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THE SCENE AT THE THRESHING FLOOR: Suggestive Readings and Intercultural Considerations on Ruth 3

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Situated in the agrarian setting of ancient Israel, the Book of Ruth tells the story of two women without prospects who undertook steps to reverse their fortunes. Told in simple narrative style, the tale is engaging with its tight plot and clearly defined characters. Yet the story leaves room for interpretation and for the reader's imagination to do its work. In this article, we look at a few verses where interpretation has resulted in quite divergent readings of the text.

A dramatic shift occurs within the story when Naomi takes matters in hand and sends Ruth to the threshing floor at night. Exegetes and commentators have explained this event in many ways, ranging from fairly neutral to explicitly erotic (a "striptease"¹). Trying to put the scene at the threshing floor in a right perspective, interpreters have grappled with the context within which this story is to be read, i.e., with the customs and culture of the Israelites of that time, and with the human dimensions of power and poverty, social roles and sexual roles, passivity and bold initiatives which at all times and in all places give contour to survival techniques.

Without attempting to be exhaustive, this article presents a survey of some of the readings of the first few verses of Ruth 3 abstracted from printed articles and commentaries. Alongside these readings, we would like to present a non-Western reading of the same episode as understood from the perspective of the culture of the Bowa people of Mali, West Africa. Any reading process involves cultural considerations, both conscious and unconscious. The variety of interpretations reflects a diversity of cultural values, and the interpreter's own culture shines through as the hermeneutic key for understanding the passage.

Exegetical enigmas

The elements we will focus on in Ruth 3 are listed below with a fairly literal translation:

v. 2	הלילה	"the night"; "tonight"
v. 3	ורחצת וכסת	"wash and anoint yourself"
v. 3	ושמת ² שמלתך	"put on your mantle"
v. 4	וגלית מרגלתיו	"and uncover the place of his feet"
v. 7	ותגל מרגלתיו	"and she uncovered the place of his feet"
v. 9	ופרשת כנפך	"and spread your wing"

1 Ellen van Wolde, *Ruth en Noömi, twee vreemdgangers* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1993), 82.

2 There is a Kethib (sg.) and Qere (pl.) difference here.

None of these elements in themselves is linguistically particularly unclear. But when trying to grasp their significance within the progression of the story, the reader's understanding of what happened is colored and guided by what she or he thinks to be logical, expected, or acceptable within the cultural context of the story.

Several questions arise when trying to interpret the scene. Why did Naomi send Ruth to the threshing floor at night? What connotations do Naomi's instructions to Ruth have (to "wash and anoint yourself" and to "put on your mantle")? How is the instruction to "uncover the place of his feet" to be understood? What does Ruth's request to Boaz to "spread your wing" mean?

Some Western readings and interpretations of Ruth 3

(1) The time and place: "the night" and "the threshing floor"

The fact that Naomi told Ruth to meet Boaz at the threshing floor at night or "tonight" is understood by some to emphasize expediency: now, at once, this night. Harvest time was over. Boaz was winnowing barley that evening and would sleep at the threshing floor, most likely to prevent theft of the winnowed grain. It would thus be easier for Ruth to approach him there than if he were at home. There was no time to lose.¹

Other interpreters go quite far in reading suggestive connotations into the fact that the meeting was to be explicitly at night. Ruth and Boaz had become acquainted during the daytime, now they were to know each other at night.² The threshing floor is said to have all the associations to the readers of that day that the beach with a setting sun has to modern movie viewers.³ In this regard, mention is made that the threshing floor was linked to the festivities and fertility rites of the harvest celebration (see, e.g., the polemic against the whoring of Israel at the threshing floor in Hos 9.1), thus something could happen there that night.⁴

Others dispute this suggestion, stating that there is nothing in the text to suggest that there were many people present at the threshing floor. The hypothesis that fertility rites were observed here (Hos 9.1) is said to be totally without foundation.⁵

(2) Washing, anointing, and clothing

Some think that Naomi's instructions to Ruth to wash and anoint herself are intended so that Ruth might be pleasing and show respect (cf. Judith 10.3).⁶ Others understand them to be part of the normal toilette for both men and women in a hot climate where water was scarce and hygiene was at a "most primitive stage of development."⁷

As to the clothing, the שמלה Ruth is told to don refers either to an upper garment or to a mantle worn over the shoulders and used to cover the head. The

1 See Klaas A. D. Smelik, *Ruth (Verklaring van de Hebreeuwse Bijbel)* (Kampen: Kok, 2000), 104-5.

2 Van Wolde, *Ruth en Noömi*, 78.

3 Van Wolde, *Ruth en Noömi*, 93.

4 Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 67. Cf. also Van Wolde, *Ruth en Noömi*, 78.

5 Jan G. F. L. de Fraine, *Ruth, uit de Grondtekst vertaald en uitgelegd, De Boeken van het Oude Testament (III)* (Roermond and Maaseik: J. J. Romen & Sons, 1955), 153.

6 De Fraine, *Ruth*, 153.

7 Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth and Esther* (WBC 9; Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1996), 150; Bush makes reference here to Deut 28.40; Mic 6.15; 2 Sam 12.20; 2 Chr 18.15.

first option is rejected as superfluous advice: Ruth would certainly not go through town naked. The mantle makes more sense: she could use it to hide her identity and to keep warm at night.¹

From its usage in the OT, the type of garment represented by the word שְׂמֹלֶה is a large, outer garment (cf. Isa 9.5), extending well down over the legs. In Exod 22.25-26 the word is used to describe the garment of the poor man taken as security for a loan, which must be returned to him before sunset since it is his only covering for the night. The garment was worn by both men and women, although there apparently were differences between the two (Deut 22.5). In no context does it mean “dressy clothes” or “best clothes.”²

It is suggested that 2 Sam 12.20 is almost directly parallel to Ruth 3.3. David, when learning of the death of his child, “washed himself and put on perfumed oil and changed his apparel (שְׂמֹלֶה).”³ Ruth could thus signal her return to normal activities and desires of life.⁴

In contrast, not a few commentators see the instructions to Ruth as clearly intended to make her “enticing,”⁵ “naturally to make her irresistible.”⁶ Bathing and anointing oneself with perfumed oil are seen as ways for a woman to excite the desires of a man, and comparison is made to Judith (10.3-4), whose preparations are described more extensively than Ruth’s. The relevance of the differences between the two descriptions is waived aside, since Judith, as a rich woman, had more possibilities than the poor Ruth did. Naomi’s assignment to Ruth was clear: Ruth must tempt Boaz into marriage. Now that Naomi herself had no more chances with a man (1.12), she placed all hope on Ruth’s sexual attractiveness.⁷

Some commentators leave open both the possibility of the end of a period of mourning and that of preparations for a wedding.⁸

(3) “Uncover the place of his feet”

This instruction gives rise to the most diversity in the interpretations. The more neutral explanations take this to mean that Ruth is to lift up the covers at Boaz’ feet and lay down there. The intention would be to awaken Boaz.⁹

Much discussion is dedicated to the significance of the word מְרִגְלֶה “his foot end,” following the instruction to “uncover, bare.” The word occurs as well in Dan 10.6, where it is parallel to “his arms,” and must there refer to “his feet.” Of

1 Smelik, *Ruth*, 106.

2 Bush (*Ruth and Esther*, 150-1) compares the passage with Ezek 16.8-12, where the preparation of Jerusalem as Yahweh’s bride is described, “but the two passages differ significantly and critically in the type of clothing named . . . woman’s preparations and attire when seeking to be attractive to men involved much more than simply bathing, putting on perfumed oil, and wearing a שְׂמֹלֶה.”

3 See also 2 Sam 14.2, where mourning practices involve refraining from washing oneself or anointing oneself with oil.

4 Bush, *Ruth and Esther*, 152.

5 Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (AB 7; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1995), 120.

6 Nielsen, *Ruth*, 68: further: “This is how the bride prepares herself to meet the bridegroom (cf. Ezek 16:8-9; Esth 2:12; Judith 10:3) . . . The purpose of the visit to Boaz is therefore clear enough: Ruth is to get herself a husband.”

7 Smelik, *Ruth*, 105-6.

8 Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, “The Book of Ruth” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 2; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 926: “Washing, anointing (or perfuming oneself), and donning one’s best clothes may symbolize either the end of a period of mourning (cf. 2 Sam 12:20) or the preparation of a bride for a wedding (cf. Ezek 16:9).”

9 De Fraine, *Ruth*, 153-4.

significance in this regard is the fact that in Hebrew the expression “feet” is also used as a euphemism for “genitals.”¹ The question is whether the reference to the foot end is here intended as a location or as a description of a part of the male body. Did Naomi give Ruth instructions to approach Boaz sexually?²

Against this assumption, arguments are brought forward that in other biblical texts the expression “uncover the shame” is used, not “uncover the feet.” Furthermore, Ruth 4.13 relates successively that Boaz took Ruth, she became his wife, and he came to her, a description for sexual relations. This list of three actions suggests that their sexual relationship began only at that moment and not on a previous night.³

The Hebrew prefix **מ**, with which **מרגלת** “foot end,” begins, normally refers to a location. In vv. 8 and 14, where **מרגלת** also occurs, the word functions within the sentence as an indication of place. Thus the translation “place of the feet,” “foot end,” would seem more fitting than “feet” alone. The uncovering of the male genitals is an approach much too direct to fit in this passage.⁴

F. W. Bush takes the parallel use of **מרגלת** “foot end,” and **זרעת** “arms,” in Dan 10.6 to indicate that a larger area is indicated than feet alone, and suggests “leg,” or “lower leg.” Bush takes Naomi’s instructions to mean that Ruth should uncover the lower half of Boaz’ body and lie down there close beside him, not simply “at his feet,” as is often understood. Bush denies that there is anything in the context to suggest that **מרגלת** “foot end,” functions here as a euphemism for sexual organs.⁵

Why should Ruth lie down at Boaz’ foot end? Some suggest that this is the safest place to remain unnoticed.⁶ The suggestion that the lifting of the cover would be the gesture of a bride offering herself is denied by De Fraine. Naomi’s goal was not to let Ruth be married to Boaz but to move the rich farmer to be the “redeemer.” The symbolic significance of the cover is in focus, as becomes apparent from v. 9.⁷

It seems that ancient versions took pains to avoid the possibility of sexually oriented ulterior motives. Due to a possible obscene allusion, the Syriac version has omitted this sentence. The Targum attempts to exclude sexual allusions by ascribing to Boaz the honorable age of eighty years.⁸

Even when maintaining that no sexual action is intended, many agree in drawing attention to the fact that the passage is loaded with ambivalent expressions. The act of lying down at the feet of Boaz is seen as being suggestive enough, and it is assumed that this is the author’s intent. The author is said consciously to make ample use of ambiguous verbs and expressions, such as **שכב** “to lie,” **ידע** “to know (also sexually),” **גלה** “uncover,” **בוא** “to come, to enter,” while the location (the threshing floor) in Hos 9.1 is mentioned as the place of sexual excesses. But, it is admitted, these are all allusions.⁹ No explicit sexual act is mentioned. The author is said to choose words that carry overtones

1 See Exod 4.25; 2 Kgs 18.27//Isa 36.12 [Qere]; Isa 7.20 and Ezek 16.25.

2 Smelik, *Ruth*, 107.

3 Smelik, *Ruth*, 107.

4 Smelik, *Ruth*, 107-8.

5 Bush, *Ruth and Esther*, 152-3.

6 Smelik, *Ruth*, 108.

7 De Fraine, *Ruth*, 153-4.

8 De Fraine, *Ruth*, 153.

9 Smelik, *Ruth*, 108; Bush, *Ruth and Esther*, 152.

contradictory to the simple sense of the narrative as a conscious literary device.¹ Though using language capable of double entendre, and leaving unstated and hence shrouded in ambiguity exactly what transpired between the two on the threshing floor in the dark of the night, the author has depicted both of them as people of integrity (cf. 2.1; 3.11) whose lives exhibit faithful loyalty to relationships (see 1.8; 2.2; 3.3). They will have met this moment of choice with that same integrity.² The implication is that having premarital sexual relations would not exhibit integrity of character, a conclusion not shared by all interpreters, as we shall see.

De Fraine maintains that these expressions, which may undoubtedly be interpreted sexually, need not be taken as an argument for sexual involvement here. All of these formulas do not irrefutably indicate a marriage context.³ Note that De Fraine speaks of “marriage context” when referring to sexual relations.

In a similar tone, W. A. Gage explains that by having Ruth uncover Boaz’ feet during the night, the author invokes the word “most commonly used in the proscription of incestuous relations in the law,” i.e., “uncover the nakedness of” (Lev 18.6ff.), but the idiom is carefully modified to preserve Ruth’s purity: “Nothing unseemly passes between them in the night. . . .”⁴ We draw attention to the fact that what Gage here notes as “unseemly,” apparently referring to premarital sexual relations, would in many societies not be thus characterized as long as there was common consent.

While taking the threshing floor to be a “substitute symbol of fertility,” and stating that Ruth’s “dress points to sexuality, as do the verbs for lying down, uncovering, spending the night, and knowing,” J. Bos does not further expand on sexual implications. Bos sees Ruth’s presence in an unexpected place under the cover of darkness as a subtle form of deception. The alliance to Boaz was intended to restore the necessities of sustenance, security, and posterity. “That the necessities could be provided only by a fortuitous marriage reflects the limitations of the time and the culture in which the story takes place.”⁵ Thus Bos portrays Ruth, alongside Tamar and Yael, as an “autonomous individual and as subverting patriarchal value-assumptions.”⁶

While agreeing that *textually* sexual intercourse is excluded,⁷ some commentators pull out all stops in giving a sexually loaded interpretation of this scene. E. M. Good criticizes Bos’ avoidance of “an overtly sexual interpretation of Ruth”:

To be sure marriage in those days involved contractual obligations. . . . But the contract and Boaz’ promise to pursue it are not incompatible with the implication that the night spent on the threshing floor was not passed merely sleeping . . .⁸

1 Bush, *Ruth and Esther*, 156; Van Wolde, *Ruth en Noömi*, 95-97.

2 Bush, *Ruth and Esther*, 155-6.

3 De Fraine, *Ruth*, 154-5.

4 Warren A. Gage, “Ruth upon the Threshing Floor and the Sin of Gibeah: A Biblical-Theological Study,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* (1989): 369-75, esp. 373.

5 Johanna W. H. Bos, “Out of the Shadows: Genesis 38; Judges 4:17-22; Ruth 3,” *Semeia* 42 (1988): 64.

6 Edwin M. Good, “Deception and Women: A Response,” *Semeia* 42 (1988): 117-32, esp. 117.

7 Van Wolde, *Ruth en Noömi*, 95-97.

8 Good, “Deception and Women: A Response,” *Semeia* 42 (1988): 119.

Good states that marriage “in those days involved contractual obligations,” but it would be more correct to state that this is the case at all times and in all places! Even in cultures where “living together” is accepted, actually getting married always involves taking a formal step with contractual obligations. In some societies, cohabitation also involves formal, legally defined obligations. We note that Good’s assessment that the context makes the assumption of sexual relations entirely normal would not be shared by all; Bush expressed a nearly opposite evaluation of the same circumstances (see above).

Nielsen takes “lie” and “lay” to be “keywords in this chapter, emphasizing the sexual overtones of the meeting.”¹ She interprets Naomi’s instructions to Ruth to mean that Ruth is to uncover *herself* at Boaz’ feet. She argues that מרגלת “foot end,” is a location and that the object of “uncover” is left implicit. The object would have to be either Boaz or Ruth herself. To uncover a man sexually is clearly condemned in the OT. In spite of admitting that “the action of women uncovering themselves is rare in the OT, and when it does happen, it is met with clear condemnation,”² Nielsen maintains that like her ancestress, Lot’s daughter, and Tamar, Ruth uses her sexuality to achieve her goal of procuring posterity. Both were marginalized and both used a trick rather than an agency of law to acquire the seed to produce the required heir: Ruth uncovered her sexual organs and laid down at Boaz’ feet.³

Nielsen’s statement that both Ruth and Tamar used a trick rather than an agency of law to acquire the seed to produce the required heir is not true of Ruth as presented in the text, but only as presumed by the interpreter who would have Boaz and Ruth having sexual involvement on the threshing floor previous to settling the matter publicly at the gate.

Van Wolde takes up this same type of reasoning and adds some, in our view, inconclusive grammatical arguments to strengthen her point. According to her, “the place of his feet” cannot be the object of “uncover” because it lacks the direct object marker את. Besides, מרגלת does not mean “feet” but the place where the feet lie, i.e., “at the foot end.” At that particular place Ruth was to bare or undress someone. The verb occurs more often in the Hebrew Bible to indicate that a man undresses a woman or that someone undresses himself or herself, but never that a woman undresses a man. Ruth could have been the first woman in the Hebrew Bible to do so, but one would expect that, if that were the case, Boaz then would have been mentioned explicitly as the direct object, and he probably would not have slept on so peacefully. The other solution is that Ruth bared herself. Due to embarrassment, this possibility has always been excluded. In the Christian tradition, the problem has been solved by saying that Ruth was told by Naomi to uncover Boaz’ feet and humbly to lie down there. In this way the text became a symbol for Ruth’s great humility. No one dared to think of a *striptease*.⁴

Van Wolde’s reasoning that the direct object marker את is obligatory when the object is definite (“his foot end,” in this case) is not tenable. Although there is a

1 Nielsen, *Ruth*, 68.

2 Nielsen, *Ruth*, 70.

3 Nielsen, *Ruth*, 70-71.

4 Van Wolde, *Ruth en Noömi*, 81-82.

strong tendency in narrative texts to have the object marker with definite direct objects, it is not grammatically obligatory.¹

C. M. Carmichael brings in sexuality from yet another interpretation of the texts. He assumes that in most cultures, the agricultural process of treading grain has a transferred sexual meaning: to tread a woman. The Book of Ruth is seen as pervaded by this double sense. No harvests in Bethlehem meant no treading of grain; the famine led to a sojourn in Moab for Elimelech and his family. The “treading” males within Elimelech’s family died there and his line faced extinction. With food again available in Bethlehem, Naomi and Ruth returned—at the beginning of the harvest. Ruth and Boaz became acquainted during the harvesting of the crops. After Boaz completed treading the grain, Ruth’s actions at the threshing floor were intended to suggest to him that he should “tread” her. In doing so, Boaz fulfilled the levirate custom on behalf of Elimelech. That means that the seed that came of the union between Boaz and Ruth ensured the renewed harvesting and treading of grain on Elimelech’s land.²

(4) “Spread your wing”

The commentators agree that this expression indicates a request for protection. There is divergence in opinion, however, as to what extent this request indicates that Ruth offered herself sexually at this point. De Fraine proposes that since the hem of the mantle is a symbol of the personality,³ the expression signifies showing protection. Ruth thus draws the attention of Boaz to his responsibilities as redeemer, i.e., as protector in general. According to De Fraine, the formula “spread out the hem of the mantle over us” may not be equated with “lifting up the sleeping cover” (for coitus in Deut 23.1; 27.20).⁴

On the contrary, according to Beattie, the close physical proximity of the two as indicated in the expression “spread your wing” implies an invitation to sexual relations, similar to the English expression “go to bed together.” Ruth would not here be requesting marriage, but Naomi conceived the plan of putting the idea of marriage into Boaz’ mind by putting Ruth in his bed.⁵

Others find this contradictory to the characters as defined in this story. Boaz’ response to Ruth’s request is seen as incompatible to Beattie’s view.⁶

(5) Summary and critique

The interpreters and commentators discussed exhibit a wide range of explanations as to what occurred in Ruth 3, their understanding of the passage varying according to their conceptualization of the context and culture in which it took place. Striking differences appear in particular in the role ascribed to sexuality in the scene at the threshing floor.

Many agree that it is textually impossible that the two engaged in a sexual relationship here, since later the text states explicitly that Boaz took Ruth as wife

1 See Exod 1.18; 1 Kgs 2.3, 6, 9; 3.11, 14, 24; 2 Kgs 17.12, 13, 21, 29, 31, 34, to mention just a few. Cf. also its frequent absence in many poetic texts: Exod 15.4, 7, 9, 12; Deut 32.1; 1 Sam 2.9.

2 Calum M. Carmichael, “‘Treading’ in the Book of Ruth,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 92 (1980): 248-66, esp. 266.

3 De Fraine refers here to his article, “Fimbria vestimenti,” *VD* 25 (1947): 218-30.

4 De Fraine, *Ruth*, 154-5.

5 Derek R. G. Beattie, “Ruth 3,” *JSOT* 5 (1978): 43.

6 Bush, *Ruth and Esther*, 165.

and “went in to her.”¹ Van Wolde takes pains to explain that though sexual contact is excluded by the narrative, the author does everything in his power to let the reader understand that this was, nonetheless, the case. As illustration, a comparison is made to a movie where two lie in bed and the screen does not clearly show what happens, followed by a breakfast scene: the viewer clearly knows what has transpired. So also, says Van Wolde, the author of Ruth selects vocabulary which makes it clear what the intentions are. The atmosphere is sexually loaded; the reader is to understand that there could have been sexual contact. The words point to what is felt beneath the surface. The author relies heavily on linguistic ambiguity to build up emotional tension without breaking the story line whose resolution comes in Boaz’ taking Ruth to be his wife in ch. 4.

Concerning the linguistic argumentation used, a few critical comments are perhaps not out of place. We look first at the oft-repeated reference to the choice of vocabulary. While many take the words to be intentionally sexually ambiguous, others deny that such is the case. Is there some objective basis for making a choice between these two positions?

We focus on the verb שָׁכַב “to lie down,” taken by Nielsen to be a key word of this chapter “emphasizing the sexual overtones of the meeting.”² Lexica indicate that this word means “to lie down” in various contexts: prostration after a blow (Judg 5.27), lying down to sleep (Gen 28.11), lying down in death (Isa 43.17), lodging for the night (Josh 2.1), even lying together for warmth (Eccl 4.11), as well as the meaning with a sexual connotation, focused on by the commentators cited above. Except for the last mentioned use, sexual involvement is not in focus nor is it to be understood so. The meaning with sexual involvement is clearly indicated when the verb occurs with a preposition meaning “with” or “by” (עִם, אֶצֶל, אֵת, אֲצֵר) plus a person as object of the preposition, or with a person as the direct object of the verb. Only then does this verb mean having sexual relations. In Ruth 3.4, 7 the verb occurs without one of the indicators for lying down sexually and is, therefore, in this case not loaded with sexual intent as many commentators would like to believe.

Similarly, בָּוֵא “to come,” is a frequently used verb of movement, most often accompanied by an indication of where the movement is headed. Only when occurring with a woman as where the movement is headed, and then usually with the phrase “and she became his wife,” does this verb have sexual connotations. In Ruth 3, this is not the case. Need we refer to the difference in English between “spend the night” and “spend the night together”?

Similar linguistic data in regard to the use of the other verbs in this passage could be evoked. A word does not mean all things at all times, but functions within a syntactic pattern to have a particular meaning in a specific instance. Counter to the extremely suggestive reading of these verses, we would propose that the language itself does not support such a reading. Rather, because in this passage all verbs lack the specific valency patterns which would allow for a sexually loaded rendering, we maintain that a neutral reading is required by the linguistic data.

Why this consensus among the Western authors? Is it not that within Western culture it is nearly inconceivable for a woman to lie next to a man at night without intending to offer herself sexually, especially when the context involves speaking

1 Cf. Smelik, *Ruth*, 107; Van Wolde, *Ruth en Noömi*, 95; Bush, *Ruth and Esther*, 153-4.

2 Nielsen, *Ruth*, 68.

of a future marriage? Feminist writers laud Ruth's action thus interpreted as a woman's desperate strife against all odds, leaving no holds barred. Other authors would find this "unseemly," not keeping in character, and lacking integrity, but it remains a tricky situation from a Western cultural point of view.

Interestingly, in times past there apparently were some customs in parts of the Western world where unmarried couples spent the night together as a part of the courtship. Particularly in the more remote parts of North Holland, Friesland, and on the Dutch islands of Texel, Vlieland, and Ameland, an old Dutch courting custom called "kweesten" entailed that the young man remained seated the entire night beside his beloved without saying anything which might affront her honor in any way. This old tradition was meant as a means whereby the community tested the virtue of the young man.¹ Apparently in earlier days in Wales and in some British and American communities a comparable custom, known as "bundling," involved the enamored couple fully dressed sharing the bed for a night. Some considered these customs to be an unnecessarily risky test of virtue.²

It should be noted, however, that in spite of the similarity to Ruth in the fact that there is a nighttime encounter between two of the opposite sex who were interested in one another, the Western contexts just mentioned were again sexually loaded. The intention was precisely that the young couple prove they could stand up to the test.

We draw attention to how determinative a hermeneutic key is for understanding the text. Where a suggestive framework is chosen, the interpretation of elements is shifted in that direction: washing and dressing becomes enticement and seduction, uncovering the foot end becomes uncovering the genitals or even stripping oneself naked, lying down becomes making sexual advances, "spread your wings" is no longer a request for protection but becomes an invitation to sexual consummation, and in Ruth 4.11, where Boaz is praised and encouraged by the people to be a "mighty man," a "man of power," this powerfulness is not understood as his potential to care for the widows but as his sexual prowess.³

Read from a typical Western perspective, it appears that the scene at the threshing floor cannot be understood otherwise than sexually loaded. Whether interpreters condemn or condone the possibility of actual sexual involvement, the scene seems to make no sense to Western readers without the sexual or erotic aspect playing an important role in the passage.

Is there another possible reading for this strange nocturnal encounter? There was talk of a future commitment. Does this scene make sense if not sexually loaded? In an attempt to offer an alternative understanding of the scene, we now present it through the eyes of a West African culture.

1 *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal, Achtste Deel, Eerste Stuk* ('s-Gravenhage and Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff & A. W. Sijthoff, 1916), 746: "kweesten." Cf. Simon Schama, *Overvloed en Onbehegen: De Nederlandse cultuur in de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam: Contact, 1988), 404 (translated from: Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* [N.Y.: Knopf, 1987]).

2 *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2nd ed.; Oxford University Press, 2003), 229: "bundling"; *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Cologne: Könemann, 1961), 296: "bundling." Cf. Schama, *Overvloed en Onbehegen*, 404-5.

3 A favorite interpretation among the exegetes of the so-called Amsterdam School.

A Bowa reading and interpretation of Ruth 3

The Bowa people are an agricultural society living in the central eastern part of the Republic of Mali in West Africa. Their ethnic name contains the element *bo* “true” (plural: *bowa*); their language is called *bomu* (*bo* with the nominalization suffix *mu* referring to language and culture). The Bowa people are, thus, the “true people,” ones who tell the truth in their mind. At the end of a discussion, one is asked to tell the “*bowa* truth,” the real truth.¹

A number of customs exhibit remarkable similarity to those described within the Book of Ruth. A few of these will be described before reconsidering the points discussed above from a Bowa perspective.

Bowa society is patriarchal and accepts polygamy. All members bearing the same family name are considered a brotherhood. In general a Bowa male marries one from a different patriline, or from other villages, but within the Bowa ethnic group, though marriage with one from outside the ethnic group does occur. Women coming from abroad are integrated. Marriage with a member of the matriline is encouraged as the first and most promising possibility; however, marriage to a direct maternal niece would be considered incestuous. Marriage is allowed only within one’s generation, and then only when the age difference is not too great; a man belonging to the generation of the “fathers” cannot marry a widow considered to be his daughter-in-law in age.

Several aspects have a bearing on moral values related to sexuality:

1. education does not emphasize sex; it is, if anything, asexual, so that this is not an all pervasive issue in the society;
2. in developing a relationship, the responsibility for that relationship is paramount, not the focus on personal pleasure;
3. laws of society forbid having premarital sexual relationships.

Having sexual relations outside of the village is categorically forbidden, even to a married couple. Should such take place, the two offenders are brought outside of the village. A black goat is slaughtered, a piece of its flesh is roasted until extremely hot, and then put on the genitals and lower abdomen of both of the offenders. If such were to occur, the offenders would do best to leave the village permanently due to the shame involved.

When premarital sex is committed within the village, the burning ritual does not take place, but the two have to pay for a goat for sacrifice. The two offenders are verbally humiliated. Sometimes the guilty parties leave the village before the confrontation; in any case they would certainly leave afterwards. Even after the couple has left the village, sacrifices provided by the family of the offenders are

¹ Traditionally, the pre-Christian Bowa resisted Islam, which came conquering from the north. As good warriors, the Bowa fought them off. The Islamic tribes were known to be traders who did not eschew devious means to acquire profit. This went intrinsically against the Bowa values concerning the truth. Later, the intruding colonists were just as unwelcome as was Islam, though the Bowa were curious about these strange, white people who came by sea. The first Catholic and Protestant missionaries arrived in 1920 and 1930, respectively. After learning the language and putting it into writing, they brought their message in the Bowa language. The fact that the message had to do with the truth helped it to be accepted by the Bowa culture. Learning to read was one of the characteristics of becoming a Christian. The Bowa term for “Christian” means “reader.”

offered to cleanse the community of this socially destabilizing act. To have this happen to a member of the clan is considered to be most shameful.

The Bowa culture has an interesting type of dating system for young people. When a young woman comes for a visit, whether she is looking for a partner or not, the young men of the village have the obligation to honor her, to make her enjoy her stay. The young women are invited to spend the night and share the bed with two or more young men. This occurs without sexual intercourse. It is not a secret practice: considering the type of houses involved—open and attached to one another—it would be impossible to hide oneself. At least one elder adult, a “father” or a “mother,” and the host of the visitors must be informed; their approval is obligatory. These adults determine how the time is to be spent together (always in a group, never alone). Within such a group of young people itself, no specific relationship exists between two of them. The time spent together is for making contact; many things are talked about during the night. An interest in a particular individual may develop. If a man wants to marry one of these “honored” women, he must request this publicly from the elder at the gate, at the *boro*.

At dawn the young people separate before it is possible to recognize one another from afar. Both men and women customarily arise early, the women to fetch water, and the men to begin a day’s work. An adage states: “If the sun rises and you are still in bed you will have a bad day.” Furthermore, it would be embarrassing to be clearly recognized as coming from spending the night in this manner, for it is a private matter with which one would rather not be confronted publicly.

Before the women guests leave the village they are honored by a gift of grain, peanuts, potatoes, etc., from the young men. The ones responsible must approve of the gift. Since often the young men do not yet have an independent means of income, the family supplies the present. A more mature man with personal resources provides his own gift. The intention is to honor the guest; this is not related to a bride price.

At harvests, gifts can have two different meanings. First, there is the gift to help the widows and orphans who help work in the field. After receiving something each day, they receive something extra at the end of the harvest. Second, the gift can be intended to maintain friendship, honoring another person. Women, too, give such gifts from what they make themselves. This widespread custom is not necessarily aimed at procuring a partner. Furthermore, it is an open transaction which anyone of the village may witness.

Once a more specific interest develops between two young people, the relationship takes a decisive turn: the possibility of marriage is to be considered. A man can have the woman called to come for a meeting, but he does not himself go to her family or to her bedroom. On the other hand, the woman can take the initiative and look for where the man is sleeping. The end of harvest season and other celebrations are popular occasions for such encounters.

In such a case, the woman finds the man and waits until he asks her who she is. She may lie down at his feet or next to him. She could wait for him to awaken, or hasten the process by asking him whether he is asleep. The night is spent together, but the context is not conducive to sex: one’s own pleasure is not uppermost in one’s mind, but rather procuring a partner and continuing the family line.

Marriage can be proposed and plans for the future discussed. At this more advanced stage in the relationship, either of the two may initiate the discussion as to which steps should be taken next. The opinion of the family and of society is taken into consideration. One who is reluctant to marry may be put under pressure by family members or by society. Other adult figures in whom the young people confide know of the meeting and serve as a guarantee for the quality of the developing relationship. If something should go wrong, for example, if sexual advantage were to be taken of the situation, those who knew would share in the responsibility, and would have prevented the encounter if they had suspected something could go wrong. Again, the couple separates before it is possible to recognize one another from a distance.

The practice of taking care of the widows within a clan by means of marriage is called *bowahanmu*. A *bowahan* is a “wife of the brotherhood,” i.e., a widow with the prospect of marrying within the patriclan. In general, a widow is not supposed to leave her husband’s family. Marrying a widow means keeping the brotherhood alive, maintaining family stability, giving social assistance to the woman, and integrating her children into the patriclan after the death of her husband. When there are many brothers of the same generation who have a right to marry the widow, priority is given by order of age. To be eligible for such a marriage, a younger brother must not be younger than the widow. Marriage to an older brother is permitted to a certain limit, i.e., there should not be more than ten to fifteen years difference between them. The generation of the ones involved is an important criterion in the right to marry a widow.

A man may renounce his right to marry a widow for various reasons:

1. the age of the husband: if the man can consider the widow as his daughter or daughter-in-law as far as age goes, he may refuse;
2. number of wives: if a man already has one or more wives, he may relinquish his right to another one.

In general, as long as there are others with a right to marry the widow, one may renounce his right. Also, a man is allowed to have his own wife first before taking on a widow. The widow herself may be closer to one of the candidates and can express her preference, thus making the choice herself.

When the widow involved is advanced in age, she is free to stay within the family without marrying. A specific family member is appointed to care for her. The marriage could be enacted out of respect for the widow, without it being consummated. If the extended family cannot find a husband for her, other members of the broader patriclan can ask for her in marriage. In all cases, the family does its best to care for its widows. It is not only a matter of honor, but one of the stability and continuity of the patriarchal society.

Reading the story of Ruth through the eyes of the Bowa, a number of details are put into an understandable context. Naomi’s protest to her daughters-in-law, “I am too old to have a husband” (Ruth 1.12) would be understood as the state of a widow of honorable age who no longer needs to remarry to maintain her place in the society. Her question, “if I should bear sons, would you tarry for them until they were grown?,” is understood rhetorically: the sons would be too young to be acceptable marriage partners to Ruth and Orpah. Boaz’ trip to the gate to present

his case to the elders and to the family member with first rights to marry Ruth appears as a quite natural and expected step within Bowa culture.

The details we considered above have their own particular interpretation when read within the Bowa cultural setting.

(1) The time and place: “the night” and “the threshing floor”

Naomi’s mention of “the night” or “tonight” presupposes that there had already been contact between the two. The time designation is merely indicating that this is the next step, a decisive step in which an initial general interest leads to exploring the possibilities of marriage.

The fact that Naomi does the planning in this case would indicate that Boaz is considered to be a “son” of Elimelech within the clan. If Boaz were considered to be of Elimelech’s generation (a “brother”), he could marry Naomi if the ages were compatible. If Boaz were a generation lower, and thus a “brother” of Mahlon and Kilion, then in Bowa society he would have the right to marry Ruth or Orpah, but not Naomi.

That Ruth was a stranger, i.e., coming from outside the ethnic society, presents no difficulties. She belonged to the clan by marriage; having been a good wife, she was to be treated with respect.

Ruth had already participated in the harvest. Even if it were not for the intent of marriage, Ruth could have gone to the threshing floor to receive a part of the harvest. In that case, she would not have gone to lie down near Boaz and wait. The latter step is one taken as a part of the process of preparation for the possibility of marriage.

Spending the whole night together is logically the next step at this stage of interest in one another. Those listening to the story of Ruth already know that Boaz and Naomi are people with upright characters: there would be no ulterior motives at the meeting. Neither of them would use trickery or manipulation to force a marriage by sexual advances. Due to the family relationships between Naomi and Ruth and between Naomi and Boaz, it is clear that the context is a normal one for a marriage between Ruth and Boaz. Boaz’ reply shows he understood the situation and acted accordingly. There was another family member with first rights: Boaz would see to it that the matter was taken care of.

The threshing floor as location is related to the setting at the end of the harvest season. In Bowa culture, groups spend the nights together in harvest time under the full moon, but sex in such a situation is not imaginable because of the cultural taboos in regard to sexuality mentioned above and because of the strict prohibition of sexual relationships outside of the village. In Bowa society, there is no connection between pagan worship rites and sexual practices at harvest time, as is suggested in the OT for Canaanite society (Hos 1.9), a connection which is used by some interpreters as background for a sexually tinted reading of Ruth 3.

(2) Washing, anointing, and clothing

Bowa people customarily take a daily bath in the evening. Naomi’s instructions fit quite naturally into the process of storytelling. The Bowa people do not have perfumed oil to anoint themselves, but do have a sort of “butter” made from a local tree which is applied after the bath to protect the skin in cold or dry, windy weather. It plays no role in alluring or enticing a partner. Interestingly, the Bowa

would understand the mention of anointing as referring to this “butter” as protection against harsh weather. This is not to say that Ruth’s ointment was the same, but it could be that Naomi’s instruction should be read more pragmatically than some expositors would have us believe with their allusions to myrrh and other perfumes in the Song of Songs, Judith, and Esther.

For such a meeting as Naomi proposed, no special dress is required. The instruction concerning her dress would be understood to mean that Ruth should take her cloak or mantle to be used as a blanket for warmth during the night.

(3) “Uncover the place of his feet”

When a woman seeks a man’s resting place and waits for him to notice her, it is logical that she should lie down at his feet and wait. In the Bowa context the woman could also lie next to the man, though not with sexual intent. Uncovering the feet presents no dubious connotations; she could even have taken off his cover completely, but baring his private parts would be totally unimaginable. It is, furthermore, inconceivable that she should uncover herself: why undress yourself and lie down naked?

Ruth’s lying down and waiting for Boaz to awaken was a natural course of action. Naomi, too, had indicated as much: “he will tell you what you should do.”

(4) “Spread your wing”

Within the Bowa culture, it is unacceptable that a woman who has the right to marry remains unmarried: “A family which is not able to provide partners for the widows from among the men inside the family is not a family,” as a Bowa adage goes. If Ruth were to remain unmarried, this would be understood to be a shame to Ruth herself, but even more so to Boaz and to the family of Elimelech.

Boaz knew who in the family had the most right to marry Ruth. Ruth’s request would be understood to mean: “cover me” with your blanket, with the metaphorical significance parallel to a Bowa expression *sutara ni* “hide me,” i.e., preserve my honor, prevent me from shame by marrying me. Such a request is entirely fitting within the context of Ruth being a widow, Boaz being an eligible marriage partner within Ruth’s generation within the patri clan, and Naomi’s knowledge and approval of the meeting.

Ruth’s clear reference to marriage does not entail that she provoked Boaz sexually; in fact, such would not be fitting within this context.

Carmichael’s assumption that the treading of grain in most cultures has a transferred sexual significance of “treading a woman” does not apply to the Bowa culture. There is no connection between the treading or beating of grain to obtain seed and sexual involvement to procure prosperity.

Comparison and comments

Stepping back to consider what has been brought together thus far, one is struck by the vast differences within the various approaches as to the values ascribed to the role of sexuality. All agree that marriage is the issue, but in a number of Western approaches, the possibility of marriage is inconceivable without a major role given to sexual and erotic aspects.

In contrast, the remarkable similarity between many details in Ruth and Bowa customs makes it tempting to interpret the scene at the threshing floor as a Bowa

would understand it. It provides a context in which the text can be read in a straightforward manner¹ without the twists both to grammar and to interpretive context manifest in some of the Western explanations whose efforts—however creative—betray the strain of the distance between the culture of the text and that of the interpreter.²

In contrast to the Western customs of “kweesten” and “bundling” from times past, the Bowa situation is not sexually loaded, as explained above, and neither is a straightforward reading of Ruth 3. It is rather that due to his or her own cultural background, the Western reader is unable to conceive of such a nocturnal context without sexuality playing a large role, and, in my opinion, it is this fact which has led to reading so many sexually slanted aspects into the story of Ruth.

A word of caution here lest the Bowa reading be understood to be representative of African readings of Ruth in general. E. R. Wendland goes to lengths to explain the precautions necessary within the translation to prevent the story of Ruth being understood as “prostitution,” “immoral proposition,” “illicit encounter,” “entirely too forward,” “improper sexual overtones,” etc., within the Chewa and Tongo contexts of Central Africa. In other words, within the latter two African cultures, the story of Ruth as it is would definitely be understood sexually, and such an interpretation would not be accepted favorably within these cultures³ (in contrast to the applause given by certain Western exegetes to such an interpretation).

The wisdom of E. Sapir’s precautionary remarks is again illustrated:

No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.⁴

There is a danger that once the sexual or erotic aspect has become the hermeneutic key to reading the Book of Ruth, the choices made in translation will be affected. Under the influence of such a key, “anoint yourself” could become “perfume yourself,” and “put on your mantle” could be rendered as “dress in your nicest

1 Cf. also the critical comments using linguistic argumentation above in the “Summary and Critique” at the end of the section “Some Western readings and interpretations of Ruth 3,” above.

2 In the shift of cultural values within African cultures, Bowa Christians see a right understanding of the Bible as a stabilizing factor due to the similarity between traditional African cultural values and those of the OT.

3 Ernst R. Wendland, *The Cultural Factor in Bible Translation: A Study of Communicating the Word of God in a Central African Cultural Context* (UBS Monograph Series 2; London: UBS, 1987), ch. 7: “Ruth in Central Africa: A Cultural Commentary,” esp. 177–81.

4 David G. Mandelbaum, ed., *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 162.

clothes.”¹ The translation could go even further in making the sexual or erotic aspect explicit: “uncover his foot end” could become “bare the private parts” or “strip yourself”; “foot end” could be rendered “genitals”; a request for protection could become “impregnate me”; and a “man of potential” could be made to refer to “male sexual prowess.”

Nonetheless, it is only fair to concede that the reading based on the Bowa culture, though exhibiting striking affinity to many details in the Book of Ruth, is still a reading colored by a cultural context. Yet we would offer this reading as a viable alternative and perhaps a healthy antidote to some of the interpretations of the scene at the threshing floor current in Western-based exegetical literature.

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VOCATIVES IN THE EPISTLES

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Introduction

In two previous articles in *The Bible Translator*, “Vocative Displacement in the Gospels” [47.3 (1996): 313-21] and “Vocative Displacement in Acts and Revelation” [50.1 (1999): 101-10], I discussed the occurrences of vocatives in the narrative books of the NT. In the Gospels and Acts, more than two-thirds of all vocatives occur in initial position within their sentence, and in narrative material this was taken as the normal, or unmarked position. Various suggestions were put forward to account for the cases where the vocative was displaced to another position within its sentence. In brief, these were of two main categories. The first was one-word adverbial phrases, fossilized imperatives, and interjections, all of which routinely precede a vocative, with no sociolinguistic implications. The second was increased social distance between the interlocutors. These two categories sufficed to account not only for the displaced vocatives in the Gospels and Acts, but also for those in Revelation, where all the vocatives except one are displaced.

The opportunity has now arisen to examine the vocatives in the NT Epistles, and this article presents the results.² In order to speed the investigation, two colleagues (Dr Kees de Blois and Dr Stefano Cotrozzi) independently produced for me lists of vocatives in the Epistles, generated by different computer programs. I was surprised to see that the two lists were by no means identical, and further investigation revealed that neither program was able to recognize the numerous vocative occurrences of the Greek form *agapētoi* (“beloved”). So an additional search by the time-honored method of reading the text was also necessary, and since this method is not infallible either, it remains possible that one or two examples of vocatives have escaped unnoticed. However, it is not

1 A number of scholars have understood Naomi’s instructions to mean that Ruth was to be “dressing up” to attract. This interpretation probably lies behind the translation of *simlah* as “best clothes” in many versions (see New Living Translation, NAB, NASV, NIV, RSV, GNT).

2 I am very grateful to Dr Paul Ellingworth and Prof Johannes P. Louw for their careful readings of a draft of this paper. Their comments have resulted in several improvements, but it hardly needs to be said that the remaining defects are all my own work.