Chapter 3

Ecodomy: Taking risks and overstepping boundaries in the Book of Ruth

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■ Introduction

This volume of *Verbum et Ecclesia* deals with the topic 'Ecodomy', a term that was coined by scholars of the New Testament and Dogmatics and Ethics at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria. Broadly speaking, 'Ecodomy' pertains to 'life in its fullness'. However, research on the topic revealed that 'life in its fullness' cannot be taken for granted, because reality as it presents itself in the lives of individuals and communities, comes in the guise of 'life in its emptiness', life in its brokenness. 'Life in its fullness' requires an effort, and the key role players are individuals within such troubled situations who take initiative to heal and to make a difference.

This chapter aims to address the topic 'Ecodomy' from an Old Testament perspective, particularly from the perspective of the Book of Ruth. In this book, it appears that 'life in its fullness' becomes realised by unconventional methods. The key role players, Boaz and

Ruth, dare to overstep the prescribed behaviour, legislation and customs of their time. They break down barriers and boundaries, however, never with violence. The Book of Ruth approaches emptiness and brokenness creatively, by challenging existing presuppositions in a compelling narrative.

◼ The problem of dating the Book of Ruth

The narrative background of the Book of Ruth is the 'time of the judges' (Rt 1:1). Because this time seems to fit the agrarian and pastoral scenario of the plot in the book, some scholars accept that the origins of the Book of Ruth may be traced back to pre-exilic Israel. Gow (1992:207–208), Grant (1991:424–441), Hamlin (1996:2), Loader (1994:12), Nielsen (1997:28–29) and Prinsloo (1982:5–6) date the book to the beginning of the monarchy, during the time of King David and King Solomon. Gow and Nielsen both argue that the Book of Ruth may have been written as an apology for King David's Moabite ancestors – as becomes evident in the genealogies at the end of the book (Rt 4:17b; 18–22). According to them there were some anti-David factions that were trying to slander David – during his reign or soon after – by foregrounding his possible Moabite descent. The Book of Ruth may have been written towards the end of his reign or at the beginning of the reign of Solomon in order to legitimise the Davidic monarchy. Loader and Prinsloo are of the opinion that the archaic language indicates the pre-exilic origins of the book. Focusing on the text as it is and the narrative as it presents itself, these scholars all come to more or less the same conclusion: Although God is hardly mentioned and not actively present throughout the narrative, he is working behind the curtains, helping those that help themselves. Doob Sakenfeld (1999:4–5) points out the 'timelessness' of the Book of Ruth. Regardless of its dating, it proposes an attitude of inclusivity and tolerance towards the 'other': in pre-exilic Israel towards the Canaanites, in post-exilic Israel towards those excluded by the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and in communities today, towards whoever may be considered as the 'other'.

However, if the Book of Ruth is dated to the time after the exile, it becomes something other than a 'captivating idylle', as Korpel (2001:233) puts it. Korpel agrees with other scholars that the Book of Ruth was written during the post-exilic period in Israel's history to address the problem of foreigners in the community of YHWH and that it especially polemises against Ezra and Nehemiah's policy regarding foreign wives (see e.g. Cohn Eskenazi & Frymer-Kensky 2011:xli, 4–5; Fischer 2001:62, 124; Goulder 1993:316; Grätz 2007:277; Köhlmoos 2010:xv, 4; Korpel 2001:233; LaCocque 2004:25; Lau 2011:45; Matthews 2004:212; Moen Saxegaard 2010:201; Spangenberg 2000:190; Spangenberg 2000:190; Zakovitch 1999:62–64). In fact, the whole of Korpel's quote does not describe the Book of Ruth only as a 'captivating idylle', but as 'a programmatic pamflet in the guise of a captivating idylle' (Korpel 2001:233), thereby emphasising the polemic nature of the narrative.

Especially the works of Braulik (1996:61–138, 1999:1–20) sparked the interest of the debate between the Book of Ruth and the so-called Moabite paragraph in Deuteronomy 23:3–6 and consequently the way in which this law was interpreted in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The post-exilic community was a divided community with diverse interests and it seems that one of the main problems was the presence of non-Israelites who came to worship YHWH and wished to be included in the congregation. In terms of 'Ecodomy', it appears that there were two parties who had opposing views on realising 'life in its fullness'. On the one hand were the exclusivists, represented in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah who envisioned a stable and prosperous community only by following the law in a very literal and unyielding manner, that is, prohibiting foreigners to enter the community of YHWH. On the other hand, were the inclusivists, represented in the Books of Ruth, Jonah and the passage in Isaiah 56:1–8 for whom the worship of YHWH was also paramount, but who argued that a YHWH-worshipping community would include foreigners and their diligence and contributions within that congregation.

Thus, although the Book of Ruth is set against the time of the judges, it should be read as a 'historical novel' – a deliberate choice for an archaic time with powerful critique against contemporary issues. This is also the historical backdrop against which the Book of Ruth is understood in this chapter.

■ Life in its emptiness

Life in its fullness is mostly preceded by life in its emptiness, and this is the opening scenario of the Book of Ruth in its first chapter.

■ Fate comes knocking at the door

☐ Famine (Rt 1:1)

The Book of Ruth opens with a depressing scene: A famine that drives a Judean family from their hometown to a foreign country in order to survive (Rt 1:1). The man Elimelech, his wife Naomi and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, leave their residence in Bethlehem, Judah, to find refuge in the fields of Moab. Moab, for the most of its part, is regarded as a negative space in the Hebrew Bible and receives generally bad press. First of all, the origins of the nation can be traced back to incest (Gn 19:30–37; see Braulik 1996:117; Cohn Eskenazi & Frymer-Kenski 2011:xlvii; Frevel 1992:45; Zenger 1986:36). Furthermore, during the Israelites' wanderings through the desert, the Moabite king Balak, overcome by fear for this awesome nation, hires the soothsayer Balaam to curse them (Nm 22–23) – and this is also one of the reasons why the Moabites are forbidden in Deuteronomy 23:4 to enter the congregation of YHWH.

Yet, the author of the Book of Ruth is neither negative nor positive about Moab. In fact, the statement in Ruth 1:1 is neutral: There was famine in the land – presumable Judah – and a Judahite family sought and found refuge in the field of Moab. The family stayed there and apparently survived the famine.

☐ Death (Rt 1:3, 5)

However, for Elimelech, the Judahite patriarch, the flight to Moab was not a good decision. The family survives the famine, but he, the *pater familias*, passes away (Rt 1:3). No reason is given for this tragedy: Elimelech simply dies and leaves a widow and two sons behind. However, it seems that in the meanwhile the sons have grown into manhood, because they take wives for themselves, women from the region, Moabite women. Moabite women, like the country that they come from, are also regarded with suspicion by the authors of the Hebrew Bible. Just after the Balaam incident (Nm 22–24), as the Israelites are at the point to enter the land, they 'commit harlotry' with the daughters of Moab (Nm 25:1) – and the result is apostasy (see Cohn Eskenasi & Frymer-Kensky 2011:xlvii; Doob Sakenfeld 1999:19; Köhlmoos 2010:4; Zenger 1986:36).

It seems that Machlon and Chilion did not make a good choice by taking these Moabite women as wives. In the first place, the marriages are childless. One almost reads over the lines: After taking Orpah and Ruth for wives, they 'dwelt there about ten years' (Rt 1:4). But as Marjo Korpel (2001) notices:

> The deadening silence between v. 4a and v. 4b may escape a modern ear, but certainly did not escape an audience in ancient Israel. Ten years – and two childless couples. (p. 70)

The two Judahite men and their Moabite wives suffered ten years of 'life in its emptiness'. Extended families were the backbone of communities in the ancient Near East and Israel. Infertility, barrenness was a deep tragedy. In this regard one may recall the narratives of Sarah and Hagar (Gn 16:3), Rebecca (Gn 25:21), Rachel and Leah (Gn 30) and later Hannah (1 Sm 1:1–7). A life without having children was life in all its emptiness.

Then the men, Machlon and Chilion die (Rt 1:5), and as in the case of their father, no reason is given for the death. This devastating event, says Korpel (2001:7) addresses the inexplicable theodicy question – why do bad things happen to good people and why does God allow it to happen? In the Ancient World as in Israel, life and death were in the hands of the deities, God gave life and he took it. The death of the two sons vaguely recalls a similar episode in Genesis 38 and the death of Judah's two sons, first Er (v. 7), and then his brother Onan (v. 10). However, both Er and Onan did something that was displeasing YHWH, thus, there were probably reasons why they died. In the case of Mahlon and Chilion, no explanations are given.

☐ Loss of identity

Three childless widows are left behind. In the ancient Near East this was the deepest tragedy imaginable (Fischer 2001:126; Frevel 1992:49; Köhlmoos 2010:8; LaCocque 2004:43; Zenger 1986:35, 122). Two young women lost their husbands; the elder Naomi suffered a double loss: she lost her husband as well as her two sons. Three devastated women have to cope with their agony, as well as face a desperate situation. In ancient societies men took care of the family: First the father, and if he passed away, the eldest son took over the responsibilities, among others to look after the widowed mother (Frevel 2009:40–41). For Naomi, Orpah and Ruth there were no men to take care of them.

However, verse 5 simply summarises the events: The woman (Naomi) was left without her two sons and her husband. Naomi is the centre of attention and the narrator comments on her bereavement. No mention is made of Orpah and Ruth and what they may have experienced or suffered by the loss of their spouses. At first glance the narrator may seem unsympathetic towards the two Moabite widows. Yet, the focus on Naomi seems to be deliberate. Both Frevel (1992:55) and Zenger (1986:124) consider Naomi's return from Moab to be paradigmatic for Israel's return from exile. Widow-Naomi becomes widow-Israel. Frevel (1992:50) furthermore emphasises Naomi's loss of identity – in ancient patriarchal societies women were identified in terms of men, husband or sons. When Naomi loses her husband as well as her two sons, it is more than a deep human tragedy of agonising distress. She also loses her identity. She is no one's wife, no one's mother. She stands there with empty hands (Frevel 1992:50).

Verse 5 does not want to deny the agony of the two Moabite widows; rather it wants to emphasise the emptiness and loss of identity of the Judahite widow who becomes the protagonist in the rest of the chapter. For it is widow Naomi whose emptiness is going to be filled in an exceptional manner by a foreign woman. She is Ruth, the Moabitess. By foregrounding Naomi's sorrow, the Book of Ruth 1:5 wants to alert post-exilic Israel that the loss and trauma experienced by the exile, may be addressed and consoled in unexpected ways by the foreigners in their midst.

Naomi's loss of initial identity and change to an identity of loss and bitterness, is further accentuated when she returns to Bethlehem. The women hardly recognise her, probably due to the changes that suffering and grief had brought to her appearance. Firstly, she requests that they call her by a different name: Mara, which means 'bitterness'. Some scholars (e.g. Zenger 1986:43) are of the opinion that this is an allusion to the 'bitter water at Mara' (Ex 15:23), yet one should also remember that a name in ancient societies always indicated the essence of someone's nature (Neuman 2006:325). When Naomi asks the women to call her 'Mara', she is also implying that her identity had changed. And then she cries: 'I went out full, but YHWH has brought me home empty.' (Rt 1:21). Life in its very emptiness, not only deserted by YHWH, moreover, he is to blame.

■ The turning point towards realising 'life in its fullness'

■ Reckless love (Rt 1:16–17)

The turning point in Naomi's life starts a short while before her arrival in Bethlehem. As she departs from Moab, making her way back to her hometown, her two daughters-in-law, the two Moabite women, insist on accompanying her. Naomi, who realises that she has no future to look forward to, pleads with the two younger women to turn back and start a new life while they still have a chance. One of them, Orpah understands the implications and obstacles that she would face if she chose to stay with Naomi; she kisses her mother-in-law and returns to Moab (Rt 1:14). Ruth however, refuses stubbornly. When Naomi pleads with her to do as her sister-in-law, Ruth answers her with her first and longest monologue in the whole Book, which in Hebrew consists of thirty-four words (Köhlmoos 2010:17):

> Entreat me not to leave you, or turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me. (Rt 1:16–17 [NKJV])

Ruth's role in realising 'life in its fullness' already starts in her first speech in the narrative: She insists that she will not turn back to Moab but 'cling' to her mother-in-law until parted by death (Rt 1:16–17, verbatim quote above). One should never underestimate the far-reaching implications of this choice. Obviously, it demonstrates an act of solidarity with someone in need. But, as Wetter (2014:150) points out, it goes almost without saying that one is more inclined to show solidarity with one's own group. In Ruth's case, although she seems to have had a very good relationship with her mother-in-law until now, Naomi is not part of her group, Ruth and Naomi belong to different groups of people. Ruth chooses to show her solidarity with someone who is not of her own kind.

Furthermore, Ruth is prepared to leave her identity – her nationality and theology – behind her in Moab and to assume a new identity, namely her mother-in-law's people and her God. This is a radical choice, even a stupid choice. Ruth is willing to sacrifice some security – albeit minimal – that she may have had in Moab, to follow her mother-in-law and share in her fate whatever that may be. At this stage both widows are experiencing life in its very emptiness, yet one of them is prepared to take a risk without knowing the end result, whatever that may be. Her motivation: reckless love.

■ Boaz steps in

☐ On the harvest fields

In the second chapter of the Book of Ruth, a new male character is introduced: Boaz (Rt 2:1). This information is given solely to the reader: neither Naomi nor Ruth are aware of his presence. Boaz is said to be a kinsman of Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelech, and also a 'man of great wealth'. The narrative then proceeds and resumes where Chapter 1 ended: The beginning of the barley season and Ruth who takes the initiative, perhaps because Naomi is too sunken in her depression to do anything. Ruth asks her mother-in-law's permission to go gleaning barley on someone's fields in whose eyes she may find favour (Rt 2:2).

Apparently, Ruth is laying claim to the legislation in Leviticus 19:9–10 and Deuteronomy 24:19 (Braulik 1996:118; Fischer 2001:62; Köhlmoos 2010:28; Zenger 1986:54). This legislation pertains to the harvest season in Israel and makes provision for the widow, the orphan and the stranger who may not have enough to eat. The harvesters are instructed not to pick up sheaves that they forget or that accidentally fall out of the bundles, but to leave them on the ground for the marginalised in the society to pick up. Ruth seems to qualify: she is a widow and she is a stranger.

⸗ Stranger or foreigner: What is the difference?

Before elaborating on the meeting between Boaz and Ruth and the actions that follow, it is necessary to remark on the 'stranger' and the 'foreigner' in Israel and the difference between the two concepts, as this is very important to understand the unfolding of the plot. The key text in this regard is Ruth 2:10, just after Boaz addressed Ruth with words of the utmost kindness. When she bows down before him to express her thanks, she asks him why he is so good to her, and she refers to herself as a הַנָּכְרִיָּה – a 'foreigner'. Fischer (2001:175), Siquans (2009:448–449), Wetter (2014:151) and Wuench (2014:1139–1142) all distinguish between the terms גֵּר and נָכְרִי. All these terms pertain to what is usually translated as 'stranger' or 'foreigner', however, they are not simply synonyms of the same concept.

Fischer (2001:175) and Wetter (2014:152) point out that in the post-exilic time, נָכְרִי was mostly used in a negative sense and conveyed a hostile attitude towards foreigners, the non-Israelites: נָכְרִי implies malevolence, inferiority. A נָכְרִי was more than simply an unknown stranger; the presence of a נָכְרִי foretold disaster, a נָכְרִי was a welcome element that fell outside the boundaries of Israel's cultic and social community and that was potentially dangerous (Fischer 2001:175; Siquans 2009:448–449; Wetter

2014:151; Wuench 2014:1139–1142). Furthermore, when the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah critique foreign women, they use the term הַיְרְכָנ. Fischer (2001:175), LaCocque (2004:70) and Siquans (2009:449) relate Ruth's calling herself a הַיְרְכָנ directly to the Ezra-Nehemiah objections against foreign women and are of the opinion that that Ruth 2:10 should be read in opposition to the social religious policy proposed in these books (see Ezr 2:10, 11, 14, 17, 18, 44; Neh 13:27–30). According to Ruth (2:10), she falls into this category.

Who then was the הַגֵּ? Here scholars differ. Wuench (2014:1140) is of the opinion that a הַגֵּ refers to a stranger who is also part of the Israelite community, in other words, an Israelite but one who is not known by the locals of a particular village or town. The question now arises, why should Ruth call herself a הַיְרְכָנ while such a designation would evoke emotions of hostility? Wuench (2014:1152–1153) suggests that one of the reasons may be that Hebrew does not have a feminine form for the noun הֵג. However, he finds a better explanation in Ruth's surprise over the 'favour' that she found in Boaz's eyes, and in his answer to her, namely that he knew everything about her (Rt 2:11). According to her perspective, he should have regarded her as a הַיְרְכָנ. However, from Boaz's point of view, she acted like a הֵג – in leaving the land of her birth and coming to a people that she had not known before. Wuench 2014:1140 states: 'We could therefore say that Ruth 2:10 seems to demonstrate the process of a stranger moving from foreigner to becoming a guest.'

However, Fischer (2001:175), Siquans (2009:448-449) and Wetter (2014:151) differ from Wuench: יְרְכָנ wants to emphasise Ruth's status as a foreigner. Several scholars agree that הֵג indicates an Israelite 'stranger' (cf. Braulik 1996:118; 1999:14; Fischer 2001:175; Frevel 1992:74; Siquans 2009:448; Köhlmoos 2010:41; Zenger 1986:56). Braulik (1996:118) explicitly states that the term הֵג *gehört zum sozialen Spektrum der judäischen Bevölkerung.'* In other words, the הֵ is an unknown countryman who is in need and seeks temporary refuge on the territory of a fellow countryman. The יְרְכָנ on the other hand, is considered to be a trespasser who has no right to be on the premises.

Above (see 'On the harvest fields') has been referred to Leviticus 19:9–10 and Deuteronomy 24:19 with regard to the legislation during the harvest time and special care that has to be given to the marginalised in the society. It is significant that the text of Leviticus as well as the text of Deuteronomy employs the term for גֵר [stranger], never נָכְרִי. This supports the idea that the גֵר is someone from within the group. As a נָכְרִיָה, Ruth is considered to be an outsider, she can lay no claims on the legislation which seems to benefit the widows, orphans and strangers within the Israelite population. Her foreignness is foregrounded, as a Moabite her presence on Judahite soil is forbidden, and according to the exclusivists, she poses a severe threat to the Ecodomy of the community. If a post-exilic dating of the Book of Ruth is to be accepted, the choice of נָכְרִיָה above גֵר seems to be a deliberate choice on the side of the author of the book.

◼ Boaz breaks the law

As has been said, this chapter assumes a post-exilic dating for the Book of Ruth. Mention has also been made that the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah make it clear that the presence of foreigners in Israel was a controversial matter among the post-exilic community. The so-called 'community law' in Deuteronomy 23:2–5 was especially important in this regard. Whereas Ezra is generally hostile towards foreigners and foreign women, Nehemiah 13:1–2 directly alludes to Deuteronomy 23:3–4 (Hebrew Bible [HB] 4–5) which forbids the presence of Moabites and Ammonites in the congregation of YHWH. The Book of Ruth offers narrative critique against this Moabite paragraph, as well as against the way that this text is interpreted and implemented in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Boaz's actions should be understood against this background.

At this stage the intended audience of the narrative should be fully aware of the fact that Ruth is an outsider, she is trespassing on Judahite soil. However, when Boaz notices her, he apparently does not yet know whether she is a גֵּר or a הַיּוֹרְכָב. Nevertheless, she seems to arouse his interest and he asks after her identity. His servant-in-charge informs him that she is the Moabitess who came back with Naomi from the fields of Moab (Rt 2:8). The words 'Moab' and 'Moabitess' are once more accentuated, probably deliberately to enhance the tension in the narrative. If Boaz is a good and respected 'Israelite', he should immediately give orders that Ruth should be removed from his premises – at least, that is what the audience of the Second Temple Period would expect him to do. Yet, he does exactly the opposite.

Boaz's generosity towards Ruth comes as a surprise, not only to her but to the post-exilic audience as well. Firstly, he does not chase her away; on the contrary, he forbids her to leave his field. The presence of a הַיּוֹרְכָב, moreover, if she is a Moabite among the Judahite people, is unheard of. Then Boaz instructs Ruth to stay close to his reapers, because he had forbidden them to 'touch' her (Rt 2:9). Interpretations regarding עָגַנ [touch] vary from a neutral touching or touch with the intension to cause harm, or to molest sexually (Cohn Eskenazi & Frymer-Kensky 2011:35). Whatever the case, Boaz seems to be overprotective towards this Moabite woman, preventing her from hurt or inappropriate sexual advances. Therefore, he gives Ruth the assurance that she will be safe as long as she stays on his field: this may not be the case on another person's property.

▢ Boaz challenges social boundaries

Consequently, Boaz gives Ruth permission to drink water from the vessels that are used by his workers. Once again it should be remembered that water was a scarce commodity in the desert-like climate of the ancient Near East and Israel, and very precious for the reapers who worked all day long in the scorching hot sun. The idea of sharing water with

a הַיָּרְכָן, would certainly not be welcomed at all. No wonder Ruth is overcome with gratitude at Boaz's gestures of kindness.

One may expect some resistance from Boaz's workers; he allows a הַיָּרְכָן in their midst, forbids them any sexual pleasures they may have with her, and he even grants her permission to drink from their precious water. However, no one seems to complain. Boaz is certainly an impressive figure, yet the narrative does not portray him as someone who exercises his authority by means of force. On the contrary, from the mutual greetings extended in the name of YHWH (Rt 2:4), it appears that Boaz has a good relationship with his workers, consequently they would also respect and obey his orders (Cohn Eskenazi & Frymer-Kensky 2011:31; Fischer 2001:167).

This good relationship between landowner and workers becomes furthermore apparent when Boaz extends yet another invitation to Ruth at lunchtime: to sit beside him and the reapers and to share in the meal (Rt 2:14). On the surface this appears to be a pleasant social gathering, a group of people having lunch together, before they resume their activities on the field. However, Fischer (2001:181–182), Frevel (1992:74), Lau (2011:60–61) and Zenger (1986:58) are of the opinion that in this verse, all social boundaries in the Ancient World are transgressed and turned upside down.

Firstly, the difference in social status between Boaz and his workers should be kept in mind. In the Ancient World, it was unusual that a landowner would mix freely with his workers and even share a meal with them. Secondly, and even more radically, the gender roles in ancient communities were sharply defined. Men and women seldom ate together. In this little scenario (Rt 2:14), Ruth as a הַיָּרְכָן not only shares the meal with Boaz and his workers, she is even served by him! This is shocking to say the least. Moreover, he does not stop when he realises that she is satisfied, she can even take some food home.

☐ Boaz bends the rules

Boaz seems to be a man who does not feel restricted by the laws or the social conventions of his time. And when the people rise to resume their activities on the field, he goes even further. Boaz's instructions to his workers regarding the falling sheaves from the bundles of grain, obviously allude to the stipulations in Leviticus 19:9–10 and Deuteronomy 24:19. To quote from Deuteronomy 24:

> When you reap your harvest in your field, and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the stranger [הֵגֵר], the fatherless and the widow. (v.19)

A likewise instruction can be found in the Leviticus text. However, Braulik (1996:118–119), Fischer (2001:183) and Frevel (1992:78) all remark that Boaz actually radicalises this law when he instructs his workers to let her glean among the sheaves and also to 'let some grain from the bundles fall purposely for her' (Rt 2:16). In other words, they are to leave

the sheaves that accidentally fall from the bundles and furthermore, they should purposely let some grain fall on the ground for her to glean. One could almost say that Boaz is willing to suffer losses for her to benefit from them.

Boaz's actions can be summarised in the words 'more than'. In every way does he more than is necessary. In doing this, something of 'life in its fullness' is starting to realise for the two miserable widows. At the end of the day, when Ruth returns home to her mother-in-law, she brings back food – that which she had gleaned, as well as the leftovers from the meal that Boaz had offered her. However, in the Book of Ruth, Boaz's generosity should not be read simply as deeds of kindness towards a poor woman in need: Boaz is an example of someone who (1) challenges the social boundaries of his time by allowing a הַיְרְכְנָ on his land, and (2) expands the prescribed rules regarding the accidental falling of sheaves. By daring to go against the expected norms of society, 'Ecodomy' becomes realised.

◼ Deuteronomy 23:5 – The tables start to turn

◼ The curse changes to a blessing

Just like Boaz, Ruth also challenges the stipulations of a very important law in the society. Above her identity as 'foreigner' and 'Moabite' has been illuminated. Foreigners and especially Moabites were not welcome in the Israelite community, and with regard to this section of the chapter, the community law of Deuteronomy 23:3–4 [HB 4–5] should once again kept in mind – not the prohibition against these nations, but especially verse 4 [HB 5], namely the reason why Moabites are forbidden:

> [*They*] did not meet you (Israel) with bread and water on the road when you came out from Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor … to curse you. (Dt 23:3–4 [HB 4–5])

After the first meeting between Boaz and Ruth and Boaz's unexpected hospitality, Ruth is overcome by his generosity and asks him why he is so kind to her. He first answers her that he knows what she has done: she was kind to her mother-in-law, her husband, and she left her country to live among a people unknown to her (Rt 2:11). Then he utters a blessing: 'May YHWH repay your work, and may your reward be full' (Rt 2:12).

Fischer (2001:177–178) is of the opinion that Ruth 2:12 is a correction on the curse on the Moabites because of the Balaam episode. She explains as follows. The word in Hebrew for 'hire' (in Deuteronomy 23:4) is – שָׂכָר that could mean 'hire' or 'pay'. Ruth 2:12 uses מַשְׂכֻּרְתֵּ֖ךְ – that is a noun that is derived from the same root of שָׂכָר and is appropriated to Ruth as reward for the kindness she has shown to her in-laws. Thus, reasons Fischer, Ruth, the Moabitess will be rewarded for not doing harm to Israel like Balaam, but

because she left Moab behind to seek refuge under the wings of the God of Israel while demonstrating selfless solidarity with her (Israelite) mother-in-law. Balaam would have been 'paid' for a curse, but YHWH changed the curse on the Moabites into a blessing by means of what Ruth had done. Ruth 2:12 cancels the curse that rests on the Moabites due to the Balaam episode and also disposes of one of the objections in Deuteronomy 23:4 [HB 5].

Bread and water to the destitute

Deuteronomy 23:4 [HB 5] also accuses the Moabites of not having provided the Israelites with bread and water during their wanderings through the desert after the exodus. This correction on the Moabites starts in the second chapter of the Book of Ruth, also with allusions to events in the desert, however, not to the Balaam episode, but with the gathering of manna.

One of the key words in Ruth 2 that deals with the events and the gleaning on the harvest fields, is the Hebrew word that is used for 'gleaning' (לָקַט). It occurs throughout the chapter several times: Ruth 2:2, 3, 7, 8, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19. Braulik (1996:118, 1999:13) and Köhlmoos (2010:29) notice that Exodus 16 also uses the term לָקַט to describe the way in which Israel 'gathered' manna in the desert. Likewise, the second chapter in the Book of Ruth uses the same word to describe what had happened on the harvest fields of Boaz, and it ends when Ruth brings back and hands over to her mother-in-law that which she had gleaned. Braulik's words are quite moving when he says: '*Die von der Moabiterin aufgelesenen Ähren werden zum Manna ihres Exodus, von dem sie ihrer Schwiegermutter Naomi gibt*' (Braulik 1996:118). The grain that Ruth has gathered, becomes for her like manna in her 'desert' time and from that she also gives to Naomi, her mother-in-law.

From the last verse in the chapter, Ruth 2:23, it appears that Ruth had gleaned the whole time during the harvest season on the fields of Boaz, and that she still lived with her mother-in-law. One may also conclude that she had gleaned enough grain to sustain herself and Naomi everyday with enough to eat. In this regard and with specific reference to Ruth 2, Braulik (1996:115) describes the Book of Ruth as '*eine Gegengeschichte vor allem zum sogenannten Gemeindegesetz das Deuteronomiums* (23:4–7) [a counter story against the community law in Deuteronomy]. LaCocque (1990:86–87) agrees that the whole Chapter 2 of the Book of Ruth is directed against the accusation that the Moabites did not provide the Israelites with bread and water during their journey through the desert. Ruth becomes the character of a Moabite who does exactly the opposite: She actually provides a hungry and destitute Israelite with ample food in her situation of need. With her actions of selfless love, Ruth the Moabitess uplifted the curse of Deuteronomy 23:3–5 that rested on the Moabites. She made it clear that no Israelite could object in any way to her presence – and by implication to the presence of foreigners like her – in the community of YHWH.

Decisive steps – On the threshing floor

However, 'life in its fullness' has not yet been realised completely. Some more barriers have to be broken down, and Chapter 3 of the Book of Ruth is probably the chapter that violates sexual as well social constraints in a rather radical way. It happens on the threshing floor. As Cohn Eskenazi and Frymer-Kenski (2011) state:

> Being set apart from daily activity, the threshing floor was also a liminal, or transitional space. Thus, the threshing floor could also be the site of transgressions, since it was also associated with freedom from ordinary constraints (see Hos 9:1). (p.15)

Since the opening verses of the chapter, there is an erotic 'crackle in the air' (Fischer 1995:183). Naomi instructs Ruth to prepare herself like a bride (Braulik 1999:15; LaCocque 2004:91) and to go down to the threshing floor but remain unseen. Only when Boaz is merry with food and drink, and lies down to sleep, should she quietly sneak in and 'uncover his feet' (Rt 3:4). Several scholars remarked on the sexual implications of the verbs שָׁכַב [to 'lie down]' and מַרְגְּלֹתָיו – derived from the root רֶגֶל – meaning 'foot', which is also an euphemism of a man's penis (see Braulik 1996:119; 1999:15; Halton 2012:32; LaCocque 2004:91). Thus, Naomi's instructions may be read as: 'Go and seduce the man.'

According to the narrative, Ruth follows her mother-in-law's orders closely and does exactly as she is told. The climax of the nightly encounter is reached when Boaz awakens at midnight with a start, and discovers a woman at his 'feet' (Rt 3:8). Once again he asks after her identity, and she introduces herself only as 'Ruth'. Significantly she does not refer to herself nor is she referred to in the narrative as a 'Moabitess', she merely mentions her name, thereby suggesting some measure of intimacy (Fischer 2001:210; Köhlmoos 2010:61; Nielsen 1997:73; Siquans 2009:447; Zenger 1986:71). She also calls herself his 'maidservant' אָמָה [maidservant]. The term which she applied to herself in Ruth 2:13, also translated as 'maidservant' was שִׁפְחָה. According to several scholars, these two terms are not simply synonymous: שִׁפְחָה suggests a slave girl who worked outside on the fields, while אָמָה pertains to someone who worked inside the house, and could be taken for a second wife if the first wife of a man happened to be barren (see Doob Sakenfeld 1999:58; Fischer 2001:210; Frevel 1992:100; Köhlmoos 2010:61; LaCocque 1990:110; Zenger 1986:71). It is almost as if Ruth wants Boaz to understand that she is not the slave girl mentioned in Chapter 2, but that she has now come into his house and that he should take notice of the change.

The climax of the chapter, which is also relevant to this chapter, lies in Ruth's request to Boaz: 'Spread your wing over your maidservant for you are [a] redeemer' (Rt 3:9). This may be a literary device referring back to Ruth 2:12 where Boaz lauds Ruth for seeking shelter under the 'wings' of YHWH. However, the difference between 'wings' (plural) and 'wing' (singular) should be noted. The use of 'wings' in the plural – כְּנָפֶיךָ – may indeed be metaphorically employed to indicate shelter, especially shelter under the wings of YHWH.

However, 'wing' in the singular – כָּנָף – has a double meaning. It may simply refer to a piece of clothing, but it may also imply a sexual relationship, especially in the way that it is employed in Ruth 3:9 (Braulik 1996:119; 1999:15; Doob Sakenfeld 1999:58; Fischer 2001:211; Frevel 1992:101; Halton 2012:35; Zenger 1986:71). Thus, Ruth's request to Boaz to 'spread his wing' may be interpreted as a marriage[5] proposal (Braulik 1999:15; Fischer 2001:211; Köhlmoos 2010:61–62; Nielsen 1997:73).

With this request, several boundaries are violated. Firstly, the sexual barriers in the Ancient World are overstepped: The request comes from a woman who admits that she is from a lower class הָמָא [maidservant]. Secondly, ethnic boundaries become merged: Ruth is a Moabite and Boaz is a Judahite. Lastly, religious prohibitions are ignored: marriage with foreign women are forbidden by religious law (see 'Decisive steps – On the threshing floor').

The reason that Ruth proposes for her request, is that Boaz is the גֹּאֵל [redeemer]. De Vaux (1988:21–22) explains the function of the redeemer as stipulated in Leviticus 25:23–50. This legislation pertains primarily to slavery and land redemption. If an Israelite has to sell himself as a slave or sell his land due to poverty, the redeemer, a next of kin (not necessarily a blood brother) has to step in to prevent this from happening. The main purpose was to protect the interests of the family. However, the practice of marriage – even the levirate marriage (which is not the case in the Book of Ruth) – and the practice of a slave – or land redemption are not related. Marriage and redemption are two different institutions.

According to Berlin (2010:3), Fischer (1999:40; 2001:212), Frevel (1992:108) and Zenger (1986:88) this connection between marriage and redemption is unique and occurs only once in the Old Testament, namely here in Ruth 3:9. This is an innovative and creative invention on the part of the author of the book who wishes to emphasise a particular point. An important motive may be family solidarity, for marriage as well as redemption have the objective of maintaining family relations and possessions. Furthermore, as will be revealed in Ruth 4, there is a closer relative than Boaz. Boaz is under no obligation to perform any of these duties, he is not the closest relative, but there happens to be a closer relative. Thus, Boaz is once more portrayed as an exceptional benefactor.

Berlin (2010:12–13) offers some particular heuristic insights regarding Ruth's requests for marriage and redemption in the same breath. Firstly, she agrees that Naomi's return to her homeland may be paradigmatic with Israel's return from the exile. Then she

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5. It should be noted that 'marriage' does not imply marriage in the modern sense of the word, especially since Hebrew has no noun or verb for 'marriage' or 'marry' and that ancient customs around ceremonies of betrothal were very different from customs in a contemporary Western world.

suggests that the combination of marriage and redemption, especially land redemption (see also Rt 4:5) would be most appropriate for the post-exilic community. Family relations and land ownership were destroyed by the exile and it was necessary to rebuild and maintain that backbone of the community. However, the most important point that Berlin notices, is that in Ruth 3:9 and Ruth 4:5 the promises to the patriarchs resound: promises of descent (the result of marriage) and possession of the land (Gn 12:1–3). In the Book of Ruth these promises would become realised by a foreign woman; in the post-exilic community, the promises would become realised again by the foreigners in their midst. Although the land strictly speaking belonged to the Persians, Israel still had the opportunity to eke out a living by means of solidarity among themselves and together with YHWH-worshipping foreigners.

■ Life in its fullness

The Book of Ruth has a happy ending: life in its fullness. The union between Boaz and Ruth is exceptionally fruitful and soon after he takes her as wife, YHWH grants her to become pregnant and a son is born. This son is called Naomi's redeemer by the 'women', presumably Naomi's associates, and he will take care of her in her old age. Her life of emptiness has changed to a life of fullness when she nurses the child on her lap. Furthermore, the narrative looks forward into the future, and by means of the genealogies at the end of the book (Rt 4:17b; 18–22) discloses that this child, Obed, is a forefather of none other than the great king David. Life in its fullness, not only for an individual family unit, but for the nation as a whole is realised. Read from a post-exilic context, the Book of Ruth envisions a future that does not exclude but includes foreigners who wish to be part of the community of YHWH, and who are eager to realise life in its fullness together with them.

However, a last remark by Fischer (2001:241) is important. The reader of the Ruth narrative is sometimes inclined to judge Orpah for turning back to Moab as being a coward and rejecting the 'true God of Israel' (Rt 1:14–15). Likewise, the nameless so-and-so, the closer redeemer in Ruth 4:6, is seen as being selfish and only thinking of his own interests. But in the narrative these two characters are not judged, and neither should the reader judge them. Rather, Orpah and the nameless so-and-so represent rational, logically thinking people. They are put before a choice, they weigh the pros and the cons, and eventually they do what would be the logical thing to do in the given circumstances. Ruth and Boaz, on the contrary, demonstrate what it demands to realise 'life in its fullness'. 'Life in its fullness' is realised by illogical, irrational choices, regardless of the consequences. Only by Ruth's reckless act of selfless love, of unconditional solidarity with her mother-in-law, and by taking a dangerous risk on the threshing floor, 'life in its fullness' becomes a reality. Only Boaz's disregard for the prescribed rules of behaviour of society, his

generosity towards a foreigner who should be an outcast and his eventual decision to take her as wife, provide Naomi with a redeemer in her old age, and provide the nation with a glorious king.

◼ Conclusion

This chapter examined the topic of 'Ecodomy' – life in its fullness – from the perspective of the Book of Ruth in the Old Testament. The narrative of Naomi, Boaz and Ruth serves as a reminder that 'life in its fullness' cannot be taken for granted. Ecodomy demands that more than what is necessary has to be done and that there is no room for prejudices and stereotypes. 'Life in its fullness' can only be realised by acts of loving kindness, selfless love, and often needs to challenge the expectations and norms of the society of the day without taking the consequences into account. Thus, Ecodomy is not a natural state of affairs, but requires an effort.

◼ Summary: Chapter 3

This chapter examined the concept of 'Ecodomy' – life in its fullness – as it unfolds in the Book of Ruth. The book is dated to the post-exilic period in the history of Israel, and is read as narrative critique against the Moabite paragraph in Deuteronomy 23:3–5, and against the way that this text is interpreted and implemented in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Naomi, Ruth and Boaz, the protagonists in the narrative, become paradigmatic of the situation in post-exilic Israel. Their stories, dealing with loss and the actions they take in order to heal the brokenness become indicative for the post-exilic community. As the narrative plot develops, the chapter aims to indicate how 'life in its emptiness' is changed into 'life in its fullness' by the courage and creative initiative of individuals, even if it meant overstepping boundaries and challenging the social conventions of the time. Against the exclusivist policy of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Book of Ruth argues that foreigners may be included in the community of YHWH and that their solidarity with Israel is to the benefit of all the people. The point that the chapter wishes to make, is that life in its fullness cannot be taken for granted, but requires effort.

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