SHADDAI, PROVIDENCE, AND THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF RUTH

TERRANCE R. WARDLAW JR.[*]

The themes of faithfulness and divine providence have drawn many to the book of Ruth through the centuries. In particular, Brevard Childs concluded that the major purpose of the canonical shape of Ruth is to show the ways of God in the life of one family. Childs focused on the speech of Naomi when he observed that:

> The original story was structured around a theological issue, as is evident from Naomi's discourse (1.21f.): 'I went away full and Yahweh has brought me back empty … the Almighty has brought calamity upon me!' The mysterious ways of God form the major thread of the plot in chs. 2 and 3 (2.12, 20; 3.10, 13), and culminate in the blessing in 4.14. All the features which make up the qualities of a good story bear witness to God at work.[1]

Similarly, Robert Hubbard finds that this book "portrays God as involved in life's ordinary affairs; indeed, they are exactly the arena in which he chooses to operate. It describes how God works through, not despite, the everyday faithfulness of his people."[2]

However, this traditional understanding runs counter to many recent literary and feminist readings of the book of Ruth where there is either a minimization of the divine or a preoccupation with human characterization to the exclusion of the divine. For example, in his folklorist work, Jack Sasson concludes that

> of the twenty-four references to a divine figure, only two could be considered as contributing to the development of the tale. These two instances, it is interesting to note, occur at the tale's extremities: The first occurs in 1:6, in which God's grace to the Bethlehemites sets Naomi (and the story) in motion; the second is recorded in 4:13, in which Ruth's pregnancy is permitted by God.[3]

Similarly, feminist readings tend to focus upon gender issues from a humanist perspective rather than exhibiting sensitivity to how the canonical shape of the book of Ruth portrays the providence of God in relation to both men and women.[4] This

---

[*] Terrance R. Wardlaw is a linguist and translator with SIL International, 7500 W. Camp Wisdom Road, Dallas, TX 75236.

[1] Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the OT as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 565, ellipsis his.

[2] Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 1–2.

[3] Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1979) 221.

[4] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 8, 166–99; Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994) 83–110; Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (Feminist Companion to the Bible, Second Series 3; Sheffield:

type of reading contrasts with the observation of Claus Westermann that "God is present in everything of which the book speaks. Though not said directly, this follows from what takes place between the human characters."[5]

In particular, Naomi's speech in Ruth 1:20–21, alongside each of the references to the Lord within the speech of the main characters, relates to the overall discourse structure of the book in such a way as to call into question literary and feminist readings which minimize or leave to the side the overarching theme of God's providential care.[6] Therefore, this investigation seeks to identify how the use of the name Shaddai within the speech of Naomi (Ruth 1:20–21) draws upon conventionalized knowledge from the repository of Israelite traditions in order to foreshadow what follows and in order to indicate its significance. In order to identify this discourse process, first, the construction of meaning in stories originating within an oral society will be identified. Second, the meaning complexes associated with the name "Shaddai" will be identified. Third, salient features from the narrative structure of Ruth will be identified in order to demonstrate how the use of the name "Shaddai" both foreshadows the plot resolution and contextualizes this story within the *Heilsgeschichte* of the patriarchal and Davidic lineage.

I. THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING IN ORAL SOCIETIES

In the light of E. F. Campbell's identification of an oral stage in the development of the early-monarchic authorship of Ruth, recent linguistic and anthropological research on oral cultures and oral literature may shed light on the conceptualization of meaning and the function of structural devices within this book.[7] In particular, John Miles Foley applies performance theory to oral-derived literature on the basis of Dell Hymes's development of ethnopoetics for identifying the unique and the emic structural and semantic features of literature from various cultures.[8] Accordingly, Foley attempts to identify the manner in which structural features and

---

Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (eds.), *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (New York: Ballantine, 1994); Nehama Aschkenasy, "Reading Ruth through a Bakhtinian Lens: The Carnivalesque in a Biblical Tale," *JBL* 126 (2007) 437–53; L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization: Ruth, Tamar, and the Quest for Human Dignity," *CBQ* 74 (2012) 659–74.

[5] Claus Westermann, "Structure and Intention of the Book of Ruth," *WW* 19 (1999) 285–302, esp. 300–301.

[6] References to יהוה are found throughout the narrative and direct discourse: Ruth 1:6, 8, 9, 13, 17, 21 (2x); 2:4 (2x), 12 (2x), 20; 3:10, 13; 4:11, 12, 13, 14.

[7] Edward F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth* (ABD 7; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975).

[8] Dell Hymes, "Language, Memory, and Selective Performance: Cultee's 'Salmon's Myth' as Twice Told to Boas," *Journal of American Folklore* 98 (1985) 391–434; idem, "Discourse: Scope without Depth," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 57 (1986) 49–89; idem, "Is Poetics Original and Functional?," *Language and Communication* 11 (1991) 49–51; idem, "Ethnopoetics, Oral-Formulaic Theory, and Editing Texts," *Oral Tradition* 9 (1994) 330–70; idem, "When is Oral Narrative Poetry? Generative Form and Its Pragmatic Conditions," *Pragmatics* 8 (1998) 475–500. In Foley's own words, "As the name etymologically indicates, ethnopoetics—the poetics of each *ethnos* (of each group, nation, or tribe)—starts by stipulating that poetries are plural. Each has its own shape, identity, and rules. Given the tyranny of Western poetic models, such advocacy of pluralism marks an enormous step forward." (John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* [Urbana: University of Illinois, 2002] 95).

phraseology within a given oral tradition, culture, or repository "mean."[9] This is an attempt to allow the structure of an oral-derived text to speak from within its own culture, and it is a quest, insofar as possible, to read the text sympathetically and with as much background knowledge of cultural "insiders" as possible.

This is especially pertinent for understanding the significance of the name "Shaddai" within the book of Ruth. Foley notes that a character in oral epic may be identified by one typical aspect of their personality or history, and this aspect stands for the totality of the character's identity, *pars pro toto*.[10] He identifies this device as metonymy, where "the typical aspect refers to the whole traditional identity of a character—his or her mythic Gestalt, so to speak—and actively brings to life that identity for participation in the given narrative context."[11] In layman's terms, the mere mention of a character's name or the name with a short epithet is intended to evoke an entire complex of knowledge, emotions, and attitudes that are associated with that epic figure. However, the burden of approximately recovering the original, culturally assumed knowledge of both the performer and the audience rests upon the listeners, readers, or cultural "outsiders," who remain both culturally and historically distant. In terms of the present investigation, this would suggest the need to identify thematic elements from the cultural repository or literary tradition that may have belonged to the epic *Gestalt* (i.e. frame) associated with the divine name "Shaddai" at the time the book of Ruth was composed and/or written. An epic text assumes an educated reader or auditor who is able to make connections between the wording used and prior knowledge from the tradition.[12]

Moreover, this observation suggests that insofar as the book of Ruth is oral-derived literature situated within an oral culture, the epic *Gestalt* that was intended to be associated with these texts and their phraseology will not necessarily be encoded as an *Instruktionssemantik* within the immediate context. Rather, prominent *Gestalten* will likely be found within the tradition at large. Therefore, the tradition behind the text is always the silent partner when it is read.[13]

II. THE CONNOTATIONS OF "SHADDAI" IN ISRAELITE SCRIPTURE

The foundation has now been laid to turn to the usage of "Shaddai" within Israel's traditions in order to identify the complexes of meaning that were associat-

---

[9] John Miles Foley, "Introduction," in *Oral Tradition in Literature: Interpretation in Context* (ed. John Miles Foley; Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986) 1–18.

[10] John Miles Foley, "Reading the Oral Traditional Text: Aesthetics of Creation and Response," in *Comparative Research on Oral Traditions: A Memorial for Milman Parry* (ed. John Miles Foley; Columbia, OH: Slavica, 1987) 185–212, esp. 192.

[11] Foley, "Reading the Oral Traditional Text" 193. He also refers to this semantic process as synecdoche. In terms of semantic theory, this device is similar to the cognitive-semantic notion of encyclopedic knowledge, semantic frames, their domains, as well as the textual "triggers" that evoke a given semantic frame. The cultural repository of thematic elements constitutes the encyclopedic knowledge from which the ideal cultural insider would draw during the course of the performance.

[12] Foley, "Reading the Oral Traditional Text" 198.

[13] John Miles Foley, *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Epic* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1991) xiii, xv.

ed with it according to the received text. Although many different origins have been proposed, to date no consensus has been reached regarding the etymology of Shaddai.[14] However, Westermann speaks for many commentators when he observes that none of the proposed etymologies accords with the contextual usage of any group of OT passages in any case.[15] Therefore, it is worth a brief review and summary of the 48 occurrences of "Shaddai" spanning the OT narrative, wisdom, and prophetic genres for connotations which have often been noted by exegetes. After all, the contextual usage of frequently occurring words retains primacy over speculative etymology when identifying meaning.

1. *Pentateuch.* Both sequentially and historically within the canon, "El Shaddai" occurs first preceding Abram's covenant of circumcision in Gen 17:1. In context, God identifies Himself as "El Shaddai" and promises Abram children through Sarai. However, both Abram and Sarai are beyond the childbearing years, and the promise of the covenant with Abram's descendants and his fatherhood over many nations seems threatened. In fulfillment of this patriarchal promise, Isaac is then born in Gen 21:1–7.

"El Shaddai" is next found in Isaac's blessing of Jacob, who is fleeing for his life after cheating Esau of both his birthright and his blessing (Gen 28:3). Rebekah heard of Esau's threat of fratricide, and therefore she complained to Isaac about the local women in order to spur him to send Jacob back to Padan Aram for safety. Isaac blesses Jacob by calling upon "El Shaddai" to give him many offspring, who will then possess the land promised to Abraham. This name emerges again when God identifies himself as "El Shaddai" after Jacob meets Isaac upon his return from Padan Aram with children and flocks, and after revenge is taken on Shechem for defiling Dinah (Gen 35:11). Although Jacob is afraid of the possible anger of the surrounding peoples, God blesses him by telling him to be fruitful and multiply, promises that nations and kings will come forth from him, and renews the promise to give the land to his offspring. Then again, Jacob calls upon "El Shaddai" in Gen 43:14 on the eve of his sons returning to Egypt with Benjamin. The patriarchal offspring and all of the attendant promises are threatened by famine and a capricious court minister as Jacob calls upon "El Shaddai" to grant his sons mercy before Pharaoh's official in Egypt. The final occurrence in Genesis is found in Jacob's blessing of Joseph (Gen 49:25). Jacob calls upon "Shaddai" to bless Joseph with

---

[14] Etymological possibilities and their situation in the history of religion have been discussed by W. F. Albright, "The Names Shaddai and Abram," *JBL* 54 (1935) 173–204; Lloyd R. Bailey, "Israelite ʾĒl Šadday and Amorite Bêl Šadê," *JBL* 87 (1968) 434–38; Jean Ouellette, "More on ʾĒl Šadday and Bêl Šadê," *JBL* 88 (1969) 470–71; F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973) 52–60; K. Koch, 'Šaddaj. Zum Verhältnis zwischen israelitischer Monolatrie und nordwest-semitischem Polytheismus,' *VT* 26 (1976) 299–332; M. Weippert, "שׁדי," *THAT* 2.873–81; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995 [1981]) 257–58; *HALOT* 2.1420–22; Harriet Lutzky, "Shadday as a Goddess Epithet," *VT* 48 (1998) 15–36.

[15] Both Terence E. Fretheim ("אֵל," *NIDOTTE* 1.401) and W. Warning ("Terminological Patterns and the Divine Epithet *Shaddai*," *TynBul* 52 [2001] 149–53) signal a move in the direction of the contextual analysis of this lexical item.

offspring when famine drove the patriarchal family from the land promised to Abraham.

This name is next found when Abraham's descendants are under threat from Pharaoh, who forces them into servitude and will not allow them to leave Egypt in order to serve the Lord (Exod 6:3). The Lord declares that he made himself known as "El Shaddai" to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and he goes on to reaffirm the covenant of land and offspring by declaring to Moses that he will deliver the Hebrews with an outstretched arm.

The final occurrence of "Shaddai" within the Pentateuch is found within the last chapter of the Balaam narrative in the opening verses of Balaam's third and fourth oracles. In context, Israel is under threat from Balak, who opposes them and seeks Balaam's assistance in order to curse them on their journey toward the land promised to Abraham. Balaam identifies himself as the one who "sees the vision of the Almighty (*Shaddai*)" (Num 24:4, 16).

Therefore, one may conclude from usage within the Pentateuch that the name "Shaddai" is associated with narrative complexes in which the promise of children and land is threatened from without. In the face of threats to divine promise, "Shaddai" acts in order to protect the patriarchal family and their descendants in order to fulfill the promises of offspring and land (Gen 17:1). As noted by Westermann, it is possible "that the memory of the name was bound up with blessing and increase."[16] Moreover, this resonates with Wenham's observation that the epithet "Shaddai" "is always used in connection with promises of descendants: Shaddai evokes the idea that God is able to make the barren fertile and to fulfill his promises."[17]

2. *Job.* Among all of the biblical materials, the name "Shaddai" is used most frequently within the poetry of the book of Job.[18] As is well known, the basic book structure consists of two chapters of narrative in which Job loses his children and possessions (Job 1–2). Job's lamentation and response to the "comfort" of his friends is then found within the poetic materials of Job 3–37. Most of the occurrences of "Shaddai" are found within this unit in the speech of Job and his friends. The final use of "Shaddai" occurs in chapters 38–41 within the Lord's response to these accusations and counteraccusations, where the Lord asks "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty (שׁדי)?" (Job 40:2) Within the final chapter of the book, Job confesses and repents (Job 42:1–6), and then within the closing verses of narrative material it is reported that the Lord restored Job's possessions twofold, in addition to giving him seven sons and three daughters (Job 42:10–17). Similar to the basic plot surrounding the context of usage from the Pentateuch, the name "Shaddai" within Job is associated with a threat to children and possessions. Moreover, this plot is resolved with divine intervention of protection and blessing in order to provide children for the main character, and in order to restore possessions. In

---

[16] Westermann, *Genesis 12–36* 258.

[17] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC 2; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000) 20.

[18] Job 6:4, 14; 8:3, 5; 11:7; 13:3; 15:25; 21:15, 20; 22:3, 17, 23, 25, 26; 23:16; 24:1; 27:2, 10, 11, 13; 29:5; 31:2, 35; 32:8; 33:4; 34:10, 12; 35:13; 37:23; 40:2.

relation to the book of Ruth, Westermann notes the "astoundingly close parallels" between the overall structure of Ruth and Job, and observes how both books begin with a person who suffers greatly, they are brought to despair by the withdrawal of God's grace, they are brought from suffering to liberation, and then lament is transformed into praise.[19]

3. *Prophets.* In turning to the Prophets and Psalms, it is possible to argue from the larger context that threat to the elect and the land is in view. The name "Shaddai" is found in the B line of Isa 13:6 in the context of the destruction of the day of the Lord. In this context, the name "Shaddai" sounds like the word used for destruction (שדד). In terms of wider context, this occurrence is found within the oracle against Babylon among the oracles against the nations. Therefore, once again "Shaddai" is associated with the preservation of the elect line and their land. There are then two occurrences in the book of Ezekiel. In Ezek 1:24, the prophet hears the sound of the wings of the living creatures, which are "like the sound of the Almighty (שדי)." Then in Ezek 10:5, this name is used to describe the sound of the wings of the cherubim, which are "like the voice of God Almighty (שדי) when he speaks." In his indictment of the leaders and elders of the people, Joel declares that the day of the Lord is near, and that it will come "as destruction from the Almighty (שדי)" (Joel 1:15). As with its use in Isaiah, "Shaddai" in this context sounds like the word used for destruction (שדד). Moreover, destruction is associated with "Shaddai." Therefore, the protection of the faithful depends upon the destruction of the evil which threatens the covenant with the fathers.

4. *Psalms.* In the book of Psalms, the name "Shaddai" is found twice. First, within Ps 68:15 it occurs in the A line: "When the Almighty (שדי) scatters kings there, let snow fall on Zalmon." Then it is found a second time in a B line within Ps 91:1: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty (שדי)." Both of these occurrences share a concern for the safety of either the Davidic king or a member of the covenant community.

From this consideration of the usage of "Shaddai" within the Pentateuch, Job, Prophets, and Psalms, we may observe the following. First, within the Pentateuch, the name "(El) Shaddai" is associated with threats to the patriarchal lineage and the promise of the land. When the elect are under threat, they call upon the name "Shaddai," which connotes God's protection and deliverance. The name "Shaddai" is repeatedly associated with this basic plot structure. In each impossible circumstance, God delivers the patriarchal line in order to insure its fruitfulness and blessing with a vision toward possessing the land in the future. Second, usage within the canonical book of Job conforms to the basic plot structure observed within the Pentateuch. The name "Shaddai" is invoked in Job's distress, and the marked recurrence of this name falls within the narrative brackets of Job's restoration to greater riches and more children. Therefore, the reading frame observed within the Pentateuch is confirmed. Third, usage within the prophets does not contradict that

---

[19] Westermann, "Structure and Intention" 302; so also Hayyim Angel, "A Midrashic View of Ruth: Amidst a Sea of Ambiguity," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 33 (2005) 91–99.

observed within the Pentateuch and Job, although there are slight differences. "Shaddai" may be used either in a word play on "destruction" (שדד) or as a qualifier indicating a very loud noise akin to the voice of "Shaddai." Fourth, in the Psalms, the name "Shaddai" is associated with the protection of the Davidic king or a member of the covenant community. Therefore, one may identify an epic *Gestalt* that is associated with the name "Shaddai." In biblical narrative, the use of "Shaddai" is associated with God's covenantal protection and blessing of the lineage through the main character, and this entails the eventual resolution of the problem, hardship, or obstacle. Within the book of Job the narrative framework associates this plot with the use of "Shaddai" in the poetic section. The poetic text of the Psalms and Prophets assume these narrative connotations alongside their own literary word play.

III. THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF RUTH
AND FORESHADOWING THE RESOLUTION

In turning to the book of Ruth, one may identify the following plot structure. Within chapter one, Naomi's family sojourns in Moab, her sons marry Moabite women, her husband and sons die, her daughters-in-law have no children, Orpah returns to her Moabite family, and Ruth insists on remaining with her for the return to Bethlehem. In chapter 2, Ruth gleans in the fields of Boaz, Boaz oversees the safety of Ruth, and then Naomi identifies Boaz as one of their redeemers by kinship. In chapter 3, Naomi instructs Ruth to approach Boaz on the threshing floor at night, Ruth approaches him and asks him to spread his wings over her, and then in the morning Boaz sends Ruth away discretely. Finally, in chapter 4, Boaz meets the closest kinsman redeemer at the gate in order to inquire whether he would exercise his right of redemption or whether Boaz would be able to redeem both the fields of Elimelech and Ruth. The book closes and the plot is resolved with the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, the birth of a son, and the genealogy showing the lineage of David through Boaz and Ruth. Therefore, one observes that the book of Ruth touches on the patriarchal themes of childlessness, an endangered lineage, and the inheritance of the land.

CHART 1

The Structure of the Book of Ruth

Famine and Widowhood	Providential Gleaning	At the Feet of Boaz	Redemption	The Genealogy of David
1:1–22	2:1–23	3:1–18	4:1–17	4:18–22

CODA

CLIMAX

This association of the structure of Ruth with similar themes in the patriarchal narratives is well established in discussions of intertextuality. First, the mention of Rachel, Leah, Perez, and Tamar in Ruth 4:11–12, 18 warrants the argument that

there is a connection between the patriarchal narratives and the book of Ruth. Second, the identification of motifs common to Ruth and the patriarchal narratives provide further backing. For example, Ellen Van Wolde, among others, notes the many points of similarity between the story of Tamar in Genesis 38 and the book of Ruth.[20] Third, Talie Sutskover identifies the lexical field associated with "El Shaddai" within the patriarchal narratives and then notes similar vocabulary and themes within Ruth.[21] Fourth, the inclusion of the genealogy in 4:18–22 is similar to the inclusion of genealogies within Genesis.[22]

With these similarities between the patriarchal narratives and Ruth, it is noteworthy that Naomi attributes her childlessness, the endangered lineage, and the threatened inheritance of the land to "Shaddai":

וַתֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶן
אַל־תִּקְרֶאנָה לִי נָעֳמִי קְרֶאןָ לִי מָרָא כִּי־הֵמַר שַׁדַּי לִי מְאֹד׃
אֲנִי מְלֵאָה הָלַכְתִּי וְרֵיקָם הֱשִׁיבַנִי יְהוָה לָמָּה תִקְרֶאנָה לִי נָעֳמִי וַיהוָה עָנָה בִי וְשַׁדַּי הֵרַע לִי׃

"Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" (Ruth 1:20–21, ESV).

Ironically, as noted by LaCocque, "Shaddai" is the one who gives and restores offspring, and to this point in Naomi's life he had not been faithful to his name. Moreover, Lee notes this widow's cry for redress, while observing that the rest of the narrative will be occupied with its steady resolution.[23] This is in keeping with Hubbard's observation that "the apparent harm turned out to be the beginning of a larger, greater blessing."[24]

However, although some literary readings applaud the actions of Naomi and use them as the foundation for a contemporary feminist ethic, Charles Baylis provides a needed corrective when he reads the narrative of Ruth under the assumption that references to the patriarchal narratives assume the original literary audi-

---

[20] Harold Fisch, "Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History," *VT* 32 (1982) 425–37; Eugene H. Merrill, "The Book of Ruth: Narration and Shared Themes," *BibSac* 142 (1985) 130–41; Ellen Van Wolde, "Texts in Dialogue with Texts: Intertextuality in the Ruth and Tamar Narratives," *BibInt* 5 (1997) 1–28; L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization" 659–74.

[21] Talia Sutskover, "The Themes of Land and Fertility in the Book of Ruth," *JSOT* 34 (2010) 283–94.

[22] Adele Berlin argues that the genealogy is part of the unified structure of Ruth, and that it functions as a coda in order to end the story. (Berlin, *Poetics* 110; similarly A. Boyd Luter and Richard O. Rigsby, "An Adjusted Symmetrical Structuring of Ruth," *JETS* 39 [1996] 15–28, esp. 24–26; Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth* [OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997] 7–8; K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges and Ruth* [NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002] 397–99).

[23] André LaCocque, *Ruth* (trans. K. C. Hanson; Continental; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 57; Eunny P. Lee, "Ruth," in *Women's Bible Commentary* (3d ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012) 142–49, esp. 145.

[24] Hubbard, *Ruth* 127.

ence possessed knowledge of the Mosaic commands.[25] He concludes that the actions of Naomi's family are not prescriptive, but rather dramatic irony in the light of what a member of the covenant community should have done. For example, whereas in the Law famine was intended to lead to repentance, it instead led Elimelech to go elsewhere seeking food.[26] Not only did Elimelech leave Bethlehem, but he took his family to Moab, where Israel earlier committed idolatry on the plains of Moab (Numbers 25). Moreover, Elimelech's sons married Moabite women, whose children could not enter the sanctuary up to the tenth generation. This attempt to fulfill natural needs through natural means contrasts with Ruth, who operated by a second level of values found in the Mosaic covenant when she emulated the Lord's mercy by committing herself to care for a poor widow in a foreign land without any hope of personal benefit. Baylis's reading notes the same foibles within Elimelech's family and their closest redeemer as within the patriarchs. Yet in spite of their shortcomings "Shaddai" protects and cares for them, and he fulfills the original promises to Abraham.

In keeping with the use of significant names and the construction of meaning in oral cultures, the emergence of "Shaddai" in 1:20–21 situated within this plot structure is significant on at least three counts. First, irony comes into play since the name "Shaddai" (שדי) sounds like the word for "destruction" (שדד). Given a close reading of the text, Naomi seems to assume that it was indeed God's hand against her in the death of her husband and two sons while in Moab. This literary connection resonates with the word play between "Shaddai" and "destruction," which appears in the prophets. Moreover, this understanding assumes a connection between Baylis's reading of this narrative in the light of Torah and an understanding of these calamitous events as God's judgment for failure to keep the covenant.

Second, this use of Shaddai within Ruth fits the overall plot structure of the patriarchal narratives in which "El Shaddai" was called upon to provide children, insure the inheritance of the land, and see the elect line through hardship. In this case, Naomi has no foreseeable hope of children, perpetuating the line, or of raising up children to inherit the land. As in the mention of El Shaddai within the patriarchal narratives, a consideration of the character and past acts of Shaddai at this early point in the narrative of Ruth points toward the resolution of the story in the same manner that "El Shaddai" guarded and blessed the patriarchal line. On these grounds, invoking the name "Shaddai" foreshadows the general resolution of the

---

[25] Charles P. Baylis, "Naomi in the Book of Ruth in Light of the Mosaic Covenant," *BibSac* 161 (2004) 413–31; cf. the deconstructing reading of LaCocque, *Ruth* xviii. LaCocque fails to recognize how the Law is an expression of God's character (Exod 34:6–7). Therefore, the Law is not a rigid fetter. Rather, its ethical instruction is a means of expressing God's attributes in day-to-day human relations. The present author would date the primary composition of the Pentateuch to Moses, with minor additions in the days of Joshua prior to the crossing of the Jordan, and then the incorporation of several scribal phrases during the monarchic period. This dating scheme suggests that both the written Pentateuch and its oral recitation would have been common stock in the cultic centers of Israel during the period of the Conquest and Judges.

[26] However, famine also took Joseph's family to Egypt, and this providential situation was intended to safeguard the elect line and eventually lead to the gift of the land.

plot in a manner similar to the patriarchal narratives: God will somehow grant children in order to fulfill the patriarchal promises.

Third, "El Shaddai" is invoked within the patriarchal narratives in order to make a great nation. However, the promise to Abraham of kings in his lineage (Genesis 17) has not yet been fulfilled:

> I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God. (Gen 17:6–8, ESV)

Therefore, this emergence of "Shaddai" at the outset of Ruth suggests that this story is more than a quaint story about a foreigner who was faithful in a backwater time of Israel's history. In fact, this suspicion is satisfied with the descent from Obed to Jesse, and thence to David (Ruth 4:17), as well as with the inclusion of the genealogy of David in 4:18–22. With this genealogy, the well-known patriarchal lineage from Abraham to Judah is connected to the line of descent from Perez to David. Above all, this genealogy fulfills the original promise of a royal lineage from Abraham. As noted by Hubbard, "the same divine guidance which led Israel's famous ancestors has brought David on the scene."[27]

Fourth, it is significant that the promise of children and a king to Abraham is fulfilled through Ruth, a Moabite who turned to the people of Israel and their God. The mention of "Shaddai" in 1:20–21, thus, links the patriarchal promises and God's steadfast love to the nations. Therefore, Ruth also hints at the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to Abram that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen 12:3) As noted by Nielsen in regard to God electing a Moabite woman, it is a feature of both the patriarchal narratives and Ruth that they point forward to new events.[28] Thus, the inclusion of Ruth in the Davidic lineage is not about the breaking down of racial barriers during the period of Ezra-Nehemiah. Rather, the purview of God's plan of salvation extends beyond the elect line of Israel as a foretaste of what will someday come to the nations through the Davidic line as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Therefore, these observations suggest that within the Scripture of Israel a narrative structure is associated with the name "Shaddai" (שדי). The association of this narrative complex, structure, or set of expectations is in keeping with the construction of meaning and the use of significant names in telling stories within oral cultures. Foremost, the invocation of this name within a narrative setting suggests that God will provide children for and protect the elect line. In particular, the inclusion

---

[27] Hubbard, *Ruth* 41.
[28] Nielsen, *Ruth* 7–8.

of David's genealogy in Ruth 4:17–22 indicates that the provision of children fulfills the promise in Gen 17:6 to raise kings from Abraham. Foremost, the recognition of God's guiding hand throughout this narrative indicates the significance of Ruth's faithfulness in history to a degree that discussions limited to the human plane fail to grasp. Moreover, this analysis of the text of Ruth indicates that literary and feminist readings solely concerned with the relationship between characters on the human plane present infelicitous readings of the overall discourse structure, literary setting, and the traditional socio-religious setting of the book.

In terms of its significance for the present day, the book of Ruth is a realistic portrayal of the godly life. Though we may know God's ethical demands, we fail to realize their full import in order to apply them. Nevertheless, "Shaddai" cares for the elect in order to fulfill the divine promises. Moreover, the mention of divine names within Ruth in the absence of terror-inducing theophanies reflects the common experience of God's quietly guiding hand and often silent intervention in the day-to-day life of faith. Both Ruth and Boaz provide models of steadfast love central to the covenant, and as noted by Hubbard, "every prayer in the book is answered during the course of the plot (1:8–9; 2:12, 19–20; 3:10; 4:11–12, 14)."[29] Thus, contra current trends in literary and feminist readings of Ruth, the use of "Shaddai" within its literary matrix points toward the prominence of the Lord in his providential care for Israel and the church. Indeed, ideological readings that marginalize God and his providence fail to do justice to the book's overall discourse structure and semantic frame.

---

[29] Hubbard, *Ruth* 70.