

## Joy to Naomi, Obed Is Born: A Literary and Theological Analysis of Naomi's Story

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The Book of Ruth<sup>2</sup> presents Ruth as a woman of outstanding character. The Moabitess' loyalty to her mother-in-law is remarkable, and she fulfills an important role in redemptive history. She is, after all, the great-grandmother of King David. She is not, however, the central character of the book. As shown below, Ruth's story is embedded in Naomi's story of trial and reversal. The parallels at the beginning and end of Ruth underscore the theme of reversal. For example, death renders Naomi *empty*, and Obed's birth causes her to be *full*. There is yet a more subtle reversal that is often overlooked by most analyses of Ruth. In the beginning of the story, Naomi is *distressed* (or "bitter"), but at the end, she is *joyful*. Studying the Book of Ruth from two angles supports this point. The following analysis seeks to demonstrate that the literary structure of Ruth and its intertextual connections advance this often-overlooked subtheme of joy.

The commentary literature on Ruth is vast. Edward Campbell's commentary offers good insight into the literary and linguistic features of Ruth.<sup>3</sup> Campbell sees Naomi sympathetically and at times hints at the book's subtheme of joy. Likewise, Loader offers a sympathetic perspective on Naomi and proposes a comparison of parallels between Naomi and Job.<sup>4</sup> Justin Jackson pens an excellent article on biblical theology and the story of Ruth in the Christological "trajectory" of the OT. He does not, however, examine the thematic connections of famine and infertility to the Pentateuch and other OT sections, nor does he explore the theme of joy as it relates to Naomi and the biblical narrative.<sup>5</sup> For a philological commentary, Joüon provides unparalleled insights into the language of the book, including thoroughly detailed data on each word in the book.<sup>6</sup> Stephen Bertman<sup>7</sup> and A. Boyd Luter and Richard O. Rigsby<sup>8</sup> examine the structural design of Ruth, providing a helpful guide for outlining

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<sup>2</sup> The Book of Ruth includes the themes of God's *providence*, *kindness* (*hesed*), and *the Davidic seed*. Peter H. W. Lau and Gregory Goswell, *Unceasing Kindness: A Biblical Theology of Ruth*, NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2016). In addition to these, it is worth noting the motifs of *suffering* (inflicted by *famine* and *death*) and *reversal*. Suffering relates to Naomi's crisis, whereas reversal brings the plot to a resolution. This paper focuses on reversal and gives special attention to a reversal in the emotional tone of the story.

<sup>3</sup> Edward F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, vol. 7, AYB (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> J. A. Loader, "Job's Sister: Undermining an Unnatural Religiosity," *Old Testament Essays* 6, no. 3, (1993): 312–29.

<sup>5</sup> "The One Who Returned: A Retrospective and Prospective Reading of Ruth," *JETS* 63, no. 3 (September 2020): 435–54.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Joüon, *Ruth: Commentaire Philologique et Exégétique* (Rome: Institut Biblique Pontifical, 1924).

<sup>7</sup> "Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth," *JBL* 84, no. 2 (June 1965): 165–68.

<sup>8</sup> "An Adjusted Symmetrical Structuring of Ruth," *JETS* 39, no. 1 (Mar 1996): 15–28.

the book.<sup>9</sup> In his article, “Ruth and the Covenant Heir: Reading Ruth in Light of Isaac’s Famine and Sojourn,” Joshua Jensen offers valuable observations on the intertextuality between the narratives of Ruth and Isaac, but he does not address significant parallels between the birth accounts of Isaac and Obed.<sup>10</sup> Despite the abundant number of commentaries on Ruth, no work focuses on the book’s subtheme of joy, centering the discussion on Naomi and Obed as her son.

The first task is to analyze the book’s structure. Its symmetrical nature and its profuse number of pairs provide valuable insight on the themes of the book. Evidence for chiasms exists on the micro and macro levels. The second step is to move beyond the structural evidence into a study of intertextual connections.<sup>11</sup> This article addresses two types of intertextual connections—retrospective and prospective. Then it makes some observations about God’s provision and the themes of seed and joy.

### *Structure*

Naomi is the central character in the narrative. The book’s exposition, crisis, and resolution support this point. The following plot overview provides the context needed for evaluating Ruth’s structure.

The book’s opening clause<sup>12</sup> specifies the time frame of the narrative (1:1).<sup>13</sup> The second clause—“and there was a famine in the land” (וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ)—establishes the story’s setting and Naomi’s initial problem. Although the book mentions famine (רָעָב) only once (1:1), it is an important background element that initiates the subsequent chain of events—Elimelech’s family’s move to Moab (1:2),<sup>14</sup> the death of all males of the family (1:3–4), and a seemingly hopeless return to Bethlehem<sup>15</sup> after its recovery from the famine (1:6ff).<sup>16</sup> Death brings about Naomi’s fundamental problem. Having been

<sup>9</sup> Bertman, 165–68.

<sup>10</sup> “Ruth and the Covenant Heir: Reading Ruth in Light of Isaac’s Famine and Sojourn,” *JBTW* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2022): 41–60.

<sup>11</sup> The word *intertextual* will be used in the sense of “inner-biblical interrelationships,” as Lau and Goswell prefer to call it. No intent is made to engage in free intertextuality that regards canonical and extra-canonical books on the same level. *Unceasing Kindness*, 66.

<sup>12</sup> וַיְהִי בִימֵי שֹׁפֵט הַשְּׁפָטִים (“Now it came about in the days of the judging of the judges”).

<sup>13</sup> Lau and Goswell comment, “The mention of this historical period is probably meant to recall the period in general.” *Unceasing Kindness*, 78.

<sup>14</sup> At its worst, famine could be caused by a military siege leading to an intense sort of despair—a people so hopeless that they would sink to family cannibalism (2 Kgs 6:26–29; Jer 19:9; Lam 4:10; Ezek 5:10; cf. Deut 28:53). At its best, famine would uproot families and potentially cause them to lose land inherited from their ancestors, as they went in search of greener pastures. Elimelech’s decision to sojourn in search of more favorable conditions is understandable. Campbell, 59.

<sup>15</sup> It is ironic that Elimelech’s family would leave Bethlehem (“house of bread”) because there was no bread. Daniel I. Block comments on this irony, adding that “they also sought hospitality in the land of those who had earlier hired Balaam the prophet to curse the Israelites (Deut 23:3–5[2–4]).” *Ruth: A Discourse Analysis of the Hebrew Bible*, ZECOT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 66.

<sup>16</sup> The text reads, “She [Naomi] had heard in the land of Moab that the Lord had visited his people in giving them food” (1:6b). The clause לָתֵת לָהֶם לֶחֶם (“giving them bread”) is alliterated and has a beautiful assonance. See Robert Alter

married for, likely, ten years (cf. 1:4), her sons die leaving no offspring. There is no heir to inherit Elimelech’s wealth, carry forward his name, and provide for Naomi in her old age (cf. Gen 15:2–4; 25:5; Deut 25:5–6). Death is at the heart of Naomi’s distress and represents the crisis of the plot.<sup>17</sup> In a sense, infertility can be viewed as another type of famine—the famine of family legacy.<sup>18</sup> A series of reversals unfolds as the story progresses toward its dénouement, bringing a satisfying resolution to Naomi’s circumstances.

### Narrative Frame

The macrostructure of Ruth follows a chiasmic structure. Bertman<sup>19</sup> proposes a chiasmic outline for Ruth’s structure. Luter and Rigsby fine-tune Bertman’s outline.<sup>20</sup> Luter and Rigsby rightly place Ruth 4:18–22 outside the narrative, calling it “epilogue.” They also identify the center of the story (layer D) that highlights God’s blessing via Boaz. I revise this outline by making two modifications (see column 3 of Table 1). First, my outline shortens Luter and Rigsby’s layer A (1:1–5), naming it “exposition” (1:1–2). Second, it maintains all the material most relevant to Naomi’s story in layers A and A’. In this chiasmic structure, most of layer A has a parallel in layer A’—including the emotional tone of the passage. In other words, the story moves from Naomi’s suffering and distress to her blessing and joy.

**Table 1. Chiasmic Structure of Ruth**

<b>Bertman</b>	<b>Luter and Rigsby</b>	<b>Borges</b>
A (1:1–5) <sup>21</sup>	A (1:1–5)	Exposition (1:1–2)
B (1:6–22)	B (1:6–22)	A (1:3–22)
C (2:1–23)	C (2:1–23)	B (2:1–23)
	<b>D (2:18–23; 3:1–5)</b>	<b>C (2:18–23; 3:1–5)</b>
C’ (3:1–18)	C’ (3:1–18)	B’ (3:1–18)
B’ (4:1–17)	B’ (4:1–12) A’ (4:13–17)	A’ (4:1–17)
A’ (4:18–22)	Epilogue (4:18–22)	Epilogue (4:18–22)

What to make of the middle layers? This outline shows that there are two stories, a “Ruth story” (layers B and B’) that is embedded in “Naomi’s story” (layers A and A’). The two central characters of the middle layers are Ruth and Boaz. Embedded in Naomi’s story, Ruth’s story gains prominence, but only for a while until the narrator refocuses on Naomi. Ruth’s story portrays Ruth and Boaz as

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and Frank Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 322.

<sup>17</sup> Block, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Reg Grant, “Literary Structure in the Book of Ruth,” *BSac* 148, no. 592 (October 1991): 428.

<sup>19</sup> Bertman, 165–68.

<sup>20</sup> Luter and Rigsby, 15–28.

<sup>21</sup> Bertman’s model sees 1:1–5 as an account of Naomi’s family history. On this basis, the model displays verses 1–5 as parallel to the Epilogue. This seems farfetched, however. “Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth,” 167.

conduits of God’s kindness toward Naomi; they are the means through which God provides for her.<sup>22</sup> Table 2 expands this chiasmic arrangement, providing a summary of each layer’s content.

**Table 2. Macrostructure of Ruth**

<b>Outline</b>	<b>Summary</b>
<b>Exposition (1:1–2)</b>	Famine; sojourning/Moab; family
<b>Act I (Layer A)</b>	
Introduction: Crisis (1:3–5)	Death; marriage; death
Scene 1 (1:6–18)	Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem; Orpah (Ruth’s foil) returns to her household
Scene 2 (1:19–21)	Townswomen; Naomi names herself Mara; bitter acknowledgement of negative providence (God is the antagonist)
Conclusion (1:22)	Restatement of the widows’ return; it was the beginning of the barley harvest
<b>Act II (Layer B)</b>	
Introduction (2:1)	Mention of Boaz
Scene 1 (2:2–18)	Naomi gives Ruth permission to go to the field; Ruth goes to Boaz’s field; Boaz asks for Ruth’s identity; Boaz is kind and generous; Ruth returns to Naomi
Scene 2 (2:19–22)	Naomi advises Ruth to act
Conclusion (2:23)	Ruth stays with Boaz’s maids and lives with Naomi
<b>Center (2:19–23; 3:1–5)</b>	
<b>Act III (Layer B’)</b>	
Scene 1 (3:1–5)	Mention of Boaz; Naomi advises Ruth to go to Boaz’s threshing floor
Scene 2 (3:6–15)	Ruth goes to Boaz’s threshing floor; Boaz is kind and generous; Ruth returns to Naomi
Scene 3 (3:16–18)	Naomi advises Ruth to wait
<b>Act IV (Layer A’)</b>	
Scene 1 (4:1–12)	Boaz and the close redeemer in Bethlehem; close redeemer (Boaz’s foil) refuses to redeem. Townswomen; marriage; birth
Scene 2 (4:13–17)	Women give joyful praise (God is the hero); Obed represents Naomi’s restorer of life and a sustainer; Ruth is better than seven sons
Falling action	Obed is cared for and named
<b>Epilogue (4:18–22)</b>	Genealogy from Perez to David

<sup>22</sup> The close redeemer whom Boaz addresses as פְּלֹנִי אֶלְמֹנִי serves as Boaz’s foil. The narrator is deliberate in making his name anonymous. The meaning of this rhyming designation is somewhat obscure. Some English versions render it as “my friend” (NIV, NASB, NRSV, JB) or “So-and-so” (NJPS). What is the reason for this anonymity? Berlin believes that the author’s wording simply reflects an author’s desire to “keep the story ‘more story-like.’” See Robert D. Holmstedt, *Ruth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 183. Block’s assessment, however, seems more reasonable. He connects this anonymity to the witnesses’ blessing to Boaz, which would have been the nameless redeemer’s blessing; that his name would become famous in Bethlehem (4:11). The irony is that the close redeemer’s attempts to preserve his name rendered him nameless, while Boaz’s kindness in raising a name for the widow was rewarded. *Ruth*, 206–207; cf. Campbell, 141.

Outer Layers

Luter and Rigsby provide a helpful comparison of A (1:3–22) and A' (4:1–17).<sup>23</sup> Table 3 summarizes their insight and is expanded in the following paragraphs.

**Table 3. Elements of Parallelism in Layer A and A'**

Layer A	Layer A'
1 Contextual mood: death of family males	Contextual mood: birth of a new son <sup>24</sup>
2 Loss of all hope through husbands' deaths <sup>25</sup>	Regaining of hope through marriage <sup>26</sup>
3 Widows left barren (no sons born in ten years) <sup>27</sup>	Reversal of barrenness
4 Ruth distantly related: once married to now-deceased son	Ruth closely related through Boaz: next-of-kin to Naomi <sup>28</sup>
5 Naomi's emotional response: explicit in her words ("call me Mara")	Naomi's emotional response: implied in joy of neighbors
6 3 Characters: Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth <sup>29</sup>	3 Characters: Ruth, the close redeemer, Boaz

<sup>23</sup> "An Adjusted Symmetrical Structuring of Ruth," 19.

<sup>24</sup> The wording, "and YHWH gave conception to her" (וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה לָהּ הַרְיוֹן), deliberately emphasizes God's hand in Ruth's conception. This point reinforces a change in the theological focus in the narrative. Whereas Naomi first recognizes God's negative providence, here the author balances her perspective by underscoring God's positive providence.

<sup>25</sup> No potential for help is mentioned; these deaths represent the loss of all hope. Block notes that this loss of hope is twofold: "The hope that Moab represented for Elimelech and his family was dashed, and ultimately the hope for Israel's royal line was jeopardized, when first the head of this household and then Naomi's two sons died, leaving only three surviving widows." *Ruth*, 69.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. verses 4:14, בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִשְׁבִּית לָךְ גֹּאֲל הַיּוֹם (lit. "Blessed is YHWH who has not let a redeemer be lacking to you today"), and 4:15, וְהָיָה לָךְ לְמַשִּׁיב נֶפֶשׁ וּלְכֹלֵל אֶת־שִׁבְיֶתְךָ (lit. "he will be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age"). The women's words to Naomi underscore and celebrate that God has given her a redeemer who would provide both security in her old age and restoration of life. While at first Naomi was hopeless due to her old age, barrenness, and widowed state, she is now hopeful in the company of her legal son, Obed. The hiphil participle מְשִׁיב ("a restorer"), from שׁוּב ("to return"), should remind the reader of the theme of return in chapter 1, especially the fact that Naomi returns to Bethlehem empty-handed (that is, childless).

<sup>27</sup> Regarding God's blessing and provision, the three widows are left barren. Once having had two sons, Naomi is now childless and too old to conceive children.

<sup>28</sup> As the women finish their speech, they refer to Ruth as Naomi's daughter-in-law followed by two modifying clauses—אֲשֶׁר־אֶהְבֶּתְךָ יְלֻדָתוֹ ("who loves you") and אֲשֶׁר־הִיא טוֹבָה לָךְ מִשִּׁבְעָה בָּנִים ("who is better to you than seven sons"). This twofold description of Ruth contrasts with how she is depicted in chapter 1 and throughout most of the book, where she is known as Naomi's daughter-in-law or as a Moabitess. She becomes more closely related to Naomi again through her marriage to Naomi's next-of-kin. That Ruth is better to Naomi than seven sons should remind the reader of Naomi's words at her entrance into the city—"YHWH has brought me back empty" (1:20). This was not entirely true, since Ruth—"who is better . . . than seven sons" (4:15)—was standing next to her mother-in-law. Amid her embittered state, Naomi was blind to God's kindness to her, channeled through Ruth's loyal love. This human tendency of blindness to God's good gifts in the midst of grief is a common problem, often occurring because one fixates on life's problems rather than blessings.

<sup>29</sup> There are two dialogues in this section. In the first dialogue, Naomi addresses both Ruth and Orpah, proposing that they both return to their household. Although they initially reject it, Orpah eventually acquiesces to the proposal (1:14). Then Naomi proceeds with a new attempt to convince Ruth to follow Orpah's example, but Naomi loses the argument, and it is Naomi who acquiesces to Ruth's counter proposal (1:18). Thus, Ruth's foil acts in conformity with Naomi's desire. Likewise, it is possible that Boaz's foil, the close redeemer, also acts in conformity with Boaz's will by rejecting his proposal (4:6). Verse 4:5—what Rowley calls the "master-stroke" (Campbell, 158)—might be evidence for this reading, if it is understood that Boaz's mention of the Israelite customs is intended to discourage the close redeemer

	Layer A	Layer A'
7	Specified time frame: beginning of harvest	Specified time frame: near end of harvest
8	Townswomen’s response: “stirring” of joy at Naomi’s return	Townswomen’s response: blessing on Naomi for her son
9	Naomi’s attitude: bitter, rebukes neighbors	Naomi’s attitude: joyful, joined by chorus of praise from women

Since items 8 and 9 in Table 3 directly relate to the emotional tone of their respective scenes, a few observations are indispensable. In layer A, the storyteller records the townswomen’s emotions in response to Naomi and Ruth’s return to Bethlehem (1:9). While the entire city is mentioned in the first clause, it is the voice of the women that is rhetorically highlighted in the second clause. The “entire city was stirred” (וְתָהָם כָּל-הָעִיר עָלֶיהָ) —this was a joyful event. The expression וְתָהָם echoes its usage in the context of joy elsewhere (1 Sam 4:5; 1 Kgs 1:45).<sup>30</sup> The joyful welcome clashes with Naomi’s internal emotions. Her emotional response brings the scene to a climax when she speaks of God’s negative providence and, with a pun, changes her name from Naomi (“pleasantness” or “sweet”) into Mara (“bitter”).<sup>31</sup> In layer A’, the city and the women respond to the events, with the city playing the part of a legal witness and the women serving as a support group (4:11–12, 15–17; cf. 1:19). In addition, the witnesses assert that YHWH is the one who gives Boaz offspring (4:12). This response represents a positive shift in attitude toward God (cf. 1:21).

In layer A, Naomi’s words (1:20–21) focus on God as an antagonist, since his sovereign hand is behind all her suffering.<sup>32</sup> The initial excitement of the women contrasts harshly with Naomi’s bitter grief (1:19–21). But in layer A’, the women return to the scene with a chorus of joyful praise to YHWH. This time, however, Naomi does not rebuke them for their excitement and blessing. Naomi’s non-verbal response brings her final interaction with the townswomen to resolution (4:14–15). Her acquiescence, then, shows her embracing of joy in God’s provision (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Naomi’s Positive Response Implied through Rhetorical Means**

Dialogues	Sections of Dialogue	Text
Resolved Simple Dialogue 1	Initial Utterance:	Praising YHWH: בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִשְׁבִּית לְךָ גֹּאֵל הַיּוֹם “Blessed is YHWH who has not let a redeemer be lacking to you today.”
		Blessing Obed: וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל “May his name become famous in Israel.”
		Remark: וְהָיָה לְךָ לְמַשִּׁיב נֶפֶשׁ וּלְכֹלֵל אֶת-שִׁיבֹתֶךָ “He will be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age.”
		Elaboration: כִּי כָלֵתֶךָ אֲשֶׁר-אֶהְבֶּתְךָ יִלְדֶתוּ אֲשֶׁר-הִיא טוֹבָה לְךָ מִשְׁבֶּעָה בְּנִים

from redeeming Naomi’s property and Ruth. Similarly, Holmstedt believes Boaz’s words are intentionally ambiguous in order to produce the realized outcome. See Campbell, 158; Holmstedt, 192.

<sup>30</sup> Nifal of הוּם, “to be in an uproar.” The Syriac Peshitta translation adds “they rejoiced,” inferring the idea of joy from the context. Joüon, 43.

<sup>31</sup> Luter and Rigsby, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Campbell, 83.

Dialogues	Sections of Dialogue	Text
		“For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.”
	Resolving Utterance:	Non-Verbal Response: ותקח נעמי את־הילד ותשֶׁתהוּ בְּחִיקָהּ וְתַהֲיִלּוּ לָאִמָּנָת׃ “Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap and became his nurse.”
Continuing Action:		The women name the child and say:
Unresolved Simple Dialogue 2	Initial Utterance:	Exclamation: יל־דָּבָן לְנַעֲמִי “A son has been born to Naomi!”
	Resolving Utterance:	None
Narrator’s Closing Comments:		וְתִקְרָאנָה שְׁמוֹ עוֹבֵד הוּא אָבִי־יֵשׁוּ אָבִי דָו׃ “So they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.”

The narrator omits Naomi’s words and quickly closes the scene with a series of *wayyiqtol* verbs.<sup>33</sup> Naomi’s actions of *taking* the child, *laying* him on her lap, and *nursing* him express her tenderness and satisfaction as she finally holds her son. At last the women say, “A son has been born to Naomi!” After this exclamation and the two closing statements, the curtain drops and the story ends. The closing scene unmistakably rings overtones of joy. Although analyses of Ruth have not identified joy as one of the book’s subthemes, some commentators have noted this joyful ending.<sup>34</sup> For example, Campbell perceptively hints at this when he writes, “The mood of the vignette which brings the Ruth story to a close is one of joy and happiness. All the words belong to the women, the same chorus which had met Naomi upon her return to Bethlehem from Moab; then they could only hear Naomi out, but here, under new circumstances, they bless.”<sup>35</sup>

In addition, Campbell notes how Naomi evolves throughout the story.<sup>36</sup> Not only does she mature emotionally, but she also gradually progresses from “passivity” to “activity.”<sup>37</sup> Campbell adds, “The final spoken words in the book come from the women celebrating Naomi’s joy as she holds the lad who replaces her own sons to her bosom: ‘A son is born to Naomi!’”<sup>38</sup> According to Campbell, the last scene is about the restoration of Naomi’s joy.

<sup>33</sup> The *wayyiqtol* is the primary verb form that advances the plot.

<sup>34</sup> Loader comments on this joyful scene, saying, “The significance of the chorus words is that they highlight and interpret the change of bitterness into happiness in a remarkable way: on the one hand we learn that this has come about by human initiative, but divine providence has also somehow been involved. On the other hand, the words contribute nothing to a solution of the underlying problem which left them dumbfounded in chapter 1. The women speak joyfully, but not a word about the sorrow and bitterness of earlier. If not involved in a ‘conspiracy of silence,’ they are all as quiet about the question brought into Bethlehem by Naomi as they were when she returned.” “Job’s Sister,” 323.

<sup>35</sup> Campbell, 168.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

### Observations

The structure of Ruth supports the fact that there is a pair of correlated emotions in the outer layers. These emotions relate to each other by means of contrast. Also, since Obed's birth is the decisive factor that reverses Naomi's fortune, the women's joyful praise surrounding his birth must be directly connected with the theme of reversal. Furthermore, it must be noted that there are at least two clues indicating that Naomi's redeemer—as far as the narrative goes—is Obed, not Boaz. First, the women's chorus explicitly indicates that Obed is the *בְּרִיאָה* whom YHWH had given to Naomi (4:14–15). Second, the structure of the book likely reinforces this point. The chiasmic structure seems to indicate that two individual stories are fused in the book—the story of Ruth (layers B, and B'), and that of Naomi (layers A and A').<sup>39</sup> These stories are deeply intertwined and cannot be easily separated.<sup>40</sup> But in a sense, both Boaz and Obed are different redeemers to different characters in the story.<sup>41</sup> Obed is clearly Naomi's redeemer, and Boaz is primarily Ruth's redeemer. Whereas it is possible that both redeemers anticipate Christ in different ways, the discussion on intertextual connections to Naomi's story will focus on Obed as a *בְּרִיאָה*. This study demonstrates that the birth of Obed points prospectively to Jesus' birth—an event that was received with an outburst of joy.

### *Intertextual Connections*

The above underscores overtones of joy in the plot Ruth. Paying special attention to the subtheme of joy, the following demonstrates that Naomi's story echoes previous stories of barren women and points forward to Mary's supernatural conception of the Messiah.<sup>42</sup> These stories are strung together throughout the redemptive metanarrative, forming a “theological harmony.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> This is a thesis that, to my knowledge, has not been argued yet. Athalya Brenner might give some direction toward establishing this point. Although I disagree with Brenner's presuppositions and conclusions, she finds several parallels between Naomi's and Ruth's individual stories. For example, with regard to their marital status, Naomi was an “elder widow, bereaved mother, in exile,” and Ruth was a “young and childless widow, in her own homeland.” Also, they were both foreigners at some point in their lives. Furthermore, they were both destitute and vulnerable. Moreover, they both had a satisfactory resolution of their problem that took place through a series of reversals. Coming from a source-criticism perspective, Brenner sees these parallels as evidence for two different oral traditions that were later compiled into one single book. While I disregard this conclusion, I suspect that these parallels might orient an analysis of each individual story. Perhaps more parallels—such as both widows having a redeemer—can be established. *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 70–84.

<sup>40</sup> Layton Talbert pointed out in a conversation that each character has an individual story that is intertwined with the other, and the two together comprise the whole book. Thus, the book can be read from each character's perspective.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion on both redeemers in Ruth, see Lau and Goswell, 117–119.

<sup>42</sup> The idea of connecting Naomi's story retrospectively and prospectively to other stories comes from Justin Jackson's article, where he examines the partial fulfillment of God's Pentateuchal promises and anticipation of the Messiah in Ruth. Jackson calls this retrospective and prospective outlook of Ruth “typological trajectory.” “The One Who Returned,” 435–54.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.



### Birth Narratives

Obed's birth represents both God's provision for Naomi individually and his faithfulness to his promises to Israel. In his providence toward Naomi, God preserved the lineage through which King David and the Messiah would later come (4:18–22).<sup>44</sup> Thus, Ruth's birth account is conceptually linked with birth narratives of other significant OT figures such as the patriarchs. While there are similarities between Obed's birth account and previous narratives, the parallels are not rigid.

**Table 5. Obed's Birth Narrative**<sup>45</sup>

I.	Birth report and reaction of women (13–15)
A.	Birth Report (13)
i.	Setting: Boaz marries Ruth and has intercourse with her (13a)
ii.	Birth report proper (13b)
B.	The women's reactions: praising YHWH for the child (14–15)
i.	Speech formula (14a)
ii.	Speech (14b–15)
1.	Praise of YHWH (14b)
2.	Hopes for the child (15)
II.	Naomi nurses the child and reaction of neighboring women (16–17)
A.	Naomi nurses the child (16)
B.	The neighboring women's reactions (17)
i.	Speech of neighboring women (17a)
ii.	Naming and significance of the child (17b)

Block and Finlay note that Obed's birth story differs in a few points from a typical birth narrative which includes four main elements:

1. A barren woman longing for a son
2. A divine announcement of a conception of a son who would take on a special role in redemptive history
3. The son's conception and birth
4. The son's naming<sup>46</sup>

First, in Obed's birth story there is no indication that there was a divine announcement. Secondly, there is a surprising twist in the conclusion of Obed's birth account. The Bethlehemite women identify Naomi—not Ruth—as his mother. This identification indicates that this is Naomi-and-Obed's birth narrative. Moreover, while in birth narratives the child is typically named at the announcement of conception, Obed is only named after his birth (4:13 and 4:17). Concerning this unusual naming, Finlay points out that in no other instance in the OT does a group of people—such as the townswomen—name a child. Furthermore, unlike Isaac's case, Obed's name is not circumstantially

<sup>44</sup> Block, 231.

<sup>45</sup> Timothy D. Finlay, *The Birth Report Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 210.

<sup>46</sup> Block, 231–232.

derived, but community given. Finally, in Obed's story, no one character dominates the scene and the only ones to speak are the women (4:14, 17).

Despite the differences above, there is unity in the midst of tension, forming a "theological harmony."<sup>47</sup> Echoes and allusions do not always require a strict correspondence between the source and target passages; in fact, most allusions lack strict correspondence. In Finlay's words, one should not forget that "each individual narrative is driven by its own plot and characterization" and therefore allows some levels of freedom in alluding back to the source text.<sup>48</sup> Jackson adds, "Biblical theology, properly engaged, requires an appropriate tension between unity and diversity."<sup>49</sup> In other words, the birth narratives of Obed and others have conceptual unity and general similarities, while allowing for diversity in the more minute details.

### Retrospective Analysis

While the witnesses and elders bless Boaz, they allude to the matriarchs Rachel and Leah who "built the house of Israel" (4:11; cf. Gen 29:25–30). They also allude to Genesis 38, saying, "May your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the offspring which the LORD will give you by this young woman" (Ruth 4:12). Several works examine these allusions and their intertextual connections to the book of Ruth. More subtle intertextual connections, however, deserve a careful treatment. The following discussion, although not comprehensive, examines echoes of barren-women stories such as Sarah's and Hannah's.

#### *Sarah*

Rabbinic scholarship is often unsympathetic toward Sarah. Some rabbinical writings describe Sarah's infertility as some sort of punishment.<sup>50</sup> Other Medieval writings view Sarah in a negative light due to her cruelty to Hagar.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Naomi has not had the most sympathetic readership. Negative perceptions aside, they both share in the improbable way that YHWH provides them with a child.

Unlike Obed's birth story, Isaac's birth fits Block's outline of typical birth narratives. Table 6 summarizes relevant information about the broader context for Isaac's birth account.

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<sup>47</sup> Jackson, 435.

<sup>48</sup> For Finlay's critique of Fisch's structuralist approach in analyzing parallels between Genesis 19, Genesis 38 and Ruth 4, see *The Birth Report Genre in the Hebrew*, 217.

<sup>49</sup> Jackson, 435.

<sup>50</sup> Adele Reinhartz and Miriam Walfish, "Conflict and Coexistence in Jewish Interpretation," in *Sarah, Hagar, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 108.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 113–15.

**Table 6: Isaac’s Birth Narrative**

Birth Narrative Pattern <sup>52</sup>	Genesis	Sarah <sup>53</sup> and Isaac
1. A barren woman longing for a son	11:30 16:1 16:1–3	“Sarai was barren; she had no child.” “Sarai, Abram’s wife had borne him no children.” [Sarai gives Hagar to Abram; he listens to her and marries the slave.]
2. A divine announcement of the conception of a son who would take on a special role in redemptive history <sup>54</sup>	17:15–16  17:19	“Then God said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah <i>shall be</i> her name. I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be <i>a mother of</i> nations; kings of peoples will come from her.’” “Sarah your wife will bear you a son.”
3. The son’s conception and birth	21:1–2  21:6–8	“Then the Lord took note of Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him.” [Sarah’s joyful laughter].
4. The son’s naming	17:21 21:3	“You shall call his name Isaac.” “Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac.”

Key themes from Isaac’s birth narrative are echoed in Naomi’s story. First, Sarah’s infertility brought her grief. This is evidenced by Hagar’s animosity toward Sarah (Gen 16:5).<sup>55</sup> Ishmael adds to Sarah’s distress when he mocks her (Gen 21:9–10). Second, in the opening of his covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:1), God identifies himself as אֱלֹהֵי שָׂדֵי—the “Almighty God” who is capable of keeping his past and future promises to Abraham. Naomi refers to God with the same title (Ruth 1:20).<sup>56</sup> The אֱלֹהֵי שָׂדֵי that both Sarah and Naomi experience is, as Jackson defines, the “God who can overcome any hindrance in order to keep his promises, including overcoming Sarai’s barrenness.”<sup>57</sup>

Thirdly, Naomi’s change of her own name parallels the divine change of Sarah’s name (from “Sarai” to “Sarah,” Gen 17:15). A more salient parallel relates to their age, as the Genesis accounts make several references to Sarah’s being old and barren (e.g., Gen 17:17; 21:5). This repetition in Genesis rhetorically emphasizes the point that, humanly speaking, Sarah was hopeless. Likewise, Naomi’s words to her daughters-in-law echo these references and connect Naomi with Sarah (Ruth 1:11–13). Furthermore, Isaac’s birth account underscores God’s promises to Abraham and Sarah in several instances (e.g., Gen 18:10; 21:1–8). The theme of promise, especially pertaining to Abraham’s offspring and God’s covenant, is also paralleled in Naomi’s story in the sense that her offspring intersects with the royal and Messianic lineage. Moreover, Isaac’s birth account shows that God has

<sup>52</sup> Adapted from Block, 231.

<sup>53</sup> For the sake of clarity, “Sarah” and “Abraham” will designate these characters even when the relevant verse precedes their name change.

<sup>54</sup> While Obed’s birth introduces some variation in the form, in essence it still contains all four elements with exception of the first half of the second one (“divine announcement”).

<sup>55</sup> וְאֶקַּל בְּעֵינֶיהָ (lit. “I grow small in her eyes”).

<sup>56</sup> This title for God is predominantly used in Genesis and Job (e.g., Gen 17:1; 28:3; Job 5:17; 6:4, 14).

<sup>57</sup> “The One Who Returned,” 448.

control over Sarah’s womb as well as any woman’s womb.<sup>58</sup> Obed’s birth account also explicitly references God’s sovereignty over the womb (Ruth 4:13).

Finally, it is remarkable that Isaac’s birth account also hints at the theme of joy. The references to laughter highlight joy as a theme in the story. First, both Abraham and Sarah laugh (צחק) at God’s promise of a child (Gen 17:17; 18:12). This sarcasm reveals doubt (18:10–15). Sarah’s laughter (18:11–12) is sandwiched between God’s assurance and reassurance of his promise to them (18:13–14). Second, a more significant development of this theme takes place in the birth and naming of Isaac (21:1–8). In this passage, the first verse records God’s fulfillment of his promise, and the second verse explicitly records Isaac’s conception and birth. Then Abraham names his son according to the command he received from God (Gen 17:19, 21). The name that Isaac received was circumstantial—Isaac (יצחק) means “laughter.” Following that, Isaac is circumcised (21:4). Finally, in Sarah’s following words, the text explicitly explains the significance of Isaac’s name with a pun:<sup>59</sup>

צחק עשה לי אלהים  
כל־השמע יצחק־לי:

Gen 21:6

“God has made *laughter* for me;  
*everyone who hears will laugh* with me.”

In this declaration, Sarah alludes to Isaac (whose name means “laughter”) and to Ishmael’s mockery (whose name is etymologically related to שמע [“to hear”]).<sup>60</sup> The choice of the *yiqtol* verb form יצחק is likely intentional as it approximates the verb’s pronunciation to Isaac’s name. Not only does this joyful exclamation highlight Sarah’s reversal from barrenness to motherhood, but it also reflects an emotional reversal. The afflicting mockery and shame that had plagued her whole life are now turned into joyful laughter.

It seems, then, that Isaac’s name choice has a twofold function. First, it is intended to remind Abraham that his doubts were unfounded and his faith in God vindicated.<sup>61</sup> Second, the name is meant to bring joy to Sarah by reminding her of God’s provision for her. She further expresses her joy in the following verse, saying, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age” (Gen 21:7). Interestingly, Naomi’s nursing of Obed (Ruth 4:16) and the words of the neighboring women to Naomi (“A son has been born to Naomi!” in v. 17) recall this scene. The narrative frame of Sarah’s barrenness compares with Naomi’s as shown in Table 7.

**Table 7. Comparison: Sarah and Naomi**

Sarah		Naomi
Barren, old, wife of an old man	Situation	Barren, old, widowed
Mocked, ashamed	Emotion	Afflicted, hopeless
Doubtful (sarcastic)	Religiosity	Confused
Supernatural conception	Provision	Creative conception (via Ruth)
<b>Motherhood, joy, faith</b>	Reversal	<b>Motherhood, joy, hope</b>

<sup>58</sup> In Genesis 20:18, Abraham and Sarah’s interaction with Abimelech makes this explicit.

<sup>59</sup> Isaiah makes a typological reference to Sarah’s barrenness as he prophesies the reversal of Israel’s misfortunes (Isa 51:3).

<sup>60</sup> K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 267.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

In sum, the evidence above establishes an intertextual connection between Sarah’s and Naomi’s reversals. It is striking that they both hint at a theme of joy. In both stories, the reversal of bareness is followed by a joyful response.

*Hannah*

Hannah’s story also has significant intertextual connections with Sarah’s and Naomi’s story. It is remarkable that the birth of Samuel is received with a magnificent hymn of joyful praise to YHWH. This hymn, as is frequently the case with OT narratives, is full of links and parallels that point retrospectively and prospectively to key parts of redemptive history.<sup>62</sup> Table 8 displays some noteworthy points of comparison between Hannah and Naomi.

**Table 8. Comparison: Hannah and Naomi**

Hannah		Naomi
Barren, provoked, humiliated, misunderstood	Situation	Barren, old, widowed
Distressed (מַרְתָּ נֶפֶשׁ)	Emotion	Afflicted, Hopeless
Devoted	Religiosity	Confused
Providential conception	Provision	Creative conception (via Ruth)
<b>Motherhood, joy</b>	<b>Reversal</b>	<b>Motherhood, joy, hope</b>

The story begins with Hannah—the “graced one”—and her family (1 Sam 1:1–28). Verse 2 is full of tension: Elkanah has two wives, and infertile Hannah is in desperate need of *grace*. Verse 3 begins with a *weqatal* verb introducing a block of verses that provide some important background information and set the tone for the narrative. Every year Elkanah’s family would *go up* (*weqatal* וַעֲלֶה) to the temple to worship, and he would *give* (*weqatal* וַיִּתֵּן) his wife Peninnah her portions. Verse 5 contrasts Peninnah and Hannah by using a different construction—disjunctive *waw* + indirect object + *yiqtol* verb. “But to Hannah he would give a double portion” (וַיִּלְחֶנְהָ יְתֵן מִנֶּה אֶחָת אֲפָיִם). The reason for Elkanah’s generosity is that he loved Hannah, but the Lord had closed her womb (1:5–6).<sup>63</sup>

The scene is set for Hannah’s crisis. Verse 6 adds that Hannah’s rival Peninnah would provoke her (*weqatal* וַיִּכְעֲסֶתָּהּ). The *weqatal* here stresses the habituality of this provocation. In verse 6 this verb is a *piel* meaning “to irritate.” In verse 7, the same verb in the *hiphil* intensifies Peninnah’s action; that is, she “provokes Hannah to anger.” Hannah’s situation is one of deep distress.

Peninnah’s provocation goes on year after year, causing Hannah to grow in her distress. Hannah’s weeping and fasting (1 Sam 1:10) is emotionally stirring. Moreover, when she prays to YHWH, the text describes her as “bitter of soul” (מַרְתָּ נֶפֶשׁ) and having bitter tears.<sup>64</sup> Evidently, Hannah’s emotions and the language in her story parallel Naomi’s initial emotional state.

<sup>62</sup> Examples of passages linked to this hymn include Exod 15:1–21; Deut 32; Judg 5; 1 Sam 2:1–10; 2 Sam 22; Dan 2:20–23. Lau and Goswell, 67.

<sup>63</sup> This also highlights God’s sovereignty over the womb.

<sup>64</sup> A similar construction is used in Job (3:20; 7:11; 10:1; 21:25).

Regarding her religiosity, she models a life of devotion to YHWH as she pours out her suffering and confused soul before God (1 Sam 1:11). Her prayer expresses her strong desire to have a child and to be free from her distress (#1 in Table 6). Along with her prayer, Hannah vows to give her future child to YHWH (1 Sam 1:11). On this point, Hannah’s story diverges from the standard birth narrative form in a subtle way (#2 in Table 6). Instead of including a divine announcement of Hannah’s conception and stating her son’s special role, it is Hannah who seeks God and assigns her future son a special role. In contrast, Obed’s role is unveiled only as redemptive history progresses, although it is hinted at in the epilogue of Ruth.<sup>65</sup> Regarding God’s involvement, in both Hannah’s and Naomi’s case, God does not speak directly to the barren women. Nonetheless, Hannah receives assurance from Eli that God would attend to her request (1:17).

After Hannah’s prayer, a series of nine *wayyiqtol* verbs quickly moves the plot to a satisfying resolution (1 Sam 1:19–20). Here, the child’s naming takes place together with the child’s birth. Samuel’s name, like Isaac’s, is circumstantially given: “God heard” (her prayer). As in Obed’s and Isaac’s accounts, Samuel was received into the world with a joyful celebration (2:1–10).

### Prospective Considerations

Mary’s Magnificat has remarkable links with Hannah’s praise (Luke 1:46–56).<sup>66</sup> These two joyful praises intersect by means of various themes: joy, salvation, God’s sanctity, pride, the greatness of God, the strength of God’s arm, God’s throne, a reversal of expectations, a contrast between the powerful and the weak, and wealth and poverty. The parallels between the births of Jesus and Samuel go beyond these songs of praise. In fact, all these barren-women narratives are woven into the grand story and advance God’s purpose in bringing salvation to the world. Using the same model from Tables 7 and 8, Table 9 compares Mary with Naomi, demonstrating how these four histories come together.

**Table 9. Comparison: Mary and Naomi**

Mary		Naomi
Virgin, young, betrothed	Situation	Barren, old, widowed
Perplexed <sup>67</sup>	Emotion	Afflicted, hopeless
Devoted	Religiosity	Confused
Miraculous conception	Provision	Creative conception (via Ruth)
<b>Motherhood, joyful</b>	<b>Reversal</b>	<b>Motherhood, joyful, hopeful</b>

The comparison of the stories above, although not comprehensive, shows how Naomi’s story in the Book of Ruth is an intermediary link between preceding stories and the birth of the Messiah. These stories demonstrate God’s provision of a child who eventually became an important character in

<sup>65</sup> While exercising his role, Samuel anointed David, Obed’s grandson, to be king.

<sup>66</sup> For a comparison between Hannah’s praise and Mary’s Magnificat, see Cristina Buffa, “The Magnificat and the Song of Hannah: Comparing Social Conditions,” *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, 92 no. 3 (2018), 377–92.

<sup>67</sup> Mary was “perplexed” (διαταράσσω, Luke 1:29) and “afraid” (μη φοβοῦ, Μαριάμ, v. 30).

redemptive history. Each of these birth stories includes a scene of joyful celebration; likewise, at the birth of Jesus there is an outburst of joy. Preceding Jesus' birth, the Magnificat opens with Mary's words, "My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior!" (Luke 1:46). Following Jesus' birth, an angelic chorus praises God, saying, "Glory to God in the highest" (2:14). The thematic connection of joy across these narratives supports the proposed thesis that the Book of Ruth contains a subtheme of joy. In fact, the birth of Obed, Naomi's redeemer, prospectively anticipates the birth of the Messiah.

### *Conclusion*

This article has argued that Naomi's reversal extends beyond her circumstances; it represents a reversal of her emotion as she experiences God's negative and positive providence. While much of Naomi's readership has been negative toward her, this article proposes a sympathetic reading of her story. Naomi is an evolving character who initially is deeply confused and distressed due to her suffering. Her complaint about God's hand in Ruth 1 does not necessarily indicate bitterness toward God. Instead, she recognizes God's sovereign hand in the events of her life. This is to be human and to "take God seriously."<sup>68</sup> Much like the Psalmists, Job, and many saints throughout history, Naomi wrestles with the problem of theodicy.<sup>69</sup> While Naomi suffers (Ruth 1), the narrator and the women stay silent. But as the story unfolds, the women's joyful shout stands as a witness that Naomi's questions have been answered—"A son has been born to Naomi!" (Ruth 4). Yes, God cares for his suffering people, and he cares for Naomi. While looking at the particulars of Naomi's life, this article also calls the reader to consider a bigger picture. That is, in providing for Naomi, God continues to bless Abraham's seed through whom the Messiah would finally come. He has come and redeemed his people. "Joy to the world, the Lord is come!"

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<sup>68</sup> Campbell, 83.

<sup>69</sup> See *ibid* for a discussion of Naomi's employment of judicial metaphorical language.