

Yael Ziegler

RUTH

FROM ALIENATION TO MONARCHY

Yeshivat Har Etzion
Maggid Books

Ruth
From Alienation to Monarchy

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חכמות נשים בנתה ביתה (משלי יד, א)

*Dedicated in loving memory of
Faye Deborah (Jospe) Kronitz
צפורה דבורה בת ר' יוסף וחנה*

*A wise and gracious woman who lived her life to
the highest standards of integrity and kindness.
Her love and dedication to her family, Am Yisrael, and
Medinat Yisrael were boundless. She will forever be an
inspiration and a source of wisdom and compassion.*

תנצב"ה

*Dedicated to my parents, who taught me love of Torah
Naomi Ruth z"l and Dr. Allen Zeiger*

לאמי מורתי: נעמי רות ז"ל בת אהרן שמחה וברכה זלדה
"פיה פתחה בחכמה ותורת חסד על לשונה"

לאבי מורי: אברהם בן יונה צבי וחנה אסתר
"כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו ובתורתו יהגה יומם ולילה"

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The Study of Ruth: Methodology and Context

Introduction: Methodology of Tanakh Study

Writing a book on Ruth is a humbling and overwhelming experience. This short book has attracted many admirers, as evidenced by the prodigious literary output it has inspired. As will become apparent from the quantity of citations, I have culled many ideas, literary readings, and exegetical observations from previous books, articles, and biblical commentators. I am in debt to many interpreters, both ancient and modern, for deepening my understanding of the Book of Ruth.

I do not presume to propose what some authors call a “new reading” of the Book of Ruth. The particular contribution of this work may be found in its methodological approach. Drawing on my traditional background alongside my academic one, this book represents an attempt to fuse together traditional interpretations with scholarly ones. I have systematically applied literary poetic tools along with an insistence that the reading must yield a deeper appreciation of the religious-theological meaning of the narrative. The most useful designation for the method I deploy is “literary-theological reading,” originally designated as such by Rabbi Shalom Carmy.¹ While this approach is located well within the

1. See Shalom Carmy, “A Room with a View, but a Room of Our Own,” *Tradition* 28:3 (1994): 39–69. His formulation of this methodology may be slightly different from

continuum of traditional readings of Tanakh, it is distinguished by the self-conscious attempt to marshal modern techniques, especially literary academic approaches, to mine the Tanakh for insights and deeper meanings.

I endeavor to strike a quantitative balance between modern and traditional interpreters. This balanced presentation demonstrates the manner in which both of these resources can enhance our ability to delve more deeply into profound textual ideas. More to the point, it illustrates the manner in which these sources can be used in tandem and may be of mutual benefit to one another. Remarkably, the fusion of these two seemingly distinct approaches to the biblical text is more seamless than one might suppose. Many of the poetic techniques employed by academic literary scholars were intuitively used by early rabbinic interpreters, and the overlap of approaches is very often observable.

Despite my attempt to balance these approaches, I have eschewed a pretense of academic detachment, preferring to approach Ruth as a sacred book that contains profound insights into the religious experience (whether social, political, or purely religious). I have also given priority to traditional sources, which I frequently quote in the body of the work, while generally relegating academic sources to the footnotes. In this way, I have consciously chosen to present my book on Ruth as a link in traditional exegesis, as a religious pursuit designed to offer insights into a sacred book.

THE STUDY OF TANAKH AND LITERARY CRITICISM

In 1962, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein delivered a public lecture at Stern College entitled “Criticism and *Kitvei HaKodesh*.”² He posited what was

my adaptation of the term, as he places greater emphasis upon the historical context of the biblical narratives. Nevertheless, I think that it is the most accurate term to describe my methodology.

2. Rabbi Lichtenstein’s essay was published in a recent collection of essays presented in honor of Rabbi Shalom Carmy: “Criticism and *Kitvei Ha-kodesh*,” in *Rav Shalom Banayikh*, ed. Hayyim Angel and Yitzchak Blau (Jersey City: Ktav, 2012), 15–32. Rabbi Lichtenstein expresses strong reservations about using the word “criticism” in conjunction with Tanakh, recognizing that it could easily lead religious readers to recoil from the word’s anti-religious associations (p. 17). In fact, Rabbi Lichtenstein categorically rejects the notion that critical analysis of Tanakh should include a “semi-judicial enterprise,” involving judgment and evaluation (p. 24). He maintains that we do not have license to grade the success of the biblical corpus, nor to

at the time a somewhat novel proposition: that students of Tanakh might well be rewarded by the attempt to apply techniques of literary criticism to learning Tanakh. Rabbi Lichtenstein did not publish his essay until quite recently, and in the interim, others have independently reached the same conclusion. In the early 1980s, academic scholars of both Bible and literature began to undertake precisely what Rabbi Lichtenstein had proposed. Scholars such as Michael Fishbane, Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg, Adele Berlin, and Shimon Bar-Efrat (to name just a few) began to employ literary methods in interpreting biblical texts, often yielding magnificent insights. Even if these studies were not undertaken with the intention of mining the text for its deeper religious meanings, many of the observations and conclusions paved the way toward a more profound understanding of Tanakh.

For the student of Tanakh steeped in tradition, the approach commonly termed “New Criticism” should be of particular interest.³ This literary approach treats the text as an object, or a product, rather than a window upon historical actuality or the sensibility of the author. This is substantially different from the critical approach that dominated academic study of the Bible for approximately two hundred years, an approach that sought to determine the history of the composition of

postulate criteria of excellence with regard to it. After all, this is divinely inspired writing. However, the primary meaning of the word “criticism” is not to judge or evaluate, but rather to discern (pp. 25–26), and that, he asserts, is indeed the task of anyone who is looking to find deeper meanings in the biblical texts. To be clear, it is important to distinguish between literary criticism of biblical texts, which involves analysis of the literary nature of the books of Tanakh, and source criticism (also known as biblical criticism), which refers to the attempt to establish the sources used by the author of a given work. Rabbi Lichtenstein is interested in the former and firmly rejects the latter when applied to studying the Bible.

3. New Criticism has its roots in the 1920s (for the most part in America) and originated as a corrective of both historical and affective literary criticism. The term New Criticism should not be understood to mean that it is the most recent literary approach; in fact, there are many newer methodologies of literary criticism that are also employed in biblical study. Another important literary theory that has impacted the study of Tanakh as literature is reader-response criticism, which focuses on the manner in which the reader constructs meaning. For an excellent survey of the manner in which different literary approaches have been employed in reading the Bible, see John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, 2nd ed. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1996).

biblical narratives. Proponents of that approach have frequently and openly declared that they reject the divine origin of the Bible, and that form of criticism has therefore generally been regarded as one that clashes with Jewish tradition.⁴ In contrast, a literary approach that is interested in the final product – namely, the literary unity of the final text – facilitates a reading of Tanakh that uses rigorous academic methods while allowing for a presupposition of textual unity. While this approach is not designed to promote the concept of a divinely inspired Torah, it more easily coheres with it than did previous academic biblical studies.⁵ When properly applied, a literary approach to Tanakh study can deepen our understanding of the Bible and thereby enhance our religious experience.

One aspect of New Criticism that is considered to be central is the manner in which it focuses on features inherent within the text.⁶ It is interested in a close, unmediated reading of the text, and it perceives meaning that emanates from the patterns, allusions, and structure of the text itself, rather than the external questions that surround its origin. Some New Critics have maintained that one should look for the meaning of a text not only within the text itself, but within the web of allusions to the canon of existing literature as well.⁷

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4. There have been attempts to reconcile the critical study of the Tanakh with Jewish faith and observance. One example is the approach of Rabbi Mordechai Breuer, who devoted himself precisely to this task. For more on Rabbi Breuer's methodology, see Yosef Ofer, ed., *Shitat HaBehinot shel Rav Mordekhai Breuer* (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2005).
 5. Thus, to offer one example, even if Robert Alter's work, at its core, assumes the doctrine of source criticism, his assumption that the final product deserves attention results in astute literary readings that can enhance our understanding of the theological meaning that inheres in the biblical text.
 6. Cleanth Brooks and T. V. F. Brogan, "New Criticism," in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 833–34, acknowledge that close reading is regarded as the hallmark of New Criticism. Nevertheless, they maintain that it is by no means the most distinctive trait of New Criticism and may also be its limitation, preventing close readers from looking beyond the text.
 7. This concept is formulated in a now classic passage of T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932), 15. For a critique of this idea, as well as the internal inconsistencies it presents within the very tenets of New Criticism, see Barton, *Reading*, 170–78.

The literary approach described here is one that I will employ quite frequently during the course of our study of the Book of Ruth. I will assume the internal allusive character of biblical texts, frequently noting parallels between Ruth and other books of the Bible. I will often engage in close readings, paying careful attention to individual words, syntax, and the order in which sentences and ideas unfold as they are read. I will also endeavor to draw attention to conscious rhetorical devices of writing, such as omissions, subtle variances, ambiguities, and allusions. We will observe many other literary techniques, such as the employment of key words and phrases, thematic patterning, division of units, character development, type-scenes, plot movements, wordplays, chiasmatic structures, and language cues.⁸

Despite the usefulness of applying these academic literary methods to Tanakh study, the theological dimension of that application is sometimes marginalized or ignored by scholars.⁹ Academic literary studies can become an exercise in intellectual and aesthetic prowess,¹⁰ focusing on the form while ignoring the notion of a deeper religious

8. In order to achieve the best results, I have not followed one consistent translation of the biblical and exegetical sources cited in this book. Instead, I have carefully selected the language that I feel best represents these sources in English.

9. One striking example is Stephan Bertman's seminal article delineating the exceptional literary artistry of the structure of the Book of Ruth ("Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 [1965]: 165–68). His rather bland conclusion is that the Book of Ruth has

a unifying plan, an architecture. The reason for this style of architecture is difficult to determine; the motivation for the composition may well be akin to that which produced the parallelism of Hebrew poetry. Possibly it is the result of a psychological disposition, a way of conceiving things which affects the shape of the created work, a disposition by virtue of which things are thought of not separately, but together, not singly but in balanced relation; or possibly it is the result of an aesthetic preference which finds one arrangement of material, here one involving repetition, more pleasing or satisfying than another.

To be fair, this study represents an early stage of the attempt to examine the rich literary artistry of biblical stories. Later scholars were generally more interested in revealing the manner in which form and meaning complement one another.

10. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein (*Criticism*, 21–22) does present a compelling case for the spiritual value of aesthetic experience in general, and particularly when beauty may be seen as a reflection of divine revelation. Nevertheless, he clearly maintains that Tanakh is much, much more than merely beautiful literature.

meaning.¹¹ The New Critical perception that literature has no referential function and is not intended to convey any meaning, but is instead an artistic creation meant to be appreciated solely for its aesthetic merit,¹² is particularly unacceptable to a religious student of the biblical narratives.¹³ The religious student is unwilling to assume a detached posture and examine these narratives for their purely literary or aesthetic value. Traditional interpreters of biblical texts insist on discerning the religious meaning that emerges from a text. Close readings of the narrative must yield meaning and add a significant dimension to our understanding of the story. I have consistently sought to apply this notion in my reading of the Book of Ruth.

Scholars enthusiastically concur that the Book of Ruth is a remarkably artistic literary masterpiece. Its apparent simplicity of plot and economy of description do not conceal its masterful use of structure, its exquisite utilization of language, its pleasing tempo, vivid details, and well-crafted characters. Eloquent and lyrical dialogue recurs quite frequently in this book, focusing the reader's attention on its characters and their verbal dexterity. And yet, the book's magnificence cannot be properly understood without observing the relationship between the superb construction of the book and its religious ideas. The elaborate techniques deployed in crafting this book transform and deepen its meaning. As we will see, the

11. In this vein, religiously disposed literary critics, such as T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis, expressed reservations with regard to academic literary study of Tanakh. See T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932), 343, and C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 214.

12. This is starkly articulated in the poem "Ars Poetica" by Archibald MacLeish (1892–1982): "A poem should not mean / But be."

13. An approach in which literature has no meaning, and exists merely for its own sake, naturally rejects theological readings. Religious students are not the sole proponents of rejecting this aspect of New Criticism. Robert Alter, "Introduction to the Old Testament," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (London: Fontana, 1987), 15, asserts that

it is the exception in any culture for literary invention to be a purely aesthetic activity. Writers put together words in a certain pleasing order partly because the order pleases but also, very often, because the order helps them refine meanings, make meanings more memorable, more satisfyingly complex, so that what is well wrought in language can more powerfully engage the world of events, values, human and divine ends.

Book of Ruth employs artistry to create a seamless relationship between God's will and human actions. The book stretches out toward kingship, elegantly weaving its theology of kingship throughout the narrative. And the characters choose their destiny, for better and for worse, offering profound lessons with implications for a myriad of preeminent religious and social topics that predominate in the biblical narratives.

USE OF TRADITIONAL TEXTS

For a religious student of Tanakh, perhaps the most attractive feature of the New Critical textual concerns is the manner in which they so often cohere with midrashim and with traditional exegetical methodologies employed in the study of Tanakh. New Critical methods feel familiar to the student well versed in *Ḥazal's* approach to the text. *Ḥazal* are not often self-conscious about their methodology;¹⁴ nor do they offer a consistent, systematic reading of Tanakh narratives using any one methodology. Nevertheless, midrashim tend to be sensitive to many of the techniques associated with New Criticism. In fact, Robert Alter makes the remarkable assertion that “in many cases, a literary student of the Bible has more to learn from the traditional commentaries than from modern scholarship.”¹⁵ In this vein, Alter alleges that it is the midrashic assumption of the deep interconnect-edness between all biblical books that accounts for the midrash's exquisite ability to be attuned to the “small verbal signals of continuity and significant lexical nuances” that are so important for interpreting Tanakh.¹⁶

Consider, for example, *Ḥazal's* appreciation of literary parallels. Midrashim draw our attention to the connection between the narrative of the sale of Joseph with the attendant deception of Jacob (accomplished with the words *haker na* in Gen. 37:32) and the story of

14. Sometimes *Ḥazal* do offer a programmatic methodological approach. A *baraita* at the end of Berakhot cites thirty-two methods used by R. Eliezer b. R. Yose HaGalili in studying Aggada. See *Yalkut Shimoni* 1:20, which brings as an example of one of these methodologies a case in which an elliptic narrative may be explained by another more detailed one. The midrash in this case points to Ezekiel 28, which provides information about the Garden of Eden unknown from the narrative in Genesis. For other examples, see *Yalkut Shimoni* 1:92, 942.

15. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 11.

16. *Ibid.*

Judah's desertion of his brothers along with Tamar's attendant deception of Judah (accomplished with the words *haker na* in Gen. 38:25).¹⁷ Narrative analogies based on literary parallels are common in *Hazal*, who embrace and astutely note literary connections between many biblical narratives.¹⁸ For example, midrashim compare the story of Joseph in the palace in Egypt to that of Esther in the palace in Shushan,¹⁹ just as they point to the linguistic and thematic parallels between Abraham's sojourn in Egypt and Israel's later sojourn in Egypt.²⁰

Midrashim likewise recognize literary connections that point to similarities between various biblical characters. Examples include comparisons between David and Esau,²¹ Pinchas and Elijah,²² and Boaz and Samson.²³ *Hazal* are likewise sensitive to the notion of a key word,²⁴ an *inclusio*,²⁵ different words used to modify characters,²⁶ a deliberately ambiguous phrase,²⁷ type-scenes,²⁸ and wordplays.²⁹

In this study of the Book of Ruth, we will frequently encounter *Hazal's* literary sensitivities, and will often cite midrashim in search of their literary contributions. I will not cite every midrash, but rather

17. Sota 10b; Genesis Rabba 84:19.

18. See Yair Zakovitch, *Mikraot B'Eretz HaMarot* (Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz Hameuhad, 1995), 12, where Zakovitch observes *Hazal's* attention to analogies.

19. Genesis Rabba 87:6.

20. Ibid. 40:6.

21. Ibid. 63:8.

22. E.g., *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 46.

23. E.g., Tanḥuma, *Naso* 4.

24. E.g., Berakhot 28b, where *Hazal* note that the name of God appears eighteen times in Psalms 29, corresponding to the eighteen blessings in the *Shemoneh Esreh*.

25. E.g., Berakhot 10a, where *Hazal* advance the notion that those Psalms that were beloved by David opened and closed with the word "*ashrei*." (This statement assumes that chapters 1 and 2 in Psalms were regarded as one chapter.) *Hazal*, of course, do not use the term "*inclusio*."

26. E.g., Genesis Rabba 80:10, which astutely observes that it is meaningful to refer to Simeon and Levi as "the brothers of Dina" (Gen. 34:25). This midrash makes similar observations with regard to other similar modifiers, such as Miriam's depiction as "the sister of Aaron" (Ex. 15:20).

27. E.g., Ruth Rabba 7:12.

28. E.g., Exodus Rabba 1:33, which observes that three couples meet by a well in Tanakh.

29. *Hazal's* use of wordplays may be observed in the "*al tikrei*" homiletical readings. See, e.g., Song of Songs Rabba 1:3.

those I feel can either illuminate the simple meaning of the narrative or offer a deeper understanding of the theological idea that lies at its core.

I have been particularly interested in illustrating the manner in which midrashic readings reveal the heart of the *peshat*, the simple meaning of the text. All too often, those who are searching for the *peshat* dismiss or ignore the midrash, which appears to stray far from the text.³⁰ While the midrash may not be designed to explain the verse itself, it has been my experience that a deeper examination of midrashim often uncovers a deep apprehension of the crux of the narrative. When the midrashim do stray from the simple meaning of the text, it is often enlightening to ask why they did so and to try to determine the objectives of the midrash. This is especially true when the midrash offers an implausible or homiletical reading. To this end, I have on occasion introduced midrashim that appear to have strayed far from the *peshat*, with the express purpose of explaining the manner in which the midrash actually penetrates to the core issues of the narrative.³¹

HERZOG COLLEGE AND TANAKH STUDY

The literary-theological method is one of the exciting new vistas that have recently opened for Tanakh study. Utilizing academic methods along with traditional ones, this approach is deeply relevant to the

30. I would be remiss if I did not mention my deep debt of gratitude for this aspect of my methodology to one of the *Roshei Yeshiva* of Yeshivat Har Etzion, Rabbi Yaakov Medan. His familiarity with the vast corpus of rabbinic interpretive literature is extraordinary, and, in approaching midrashim, Rabbi Medan invariably attempts to illustrate the deep core of *peshat* that may be revealed with a proper examination. I have attempted to apply this aspect of Rabbi Medan's approach throughout this study.

31. One of my favorite examples involves the creative etymology of Elimelekh's name found in Ruth Rabba 2:5. Elimelekh's name literally means "My God is king." This midrash alters the vowels, explaining that Elimelekh's name reflects his (erroneous) supposition that the kingship belongs to him: "To me will come kingship." While at first glance the etymology seems to wreak havoc with the simple meaning of the name, a closer examination suggests that *Hazal* were consciously contrasting Elimelekh, who is entirely focused on himself, with Ruth, who often ignores her own needs in favor of others. This contrast explains the very reason that Elimelekh cannot produce kingship while Ruth must and does! This is a superb example of midrashic creativity that cuts to the very heart of the meaning of the narrative.

contemporary religious student, who is devoted to religious tradition but also steeped in modern scholarship and a current approach to texts. Perhaps the foremost champion of this approach is Herzog College, a teacher-training college located in Alon Shevut and associated with Yeshivat Har Etzion.³²

From its inception, Yeshivat Har Etzion incorporated serious study of Tanakh in its curriculum at the insistence of both Rabbi Yehuda Amital and Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein. The founding of Herzog College several years later created a suitable setting for the study of biblical texts that could combine both academic methodology and a traditional approach in searching for religious meaning in the text. Its journal, *Megadim* (first published in 1986), has produced many articles that attempt to combine traditional and academic approaches in order to produce a rich and compelling reading of Tanakh. More significantly, its teachers' college has produced thousands of teachers who are trained to employ this combined interpretative approach in their own teaching. It is my great privilege to be a member of the staff of this illustrious institution, which has paved the way for a profound and enlightening approach that can yield magnificent insights into Tanakh.

This book began as a series of *shiurim* on the Book of Ruth written for Yeshivat Har Etzion's Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash (VBM), one of the pioneering Internet sites that disseminate and archive original series of *shiurim* on a variety of Torah subjects. This vast educational

32. There is, of course, no one monolithic way to accomplish a synthesis between tradition and academia. Herzog College offers many more avenues of research than the methodology that seeks to combine literary readings and traditional exegesis. One fruitful avenue of research involves the quest to restore the historical context of the biblical narrative using geographical knowledge, archaeological discoveries, and ancient Near Eastern languages and texts. A recent volume offers an array of essays by educators at Herzog College that seek to present and disseminate its various methodologies to the public. This volume, *Hi Siḥati: Al Derekh Limmud HaTanakh*, ed. Yehoshua Reis (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), which includes essays by Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein and Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun, was born from the recognition that Herzog College's approach involves some measure of significant innovation and, as is the case with all innovations, is not without its detractors. The volume is both a partial presentation of the methodologies that have emerged from Herzog College and a defense of their place within a traditional continuum of studying Tanakh.

project has succeeded in reaching thousands of students in the farthest corners of the globe. It has also provided many teachers like myself with the opportunity to commit to writing ideas originally produced in a classroom, giving teachers the impetus and incentive to produce their ideas in written form. After more than twenty years and hundreds of hours spent exploring the Book of Ruth in a classroom setting, writing weekly *shiurim* was an edifying experience. I received enlightening comments from a wide variety of readers that deepened and broadened my understanding of this short narrative. Perhaps the most gratifying part of that experience was in realizing just how bottomless are the depths of Torah study. I was unceasingly amazed to discover how many new insights emerged from a different sort of encounter with the Book of Ruth, an encounter brought about by systematic research and by formulating ideas in writing.

RUTH: IN SUMMATION

This study presents a literary-theological analysis of the Book of Ruth. I begin by examining the Book of Ruth in its biblical and historical context. What is the contribution of this book to the historical continuum of biblical narrative? How do its characters and themes engage in dialogue with other biblical characters and themes? This short book weaves a web of intertextual allusions whose meaning reaches out beyond the confines of its four chapters. The framing of the narrative during the period of the judges situates Ruth relative to another biblical book, the Book of Judges. This textual phenomenon obliges the interpreter to compare these biblical narratives. I have, in fact, devoted an entire section to this analysis, illustrating the manner in which the Book of Ruth moves us from the period of lawlessness and sexual immorality characterizing the Book of Judges to the monarchy, which appears at the end of the Book of Ruth, anticipating a more stable period. I have examined Ruth's thematic connections to other biblical narratives, such as Lot and his daughters, Lot and Abraham, and the Davidic dynasty. In broadening the scope of the book to include other biblical narratives, I have aimed to show that no book of Tanakh should be read as an independent entity; rather, all biblical books should also be understood within the broader context of the entire corpus of Tanakh.

The bulk of this study engages in a textual analysis of the Book of Ruth, following the trajectory of the narrative to offer a thematic but textually based investigation of the language, events, and characters. Although I have divided each chapter into thematic sections, I have endeavored to adhere to the events of the chapter in sequential order, insofar as the thematic divisions allow. In this way, the reader can learn the Book of Ruth alongside this book, concurrently perusing this study as an aid to extracting the Book of Ruth's magnificent subtext and undercurrents.

The Book of Ruth has always attracted learned interpretation quite out of proportion to its length or dramatic impact. One reason for this is the evident centrality and significance of the themes that crop up in this short but consequential narrative. I have tried to illustrate the manner in which the Book of Ruth functions as the nexus for many different Tanakh themes: God's involvement in human affairs; kingship; redemption; recognition of the Other; *hesed*; loyalty; social cohesiveness; ideal leadership; the relationship between names, identity, and destiny; blessings; the intertwinement and centrality of land and fertility; house building; and effective interpersonal interactions.

The Book of Ruth documents the manner in which people lead their humdrum lives, without dramatic events, obvious conflicts, or extraordinary miracles. And yet, while it records ordinary interactions, it also features the extraordinary behavior of two great individuals who succeed in reversing the negative direction that society has taken during the period of the judges. This is a deeply optimistic story, despite its setting in one of the most troubled periods of biblical history. Ruth and Boaz teach us how two individuals can act in accordance with their own conscience and in contrast to the social alienation and apathy that prevails. In doing so, they offer the possibility of bringing this lawless and hopeless situation to an end, and pave the way toward a well-functioning society, in which the nation can build a strong and unified house. It is my fervent prayer that a deeper understanding of this magisterial book and its exemplary characters will have a positive impact, especially in this blossoming and vital stage of building a society in modern Israel.