. Then, like Uriah, 'Boaz ate and drank, and he was good and happy, and he went to lie down...' (3.7). And yet, just as David's efforts are foiled when Uriah keeps to his commitment not to 'go home to eat, drink and sleep with [his] wife', Naomi's attempt is likewise thwarted when Boaz and Ruth diverge from her plan in the middle of the night. The following table summarizes the key correlations:

'[Uriah] ate before him and drank—[David] got him drunk—and he left...to lie down...'	→	Uriah does not cohabit with Bathsheba
'Boaz ate and drank, and he was good and happy, and he went to lie down...'	→	Boaz does not cohabit with Ruth

Yet again, what functions to condemn David in the Bathsheba story does the opposite for his forebears in the book of Ruth. Uriah frustrates David's efforts and—if unwittingly—sharply denounces the king's nocturnal encounter with Bathsheba, whereas in direct contrast, Ruth and Boaz bring honor to themselves and to the royal bloodline with their midnight transformation of Naomi's scheme.

## 5. Conclusion

In recent decades scholars have uncovered many and varied links between seemingly unrelated biblical narratives. Evaluating this often dizzying array of correlations requires considerable methodological caution; yet there is substantial agreement that the author of Ruth, by means of his

or her exceptional literary artistry, purposefully generated a range of profoundly meaningful intertextual connections.<sup>30</sup> If my observations point to some kind of literary relationship between highly specific portions of Ruth on the one hand and of the Bathsheba narrative on the other, it follows that the author of Ruth composed the work with the David–Bathsheba story prominently in mind. And if the specific suggestion offered here is correct, it emerges that the correspondences in question are indeed carefully crafted. Troubled by the portrait of the royal bloodline that emerges from the Judah–Tamar episode *and* from the David–Bathsheba story, our author set out to paint a distinctly more favorable picture. Alluding to several key components of 2 Samuel 11 that highlight the king’s flawed conduct, the book of Ruth provides subtle contrasts that underscore the supreme character and integrity of Boaz and Ruth whose line gives rise to Judean royalty.

30. The scholars listed above, n. 4, represent a sample of those who argue in favor of purposeful allusion to other biblical texts in the book of Ruth.