

Redemption in Ruth 4: 1-11: Reclaiming Humanity

Caroline N. Mbonu
mbonucaro@gmail.com

Abstract

Contemporary global communities tilt progressively toward stratification along racial lines, nationalism, and unjust economic order, structures consistent with life-denying mores. The witness of unprecedented categorization erodes the notion of common humanity with far-reaching consequences manifesting in heinous murders, hate crimes, xenophobia, and various degrees of hostilities against innocent persons. Nigeria shares much of these characteristics. Contribution towards a more constructive relationship between persons and nations, and deep connection with persons and land can be found in the Bible, hence, this essay seeks insights from the Book of Ruth, a multilayered subversive text. Ruth 4:1-11, specifically vv. 9-10, provides interpretative lens for regaining of humanity, a central theme of the book. It would be ambitious, to attempt to fully engage this multifaceted classic modest in this paper; the Nigerian context offers a logical space from which to tease out the considerations of what it means to be a being in relationship with land and lineage. With exegetical survey, literal reading, socio-cultural hermeneutics, and characterization as methodological tools, the essay reveals that conduct grounded in *hesed* (loving kindness), exemplified in the experience of the principal characters, Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, can bring about redemption to a world torn apart by animosity, bigotry and ethnocentrism.

Keywords: humanity, *hesed*, redemption, land, nationalism

0. Introduction

In a world increasingly defined by status, ethnicity, violence and nationality, the attending negative consequence of our common humanity continues to be threatened on all fronts. On the global level, unjust economic order that stratifies humanity into ever-developing and developed nations escalate the division and produces more structures inconsistent with life-affirming values. Militarization, forced migrations and calculated political destabilization are but a few of the culture of death that has bedevilled the world. Discussing these issues globally may resonate remotely from African perspective since Africa appears, as it were, at the receiving end of the harsh reality of the present world economic order. These stereotypes and categorizations erode the notion of common humanity and manifest in discrimination, xenophobia, as well as violence, with far-reaching consequences on our common humanity. But African has her own version of the global torment. In Nigeria, for example, ethnic violence, religious bigotry, and unbridled corruption fuels degradation of human life. In addition, forcefully ejecting persons from or taking over ancestral lands constitutes a robbery of humanity. Undeniably, the concept of tying land to a people, such as Etcheland, Egbaland, England, strongly suggest the intimate bond between the land and the inhabitants. Where life remains tied to the land, a person without land remains groundless, can be said to be a non-being, where “being” denotes rootedness in a community. Hence, the trending situation of land grabbing in Nigeria that dishonours human dignity, cultural trimmings, and other such responsiveness, demands redemption. Redemption, particularly of the land translates to reclaiming humanity and restoration of a people. Several biblical texts offer images of constructive relationships among peoples and most importantly of redemption in the sense of healing, restoration and reestablishment, this essay, therefore, seeks insights from the Book of Ruth to lend a voice to resolving cultural situation that supports positioning persons as permanent outsider, not connected with the community, a “non-being” as it were.

The appropriateness of the book of Ruth for this inquiry lies in the themes of death-dealing circumstances that resonate with the present predicament in Nigeria. The theology of redemption in Ruth provides a pivot for a liberative reading of re-establishment of humanity where it is crumpled by disease and death. A rather short story with characters

larger than life, the story represents various characteristics of a person: female, male, mother, father, husband, wife, son, daughter, In-laws, kinfolks, foreigners, indigenes, sickness, health, life, death, landowner, all woven together in a rich tapestry to represent a fuller humanity. Though miniature, the book contains virtually everything about human relationship. Written in rich stylistic expressions, studded with innuendos and metaphors, this multi layered piece of literature encapsulates timeless values of friendship, fidelity, justice, compassion, generosity and humanity, attributes that moderately translates the Hebrew word *hesed* (loving kindness, fidelity), enduring Hebrew ethical value.¹ It would be somewhat rash, however, to hope to adequately cover the various themes of this many-sided text in the course of a modest undertaking such as this paper; the focus here, rather, shows how the experiences of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, can bring about redemption to a people torn apart by anti-life circumstances. Complex writing usually deploys an array of methodologies, but the present task utilizes a limited exegetical survey, socio-cultural hermeneutics complemented by the literal reading of the text and characterization. The rest of the essay is laid out in four sections, background to the Book of Ruth, exegetical survey, characterization of the land, and the three central actors: Naomi, Ruth and Boaz, and then the contextualization. The essay concludes with recommendations. I owe much of the insight expressed in this work to André LaCocque commentary on *Ruth* and Pope Francis encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*. To isolate a passage from the Ruth for analysis poses a challenge as the story consists, as it were, one woven piece from top to bottom.

1. Background to the Book of Ruth

A Second Temple literature, the book of Ruth, is a fiction set in the historical context of the time of the Judges. The only biblical book named after a gentle and most peculiarly, a gentile woman, Ruth represents an archetype of subversive writing.² Fundamentally, the book presents a response to the crisis of human need. The warp and woof of

¹ Paba Nidhani De Andrade, “*Hesed* and Sacrifice: The Prophetic Critique in Hosea”, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (January 2016), 64.

² Caroline N. Mbonu, “Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1:16-17): Paradigm for Relationship in Contemporary Family Life”, *Journal of Inculturation Theology*, Vol. 16, no 1 (2019), 88.

Ruth rests on fidelity, harmony, relationship, and loving-kindness. Religious faith is presumed; hence, God's Providence ever present.

Strategically placed at the end of the Historical Books in the Christian Bible, the Book of Ruth appears as summary, a metaphor, a miniature poem, of the Holiness and Covenant Codes. Its position in the Catholic Bible is highly suggestive of the practical forms and expressions of covenantal relationships that points to inclusiveness and more humanity. Although the author employs metaphors, drama, and innuendos to tell the story of women in a situation of unredeemed patriarchal sexism, yet, places the dignity of the women in the story at par with the men.

A strong presence of a gentile, a woman, in this Hebrew sacred text points to its subversion³ pointing to an exception that questions the rule. The story begins with a Bethlehemite family on self-imposed economic exile in Moab. Hunger and want compelled Elimelech, his wife Naomi and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion to leave their homeland for the land of Moab in search of greener pastures. At the demise of the three men, Naomi was left with her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Bereaved of her husband and two sons, Naomi decided to end her economic exile by returning home to Bethlehem (1:22), for she heard the LORD has favoured the land with plenty. Note that the "favour of the land with plenty," was a foremost motivation to return home. After a long persuasion by Naomi to stay back with their people, Orpah returns to her natal family, while Ruth attached, herself to her mother in-law, Naomi and followed her back to the land of Israel. Ruth's fidelity grounded in her unilateral covenant of unflinching fidelity to Naomi, her mother-in-law, even beyond this life (1:16-17), derives this timeless story.⁴ For this subversive literature, therefore, *hesed* redeems everything.

Ruth can be read as a political parable relating to the issues around the times of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 9:1-2; Neh 13: 1), from the fall of Babylon in 539 BC to the second half of the 5th century BC. Ezra-Nehemiah law was promulgated to force the expulsion of foreign women and their children from the community. The experience of exile and the

³ André LaCocque, *Ruth: A Continental Commentary*, Translated by K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 1.

⁴ Mbonu, "Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1:16-17), 90.

purity of Israel combined to produce in them what today can be termed xenophobia. Prejudice, Intolerance, and dislike of foreigners, driven by the controversy around intermarriage in Israel became the Gordian knot, the book of Ruth attempts to untie. A liberalism towards foreigners characterizes this Second Temple writing. An interpretation of the Torah in unexpected circumstances, the book of Ruth, debunks the ultra-nationalism notion of ethnic purity. Ruth's connection to the celebration of the Torah, Israel's common wisdom and culture, informs its reading at the feast of Shavuot (Exod 34:22) annually. For in reading, the readers in one way or another, rediscover that an interpretation of the law that does not amplify love is stifled and eventually dies.⁵

Intensely overlaid with feminine sensibilities, the suggestion of a female author of this constantly allusive text, remains open to debate though LaCocque states that Ruth remains “a feminine book from beginning to end”.⁶ Read by some solely from a feminine perspective, Ruth presents an earthy tale about what can be considered full humanity. The singular role of Boaz, in the human order, in bringing about the restoration to the family of Elimelech, informs the choice of the two verse (9-10) for the brief exegetical survey.

2. Exegetical Survey: Ruth 4:9-10

Then Boaz said to the elders and the all the people, ‘Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses’ (Ruth 4: 9-10, NRSV)

Verse 9: After the transformative encounter with Ruth at the threshing floor, Boaz moves forward to the city gate as was the custom in the land (4:1-2), to formally settle Ruth, a needy widow whose loyalty inspires him to act in greater loyalty. With the refusal of the next-of-kin of Elimelech to take on the land of Naomi as well as take on Ruth (4:3-8),

⁵ LaCocque, *Ruth*, 25.

⁶ LaCocque, *Ruth*, 5.

Boaz takes on the responsibility. Thus, he addresses the elders and all the people at the city gate of his intention and calling on them as witnesses to his purchase of the land of Naomi and all that goes with it. The verse that follows specifies the implication of the Boaz purchase of the land.

Verse 10: Since the purchase of the property was tied to the widow (Ruth, 4:5), Boaz also acquired Ruth as wife to keep alive the lineage of Elimelech in the land of Israel. Narratives about life is entwined at different levels of discourse, no point of view can fully mine the rich deposits of life's story in the unfading Ruth tale. Central to the story is land, perhaps, the one and only space from which a human being can truly live and have a meaningful existence. Land supports life. Consequently, the next section on characterization begins with land.

3. Characterization

3.1 Land

The decision to include land in the section of characterization is borne out of the experience of the personification of land by most indigenous people, moreover, favour to the land of Israel, motivated Naomi's return, "for she heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had had consideration for this people and given them food" (1:6). For these persons land has the attribute of a person and assigned a female character. Land in common parlance, in the sense of earth, is referred to as mother, mother earth. In addition, among the Igbo, for example, connection between land and people is often ritualized in a token parcel of earth presented as farewell gift to a relative who leaves home for a prolonged stay in a distant land. The ritual serves as a visible reminder of homeland, subtlety of a return implied.

In a profound manner, the themes of land and return in Ruth, suffuse the story and shows how these determine human habitation and as such life in its essence. Failure of the land of Bethlehem to support its inhabitants, forced Elimelech and his family into economic exile to the land of Moab because the land of Moab yielded food. After a decade-long exile in the land of Moab and bereft of her male relatives, Naomi on hearing that "the LORD had had consideration for his people (Bethlehemite) and given the food" (v. 6), began her journey back to the land of Israel. These

opening verses draped with the theme of land, establishes the connection between redemption of a people and the land. In 4:4, therefore, Boaz, engages the unnamed next-of-kin of Elimelech at the assembly of the elders at the city gate, to initiate the final stages of the redemption process of the clan of Elimelech, which according to the custom in Israel, involves a transfer of ownership of land held by Naomi (v. 5).

Furthermore, land is deeply connected to life in ancient Israel; in that culture, land is akin to a covenantal relationship. According to Israelite statutes, the land belongs to God. The term “land” is witnessed in 1470 verse(s), 77 chapter(s) and 44 book(s) of the Bible. Leviticus 25: 23-25; 47-49, spell out the land tenure and redemption act.

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. 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, then the next of kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold (Lev 25:23-25).

Not only in ancient Israel is land imbedded in the totality of life of the inhabitants, both spiritual and temporal. Many indigenous African people share similar experience. For this reason, land is never sold but can be exchanged among the people of Etche, for example.

In the Mosaic Law, the basic idea of redemption is that of monetary payments required to free persons or property from an obligation. The word, redeem [*gaal* (verb) in Hebrew], is a legal term for the deliverance of some person, property, or right to which one had a previous claim through family relation or possession (Lev 25: 24-25, Ru 4: 1-6; Jer 32: 6-9). *Go'ēl*, the participle of *gaal* is the term for the person who performs the duties of a redeemer. Attested 18 times in the Hebrew Scriptures (13 in Isaiah alone), redeem is central to covenantal relationship, a thought that suffuses New Testament theology.

Back to the book of Ruth, the sale of Naomi’s land was not a sale per se, the transaction was in keeping with covenantal relationship, reclaiming

life. To redeem this piece of land came with other responsibilities as the text under consideration greatly amplifies because a piece of land does not stand alone. A piece of land is bound up with the life of the individual connected with it and the lives of the community as well. Land as a community patrimony is well attested in the Bible; an example is the case of the daughters of Zelophehad. So that the land does not leave the Manassite clans, the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad (Num 27:1-11; 36:1-11) was highly contested and resolved with the women marrying from their paternal clan.⁷ Keeping the land within the family, therefore was tantamount to perpetuating the clan. Land therefore remains a vital sign and symbol of life of the clan.

With her piece of land as security, Naomi and Ruth interprets the law and custom creatively in their favour; they identified Boaz, a distant wealthy relative of Elimelech as the *gō'ēl*⁸ and “so they suppose, and thus is responsible for redeeming Naomi’s land (see Lev 25:25).⁹ But, according to the levirate law in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, only the brother of the dead husband and not a distant relative can be a *levir* (cf. Gen 38:8; Deut 25:5-6; Mark 12:19; Matt 22:24; Luke 20:28); “the nearer relative appears surprised by the news that acquiring the field also implies acquiring the widow (4:5-6)” and Irene Nowell argues that redemption is intricately connected to land.¹⁰ But Naomi’s land must be redeemed by a relative in order to assure continuity of the clan of Elimelech. Because women were considered property in ancient Israel (cf. Exod 20:17), a widow of a deceased childless man, stands redeemable by the kinsman-redeemer in order to provide an heir for the deceased husband’s name. In other words, Ruth becomes the object of redemption. A cursory exegetical survey (4:9-10) shows the connection between the purchase of land and the acquisition the widow of Mahlon, as two-part single transaction: land

⁷ In another instance, life is lost because of land as in the case of Naboth the Jezreelite and his vineyard (I Kgs 21: 1-16, 20-24). King Ahab and his wife Jezebel murdered Naboth because he refused to give his land, his inheritance to the King for a vegetable garden.

⁸ Irene Nowell, “Jesus’ Great-Grandmothers: Matthew’s Four and More,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 70, No. 1(January 2008), 7

⁹ Nowell, 7

¹⁰ According to Nowell, “In the *ketib* of 4.5, Boaz says “I” will take(‘תְּנַצֵּחַ), but the *qere* says “You” (תְּנַצֵּחַ). In either case, marriage is linked to the redemption of the land”.

and woman of which verse 5 elucidates, ‘*The day you acquire the field (land) from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth(wife) the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance*’.

Three principal characters, Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz in the book, blend together in reclaiming humanity devastated by death, they actively resisted situation of dehumanization and pursued reintegration by pushing the law to its limit. Although each character played a specific role, *hesed* elevated their actions from the trivial to the sublime, from the sordid to the sacred.¹¹ Unbounded *hesed*, which pervades the book reverberations in the New Testament theology.¹²

3.2 Naomi (Pleasant)

Naomi, a native of Bethlehem of Judea was the widow of Elimelek and the mother of their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion and mother-in-law of Orpah and Ruth. Her ten-year economic exile in the land of Moab left her empty in the sense that she was bereft of her husband and two sons. Naomi, rendered childless by bereavement, however, gained two other relatives in the land of Moab, Ruth and Orpah, Ruth and Orpah were widows of her deceased sons, Mahlon and Chilion, respectively. How a Judean family lived and married from an Israel “enemy” territory (Jdg 3: 12-30; Deut 23:4), remains a puzzle, which a consideration that the book of Ruth, grounded in *hesed*, can proffer a response.

Naomi’s experience of *hesed*, is demonstrated in the willingness of her daughters-in-law to return to the land of Israel with her. Here we see two young women tearing down a culture of exclusion, welcoming another culture in order to fill Naomi’s “emptiness. “With a name denoting pleasant, tenderness, Naomi’s charming personality undoubtedly, impressed the younger widows, revealing their own *hesed*, evidenced in the blessing of Naomi, “May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me (1: 9). Undeniably, Naomi’s warmth to her daughters-in-law, transformed the two women, for according to Victor Matthews, “ancient Near Eastern hospitality

¹¹ LaCocque, *Ruth*, 31.

¹² LaCocque, *Ruth*, 75.

transforms a stranger into an ally.”¹³ Although returning home empty without a husband, children, social status, and “lost” ten years of life—was a bitter experience, Naomi nevertheless courageously embarked on the journey. Her courage encapsulated in her new designation, *Mara*, (meaning, bitter) “call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara” (1: 20). With a pledge of unalloyed allegiance from Ruth (1:16-17), Naomi’s full humanity came to play in the experience of *hesed*, expressed in her ability to combine loving kindness and shrewdness in orchestrating a redemption of her lineage when she tied the sale of land to the marriage of Ruth. Naomi’s loving-kindness comes full circle with the birth of Obed by Ruth (4:13:16). Her shrewdness manifests itself in the deployment of Ruth, with the intention of “satisfying” her deepest desire, which is, reclaiming humanity by restoring her lineage. At the birth of Obed, Bethlehem neighbourhood women praise Naomi’s good fortune brought about by a foreigner daughter-in-law, Ruth, the Moabite. To quantify Ruth’s love for her mother-in-law, these women compare Ruth to the worth of seven sons: “for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons” (4:15). At the end of the story, Ruth leaves Naomi fully satisfied.

3.3 Ruth (Satisfy)

In Ruth the author paints an uncommon character, an extravagant outsider, whose devotion to people comes first, and makes her an embodiment of covenant fidelity (*hesed*). What today would be called a “dreamer,”¹⁴ Ruth remains a strong character from the beginning of the story to the end, clothed with the characteristics of virtuous woman of Proverbs 31: 10-31.¹⁵ A foreign national, from a nation considered amoral by Israelite standard, Ruth’s unconditional vow to follow Naomi back to the land Judea, echoes Second Temple prophet, Zachariah 8: 23, consideration of those drawn to the LORD because of their positive experience of religious fidelity of diaspora Jews: “People will come from

¹³ Victor H. Matthews, *Judges & Ruth The New Cambridge Biblical Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 228.

¹⁴ Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship, 3rd October 2020.

¹⁵ L. Juliana M. Claassens, “Resisting Dehumanization: Ruth, Tamar, and the Quest for Human Dignity,” *the Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 74, No. 4/(October 2012), 671.

all the earth to Jerusalem because God is there,”¹⁶ a confirmation of Naomi’s covenant fidelity in the land of Moab, on one hand and of Ruth’s unconditional self-gift (1,16), on the other hand. Ruth’s social location, a foreigner, a widow and, an “orphan,” though by choice, constitute a typical example of Israel’s poor (Exod 22: 21-22), whom the LORD delights in (Ps 149: 4). Casting Ruth as the poor of the LORD, prepares her for her exploits in the field of Boaz. In other words, her faithfulness (2:11), draws Boaz into the plot thus opening up a hope for redemption. She fits well into the socially invisible and voiceless and a subject of justice. An alien in the land of Israel, Ruth the Moabite, remains socially invisible and voiceless but never lost her dignity. Seven times in the narrative, the reader was reminded of her foreign origin (Moabite: 1: 22; 2: 2, 6, 21; 4:5,10 and once as “foreign”: 4:10); this foreigner would soon become a symbol of that newness that a covenantal relationship creates and sustains. Identified as a non-native, yet she shared in the covenantal prescription reserved for the poor and the foreigners, the Moabite, goes to the fields to glean that reserved “for the poor and the alien” (Lev 19: 9-10; 23: 22). Foraging for food became a natural opening for the awaking of new life, thus redemption proper began with the gleaning episodes. Ruth fortuitously happens into the field of Boaz, the one deigned to bring about the ultimate desire of Naomi: “a name and a land”.¹⁷ By the very act of foraging for food, Ruth would realize the meaning of her name, satisfy. She thereby positions herself to satisfy the hunger of “those who hired themselves out for bread” (I Sam 2: 5, Luke 1:53a). Ruth, would later in the narrative, satisfy a much deeper hunger, that of the Bethlehemite with the birth of a new life, a progeny, Obed (4: 13). Beverly Mitchell describes Ruth’s uncommon pursuit at restoring the lineage of Elimelech devastated by disease and death as the untainted example of the tenacity of the human spirit as well as “an affirmation of the resilience of the glory bestowed upon the human by the gracious God”.¹⁸ These attributes contribute to the undying worth of the Ruth narrative.

¹⁶ Aelred Cody, O.S.B. “Haggai, Zachariah, Malachi,” in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 356.

¹⁷ https://www.lexico.com/definition/yad_vashem. The notion of “a place and a name,” appears rooted in the concept of Levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-10). From Modern Hebrew *Yād Wāšēm*, lit. ‘a place and a name’ from *yād* monument, place (in biblical Hebrew literally, hand, arm’) + *wā-* and + *šēm* name

Nowell argues that “Ruth exhibits a complex interweaving of initiative and docility,”¹⁹ she satisfies the hunger of Naomi at two levels; first a physical hunger from the abundance of grain gleaned from the field of Boaz and, second, a more profound hunger, redemption of the clan of Elimelek,²⁰ in risking all to meet Boaz at the threshing floor beseeching him, “spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin” (3:9), she invites Boaz to act for God.²¹ Ruth’s scandalous generosity, her “reckless” loving kindness, secured *yad wašēm*,²² a place (hand) and a name, for her deceased husband, Mahlon with the birth of a son, Obed, meaning, serving, worshipping. Serve, worship, ricochets Ruth’s unconditional vow to her mother-in-law, Naomi, “and your God my God” (1:6). Through Obed, Ruth, the foreigner established herself in Israel’s religious tradition and becomes a progenitor of the ultimate redeemer, Jesus the Saviour (Matt 1:5). Because of her role in keeping the clan of Elimelech alive, Ruth exits the story exalted above the ideal number of male children, “more than seven sons,”²³ thanks the providential intervention and a reciprocal superabundance of *hesed* of a kinsman-redeemer, Boaz.

3.4 Boaz (Strength)

The opening of chapter two calls Boaz a prominent man (*ish gibor*). *Gibor* can also mean warrior. His ability to convoke a meeting at the city gate shows him to be a prominent and rich person. But he did not use his position or influence to bend the tradition (4:4). The author drapes the character of Boaz with abundance and surplus, essential principle of

¹⁸ Beverly Eileen Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps: Religion, Ideology, and Human Dignity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 33.

¹⁹ Nowell, “Jesus’ Great-Grandmothers,” 6.

²⁰ The rich stylistic expressions of the book of Ruth confirms abundantly the symbolic value of proper names (see Ruth 1:20). Hence, there is a way in which the meaning of Ruth, the motif of “satisfy” in the narrative echoes Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1: 53), which harks back to the prayer of Hannah (1 Sam 2: 5)

²¹ Nowell, “Jesus’ Great-Grandmothers,” 6.

²² https://www.lexico.com/definition/yad_vashem.

²³ Phyllis Trible, “RUTH” in *Women in Scripture: a dictionary of named and unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books, and the New Testament*, ed. Carol Meyers, General Editor, Toni Craven and Ross S. Kraemer, Associate Editors (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 146-147.

hesed. A father figure and leader, the author showed this by giving him “large ears”.²⁴ With ears to the ground, Boaz knew Ruth by hear-say. Of her he said: “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and come to a people that you did not know before” (2:11). Boaz’s utterance suggests Ruth already has found a place in his heart. Little wonder the lavished generosity he exhibited towards the foreign maiden (2:8-9). He would advise Ruth to remain in his field and glean shielding her from the molestation of his male harvesters as well. Moreover, she must as well keep close to Boaz young women laborers; and that is not all, Boaz blesses Ruth (2:12). The event at the threshing floor reveals more of Boaz’s covenant fidelity (3:10-11). On his liberality, LaCocque comments, “Boaz pushes generosity to the extreme, according to the central principle of the book: overabundance, ‘how much more’ – again, very much a ‘gospel’ principle (see Matt 7:11 and Luke 11:13; Matt 12:11-12; Rom 11: 12, 24; Heb 9:14; etc.)”.²⁵ True to the symbolic value of his name, “Strength is within him,” (*bo* = in him, *az* = strength) and in Hebrew is spelled BET-AYIN-ZAYIN,²⁶ the author presents Boaz as a doer of the Law and champion of social justice, one who in the midst of tragedy or structural injustice, acts for the good of others. His solidarity with those at the margin, those without connection to patriarchy, in this case, Naomi and Ruth, would redeem their desperate situation. Accordingly, taking on the role of *levir* (husband’s brother) though a *go’el*, Boaz helped to re-establish the clan of Elimelech in the land of Israel with the birth of Obed.

4. Contextualization

The family resemblance of the book of Ruth to traditional African socio-cultural context presents a temptation to ascribe an African background to this Second Temple literature. Ruth resembles a typical African family setting and value system, which resonates with the Igbo ethos of *Ahamefula* (literally, may my name never be lost) or *Amaechina*

²⁴ Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 11, 18, 146-148

²⁵ LaCocque, *Ruth*, 75.

²⁶ <https://findanyanswer.com/what-does-boaz-symbolize>.

(literally, may my path, [homestead], never close or be extinct). The two African Igbo names, *Ahamefula* and *Amaechina* closely parallel the Hebrew *yād wāšēm*, fundamental issue in the book of Ruth. Undeniably, the experience of Elimelech and his family, economic exile, a strong sense of family and death, resonates with many African peoples. Concerns of a widow and of childlessness in this book that inspires as well as entertains, has not changed even in contemporary Africa. Most importantly, the theme of *hesed* and redemption, represents traditional core values of the African communities, the resilience of the women in the story, echoes with African homes, villages, and cities in the face of death-dealing circumstances.

Reclaiming humanity devastated by death, a thread that runs through in the book of Ruth offers the contemporary African images to resolve life-denying circumstances such as discrimination, hostility, ethnic violence that continues to diminish the humanity of persons on the continent. Ruth offers contemporary African Christians fresh insights into values that sustained common life in the tradition past but being eroded by life-denying positions that tend to exclude rather than bring people together. A hermeneutic of retrieval can help recover these traditional core values making them contemporaneous in order to solve today's problem of xenophobia even among the different ethnic groups. Nigerian economic exiles have models of survival from the Ruth and Naomi, integration as well as fidelity to natal culture. In other words, adapting to the host culture must consider some level of affinity to the homeland, particularly in terms of upholding one's religious faith tradition.²⁷ One cannot overlook the tension that exists in such situations, but a recognition of common humanity fostered by solidarity and social friendship can be liberative.

Social friend a strong element of *hesed*, echoes Ubuntu philosophy, a value tantamount to common humanity. Ubuntu, in Nguni Bantu expression, means "humanity." The term literally means that a person is a

²⁷ C. N. Mbonu, "Continuing Communal Identity through Cultural Beliefs in 4 Maccabees: Paradigm for Cultural Preservation in Etche Ethnic Nationality," *Unilag Journal of Religious Education*. Vol 1, no. 4. (2010), 119-134; Mbonu, C.N, "The Importance of the Study of Religion and Culture: A Biblical Perspective," in Akama, Emumena Samson (ed.), *Introduction to Religion and Cultural Studies* (Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press,2012), 217.

person through other people and often translated as “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am”. Stated differently, Ubuntu undoubtedly suggests an attitude that upholds the humanity of others, a belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all. The Igbo *onye ahala nwanneya* (let no one leave a neighbour behind), conveys similar import. I was privileged to have experienced some sense of Ubuntu, *onye ahala nwanneya*, during the Nigerian Civil War (1966-1970), some persons acted on behalf of the community to help us reclaim humanity in a death-dealing circumstance.

Likewise, for the African, the principle of “I am because we are,” applies not only to the living, the “I am” or “being” is inclusive of the dead and the yet unborn. African scholar of Religion, John Mbiti puts it thus:

The existence of the individual is the existence of the corporate; and where the individual may physically die, this does not relinquish his social-legal existence since the “we” continues to exist for the “I”. This continuity is of great psychological value: it gives a deep sense of security in an otherwise insecure world in which African peoples live.²⁸

The sense of “I am because we are” is critical to the theme of redemption in Ruth. A close reading of Ruth discerns how the “we-logic,” the “we are,” motivated by *hesed*, kept alive the social-legal existence of the Elimelech’s clan through an act of redemption. A strict observance of the Ezra and Nehemiah ultra-nationalism notion of ethnic purity appears based on the “1-logic” with little or no room for hyper-connectivity, made possible by love, the essence of the Torah cannot subsist in an environment, which the book of Ruth fosters.

How do African peoples retrieve and revitalize the “we-logic” in the face circumstances that tend to dehumanize such as tribalism, nationalism, and xenophobia? In Ruth, the foreigner, is integrated, the female honoured, new relationships formed, new reality created, and humanity restored through a deep and profound co-mingling of the characters, which climaxes in the birth of a new life, Obed. Experience of *hesed*,

²⁸

Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd edition (London: Heinemann, 1990), 141.

overabundance of loving kindness, builds a community where human dignity remains the yardstick for all other human activities in the land.

5. Conclusion

The book of Ruth shows how a broad interpretation of the Torah can be liberative and redemptive both for the individual, the community, and the nation. Ruth presents religion at the service of humane living, endorsing the hermeneutic that God is greater than the law; a position made abundantly clear by a representation of how team spirit, can achieve redemption. A shared passion in creating a community of belonging, challenges draconic laws that privilege ethnic purity and, nationalism in any context. Such craving indicates that embracing diversity and variety can bring about the desired peace among peoples fostering a peaceful dwelling in the land. A reading of Ruth in this paper makes a case that upholding kind-heartedness (*hesed*), the cord that binds together human relationship, can save families, nations, and Nigeria from plummeting toward a nationless condition of “non-beings.” In sum, Scripture can lead to that true wisdom that demands an encounter with reality that would help unmask and challenge constructively, structures and attitudes inimical to realizing and sustaining full humanity, a lesson that would serve contemporary Nigerian Christians well in the face of growing animosity even among Christians.