Respecting the Ancestors: Reading the Book of Ruth Together with the Fathers and Mothers

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ABSTRACT

Professor Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) has engaged with the biblical book of Ruth to illustrate how a reception by single, African, Christian women could look like. In her reading, she inculcates her own African context masterfully to show the prospects for knowledge, for belief and for life that might come out of such an interpretation of the book Ruth. In my discussion of this aspect of her scholarship, I will first show appreciation for her efforts to read the Bible together with the brothers and the sisters (especially the sisters) of her own context. I will further show how respect for the ancestors should also lead us to read the book with the fathers and mothers who went before us in faith. This aspect will be discussed in critical comparison with an article on Ruth by Gerda de Villiers. Professor Masenya's reading together with the (brothers and) the sisters can be enriched by complementing it with a reading together with the fathers and the mothers, as suggested in the conclusion of the article.

KEYWORDS: Ruth, Ancestors, African feminist interpretation, Historical dimension, Gerda de Villiers

A INTRODUCTION

Our colleague, Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) has been – and still is – a trailblazer in Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament scholarship. Not only has she led the way in the past in developing an authentic African feminist approach to biblical interpretation in the South African context (her *bosadi* approach),[1] but she has already been recognised and awarded many accolades in international

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[1] See, *inter alia,* Madipoane J. Masenya, "Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Perspective" (Ph.D Thesis, University of South Africa, 1996); Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Redefining Ourselves: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach," *OTE* 10/3 (1997): 439–448; Madipoane J. Masenya, "An African Methodology for South African Biblical Sciences: Revisiting the Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach," *OTE* 18/3 (2005): 741–751.

contexts, including in the rest of the African continent.[2] She has played a leading role in the South African Old Testament Society as well as in numerous international fora (including the Society of Biblical Literature). Her role and influence in all these contexts cannot be overstated.

However, the biggest impression that she has made on this author is her critical but honest and fair engagement with the difficult and sensitive topic of who could be considered an African scholar of the Bible.[3] Her openness and amiable demeanour in these engagements made a lasting impression on many South African colleagues in the field of Old Testament studies, and it provided a platform for constructive interchange and debate.[4]

Masenya's oeuvre stretches wide—not only has she developed and implemented her *bosadi*/womanhood hermeneutic in numerous studies, but she has also developed an indigenous hermeneutic in which she reads biblical texts through the lens of African (mainly Northern Sotho) proverbs.[5] Her concentration thus far has been on the biblical books of Proverbs[6] and Ruth[7]

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[2] See, for example, Elivered Nasambu-Mulongo, "Bosadi: Madipoane (Ngwana'Mphahlele) Masenya's Contribution to African Women's Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations* (ed. Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora R. Mbuwayesango; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2024), 43–61.

[3] Madipoane J. Masenya, "Is White South African Old Testament Scholarship African?" *BOTSA* 12 (2002): 3–8.

[4] Louis C. Jonker, "'Contextuality' in (South) African Exegesis: Reflections on the Communality of Our Exegetical Methodologies," *OTE* 18/3 (2005): 637–650.

[5] See, *inter alia,* Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "A Literary Figure or Patriarchal Reality? Reflections on the *'ēšet Hayil* in Light of Depictions of Womanhood from Selected Yorùbá and Sotho Proverbs," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39/1 (2018): 1–7; Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Tamed Identities? Glimpsing Her Identity in Proverbs 10:1–22:16 and Selected African Proverbs," *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 74/1 (2018): n.p. .

[6] See, *inter alia,* Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Reading Proverbs 7 in the Context of Female 'Blessers' and Sugar Mamas in South Africa," *Scriptura* 116 (2017): 120–32; Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Wisdom from African Proverbs Meets Wisdom from the Book of Proverbs," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Wisdom Literature* (ed. Samuel L. Adams and Matthew Goff; London: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 464–478.

[7] See, *inter alia,* Madipoane J. Masenya, "'Ngwetši' (Bride): The Naomi-Ruth Story from an African-South African Woman's Perspective," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14/2 (1998): 81–90; Madipoane J. Masenya, "Struggling with Poverty/Emptiness: Rereading the Naomi-Ruth Story in African-South Africa," *JTSA* 120 (2004): 46–59; Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "'Impoverished on Harvesting Ground!' Ruth 3 and African Women in an HIV-Positive South Africa," in *Another World Is Possible: Spiritualities and Religions of Global Darker Peoples* (ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Marjorie Lewis; London: Routledge, 2009), #7 pages; Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Is Ruth the *'ēšet Hayil* for Real? An

(although there are also other foci in her work).[8] In all her work, there is a contextual sensitivity or, more precisely, a sensitivity for the various (African) contexts of modern-day reception. She is an engaged scholar who does not interpret the Bible simply for academic purposes, but also for the benefit of those living with HIV-AIDS, who are marginalised and who could find their strength in the biblical texts. One could say that she is a prime example of a biblical scholar who wants to read and interpret the Bible together with "the brothers and sisters" (especially "the sisters") of her own context.

In this contribution that I offer to the celebrant as a small token of appreciation for her role in South African biblical scholarship, the focus will be on a study in which she has combined her expertise in the book of Ruth with some empirical work on how lay female readers in her church environment interpret the narrative. This author's own interests in narrative literature as well as empirical research on biblical reception in contemporary contexts determined the choice. This is not the place to give a fully-fledged review of the article; rather, this contribution engages with a selection of significant aspects of her work on Ruth. Masenya's study will then be used as the backdrop against which some reflections on African biblical hermeneutics will be offered, in particular on how various approaches can complement one another. Masenya's study on Ruth will therefore be brought in dialogue with a study on the same book by another South African female scholar, namely Dr. Gerda de Villiers. From this dialogue, certain guidelines for doing Old Testament scholarship in (South) Africa will be discerned.

Exploration of Womanhood from African Proverbs to the Threshing Floor (Ruth 3:1-13)," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 36 (2010): 1–21; Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Engaging with the Book of Ruth as Single, African Christian Women: One African Woman's Reflection," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34/1 (2013): 1–9; Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Who Calls the Shots in Naomi's Life? Reading the Naomi-Ruth Story within the African Religio-Cultural Context," *Acta Theologica* Supp 24 (2016): 84–96; Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "A Woman with Multiple Identities: Reading the Ruth Character in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *OTE* 36/1 (2023): 189–201.

[8] See, *inter alia,* Madipoane J. Masenya, "A Bosadi (Womanhood) Reading of Genesis 16," *OTE* 11/2 (1998): 271–287; Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "South African Female Presidential Leadership and the Inevitability of a Donga as Final Destination? Reading the Deuteronomistic Athaliah the Bosadi Way," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37/2 (2016): 1–8; Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Making Sense of Psalm 127:3-5 in African/ South African Contexts," *OTE* 32/2 (2019): 412–25; Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Reading Hegemonic Masculinities in 2 Samuel 11 in the South African Contexts," *STJ* 5/3 (2019): 399–419. Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Reverend Mother and Tamar (Gn 38) Trapped between 'Artificial' Barrenness and 'Normative' Motherhood: Any Fitting Biblical Hermeneutic?," *HTS Theological Studies* 75/3 (2019): 1–7;

B RUTH, A SINGLE WOMAN IN A MAN'S WORLD

In Masenya's 2013 article, titled "Engaging with the book of Ruth as single, African Christian woman,"[9] she merges various aspects of her scholarship to re-tell the story of Ruth and Naomi. Whereas the basic narrative line of the book of Ruth is followed in the re-telling, the setting of the story is framed differently, from a contemporary traditional African environment. Masenya remembers her childhood visits to her grandmother who lived in a village in Limpopo province, particularly, how her grandmother told the children stories around the fireplace. She takes up the role as storyteller in the article when she presents herself as "Moremadi" (her praise name).

Moremadi's role in the re-telling of the narrative of the book of Ruth is not only to interpret from an African perspective, but also to explain certain aspects to the academic readers of her article. In these explanations (mainly in footnote annotations), she deals with the differences in life world between modern-day interpreters and the life worlds reflected in biblical texts. A good example is her explanation of the Northern Sotho concept *gae* ('home'). Moremadi's narrative starts with the introductory words "Long, long ago, a man called Elimelech decided to leave *gae*, literally, home."[10] She explains the continuity and discontinuity of the biblical life world with African understandings in a footnote:

> Moremadi, though, notices some points of resemblance and dissonance between the cultural contexts which produced biblical texts and the African contexts. During the patriarchal period for example, a place called *gae* would not have been in the vocabulary of the Israelite ancestors as they were wanderers. The situation would have differed with the period of settlement and, in particular, during the monarchic period where there was more stability and the understanding that a long-held dream for a promised land (read *gae* or home) would have been realised. However, the displacement by 'exile' would have removed the significant number of the Israelites from *gae* and their return during the Persian period would have reconnected them with home (*gae*). The observation that the psalmist (cf. Ps 137:4) could be captured as wondering how they could chant a song to the Lord in a foreign land (a land that is not *gae*, in which they were not legitimate 'children of the soil'), in the view of Moremadi, reveals something of a point of resemblance between the two contexts in terms of a place called *gae* (home).[11]

A further example is the annotation that explains why it is strange for an African mindset that Ruth left her own family in Moab to journey together with

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9 Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Engaging with the Book of Ruth."
10 Ibid., 1.
11 Ibid., 1.

Naomi to Judah. This is done with reference to the Northern Sotho proverb, "*lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*, a married woman's grave is (located at) her husband's village":

> The proverb reveals that once a woman is married, she has to make sure that she stays with her in-laws until death; hence, her grave of necessity should be located at bogadi, that is, her husband's place. Although there is a vast gap between the African context in which Moremadi resides and the world of the production of the story of Ruth, Moremadi notices that the graves of the matriarchs (cf. Sarah and Rachel, Gn 23:1–16; 35:16–21) were not in their places of origin, that is their fathers' households, but at the places selected by their husbands.[12]

The starkest contrast between the life world of African readers and the life world reflected in the text of Ruth is, however, the issue whether a woman may actively engage a man sexually. Moremadi, the narrator in Masenya's article, contends:

> Fertile soil seems to have been prepared for levirate marriage. Hence Naomi's advice that Ruth go and 'share a (traditional) mat' (*a robale legogong*) with Boaz. What is strange to Moremadi though, is that the *legogo* in question, would not be shared with Boaz' wife that night, but with a wife-to-be! (that is, if the text is read forwards), something undesirable in traditional African communities. … Equally strange would be an initiation of marriage by a daring young woman. Aware of forms of marriages such as *seantlo* [in the event of a wife's death], *go hlatswa dirope* [when there is barrenness], *go kgobelwa* [levirate] and *go nyalwa ke lapa* [marriage by a family], Moremadi can resonate with Naomi's planned intervention regarding Ruth's future marriage. What she finds problematic and scary, given the pronounced violence against women in South Africa, is the apparent desperateness of two women who seem to have decided that female bodies could be used for security through marriage. Moremadi is equally surprised that Boaz, a man of substance, endorses the two women's 'shady' deal! However, given the age-old trend of older men preferring younger women … Moremadi seems to get the picture.[13]

The encounter between Ruth and Boaz is thus interpreted fully within the frame of understanding that the narrative is about the issue of what would be ethical and legitimate female sexual conduct. This point becomes central in the qualitative empirical study reported on in Masenya's article (see discussion below).

When Moremadi re-tells the culmination of the Ruth narrative in the last chapter of the book, she emphasises the male domination reflected in the world

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12 Ibid., 2.

13 Ibid., 3.

of the book's narrative, as well as men's preoccupation with procreation and male lineage. She says:

> Babies, babies, babies! Men, outsiders to female reproductive anatomy, are preoccupied with procreation and male lineage! Moremadi marvels. Even before the marriage could occur (cf. Rt 4:13), the well wishes are conspicuous about their silence on the conjugal life of the 'bride' and 'groom', quiet about the economic benefits which the two widows would gain from the union. Instead, they are loud about female reproductive capacities and male lineage (Rt 4:11, 18)… The obsession with progeny is reinforced by Moremadi's observation that in just one verse, Ruth and Boaz are portrayed as married, living together, having sex, Ruth conceiving and delivering a baby![14]

The genealogy at the end of the book of Ruth is also interpreted within this framework, namely as a sign of male preoccupation with lineage.

What remains difficult to understand for Moremadi is the fact that Ruth is not praised for the male child that she had given birth to, but that Naomi stands central in the final praise. There is "a shift from the male preoccupation with female productive powers to the women's celebration of the fruit of one woman's labour pains"[15] – a change that is welcomed by Moremadi. However,

> [a]lthough Ruth is celebrated for who she has been to Naomi, she is not directly celebrated as an individual, Moremadi observes. That does not add up as, in Moremadi's context, Ruth, the mother, could have been showered with praise-names for not having returned from *madiba* [deep waters] empty-handed. Having been socialised within an African patriarchal, patrilineal setting, in which property is usually owned by men, Moremadi is intrigued by the women's claim that 'A son has been born to Naomi' (Rt 4:7).[16]

Masenya, hidden behind the praise name Moremadi, concludes her analysis by pointing out three resemblances between the life world reflected in the Ruth narrative and in contemporary African culture. First, a holistic understanding of the earthly and the divine is reflected in both life worlds. In the narrative, Yahweh, the God of Israel, is portrayed as participating in the everyday life of the biblical characters. Second, in both life worlds, heterosexual marriage is normative and third, in both life worlds female anatomy is celebrated for its capacity to bear male children. These issues play a determining role in the reception of the Ruth narrative in contemporary African female contexts, as will be discussed in the next section.

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14 Ibid., 4.
15 Ibid.
16 Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Engaging with the Book of Ruth," 4.

C QUALITATIVE EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS

Masenya departs from the following valid point in her empirical study: African Christian communities do not merely read the Bible to gain new knowledge, but they also read it to nurture their faith and to enrich their lives. In this respect, African interpretations differ significantly from many Western-oriented interpretations.[17] It is therefore not surprising that Masenya's study continues with the question: "[W]hich possibilities would the story have if read by single African Christian women?"[18]

In order to investigate the answers to this question, Masenya designed a qualitative empirical study in which she engages ten African women from her faith community through semi-structured interviews. She summarises five of these in her article.

The benefit of a qualitative empirical study is that it gives us feedback on real flesh-and-blood readers' experiences with and interpretations of the Bible. It grounds us as researchers in our studies on the reception of biblical narratives in real life examples, so that our endeavors will not only remain theoretical and hypothetical. A qualitative empirical study aims to understand on a deeper level the phenomenon under observation and does not purport to show any representative patterns (such as in a quantitative study).[19] In this respect, Masenya's empirical work in the discussed article should be appreciated and lauded.[20] There are not many (South) African biblical scholars that engage in this kind of empirical work. Masenya's attempt therefore represents a novelty in our endeavours to describe the process of (contemporary) reception.

D HERMENEUTICAL ENGAGEMENT

One should, however, note that this strategy of Masenya fits into the so-called "comparative paradigm" of African biblical interpretation.[21] Holter identified

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17 Cf. Hans De Wit and Gerald O. West, eds., *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

18 Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Engaging with the Book of Ruth," 4.

19 See the following study that also employs an empirical study to gain insight in the reception of the book of Ruth in South African contexts of poverty: Stephanus J. Naudé, "Telling a Different Story of Privilege and Poverty: An Intercultural Bible Reading of Ruth in the Context of Contemporary South Africa" (PhD Dissertation, Stellenbosch University, 2024).

20 Cf. the various essays in Hans de Wit, Louis C. Jonker et al., eds. *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004).

21 See e.g. Gerald O. West, "Shifting Perspectives on the Comparative Paradigm in (South) African Biblical Scholarship," *Religion and Theology* 12/1 (2005): 48–72; Gerald O. West, "Interrogating the Comparative Paradigm in African Biblical Scholarship," in *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue* (ed. Hans De

this tendency in an extensive survey of Old Testament dissertations by African scholars during the period 1967–2000.[22] A comparative paradigm is constituted by scholars from African contexts[23] observing similarities and resonances between their own life worlds and the life worlds reflected in the biblical texts. The influence can go in two opposite directions: either African phenomena (mostly cultural and cultic) are identified in the Bible or the biblical texts are brought to bear on modern-day African experiences (such as suffering, corruption, leadership, oppression, etc.), in order to transform the present reality.

A direct comparison between the life world of African readers and the life world reflected in a biblical text may however lead to the neglect of historical contextuality, that is, of the ancient context(s) within which a biblical narrative was told. The important distinction between 'narrated world' and 'narrative world' is helpful to explain this point. The 'narrated world' is the world created in and through the narrative. Stories create worlds, whether those are reflecting any reality or are totally imaginary. The 'narrated world' constitutes the 'what' of a narrative, that is, 'what is being told?'.

Stories do not hang in mid-air, however. They are always embedded in flesh-and-blood circumstances, that is, in a 'narrative world.' That means that all narratives have a historical contextuality within which they are trying to communicate something. One could therefore say that the 'narrative world' helps us to identify the 'why' of a narrative. The context within which a narrative is told co-determines what the narrative was meant to convey, that is, what the intended rhetorical effect of the narrative had been.

In the case of biblical texts, which are ancient texts, it is naturally more difficult to determine the historical circumstances in which each narrative functioned. However, as also reflected in Masenya's annotation (the first annotation discussed in section B above), there are broad periods in ancient Israel's history in which biblical texts can be plausibly dated. These 'narrative worlds' should be taken seriously when we as biblical interpreters want to engage with those narratives in our own contemporary (historical) contexts.

Wit and Gerald O. West; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 37–64; Louis C. Jonker, "Further Interrogation of the Comparative Paradigm in African Biblical Scholarship: Towards an Analogical Hermeneutics for Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa," in *Reading, Writing Right: Festschrift for Elna Mouton* (ed. Jeremy Punt and Marius J. Nel; Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2018), 73–97.

[22] Knut Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations, 1967-2000* (Bible and Theology in Africa 3; New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

[23] Holter works with a definition of African biblical scholarship as the work done by scholars, south of the Sahara and north of the Limpopo, that is, excluding South African scholarship for understandable reasons.

One may argue that attention to the narrative worlds is not the focus of African interpretations that want to gain knowledge and experience faith and life enrichment in their modern-day receptions of the biblical texts. It is, however, a false dichotomy to think that there are no continuities between the biblical world(s) and our contemporary world. When we study biblical texts in their historical environments, we start identifying the needs of the ancient communities of faith, why the stories were told and what they were supposed to do. Through these answers given in the biblical texts, we gain insight into the needs and discourses of the ancient believers, that is, the 'fathers and mothers' who went before us in faith. Those ancient audiences also wanted to know more; and they also wanted to be enriched in their faith in Yahweh, to live a dedicated life every day. In this respect, there is continuity between the life worlds of the 'fathers and mothers of the past' and the 'brothers and sisters of our own time.' Whenever we engage with biblical texts in their historical contexts, and whenever biblical interpreters take the effort to study the 'why' of biblical texts, one starts hearing the voices of the ancestors in faith.

Biblical interpreters need both the perspectives from the past and of the present. Whenever one remains with the contexts of the ancient past without attending to the texts' modern-day reception, one merely engages in historical studies. And whenever one focuses exclusively on modern-day reception in the own (African) context, one stands endangered by self-indulgence, that is, interpreting the texts only for those brothers and sisters belonging to the same in-group of the interpreter.

In the description above of Masenya's interpretation of the book Ruth for single, Christian South African women, she surely shows an historical awareness (as discussed in section B above). However, the historical background rather serves as sounding board against which she explains the continuities and discontinuities between certain South African terminology and cultural environments on the one hand, and the biblical terminology and cultural environments as reflected in the biblical texts. With this creative strategy she brings modern-day reception and ancient contexts into conversation with one another. Working with a comparative paradigm, she exposes the (brothers and) sisters of today to some aspects of the ancient life world. However, she does not address in her contribution the 'why' of the Ruth narrative.

In the following section, Masenya's study will be brought in dialogue with another study on the book of Ruth by a South African female scholar, namely Gerda de Villiers. Both Masenya's article and the one discussed below have their strengths and value. The intention here is not to portray the one as 'better' or 'more valid' than the other; the juxtaposing of the other study serves the purpose of illustrating what enrichment there could be when contextual readings with the brothers and sisters are brought in conversation with the contextual readings of the mothers and fathers of the biblical past.

E RUTH, A FOREIGNER IN AN EXCLUSIVIST WORLD

In an article titled "Rut 4:18–22: 'n Venster na Israel se Verlede?" ("Ruth 4:18–22: A window to Israel's Past?"), Gerda de Villiers discusses how the genealogical information provided at the end of the book Ruth can assist us to determine the 'why' of the narrative.[24] Although she also focuses meticulously on the 'what' of the narrative, the historical perspectives given in the genealogy assists her to determine why the narrative was written and what role it played in its time of origin.

Her close reading of the genealogical ending of the book Ruth calls attention to the fact that there are ten names in the family list of 4:18–20, with 'Perez' opening the list and 'David' concluding it. Since the list spans about seven centuries, it is impossible that it reflects historical facts. Apart from the fact that ten is a symbolic number, reflecting completeness and perfection, De Villiers also highlights the fact that a ten-name list was customary in ancient Near Eastern royal genealogies. One would expect that the list in Ruth would start with the ancestral father, Judah. However, apart from the fact that he is already mentioned earlier in verse 12, the symbolic structure of the genealogy would then have been destroyed. The order of names is very important for the understanding of the list's function—the seventh and tenth positions were normally seen as the emphases of such a ten-name list. Boaz occupies the seventh position, while David culminates the list in the tenth position.

To establish the 'why' of this stylised genealogy, De Villiers continues with a discussion of the date and unity of the book. She discusses various options for the date but finds the view that the book dates from the early second temple-period, that is, in the early Persian period, to be the most convincing. However, she does not agree with the view of many scholars that the genealogy in 4:18–20 belongs to a later redactional phase.[25] She supports her view with the argument that the genealogy in Ruth is more similar in form and function to the ten-name genealogies in Genesis than to the David genealogy in 1 Chr 2:4–15 (the only biblical parallel to the genealogy in Ruth). In Genesis, the genealogies are normally the structural links between different epochs in ancient Israel's history; thus, integral parts of the bigger narrative. The genealogy in 4:18–20 can thus also be seen as part of the original work dated to the early Persian period.

The similar use of the ten-name genealogy in Ruth does not merely mean that the author of the narrative merely wanted to imitate the style of Genesis. Like in Genesis, the genealogy in Ruth turns a family narrative into a narrative

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[24] Gerda de Villiers, "Ruth 4:18–22: 'n Venster na Israel se Verlede?," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34/2 (2013): 1–8.

[25] See Louis C. Jonker, "'Interpretasierigting' as eksegetiese hulp: Rut in wyer kontekste," *Acta Theologica* 1 (1999): 37–57, where a different view is presented about the unity of the book.

about the people of Israel. However, it furthermore continues the narrative of Genesis into a new epoch – it bridges the period from the sojourn in Egypt (the end of the Genesis ancestral stories) to the period of king David and the monarchy. The genealogy in Ruth thus connects the story of David to the ancestral past. The genealogy is the culmination of the family narrative that leads to Ruth and Boaz having a baby who becomes one of the vital links towards the Davidic monarchy.

The 'why' of the Ruth narrative (including the genealogy) becomes apparent when one considers the following family links established throughout the Pentateuch:

> The median of the genealogy of the Book of Ruth takes place in the desert with Nahshon as the representative of that era. Nahshon's sister happens to be married to Aaron whose priesthood is elevated above the rest of the tribe of Levi, and to whose descendants eternal priesthood is promised. Phinehas, his grandson, appears to be extremely intolerant of mixed marriages – an attitude which is later sustained by his descendant, Ezra, the scribe.[26]

It is no coincidence that the family narrative of the book of Ruth involves a Moabite woman and that women play such an important role in this book. As reflected in Ezra 10 and Neh 13, the early post-exilic restoration community was intolerant about the fact that many of the returned exiles had married foreign wives and brought them along to Jerusalem and Judah. Within a phase of intense identity negotiation, that is, grappling with the question of who Israel was after the exile, it seems that some strong exclusivist views dominated the community in Jerusalem. Both Ezra and Nehemiah therefore acted strongly against the tendency of including foreign women in the 'seed' of the restored Israel. In their demand that the men of Judah simply had to divorce and chase away their foreign wives, these women are objectified and turned into possessions that could be discarded at will.

Against this tendency in the restoration community in Jerusalem, the authors of Ruth wanted to protest. Against the background of the most likely time of origin of the book, that is, the early post-exilic period, the book Ruth would have been a strong polemic about the exclusivist tendencies among the leadership and the community in Jerusalem. Not only do women play vital roles in the development of the Ruth narrative but, to top it all, it also included Ruth, the Moabite woman, who becomes an important link to the monarchy of David (as reflected in the genealogy).

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[26] De Villiers, "Rut 4," 1.

Historians remind us that there was the ideal in the early post-exilic community in Judah to resurrect the Davidic kingship.[27] The connection of the genealogical element to the Ruth narrative, therefore, must have been a strong political statement in its context. When the genealogy bridges the period of the sojourn in Egypt to the Davidic monarchy, it certainly recalled the most recent experiences of Israel in exile, with the possibility of a monarchical restoration in the post-exilic phase. The book of Ruth emphasises that such a monarchical restoration cannot be founded on exclusivist claims of a 'pure' Israel or a "holy seed," as the book of Ezra envisioned. The book of Ruth strongly makes the point that women should play a vital role in the resurrection of such a monarchy and that even foreign women should be key to this enterprise. The book is thus a strong inclusivist voice in an exclusivist context – that is the 'why' of the book.

The conclusion that follows hereafter presents a synthesis to the juxtaposing of the interpretations of two South African female Old Testament scholars, Masenya and De Villiers. The dialogue between these interpretations assists us to articulate some hermeneutical guidelines for Old Testament interpretation in (South) Africa.

F CONCLUSION

From the above discussions it becomes clear that both Masenya and De Villiers see a liberating tendency in the book Ruth. Masenya's perspective is that the book emphasises the agency of women in a male-dominated world. This particularly becomes clear in Naomi's plan to let Ruth, the Moabite woman, have sex with Boaz, a family member who could act as levirate, so that she could fall pregnant with a son who would continue the family line. This perspective on the 'what' of the Ruth narrative is then offered by Masenya as possible solution to single African Christian women's predicament of being caught up in a restrictive cultural environment.

De Villiers explains how the involvement of women, particularly a foreign woman, in the narrative became a strong protest against the exclusivist tendencies in the early post-exilic Jerusalem. She emphasises that the 'why' of the narrative can be established through detailed intertextual study but more so through the involvement of historical aspects in the interpretation process.

Both interpretations are valid. However, in both interpretations, there is a *desideratum*. Masenya's interpretation is focused on providing biblical advice and solutions to a contemporary community of single African Christian women. However, her interpretation lacks depth in the sense that she misses the strong political overtones of the narrative that can be discovered when studying the

[27] See Lester L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Volume 1: Yehud: A History of the Persian Province of Judah* (London: T & T Clark, 2004).

narrative against the background of its time of origin. Her interpretation therefore remains on a personal, spiritual and pastoral level but does not contribute to wider political issues within which women are involved. De Villiers's study of the book Ruth masterfully assists the reader to discover the deeper political dimensions in the story but it fails to indicate how the narrative influences modern-day political contexts. Her interpretation therefore remains on an intellectual and academic level and does not contribute towards transformation of societal views and structures.

However, it is exactly these different (and differing) strengths in the two interpretations (and similar other studies) that constitute the valuable contribution that South African biblical studies can make in the broader context of global hermeneutics.[28] South African biblical scholarship is blessed (and not cursed!) by the fact that it incorporates different hermeneutical traditions that are the result of the country's fractured past. Holter was surely right when he indicated many years ago that South African biblical scholarship stands on the crossroad of "the money and the methods of the North, and the myths and the meanings of the South."[29] The potential of South African biblical scholarship, to which the celebrant Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) has contributed greatly, lies in the communal and complementary efforts of Old Testament scholars and not in their exclusivist stances. Together with scholars such as De Villiers who imports the (historical) narrative world into the hermeneutical process, the texts can be read "together with the fathers and the mothers of the long-distant past," AND "together with the brothers and sisters of contemporary Christian communities." A communal approach to biblical scholarship could be a powerful legacy of South African biblical scholarship.[30]

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[28] Louis C. Jonker and Knut Holter, eds. *The Global Context and Its Consequences for Old Testament Interpretation* (IVBS 1; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2010).

[29] Knut Holter, "T's not Only a Question of Money! African Old Testament Scholarship between the Myths and Meanings of the South and the Money and Methods of the North," *OTE* 11/2 (1998): 240–54.

[30] Louis C. Jonker, "Towards a Communal Approach for Reading the Bible in Africa," in *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa: Papers from the International Symposium on Africa and the Old Testament in Nairobi, October 1999* (ed. Mary N. Getui, Knut Holter, and Victor Zinkuratire; New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 77–88.

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