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DOUBLE *HESED* OF GOD IN NAOMI'S LIFE (RUTH 1:19-22)

Panthakan Phanon

INTRODUCTION

As human beings who believe in God, sometimes we do not really understand why God allows bad things to happen in our lives. It may cause us to have a negative emotion or feeling towards Him. What should we do? Should we pretend to praise Him and say that He is good? As I read the book of Ruth, the life of Naomi caught my attention about how Naomi could blame God and God still blessed her. She was real in this story as a human being, which made me desire to understand this passage.

In this paper, I will focus on Ruth 1:19-22, which is about Naomi returning to the house of the Lord. I will find out whether Naomi really did blame God. Did she really mean that God did evil to her? Another question that arose was what was the intention of the narrator when he emphasized the beginning of barley harvest? My guiding principle in interpreting the passage will focus on the historical events that relate to the period of the Judges and its social background. This will help us to have a wider picture of the situation in the book of Ruth. In addition, I will consider word study, as well as textual criticism and some grammatical issues that relate to these passages. Through this paper, I will present the double *hesed*¹ of God through Naomi's life from which

¹The word *hesed* (חֶסֶד) in this paper has a common meaning that means goodness or kindness. See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: Coded with Strong's Concordance Numbers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 338. My definition of double *hesed* means goodness or kindness that is given to someone in such a way that is beyond the culture and expectation or hope of the person who is waiting for it. The example is that a poor man might ask us for food in order for him to survive but we give him a drink or even a job. Through this paper, we will be able to see the goodness and kindness of God

we can see God in a different picture that may not be seen from other books in the Old Testament.

Many people have a picture of God in the Old Testament as God who holds the Law rather than a God of grace. However, through Naomi's story we will see grace upon her life. I believe that through this paper, we will have a deeper understanding of Naomi's story and her speech, which will lead us to see that God's *hesed* is beyond the Law. Through this paper, we will love God more than before.

LITERARY BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT

In this section, I will provide the background of the book of Ruth, including the different views about authorship, date, theme and purpose. This will help us to understand the deeper view of this book. I will explain briefly why I am not considering the issue of the canonicity of this book.

This book is one of the five Festal Scrolls (*Megilloth*), which are grouped together in order to be read at the five major festivals of the Jewish liturgical year. Sakenfeld points out that the five Festal Scrolls, which include Ruth, may have functioned as a sub-collection in the early period, which developed to be a part of the custom in the later period.² In addition, the genealogy at the end of the book is good strong evidence that may have caused this book to be placed in the canon.³ That is why there is no reason for any new argument about the issue of Ruth being in the canon.

The main issue is not about whether the book of Ruth should belong to the canon or not, but rather the issue of the position of the book of Ruth, whether it should belong to the writings (*Kethubim*) or the prophets (*Nebi'im*). According to Bush, the scholars who hold the position of the book of Ruth belonging in the section of the writings (*Kethubim*) often indicate that the book of Ruth must date to the post-

that was shown to Naomi in such a way that she does not expect and hope for it.

² Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, eds. James Luther Mays and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1999), 8.

³ J. Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1980), 396.

exilic era.⁴ The main arguments of the issues of date and authorship are still ambiguous amongst scholars.

The argument between the postexilic and pre-exilic dating goes on and on, which falls into the ideas of language, style, environment, theology and legal usage.⁵ Even though I cannot give any absolute answer, in order to set the direction of this paper, which highlights the idea of kindness through the feast of Pentecost, I prefer the pre-exilic date.

The Holistic Genre, Purpose and Theme

According to Block, the genre of this book is complex, falling into three types that are a tale, novella and short story. These different genres cause the book to have more than one theme.⁶ Nielsen points out the structure of Ruth, stating that the bottom line of this story is all about David. He mentions that throughout the book of Ruth, we can see a constant movement between Bethlehem and other places: Bethlehem – Moab – Bethlehem -- the field – Bethlehem - the threshing floor Bethlehem – the town gate – Bethlehem. All of this links to David because his town was Bethlehem.⁷

Hubbard also points out a similar picture that its purpose is “to win popular acceptance of David’s rule by appeal to the continuity of Yahweh’s guidance in the lives of Israel’s ancestors and David.”⁸ In addition, Hubbard says that it lets the alien presence under David’s rule know that they are welcome.

However, Bush holds a different position. He believes that Ruth’s genre is a short story, in which the narrator wants to present the major characters of his story as models for his reader to emulate.⁹ Bush

⁴ Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 9 eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word Publishers, 1996.), 7.

⁵ Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 29.

⁶ Daniel I. Block, *Ruth*, The New American Commentary, vol. 6 ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville, TN: Brodman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 603-604.

⁷ Nielsen, 2.

⁸ Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, The International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 42.

⁹ Bush, 42 and 46.

believes that *hesed* is the theme of this book because it is of the utmost significance as presented through the characters of Ruth, Boaz, Naomi and Yahweh.¹⁰

Interestingly, Hubbard also claims that the genre of this book is most likely a short story because one of the features of a short story is to instruct.¹¹ This brings support for the pre-exilic date because it shows why Ruth should be read in the feast of Pentecost, as this story is a way of teaching the Law from Deu. 16 that they should love their neighbors. The character of *hesed* through the lives of Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi, or even Yahweh, was the way that the narrator used to teach the people. After the time of Judges, Israel became a leading nation and governed many countries that used to be their enemies. What would happen if the Jews at the time of David were full of hatred for their neighbors? The Law would not be fulfilled. That is why I quite agree with Hubbard that Ruth has a political purpose.

Theology in Ruth

According to my research from many scholars, I believe that double *hesed* of God is the main theme of this book. First, the name of God appears in the form of the covenant name for Israel's God, "Yahweh" (1:8,21; 2:20). The name *El Shaddai*, which holds the picture of the Creator who rules and supervises the moral order, punishing evil and rewarding good, is also mentioned. All the positive attributes of God are presented in the word *hesed*, which is presented through Boaz's words and life as well. It is important to note that the word *hesed* cannot be explained in one English word because it includes all the aspects of the positive attributes of God.

Even though the narrator may not directly present God's involvement in Ruth's story, the narrator presents "the hidden hand of God" throughout the story.¹² Hubbard also points out a similar picture, but one thing that is different is that God's *hesed* in this story presents His cosmic role as rewarder.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid, 52.

¹¹ Ibid., 47.

¹² Block, 605-608.

¹³ Hubbard, 69.

LaCocque gives a deeper view that the theological core of this book is “*God is greater than his Law*”, which derives from the theme of *hesed* in the story. Even though God prohibits Israel from participating with foreigners, we can see through the stories of Judah and Ruth that God works beyond His rule. Boaz also acted beyond the law of gleaning. It appears that Ruth also presents a double extraordinary measure of *hesed* because she followed the commandment of the Law in order to redeem the name of the death, which she actually did not need to do.¹⁴ Bush makes the same point that the theme of *hesed* in this story presents the picture of a “going beyond the call of duty.”¹⁵

However, we need to be careful when we say that this book presents only God’s *hesed*. Even though we really do not see the other pictures of God clearly in this book, we need to remember that the events in this story happened in the time of the Judges. In the book of Judges, we can see God’s anger (Judg. 2:11-15) and jealousy (Judg. 2:2). We need to be aware of the other pictures of God in the time of the Judges because they help us to understand the speech of Naomi who lived in the time of the Judges.

The background from the time of the Judges helps us to have a better understanding of the worldview of the people and the picture of God in the book of Ruth. By considering that background, we will be able to understand more about the meaning of the speeches and words of Naomi along with the other actors in the story who relate to our passage.

SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF RUTH’S STORY

In order to understand the story of Ruth, especially the speech of Naomi in chapter 1:19-21, we need to understand and know about life, the social situation and religion during the time of the Judges. These elements are essential to the plot of Ruth. The narrator has set the direction of this story in verse 1, which says “In the days when the judges ruled (Rut 1:1 RSV).” This indicates that the author of Ruth was familiar with this time.¹⁶

¹⁴ Andre LaCocque, *Ruth*, trans. K.C. Hanson, A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 29-30.

¹⁵ Bush, 53.

¹⁶ Block, 596.

By understanding the background of the Judges, we will be able to gain some insight into the intention of the narrator who wants to communicate through the character and the speech of Naomi to the audience. This is because “the plot serves to organize events in such a way as to arouse the reader’s interest and emotional involvement, while at the same time imbuing the events with meaning.”¹⁷ Also, as I mentioned above, this book functions as an instruction that serves to teach the people. It indicates that the time of the Judges must be very important for this story, so understanding that time will help us to understand our passage in a deeper way.

Life in the Book of Judges

The book of Judges presents many perspectives on human nature, but one important view that we can see is sin. We can see the idea of sin, not only in Israel or in the nations who lived around them, but also in the lives of the people in the time of the Judges. The Bible says, “Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD ...” (Judg 2:11). They did evil things because “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (21:25). It cannot mean anything other than that the time of the Judges was the time when the people of God did evil.

The word evil (עָוֹן) appears only one time throughout the speech of Naomi, who says, “The Almighty did evil to me” (Rut 1:21, my translation). This is the core of the main plot of this story that is called “problem-based plot.”¹⁸ However, the word evil (רָעָה) that appears in the book of Judges was used to refer to humans, not to God, “And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (Judg 10:6 RSV). This can be considered irony if we contrast Naomi’s speech who lived in the time of Judges with the theme of *hesed* of Yahweh in the book of Judges (10:13-16).

¹⁷Shimon, Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*. Journal for Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, vol. 70 eds. David J A Clines and Philip R Davies (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 93.

¹⁸ Bush explains, “In such narratives, a problem or conflict of some kind gives rise to a series of actions and interactions that move toward a resolution, often including a heightening of tension or suspense that reaches a climax at or just before the resolution.” See Bush, 37. By the way, Bush points out this idea of plot from Beekman, Callow, and Kopesec, and agrees with them. See more details in Beekman, J. Callow, and M. Kopesec, *The Semantic Structure of Written Communication* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1991), 4.

Society in the Book of Judges

In terms of social view, Sakenfeld explains that the book of Judges presents the pictures of warfare, violence, and repeated instances of Israel's disobedience, but in Ruth, we can see a peaceful village, orderly public process, and a faithful foreigner.¹⁹ This is because the book of Judges presents the theme that obedience to God brings prosperity but disobedience will bring oppression that comes as God's judgment.²⁰ This is a very important view to help us understand the passage that the narrator relates to the picture of the beginning of barley harvest (Rut. 1:22).

It was hard to plant food or feed the animals during the time of war, which we can see through the book of Judges, especially in Jdg. 6:1-5 when their enemies came, destroyed, and took their food. Jdg. 6:4 says, "Then they would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep nor ox nor donkey" (NKJ). The picture of the beginning of barley harvest indicates to us that it must be a time when one of the Judges ruled for quite a long time because the land was at rest and Israel could plant and wait for the produce of the plants. This is an example of irony because Naomi represents the opposite life, who went out full even though there was a famine, but she came back empty in the time that God has blessed His people. I will talk about this issue later on in this paper.

In addition, Moab was the enemy of Israel in the time of the Judges (Ex. Jdg. 3:12, 15 and 11:17). This is important background information to know when dealing with Ruth 1:22, as the narrator mentions Ruth the Moabitess who came from the land of Moab. What is the thing that the narrator wants to say in this sense? I will deal with this in the next section.

Religion in the Book of Judges

In the book of Judges, Israel followed other gods of the people who lived around them. We need to know that the Moabites had their own gods, such as Chemosh who was a god of warfare and the one who

¹⁹ Sakenfeld, 8.

²⁰ Charles R. Wilson, *The Book of Judges*, Wesleyan Bible Commentary, vol. 1 ed. Charles W. Carter (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 65.

provided for all aspects of daily life. However, they also believed in the gods of the Canaanite, such as Baal.²¹ Field claims that Israel worshiped Baal because they were confused about the name of Yahweh and Baal; both names have a similar meaning.²² In addition, in terms of life, Baal is a god who “has power over rain, wind, clouds.”²³ This shows that Israel lacked faith in God because they added more “insurance”²⁴ by worshipping other gods.

This view helps us to see the significance of the decision of Naomi's family to leave the Promised Land in order to look for help in Moab, the land of evil in the eyes of Yahweh (Num. 25). Fewell and Gunn claim that Naomi knew that Yahweh would be angry, especially when her sons married Moabite wives.²⁵

EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF RUTH 1:19-22

After Naomi, her husband and their two sons left their home in Bethlehem because of the famine, they decided to move to the land of Moab. However, her husband and her two sons died, leaving her sons' wives, who were Moabite women, with her. Naomi then heard that God had visited His people by giving food, which made her decide to return to her hometown, Bethlehem. Naomi did not go back alone; she went with her daughter-in-law Ruth, the Moabitess who did not want to

²¹ R. K. Harrison, “Moab, Moabites,” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 4 ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 265-266.

²² D. F. Field, “Baal,” in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1. ed. Douglas, J. D. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publisher, 1980), 153.

²³ K. G. Jung, “Baal,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 378.

²⁴ Ralph F. Wilson, “Canaanite Religions and Baal Worship” n.p. [accessed 16 November 2010]. Online: <http://www.jesuswalk.com/joshua/canaanite-religion.htm>.

²⁵ Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 26-27.

depart from her, unlike Orpah, her other daughter-in-law. This is the beginning of the double *hesed*'s story.

Translation

v. 19. And two of them walked until they came to Bethlehem. As they came in Bethlehem, the entire city was excited about them. And they said, "Is this Naomi?"

v. 20. And she said to them, "You do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara because the Almighty made me very bitter."

v. 21. Surely, I went out full but the Lord brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi? Because the Lord testified against me and the Almighty did evil to me.

v. 22. And Naomi returned back with Ruth the Moabitess her daughter, the one who was returning from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Welcome Back to the House of God (v. 19a)

The narrator tells us that Naomi and Ruth went to Bethlehem and it is repeated again in the following sentence that "As they came in Bethlehem" (וַיָּבֹאוּ בֵּית לְחֶם), although this phrase does not appear in the Septuagint. Even though the Septuagint gives us a shorter reading, we need to be reminded that it is a translated version of the scripture and it does not have the support of any other older manuscripts. In addition, the form that appears in *BHS* is more difficult to read, which is most likely because *BHS* is the original one.

This is important to note why the narrator repeats that they went or came into the city. Brotzman points out that the form of the Masoretic Text (*BHS*) may express some kind of importance by repeating the words for emphasis.²⁶

Why is the word Bethlehem important? In the structure of chapter one, we can see that the narrator intended to present a picture of irony. The word Bethlehem means, "house, granary of bread", but when the

²⁶ Eillis R. Brotzman, *Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction*, with a foreword by Bruce K. Waltke (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994), 139.

story starts, the city of Bethlehem does not have food.²⁷ According to Hubbard, all of the names in chapter one have meaning, such as the name Elimelek, which can mean, “my God is king.”²⁸ Interestingly, the word Moab (מואב) does not only mean “progeny of a father” or “seed” but also can refer to “water.”²⁹

The point is that the narrator may want to present an irony that God is no longer Elimelek's king, as his name declared, because he went to live his life under other gods who are Baal and Chemosh, the gods who people claimed could help his life and family from the famine.³⁰ In addition, we need to be reminded that these gods were believed to have a role of providing food, as I mentioned above. The name of Moab, which may refer to the picture of water, also gives us the picture of food as well.

This is an important picture that we need to understand because it will give us a clear picture of why the author repeated the word Bethlehem twice in such a short verse (19) in order to emphasize the returning of Naomi. She returned to God, to live her life dependent on Him. As Fewell and Gunn reflect from Naomi's thoughts, “Now what? Probably had better not stay here, she [Naomi] thought. These people weren't going to take care of a foreigner and, without her sons, she had no means of support.”³¹ Gottwald points out the similar picture that a single or widowed woman had no social or economic security at that time because a woman's life depended on a man or husband.³²

²⁷ Hubbard, 85.

²⁸ Ibid., 88. Campbell gives the meaning of the word Elimelek as “The King (Yahweh) is my god.” See Edward E. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth*, The Anchor Bible: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1975), 52.

²⁹ Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, trs. “מואב,” in *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 454. It needs to be noted that I could not find this meaning from other Lexicons.

³⁰ Hubbard has a similar view that “Certainly, given the man's situation, one cannot overlook the irony of this name [Elimelek]: that one whose “god is king” must flee that king's territory because of famine.” See Hubbard, 88.

³¹ Fewell and Gunn, 27.

³² Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Social Literary Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1987), 557.

It is more interesting when the narrator uses the word הִתְהַוּ to express the situation of the women³³ in the city when they saw Naomi and Ruth. The word הִתְהַוּ which in Qal stem means murmur, roar, discomfit has many meanings. The Niph stem that appears in the sentence of Ruth 4:19 should be translated as “*be in a stir.*” However, in 1 Sam 4:5, it is translated as “of ground *re-echoing* shout.”³⁴ The problem that we have here is that הִתְהַוּ has both negative and positive meanings. However, this word that appears in Ruth 1:19 also appears in 1 Sam 4:5 and 1 K. 1:45 in the same stem as in Ruth, both of which give the positive sense.³⁵ This indicates that the women were excited when they saw Naomi and Ruth. Campbell points out from Syriac that it was translated as “rejoice”, which points to the emotion of the women feeling delighted rather than pity. Especially, when it follows the question, “Is it Naomi?” (הֲזֵאת נְעֻמָּה), which gives the positive sense.³⁶ However, Muraoka claims that הֲזֵאת נְעֻמָּה can be translated as “this is indeed Naomi!” because the particle הֲ which is common for questions, sometimes has an exclamatory nuance.³⁷

It is not easy to make any conclusion for the word הִתְהַוּ until we can explain the issue of the pronominal suffix of עַל־הֶן . The pronominal suffix that appears in *BHS* does not agree with the Septuagint, which in

³³ The suffix pronoun of הִתְהַוּנָּה which is 3 f pl dictates the picture of women. Campbell explains that “The women. It is only the feminine plural verb form which shows that it is the townswomen who surround the returning pair; at 4: 14, when this “chorus” returns, they are specifically identified as “the women.” See Campbell, 75.

³⁴ Brown, 223. Tregelles explains that it also can mean “to be disturbed or to be commotion” in Niph stem which gives a more negative sense. See in Tregelles, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldean Lexicon to the Old Testament Scripture*, 220.

³⁵ According to Hubbard, 1 K. 1:45 is translated as “resounded with joyous excitement” and the earth “echoed” with Israel’s joyful shouts at the arrival of ark of the covenant in its camp. See in Hubbard , 123.

³⁶ Campbell, *Ruth*, The Anchor Bible, 75. Hubbard also agrees with this idea that it should express an exclamation of joyous surprise. See Hubbard, 123. Bush also points out the same idea that the word הִתְהַוּ is creating the excited commotion expressed. “It is not a real question, expecting a “yes/no” answer, but a rhetorical question having the force of an exclamation.” See Bush, 91. Probably Muraoka is right that this word should be translated as “this is indeed Naomi!” See in T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome, Italia: E.P.I.B, 2006), 574.

³⁷ Muraoka , 574.

the Septuagint, appears in a form of a singular (3 f sg) not plural form as *BHS* (3f pl). It seems likely that the Septuagint adapted the pronoun from verse 20, which only refers to Naomi.³⁸ In addition, there are not any older Hebrew manuscripts to support the Septuagint and *BHS* is more difficult to read. For that reason, I will agree with *BHS* that עָלֵינוּ is most likely an original word. This means that the women in the city were not excited only when they saw Naomi, but also when they saw Ruth. Why were they excited when they saw Ruth, who did not have any relationship with them like Naomi?

For the reason from above, it is most likely to me that עָלֵינוּ carries a positive sense. It is shown through Naomi's speech that she rejected the moment of rejoicing. She did not want the women to call her Naomi, meaning "the pleasant one," rather, she wanted the women to call her *mārar*, which means, "to be bitter."³⁹

For Ruth, we need to look at the historical view that the Moabitess is a descendant of Lot, who was a *relative* (emphasis mine) of Abraham. This indicates that Moab is not truly Israel's enemy because God told Israel to avoid fighting with Moab when Israel came to the Promised Land (Deu 2:9). Also, in the time of Judges, Israel seemed to live peacefully with Moab for three hundred years (Judg 11:25-26). This is reflected throughout the book of Ruth as well, because Ruth the Moabitess has a good relationship with the people of Israel.

This will be my argument that the women did not see Ruth as their enemy who would come and live under the blessing of God. Ruth is their relative who left her gods, land, and family by following Naomi who will live her life dependent on God. I believe that *the narrator wants to create an exciting theme of what will happen with this Moabitess woman in the land of God*. God says in Deut 23:3 that, "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his *descendants* shall enter the assembly of the LORD forever." The idea of the tenth generation is very important in terms of number. The number ten refers to the idea of completeness, completed course of time,⁴⁰ which can indicate that

³⁸ Brotzman, 140.

³⁹ Block, 645.

⁴⁰ John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology: A Basic Study of The Use of Numbers in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1968), 122-23.

Moabites would never live in the assembly of Israel;⁴¹ not just to the tenth generation. We can see strong support for the idea of using the number in verse 4:15 that says, "...your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him."

The picture of double *hesed* of God has begun here, showing that the love of God is greater than the Law. The exciting moment presents the scene of welcoming of God's people who left Him but now have returned. More than that, it is a welcoming of non-chosen people that God had cut off from Israel, but now the gate of God's house is opened for them to join in His blessing for His people.

Return with Bitterness (vs. 20-21)

These two verses are the main plot of this book, which is a "problem-based plot."⁴² However, not all scholars agree that these passages are about Naomi blaming God. Atkison claims that these verses are about trust in God because blessing is a characteristic of God Almighty (*Shaddai*). We can see more details of his idea from the following quote.

And it is by referring to that aspect of Yahweh's character which is described by 'Shaddai' ('the God who is at his best when man is at his worst', as J. A. Motyer once put it), that Naomi shows the framework to her faith in which she places her pain. It is as though she is saying: You can see the bitterness I have experienced: famine, the bereavements, the questionings, the partings, the apparent hopelessness; but I know God as Shaddai, and I can leave the explanation, and even the responsibility, for this bitterness with him.⁴³

However, I would like to argue that these passages are most likely holding a negative tone that Naomi presented as a fully human being who expressed her emotions and feelings to her God. My focus will be on the idea of the words *Shaddai* (the Almighty) and Yahweh (the Lord) because Naomi referred her problem to both names. It is an A B

⁴¹ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, The New American Commentary, vol. 4 ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994), 122-123.

⁴² Bush, 4.

⁴³ David Atkison, *The Message of Ruth, The Bible Speaks Today*, eds. J. A. Motyer and John R. Stott (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 52.

B A pattern, which can be seen as Shaddai, Yahweh, Yahweh, Shaddai.⁴⁴

There are many different interpretations in these two verses, especially the word הָרַע and the phrase עָנָה לְ. However, the plot tells us that Naomi claims that God was the one who stood behind all of the things that happened in her life. That is because Naomi used the word שָׁדַי (*Shaddai*, the Almighty), which refers to the God who has cosmic power to rule and control everything.⁴⁵ This indicates God as a person who caused everything to happen in her life.

Jukes points out the other side of שָׁדַי (*Shaddai*) that primarily means “Breasted,” or the “Pourer-forth” which comes from שָׁד that means “the breast,” or even a “woman’s breast.”⁴⁶ This indicates the picture of God as a Giver who is like a mother that gives her love to her child by feeding her child.⁴⁷ If this idea is in Naomi’s mind, she must see God as a bad mother because the Almighty should have given her milk to comfort her, but she felt the Almighty gave her bitterness instead of milk. The Almighty could have stopped her crying by not allowing her husband and her two sons to die because He who is the Almighty controls everything.

Naomi even spoke that the Almighty did evil to her (V.21). This phrase הָרַע לִי אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי can be translated as “the Almighty has brought calamity upon me” (RSV) or “the Almighty has done evil to me” literally. The root word of הָרַע is רָעַע, which has two different nuances in the meaning “doing an injury, hurt” and “doing evil, wickedly.”⁴⁸ Most scholars have a problem with this phrase that asks how God did evil. We have to remember that this word came from Naomi not God. It expresses her theology about God.

In addition, we can see that Moses and Elijah also said that God did evil to His people (Exod 5:22, Num 11:11 and 1 K 17:20). However, we cannot look at this word in this context by focusing on the meaning alone but we need to understand the worldview of Jewish

⁴⁴ Block, 645.

⁴⁵ Hubbard, 124.

⁴⁶ See more explanation in Andrew Jukes, *The Names of God in the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1972), 66.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁸ Brown, 949.

people about this word. It is because “words do not mean at all! Only people mean, and people do not mean the same thing by all words.”⁴⁹

To understand the speech of Naomi, we have to understand that the idea of the word evil when spoken by Jewish people can refer to an emotive state. It means that the speaker shows something about himself when he calls anything evil, namely that he disapproves of it or does not like it. In addition, it can refer to unhappiness (Gen. 44:34), harm such as famine, diseases, sores, or even hard work. Moreover, the idea of evil can refer to something that departs from a commonly accepted standard.⁵⁰ Wilson points out that it can imply also displeasure, anger, sadness or envy.⁵¹ This helps to interpret and understand the meaning of evil in Naomi’s speech. Naomi did not “hereby ascribe moral evil to God but the disastrous, grievous, misfortune that she experienced.”⁵²

My point is that Naomi truly said that the Almighty did evil to her. However, the idea of evil is all about the death of her family members, which caused sadness that is present through her speech, “the LORD has brought me back empty.” Block mentions that “fullness” gives the idea of family and progeny.⁵³ This is great evidence for us to see the same idea of linking emptiness with the idea of evil. Naomi did not think that God is a bad God, but she expressed her bitterness towards

⁴⁹ Del Tarr, “Preaching the Word in the Power of the Spirit: A Cross-Cultural Analysis” in *Called and Empowered: Global Mission in Pentecostal Perspective*, eds. Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 127.

⁵⁰ A. D. Verhey, “Evil,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 206-207.

⁵¹ William Wilson, *Old Testament Word Studies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1978), 150.

⁵² Block, 646. In addition, the word evil in *hiphil* stem can be translated “to cause evil upon me” (my own translation). Naomi did not say that God is evil. Also, in verse 20, according to Block, Naomi expressed that God has made her life very bitter and the word appears in the form of *hiphil* (הִפְיִיל). This word should be translated as “to cause bitterness.” See Block, 645. These two words help us to see that Naomi saw God as a person who caused bad things to happen in her life.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 647. Hubbard also makes the same point. See Hubbard, 129.

her God about the things that He had done in her life. The translation that I prefer is probably, “the Almighty has brought calamity upon me.” However, I do not think “the Almighty did evil to me” is a wrong translation. It is correct because the people *at that time* understood the meaning of the word evil from Naomi's context.

Through grammar and word study, we can see that Naomi truly has a negative expression toward God. According to Brotzman, the word הִכְנִי appears in the Syriac, Vulgate and the Septuagint as a piel stem in a perfect form, which can be translated as “He humbled me.” However, in *BHS*, it appears in qal stem in a perfect form, which can be translated as “He testified against me,” or “He judged me.” Brotzman gives three reasons why *BHS* is most likely the original one. One of his reasons is that there is a strong possibility that a rare use of a word could have more easily been changed into a normal use because it seems to fit in the context.⁵⁴ I agree with Brotzman because the Syriac, Vulgate and the Septuagint are translations of the Hebrew text, and they lack support from any Hebrew manuscripts. Even though we have a textual problem with הִכְנִי the main idea is still the same, that God is the one who caused everything that happened in Naomi's life.⁵⁵

We can see the interchange of names between the Almighty with the covenant name for Israel's God, Yahweh, in verses 20-21. This indicates to us that Naomi still recognized her God by declaring His name. However, her attitude and her mind toward God were negative. In Naomi's eyes, Yahweh, who had promised to His people that they will receive good life and good future⁵⁶, gave her nothing. She presented the picture of God in a negative view. Block believes that Naomi may come back with faith, but her faith was flawed.⁵⁷

It seems that Naomi did not have a good knowledge about God, which is most likely true. Because she lived during the time of the Judges, which had many wars, the belief of God mixed with pagan teaching and everybody acted according to his or her own desires

⁵⁴ Brotzman , 141.

⁵⁵ According to Hebrew grammar, *Hiphil* stem can express the idea of the causative action that something or someone will cause something to happen. See Muraoka, 144-145.

⁵⁶ See more details in John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 369-370.

⁵⁷ Block, 647.

because they had no king.⁵⁸ The strong evidence of religious weakness comes from the story of a young Levite who was supposed to serve God, but he lived with Micah who paid him to be a priest at Micah's house (Jud. 17). Block points out that, "The religious establishment in Israel has been thoroughly infected with the Canaanite disease."⁵⁹ This indicates to me that Naomi probably did not fully know what was wrong in her life that caused Yahweh to testify against her. She was probably an innocent sufferer who returned to God with many questions in her mind.

The Coming of Good Things (v. 21)

This last verse functions as an opening section for the second chapter because it focuses on Ruth, who will be the main actor for the rest of the story. We can see that the narrator reintroduces the identity of Ruth by doubling her identity as Moabite and daughter-in-law.⁶⁰ We can see that the narrator used the definite article הַ to emphasize Ruth the Moabite (הַשֵּׁבִיבָה מִשֵּׁבִיבָה "The one who returned from the land of Moab"). This indicates that the narrator wanted to inform the readers that Ruth was with Naomi, which will connect to the next section. LaCocque claims that the ending that mentions "the beginning of barley harvest" is intended by the narrator to explain why Naomi had to sell the field (4:3), because she came back too late for sowing Elimelek's field.⁶¹ However, the picture of the beginning of barley harvest also gives the theme of joy and happiness, which may indicate that something good is going to happen.⁶²

⁵⁸ Ibid., 37-44.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 490. However, I have a question about the women's situation in the time of the Judges. Did they study or learn something about God? We will have a more concrete picture about Naomi's knowledge about God if we can find the answer.

⁶⁰ Sakenfeld, 36.

⁶¹ LaCocque, 59.

⁶² Hubbard, 130.

Theological Significance

We can see the double *hesed* of God through the life of Naomi as well, if my claim from above is true. That is because God did not respond to Naomi's words in which she blamed Him. In addition, Naomi's attitude when she decided to return to God most likely holds the picture of bitterness toward God rather than joy. However, God rather showed His *hesed* to Naomi by giving her a grandchild. More than that, He gives her a daughter-in-law who is better for her than having seven sons. The number seven is a symbol of fullness, completion, and perfection.⁶³ This shows us that God has given Naomi more fullness than she can handle. This is the great important thing of God's *hesed* toward Naomi. It is because He can turn the bad thing into blessing for Naomi. Ruth, the Moabite who Naomi considered as one of the causes that brought evil to her life became the great blessing for her. *hesed* overflows in her life. That is why at the end of the story Naomi is speechless. The Almighty is still in control of everything.

She is probably like Job who says, "I know that thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted...Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know... therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:2-6 RSV). However, even though Naomi did not say anything about repentance in the story, it seems to me that she confessed about her misunderstanding of God silently, as shown through her speechlessness.

Moreover, I see the reason that Naomi was alive, unlike her family members, was due to God's *hesed*. Women at that time lived their lives under their husbands' power. They did not have the right to make decisions over their family. Naomi may have moved to Moab not because she wanted to, but because it was the decision of the head of the family, her husband. However, she did not die; rather she was able to make her own decision to return to God.

Lastly, the blessing of God through the picture of the beginning of barley harvest presents the picture of God's *hesed*. We can see that God used His blessing to draw not only His chosen people back to Him, but also unchosen people such as Ruth. This is because, "The *hesed* is one

⁶³ Davis, 122-123.

to whom God has shown *hesed* and who has been drawn into the divine community.”⁶⁴

Application for the Christian life

Sometimes, we are like Naomi who returned to God with the wrong attitude. However, God still loves and cares for us. He does not respond to us according to our own blindness about Him. God’s *hesed* is beyond our own understanding, as He showed to Naomi. However, through this passage, we can see that God’s *hesed* will fall upon those who return to Him. Naomi’s return may not have been full of joy, but at least she returned to God and surrendered her life under His wing. This picture reminds me of the story of the lost son (Luke 15:11). Naomi’s story is like an early version of that story in the picture of women, because we can see the famine as a main reason that caused the son to return to his father as well (Luke 15:14).

This is a double encouragement to all Christians who backslide from God. He is willing to redeem us from our own mistake *if* we choose to return to Him. The picture of God’s *hesed* in Naomi’s story is beyond the Law of the Old Testament but it did not break the Law. Lastly, this story reminds us that to return to God because we want to reactivate God’s blessing is not wrong. Naomi returned to God because she wanted to live in God’s blessing and God did bless her.

CONCLUSION

According to my study of Ruth 1:19-22, we can see that the narrator wanted to present the picture of the double *hesed* of God through the life of Naomi who returned to God with her bitterness. We can see through the language and the speech of Naomi that she blamed God as the person who caused everything bad that happened in her life. However, the story tells us that God did not respond to Naomi according to her attitude toward Him. The narrator presented that the women in the city were excited when they saw Naomi and Ruth. This gives us a positive scene of returning to the house of God. Both Naomi and Ruth were welcomed to the blessing of the Lord at the time when God blessed His promised land. This is such a wonderful picture that

⁶⁴ Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, tran. Alfred Gottschalk, ed. Elias L. Epstein (Cincinnati: KTAV Publishing House, 1975), 18.

the blessing of God was not only for the people who remained in the land, but also for the people who went out and later made a decision to return to Him. More than that, through Ruth's story, we see that the house of God is welcoming to non-Israelites as well.

Naomi is like many Christians in the world today who do not really understand God in a correct way. Some experiences in their lives may cause bitterness or many questions about God. However, Naomi's life has shown to us that God will not turn Himself away from those who come to live their lives under Him. This is grace's story in the Old Testament that we can see in the life of Naomi, who is like the lost son in the New Testament.

Let us who are God's ministers tell the story of Naomi to people who have turned their lives from God to let them know that God is waiting for them. Even though they have a negative attitude toward God, like Naomi, because of some situations in their lives, God still has great plans for them.