

# Naomi and Ruth: the Birth of the Son

## In Reference to a Painting of Willem Drost

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In Dante's *Paradiso* (32, 10f.), among the Group of women sitting under Mary, appears the woman whose great-grandson sung 'miserere'. The riddle is not difficult to solve. The son is David, the poet of the Psalms, and therefore the woman is Ruth. Not Naomi; she is for a christian view on the Old Testament less interesting. The marriage of Ruth and Boaz is a beloved subject for prints of the late Middle Ages, because of the prefiguration the marriage of Christ with the Church. The birth of her son Obed could typologically be applied to the birth of Christ.

In a Dutch painting of the 17th century,<sup>1</sup> the interest changed. Painters choose, undoubtedly because of their clientele, the dramatic scenes of the story, for example, Ruth, the Moabite on the field of Boaz, which yet elicited the romantic description from Keats in his famous *Ode to a Nightingale*: 'Perhaps the self-same song that found a path / Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick for home / She stood in tears amid the alien corn.' Especially the moment of the separation of Orpah from Naomi and Ruth and Ruth's oath of dedication to Naomi is such a dramatic scene. Rembrandt's teacher Pieter Lastman and his pupil Willem Drost painted it. Lastman depicts the dialogue of Naomi and Ruth just after the departing of Orpah (see pict. 1). We can see her as a little figure, far away, at the other side of the bridge, in the richly embellished landscape. In a close-up at the right of the painting the viewer is confronted with the two very colorful protagonists of

<sup>1</sup> Judith van Gent and Gabriël M. C. Pastoor, 'Het tijdperk van de Rechters' in: *Het Oude testament in de Schilderkunst van de Gouden Eeuw*, Zwolle s. a., 83ff. (Lastman: Niedersächsische Landesgalerie, Hannover. Drost: Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

the story. They have already passed the border river. Naomi on her donkey, ready for her journey to far Bethlehem, energetically waves Ruth back with her hand. The beautiful young Ruth looks and gestures in an imploring manner: 'Do not press me to leave you!' Thus Lastman gives a fine illustration of the first dramatic happening of the narrative. Willem Drost paints the same dialogue between Naomi and Ruth, only a moment later (see pict. 2). Not only, as obvious, 'after Rembrandt', but also a moment later in the biblical text. Naomi's protesting hand falls back, while Ruth speaks her reply. The landscape background is left in mysterious vagueness, so to concentrate fully on the two women. Just as with Lastman the attention is firstly fixed on Naomi, not on Ruth. Floodlight falls in the clair-obscure on her bright yellow cloak and her mournful face. The light touches only the little figure of Ruth and her tiny left hand, raised for her oath, is compositionally in the center of the painting. Willem Drost did not paint an illustration to the scriptural narrative, but rather put artistic concentration on the message of the scroll of Ruth. So he gives the exegete an opportunity to read the story in connection with his pictorial representation.

### *Without her sons*

Naomi returns 'empty' from her exile in the field of Moab, without her two sons and her man, a widow, who does not still have sons in her womb.<sup>2</sup> The narrator reckons with associations of his readers with many passages in the Hebrew bible, in which the theme of the birth of the son is varied in several ways: the birth from the barren, the old, the desolate woman. In his story in addition he supposes his readers to be acquainted with many passages of the Scripture in a literal sense. So we come across, for example, with words and expressions from Lamentations 1: Like a widow Jerusalem has become, her lot is bitter; her children have gone away, she has nobody 'to bring back her soul' (4:15; Lam. 1:11). Naomi is like the uncomfortable Rachel, weeping for her

<sup>2</sup> For detailed discussions, see: K. A. Deurloo / C. van Duin, *Beter dan zeven zonen*, Baarn 1996.

children, 'because they are no more' (Jer. 31:15). Perhaps she is even nearer to the barren Jerusalem of Deutero-Isaiah, who can sing because of the wondrous way in which she will have children; who may make forget the disgrace of her widowhood, for her Maker is her husband, the 'redeemer' (Isa. 54:1ff.). Naomi will in the last chapter hear the women saying over her, who called herself Mara, 'Bitter': 'Blessed be YHWH, who has not left you without a 'redeemer' ... a son has born to Naomi' (4:14, 17).

One can paraphrase the question: Shall she, the old, barren woman bear a son, with: Shall Jerusalem, shall Israel have future. In the Scripture authors use the common feature in the ancient semitic society: a woman is blessed when she bears masculine offspring, as a metaphor. The birth of the son is in their stories and prophecies not a natural process, for future is the result of a wondrous intervention of YHWH. They assiduously avoid to say that YHWH is the begetter. The expression 'Your Maker is your husband' (Isa. 54:5) goes as far as possible. Just as cautious the narrator of Genesis says: 'YHWH dealt with Sarah as he had said and YHWH did for Sarah as he had promised, Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son' (Gen. 21:1 ff.), so expressing the unbelievable breakthrough to future at the very beginning of Israel's existence, which is the unexpected deed of YHWH.

A marvel of the same level is the davidic kingship. On the threshold of its emergence the barren Hannah is blessed with the 'grace' to give birth to the son, the prophet who will anoint the king. Eliah and especially Elisha have their stories with childless women. In the last case the metaphoric use of the theme becomes very clear in the scene in which Gehazi is to tell to the king 'all the great things that Elisha has done'. The Shunammite woman gave birth to a son on the prophet had announced word and the life of her son was restored by the prophet's action. At the moment when Gehazi is telling about her, she just returns from her exile, which the prophet commanded to her on account of seven years of famine. She returns with her future in person, her son, appealing to the king because of her house and her land. The promise of the 'land' and the promise of the 'son' are of course—we have only to look at the Abraham cycle—interrelated. The reader does not need to have much fantasy to associate this story with the 'return from exile' as the central point of the great prophets.<sup>3</sup>

## *The two of them*

*Famine* is also the reason for Elimelech and his family to stay in the field of Moab. Naomi returns to Bethlehem, ‘House of bread’, because she has heard ‘that YHWH had considered his people and given them bread, *la-tet lahem lechem*’ (1:15). The material basis to live in the land is guaranteed, but she has no ‘son’. We can expect therefore a story of the wondrous birth of a son in Bethlehem. The variation on the theme consists in the fact that two women are featuring: the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. Together they will play their role on behalf of a future which is indicated with the last name on which the book ends: David. It is not coincidental that in the marriage-blessing the witnesses in the gate speak of the matriarchs Rachel and Leah, who—the two of them—built up the house of Israel. Their building up (*banah*) was of course their giving birth to sons (*banim*). We find the same a wordplay in Psalm 127: Unless YHWH builds the house, those who build it (*bonim*) labor in vain... ‘Sons (*banim*) are a heritage from YHWH ... a reward’ (cf. Ruth 2:12). Naomi has not any longer sons in her womb. Her question is rhetorical: ‘Even if I should “be of a man” this night...’ (1:12). In Ruth’s confession it is to remark in this line that she articulates a sentence, which is as such redundant: ‘Where you spend the night, I will spend the night’, a profession of her night of with Boaz chapter 3, whose first question, seeing Ruth will be: ‘(Of whom is), to whom does this young woman belong?’ (2:5). She does not belong to a man, for she is like her mother-in-law, a widow.

As a ‘capable wife’ (3:11, cf. Prov. 31:10)—just as Boaz is a ‘capable man’ (2:1)—Ruth took, not without consent of Naomi, the decision to glean in the field, where she becomes the central figure, because of Boaz’s interest in her. With literary devices the author puts her in the middle of the story in full daylight. Obedient to her mother-in-law she also is the daring figure in the venture of the night. Although the booklet bears her name not without good reasons, Ruth is not playing the leading part. Drost is right in painting Naomi as the tallest woman in the skimming

<sup>3</sup> Aleida G. van Daalen, ‘Vertel mij toch al het grote dat Elisa gedaan heeft’, *Amsterdamse cahiers voor exegetische en bijbelse theologie* 1 (1980), 51–61.

light and Ruth as the little one who is in a sense serving her mother-in-law. It turns out to be an indispensable service.

### *Return*

If we had to characterize Drost's painting exegetically with one word, we had to choose the verb *shuv*, which as a keyword dominates the first chapter. It is Naomi who *returns* from exile to Bethlehem in Juda without her husband and her sons, without any hope: 'For me', she said to Orpah and Ruth, 'it has been far more bitter than for you, because the hand of YHWH is gone out against me!' After Orpah has kissed her and *returned* to her people and her God—Orpah had shown her *oref*, the neck, according to the midrasj (Ruth Rabbah 2,9)—Naomi said to Ruth: 'Return after your sister-in-law', but she did not want to *return* back from following Naomi (1:6–16). In the last verse of the chapter we hear: 'So Naomi *returned* together with Ruth the Moabite, who *returned* from the field of Moab'. Ruth's return however is not a coming back from exile, but—according to her confession—a changing turn about. The reader discovers a double bottom in the answer of the servant to Boaz: 'She is a Moabite, who turned back with Naomi' (2:6). It is nearly an impossible case, for the law says: 'No ... Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of YHWH; even to the tenth generation...' (Deut. 23:3). Nevertheless Boaz accepts her as a gleaner, benefits her and speaks: 'May you have a full *reward* (!) from YHWH, under whose wings you have come to refuge' (2:12).

### *One of our redeemers*

When her mother-in-law sees how much she has gleaned, she says after being informed: 'Blessed be he by YHWH, whose kindness (*chesed*) has not forsaken the living and the dead'; in other words: Future is dawning. She adds that this man is 'one of our redeemers'. It is the only place in the Hebrew bible where the word *goel* is used in the plural. Hearing this, the reader first thought is of the redemption of 'land': 'The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine ... Throughout the land that

you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land. If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, than the next of kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold' (Lev. 25:23ff.). Also in this story this law is not unimportant. Land is the material basis for future. Aside and as a device, the redemption of land is present in the last chapter, but when Ruth the wings of YHWH where she had come to refuge applies to Boaz with the word: "Spread the 'wing', the tail of your cloak over your servant" (of Ez. 16:8), she adds: 'For you are redeemer' (3:9) At once quite an other connotation of the word *goel* emerges. We are reminded of prophetic texts, as already cited above: Widow Jerusalem has her Maker as her husband; YHWH, the God of Israel is her 'redeemer' (Isa. 54:1–8). Not so much the land, but the woman has to be redeemed. This becomes clear in Boaz's reaction. He speaks of a redeemer nearer than he. If this one 'has no desire'—possibly a first hint at levirate-marriage (Deut. 25:7)—to redeem you, then I will redeem you, as YHWH lives'(3:13). Despite the highly erotic sphere of the scene, indicated by several ambiguous words<sup>4</sup> conception cannot have taken place in that night. Instead of it Boaz pours six (measures of) barley in her shawl (3:15). The word 'measures' is missing in Hebrew and the number six is emphasized. Boaz is not yet in a position—in this period of omer-counting—to give 'seven', the fullness of his fertility. Besides it is a sign too for Naomi, for he added, according Ruth's naively spoken commentary: "You may not come 'empty' to your mother-in-law" (3:17). Naomi, as we remember, came 'empty' to Bethlehem, without her two sons and her husband. It is a sign from which Naomi understands that this man will do what only a man can do, as he does in his juridical action in the gate on the day after that night. In his description of the session in the gate the author makes sophisticated use of the pericope about levirate-marriage (Deut. 25:5–10) giving an accent to words and expressions apt to his own story. The redeemer nearer than Boaz is only indicated as an 'anonymous', for he deserves no name in this story. The two would-be redeemers form the counterpart of the two daughters-

<sup>4</sup> See: e.g. the motif-word ידע, the uncovering of the 'feet', the heap of grain (ירר, cf. Songs 7:3), the shawl (טפה: not only 'spread out', but also 'bring forth the child fully formed', Lam. 2:22)

in-law, who returned with Naomi. Orpah goes home to Moab. In Bethlehem it is the Anonymous who refuses to redeem.

### *A son to Naomi*

The witnesses can speak their marriage-blessing. Included in the house of Israel, built by the two (!) matriarchs and the house of Perez—the result of an equal daring action as Ruth’s one by Tamar–Boaz, stands in the center, a man of *chayl* (2:1), capacity, power: ‘Act powerfully in Ephrathah and call a name in Bethlehem’ (4:11). Whom will he beget? After the blessing with the special mention of the house of Israel and the house of Perez, the progenitor of the davidic house, not forgetting the meaningful name Ephrathah (cf. e. g. Mic.5:1), the reader will not miss to think of David. The story as a whole is by the names Bethlehem (1:1) and David (4:17, 22). But in the matter of fact Obed will be born. Therefore the calling of the name of this son does not happen by Boaz, nor by Ruth. Moreover, just as Drost painted, it is firstly Naomi who is in the picture. The names of Ruth and Boaz in the last section of this chapter and all the light falls fate again on Naomi. As short as possible the narrator ends the story of Boaz and Ruth: ‘So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. He went in unto her and YHWH gave her conception’. Especially the last sentence reminds us again of the Genesis theme. According to the Midrash: ‘She lacked the main portion of her womb, but the Holy One, blessed be He, shaped a womb for her’ (Ruth Rabba 7,14). ‘And she bore a son’ (4:13). What does this mean for Naomi? The women of Bethlehem are like the choir in a classic drama present to formulate it. Their first statement runs as follows: ‘Blessed be YHWH who has not left you this day without a redeemer’. Many commentators relate these words to the child,<sup>5</sup> reading it in one breath with the following statement. Christian tradition was eager to adopt this blessing typologically on the birth of Christ, as also medieval printing is proving. Never-

<sup>5</sup> Despite earlier publications J. M. Sasson: “Women in choir ... laud Boaz as an ideal redeemer, the child Obed as a perfect comforter and a solicitous sustainer, and Ruth as Naomi’s beloved”, in: *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. R. Alter and F. Kermodé, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1987, 327.

theless I guess that we have to understand these words in connection with the not mentioned name of Boaz. Did not Naomi say: 'He is one of our redeemers' (2:20)? Was it not Naomi who came back 'empty' to Bethlehem, who is firstly—because of the birth of this son—redeemed by Boaz? Does not his action refer to YHWH, the redeemer, as in Isa. 54:8? The first statement ends with: 'May his name be called, proclaimed in Israel'. Boaz was ready to redeem. He did not say like Anonymous (3:13) or the man of the levirate-law (Deut. 25:7): 'I have no desire ...', whose name of the last one is proclaimed in Israel as a shame (Deut. 25:19). Moreover, sustaining old family members is not the duty of a 'redeemer'. Therefore, we should read the next sentence as a special statement about the child: 'He shall be for you a restorer of life (*le-meshiv*—cf. chapter 1—*nefesh*) and a nourisher of your old age.' For a name, suitable for this task of the son, the reader has yet to wait for a moment. He is surrounded by his parents because the last statement regards his mother: 'for your daughter-in-law who loves you has born him, she who is good to you, more than seven sons' (4:14–15, cf. 1 Sam. 2:5). It is the only text in the Hebrew bible mentioning love between women. It reminds us of Elkanah, who loved Hannah and who said to her: 'Am I not good for you, more than ten sons?' (1 Sam. 1:8), the number of the *Tholedoth*—list of 4:18–22. But the fullness of seven is even more. From the threshing floor Ruth could bring only the 'six (measures) of barley', reporting that Boaz said: 'You may not come *empty* to your mother-in-law' (3:17). Now she turns out to be more the plenitude of seven for Naomi, who came back *empty* to Bethlehem. It is the davidic messianic future<sup>6</sup> which is made possible by the presence of Ruth, the Moabite, but it really is future for Naomi. Therefore the women of the neighborhood call his name Obed, Servant, but not after having said something very peculiar: 'A son has been born *to Naomi*' (4:17). The expression is elsewhere used for men, becoming fathers,<sup>7</sup> for example

<sup>6</sup> So E. Zenger, *Das Buch Ruth* (Zürcher Bibelkommentare AT 8), Zürich 1986.

<sup>7</sup> 'Buchstäblich unerhört ist diese Interpretation der Geburt eines sohnes, insofern nirgends sonst in der hebräischen Bibel davon die Rede ist, das einer Frau ein Sohn geboren wird', Klara Butting, *Die Buchstaben werden sich noch wundern: Innerbiblische Kritik als Wegweisung feministischer Hermeneutik*, Berlin 1993, 43.

in this very chapter: 'Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah' (4:12). Naomi is not only the nurse, the care-taker of the child (cf. Num. 11:12); laying him in her bosom she is not only adopting him, no, he really *is* her son, born to her. So the story tells in a lovely natural way of the wondrous birth of the son.

Naomi she was, she expressed in a highly poetical, Job-like way at the moment of her return from exile. The dark divine name Shadday includes that of YHWH:

Call me no longer Naomi, 'My lovely One'  
Call me Mara, 'Bitterness'  
for Shadday has dealt bitterly with me.  
I went away full,  
but YHWH did return me empty.  
Why call me Naomi,  
when YHWH has testified against me,  
Shadday has brought evil upon me? (1:20–21).

All her bitterness readable on her face at the painting of Willem Drost. *Evil!* But little and nevertheless full of passion for her, there stands Ruth, who is *good* for her, more than seven sons. She proclaimed and swore:

Do not press me to leave you,  
to turn back from following you!  
Where you go, I will go,  
where you spend the night, I will spend the night.  
Your people is my people,  
your God is my God.  
Where you die, I will die  
and there will I be buried.  
May YHWH do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you (1:16–17).

Willem Drost gave to Ruth a stocky figure and a rather common face. Just in this way she is full of modest certainty and energetic readiness. Barefoot she takes her stand, her starting place to *return* with Naomi, to become ha-shava, the 'returned', the 'reverted', the converted young woman (2:6). Naomi's protesting hand sinks down at so much love for her, for her people, for her God. The intensive red, draped sleeve of Ruth glows like her heart.