

“Gleaning among the Ears”—“Gathering among the Sheaves”: Characterizing the Image of the Supervising Boy (Ruth 2)

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One of the difficult verses in Ruth, regarding which much ink has been spilt, is the verse that records the words of the supervising boy to Boaz about Ruth:¹ “and she said: Let me glean, I pray you, and gather after the reapers among the sheaves; so she came, and hath continued even from the morning until now, save that she tarried a little in the house” (2:7).²

I want to focus on the first part of the verse, where the boy quotes Ruth as asking to reap “among the sheaves.” The difficulty in interpreting this clause relates to two different realms: linguistics and content. Linguistically, the meaning of the prepositional letter ב within the context of this verse (בעמרים) is unclear. Most translations and commentators understand the letter to mean “between,” “among the sheaves.”³ Syntactically, this reading is plausible and consistent with the frequent usage of the preposition ב in this sense in the Scriptures.⁴ In light of this linguistic explanation, however, the second problem, involving content, becomes more acute. If Ruth indeed asks the boy to gather also among the sheaves, then her request is most peculiar.

¹ “The verse is undoubtedly the most difficult Hebrew in the whole book” (Tod Linafelt, *Ruth* [Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989], 31).

² Biblical passages are rendered according to the JPS translation (JPSV).

³ JPSV; NASB; NAU (updated NASB); NEB; NIV; RSV; Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 7; New York: Doubleday, 1975), 94; Wilhelm Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth, Das Hohe Lied, Die Klagelieder* (KAT 17; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1962), 46 n. b; Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and A Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (2nd ed.; Biblical Seminar 10; Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 38, 48; Yair Zakovitch, *Ruth: Introduction and Commentary* (in Hebrew; Mikra Leyisra'el; Tel Aviv: Am-Oved; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990), 71.

⁴ BDB, 91.

According to Frederic W. Bush, "It stretches credulity to the breaking point to believe that Ruth would make a request so contrary to customary practice."⁵ He emphasizes that, in both Ruth's report to Naomi (2:2) and the narrator's description (2:3), Ruth goes to "gather" stalks of grain "after the reapers," and so it is difficult to assume that Ruth suddenly received a special privilege that was not customarily granted to the other poor people who came to glean.⁶ Bush explains that the "sheaf" in the Scriptures is a bundle of grain ready to be transported. The poor who circulate in the field gather from the single stalks and spikes that fall during the harvest.⁷ It is highly unlikely that Ruth asked the boy to grant her the unique privilege of gathering also among the bundled sheaves. This problem is magnified in light of v. 15, where the special permission that Boaz gave Ruth to gather "among the sheaves" is mentioned. If Ruth gathered among the sheaves already at the beginning of her work in the field, why must Boaz grant her special permission to do so in v. 15?

As difficult as it is to understand the boy's remarks, these words clearly serve an important role in the shaping of the story and its underlying intent. The long, detailed formulation of the boy's answer to Boaz emphasizes this point; the special place accorded to the boy's answer can be detected already in the narrator's introduction to his remarks: "And the servant appointed over the reapers answered and said . . ." Since the reader is familiar with the dialogue, there is no need to repeat the identity of the person who answers Boaz. The more common phraseology in such cases is "He answered" or "He said" (ויאמר, ויען) and the like.⁸ The repeated description of the boy's identity is intended to draw special attention to his words. Thus, on the one hand, the boy's words give rise to considerable difficulties;⁹ but, on the other, their contribution to the understanding of the plot, or the characters, is also considerable.

Edward Campbell suggests viewing Ruth's request, as quoted by the boy, as an unanswered request. That is, Ruth indeed asked the boy to gather among the sheaves, but her request was held in abeyance because the field's owner was not in the area and it was not in the overseer's authority to grant her request. On the basis of this theory, Campbell suggests a literal interpretation of the boy's description of

⁵ Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (WBC 9; Dallas: Word Books, 1996), 114.

⁶ Regarding the possibility of changing the text from עמררים ("sheaves") to עמיררים (plural of "cut grain," "swath"), see Paul Joüon, *Ruth: Commentaire philologique et exégétique* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1953), 49; Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth*, 46. Michael Moore is likewise inclined to accept this emendation (*Ruth* [NIBCOT 5; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000], 330).

⁷ Bush, *Ruth*, 114.

⁸ Cf. Joseph Roth-Rotem, "The 'Minor Characters' in the Story of the Book of Ruth" (in Hebrew), *Beit Mikra* 49 (2004): 80.

⁹ The difficulty entailed in interpreting this verse is exemplified in Campbell's treatment: he does not translate it at all in the body of the text (*Ruth*, 85), and only in his annotation does he suggest the various possible readings (pp. 94–96).

Ruth as "standing from morning until now" (ותעמוד מאז הבקר ועד עתה): "she arrived and has stood"—Ruth stands in the field and awaits the answer of the owner of the field, which will be given with his return."¹⁰ Jack Sasson adopts this approach and adds that Ruth "was deliberately presenting the overseer with a request he was not in position to grant." According to Sasson, Boaz initially refuses her request and only after dinner grants her permission to gather also among the sheaves (v. 15).¹¹

Robert Hubbard agrees with this approach but, unlike Sasson, contends that Boaz had granted Ruth's request from the beginning. Verse 15 should thus be understood as Boaz's instructions to the reapers, in which he informs them of the permission Ruth had been granted earlier in the day.¹²

An alternative interpretation of the prepositional letter ב that solves the difficulty in content emerges from the Aramaic translation of Ruth: אצבור כען ואכנוש שובלין באלומיא. This means that Ruth wished to glean stalks of grain and gather them into sheaves (bundles). This reading is developed by Bush, who translates the verse such that the prepositional letter ב serves not as a description of place but rather as an adverbial expression of manner: "She asked, 'May I glean stalks of grain and gather them *in bundles* behind the reapers?'"¹³

Needless to say, this reading obviates the need to explain Ruth's peculiar request to gather among the sheaves—for she never made such a request. Her only intention was to take the stalks of grain that she would glean and then "gather in bundles."

The various readings of this verse that have been suggested are predicated on two underlying assumptions that, I believe, are not correct. I suggest that the story's presentation leads to a different reading, according to which Ruth did not ask the boy for anything, and the peculiarity of this scene is one of the important features that significantly impacts our understanding of the literary role played by the supervising boy.

The first assumption on which the aforementioned researchers' interpretations are based is that the supervising boy indeed cites Ruth's request, despite the fact that her request is not related by the narrator:

The narrator's clever withholding of the information, rather than reporting it when it happened (between vv. 3 and 4), enables him to introduce the notion of coincidence in vv. 3–4. Now, through a flashback in indirect speech, he finally

¹⁰ Campbell, *Ruth*, 96.

¹¹ Sasson, *Ruth*, 47, 56; quotation from 47. For a critique of this method and a discussion of its inherent difficulties, see Bush, *Ruth*, 115–16.

¹² Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 154, 176. For a critique of his reading, see Bush, *Ruth*, 116–17.

¹³ Bush, *Ruth*, 117, 107; quotation from 107 (emphasis mine). Linafelt has also adopted this interpretation (*Ruth*, 32).

informed the audience, presumably since knowledge of her words was necessary to understand what followed.¹⁴

Adele Berlin calls attention to the narrative style in which the reader of Scripture is given a certain detail at a later point in the story. She cites Ruth's request from the boy as a typical example, as the reader learns of this request only from the boy's report to his master.¹⁵ However, must we indeed understand the boy's words as a direct citation of Ruth's request? The verb "to say" in the Bible often expresses a thought or plan, especially when it refers to an explanation for the intentions underlying a certain action (an explanation given both by the narrator and one of the characters). Thus, for example, the narrator describes Jacob's actions before he meets Esau as follows: "And he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two camps; *and he said*: 'If Esau come to the one camp, and smite it, then the camp which is left shall escape'" (Gen 32:7–8). We may assume that Jacob does not speak to anyone in particular; rather, the narrator employs this image as a means of revealing the protagonist's thoughts, as if to say, "and he said to himself."¹⁶ This style is used not only by the narrator but also by other characters in describing the actions of others. Thus, for example, Sasson suggests interpreting Ruth's report to Naomi about Boaz's gesture not as a direct citation of what Boaz had said but rather as her interpretation of his actions: "And she said: 'These six measures of barley gave he me; for he said to me: Go not empty unto thy mother-in-law'" (3:17).¹⁷

It seems that this biblical style should be adopted in order to understand the boy's words to Boaz, as well. Ruth did not say anything special and did not ask for anything. With her arrival at the field, she began gleaning stalks of grain, joining the other poor people of the city. The boy here intends simply to describe Ruth's actions, why she is doing what she is doing (gleaning);¹⁸ the boy's remarks to Boaz do not add any detail of which the reader has yet to be informed. The discussion between Ruth and the supervising boy, which researchers thought to recreate in light of the boy's words, never actually occurred. Hence, Rudolph's translation of this verse (following Syriac and Vulgate) is the preferable rendition: "sie hat gebeten:

¹⁴ Hubbard, *Book of Ruth*, 147–48.

¹⁵ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Bible and Literature Series; Sheffield: Almond 1983), 96.

¹⁶ See BDB, 56. We similarly find later in the story of Ruth, "and I thought to disclose it unto thee, saying: Buy it before them that sit here, and before the elders of my people" (Ruth 4:4).

¹⁷ Sasson (*Ruth*, 101), in contrast to Campbell (*Ruth*, 129) and Zakovitch (*Ruth*, 99), who view these words as a precise citation of Boaz's remarks. I prefer Sasson's reading. Not only is this Ruth's understanding of the events, but it is not at all clear that this was Boaz's intention in giving the barley. Similar ambiguity arises elsewhere, e.g., Gen 32:21; 2 Sam 17:3.

¹⁸ Rashi already explained this verse to mean, "and she said—in her heart." Hubbard (*Book of Ruth*, 136) suggests this same approach in interpreting Ruth's words to Naomi in v. 2, "I am going to the fields," and I believe he is correct (see Hubbard's n. 1, and NIV).

Ich möchte gern mit lessen und Hakme sammeln hinter den Schnittern her, dann ist sie hingegangen und auf den Beinen gewesen vom Morgen bis jetzt."¹⁹ ("She said, 'I shall gather blades behind the reapers.'")

The interpretation of the boy's words as an actual citation and a request that Ruth did indeed make is probably based on the addition of the transitive expression of request (אֵלֶּקְטָה נָא, "please let me glean"). One thinking to oneself does not need a transitive expression of request, and this may account for the view that Ruth in fact made such a request. However, this line of reasoning is flawed. In this context, the word נָא should be viewed not as a transitive expression of request but rather in accordance with its alternative meaning, "now."²⁰ The style of this verse ("said . . . now [נָא]") resembles a common construction that is found in many passages, for example, "And Moses said, 'I will turn aside now (נָא) and see this great sight'" (Exod 3:3); and "And the LORD said: 'Verily, the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great . . . I will go down now (נָא) and see . . .'" (Gen 18:20–21).

This reading leads to the next, more significant step in deciphering this verse. The second assumption made by some scholars is that the boy indeed conveys accurate information about Ruth, but this idea does not emerge from the story's presentation. The boy's words reflect his perspective on Ruth's actions, his perception and thoughts, rather than a complete, accurate description of Ruth and her conduct.²¹

¹⁹ Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth*, 45. Cf. also Gillis Gerleman, *Ruth: Das Hohelied* (BKAT 18; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965), 22, 26. Campbell mentions this interpretation (p. 95), but disregards it later in his commentary.

²⁰ BDB, 609.

²¹ Several leading literary scholars have already noted the importance of distinguishing between different frames of reference in general literature. See, e.g., Cleanth Brooks and Robert P. Warren, *Understanding Fiction* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1943); Frank K. Stanzel, *Die typischen Erzählsituationen in Roman* (Vienna: Braumüller, 1955); Norman Friedman, "Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept," *PMLA* 70 (1955): 1160–84; Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Boris Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition: The Structure of the Artistic Text and Typology of a Compositional Form* (trans. Valentina Zavarin and Susan Wittig; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen 1983).

Gérard Genette famously preferred the term "focalization" over "frame of reference," as this term incorporates as well the processes of perceiving the character in terms of memory, feelings, and modes of thought (*Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* [trans. Jane Lewin; Ithaca, NY/London: Cornell University Press, 1980]). This emphasis is of great importance here in that the supervising boy's words reveal his general feelings toward Ruth (not only what his eyes see).

Several researchers noted the importance of this point in the analysis of biblical narrative; see, e.g., Mieke Bal, *Narratologie: Essais sur la signification narrative dans quatre romans modernes* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977), 107–26; Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 43–82; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 129–52; David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 112–19; Frank Polak, *Biblical Narrative:*

This point is critical for resolving the difficulty we mentioned earlier, how Ruth dared to ask for such an extraordinary privilege. The answer is, quite simply, that Ruth never did ask for such a privilege; this is merely the perspective of the supervising boy and the manner in which he sought to characterize Ruth!²²

This interpretation emerges naturally from the similarities between Ruth’s comments to Naomi and the description of the supervising boy. The narrator encourages this comparison by using similar expressions in the two contexts:

Ruth–Naomi (2:2)	Supervisor–Boaz (2:7)
And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi:	And she said:
Please let me go to the field	Please let me
And glean Among the ears of grain	Glean and gather Among the sheaves
After one in whose sight I may find favor	After the reapers

There are three important differences between Ruth’s words to Naomi and Ruth’s words as reported from the perspective of the supervising boy:

1. Ruth uses only the verb “to glean,” which connotes a delicate and precise gathering. The narrator likewise uses this verb later in describing her work in the field: ותלקט, “So she gleaned in the field” (2:17). The boy, by contrast, mentions the verb “to glean” and then immediately adds the verb “to gather,” which, unlike the former term, expresses a crude and haphazard gathering. An effective illustration of the contrast between the two verbs can be found in the narrative of Israel’s complaints in the desert regarding the manna and the quail. The narrator describes the gathering of the manna with the verb “to glean”: “Now the manna was like coriander seed. . . . The people went about and ‘gathered’ (ולקטו) it” (Num 11:7–8). By contrast, the narrator describes the haphazard collection of quail with the verb “to gather”: “And the people rose up all that day and all the night and all the next

Aspects of Art and Design (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1994), 324–30; Gary Yamasaki, “Point of View in a Gospel Story: What Difference Does It Make?” *JBL* 125 (2006): 89–105. Berlin, too, mentions this important point with respect to the supervising boy’s words, but she believes that his words should be regarded as reliable information: “Ruth’s words are quoted within the speech of the foreman. Yet this is the first we hear of this encounter; the scene in which Ruth actually spoke to the foreman is not included in the narrative” (*Poetics and Interpretation*, 96).

²² In truth, this reading is valid even for those who claim that the boy records an actual request by Ruth, because according to this reading Ruth’s request is reported by the boy, so the reader first encounters Ruth’s words as the boy chooses to phrase them.

day and gathered (וַיִּסְפוּ) the quails: he that gathered least gathered (אָסַף) ten heaps" (Num 11:32).²³

2. This difference relates integrally to a more basic difference: according to what Ruth says, her plan is to glean among "the stalks of grain," while the boy describes her as coming to gather among "the sheaves."

3. Another slight difference is that Ruth tells Naomi she is going to glean "after one in whose sight I may find favor." It stands to reason that she refers to the field's owner, who can give her as much as he sees fit. The supervisor boy, however, changed (unknowingly, of course) the meaning to "after the reapers." As a result, the broader meaning of the term "after" in Ruth's words becomes, in the boy's words to Boaz, a much narrower reference, a technical description of the place where the grain is gathered. This, in turn, alludes to yet another difference, with regard to the question of who is the master in the field. Ruth, in speaking to Naomi, makes reference to the owner of the field, whereas the boy replaces his master with himself.

All these differences result from the supervisor's frame of reference and invite the reader to enter the boy's mind, as his words, particularly in light of the minor changes he introduces in Ruth's words to Naomi, reveal his feelings toward Ruth.²⁴

The conventional approach among the scholars perceives the boy as a positive character in the story, one on whom Ruth has made a good impression. Indeed, this boy has received many compliments. Yair Zakovitch, for example, wrote the following regarding the boy's words:

It is the Moabite damsel who returned with Naomi out of the country of Moab. . . . The boy, too, shares the perspective on Ruth's coming to Beit Lehem as a return, and his words therefore express sympathy for Ruth. Ruth's Moabite origins are mentioned twice in the scriptures, a fact that serves to glorify the impression of her clinging to her mother-in-law. Moreover, the boy's refraining from saying that Ruth is Naomi's daughter-in-law clarifies that it was not a familial-judicial commitment that had motivated Ruth to act as she did, but rather her spirit, the spirit of grace.²⁵

Hubbard similarly writes:

One must not miss, however, the narrator's design in this surprisingly lengthy report. The mention of Ruth's return with Naomi (v. 6) was meant to link the woman before him with what Boaz has heard about her. Further, Ruth was to emerge as an admirable character—indeed, a model of true devotion.²⁶

²³ Modern translations do not draw this distinction and uniformly translate both verbs as "gathered."

²⁴ Recall that Boaz had only asked him for the girl's identity; all other details included in the boy's answer are his voluntary addition (cf. Bush, *Ruth*, 128).

²⁵ Zakovitch, *Ruth*, 71.

²⁶ Hubbard, *Book of Ruth*, 152. Roth-Rotem wrote similarly, "He [the supervising boy]

I believe that, contrary to these comments, the narrator depicts the boy as having reservations regarding Ruth and her conduct in the field. Such a reading has been suggested by Moshe Garsiel:

According to our evaluation, the supervisor intended to condemn her, and these are the signs that attest to it: he does not say her name, and does not mention her familial affinity with Naomi, for him she is simply a "Moabite damsel that came back with Naomi out of the country of Moab." The anonymity, while emphasizing the foreign origin, reflects contempt.²⁷

It is possible that the boy is impressed by her diligence, yet this diligence only adds to the boy's uneasiness with the Moabite girl, as I will soon clarify.

The various differences between the boy's description and Ruth's words are all related to the supervising boy's feeling that Ruth gathered grain excessively. He seems to insinuate to his master, the field's owner, that this girl is not like the other gatherers, and that she must be carefully watched because she gathers too much grain. This is suggested by the shift from the verb "glean" to the verb "gather," as well as by the change in reference to the place of gathering. One cannot collect too much grain when gathering among the stalks, whereas among the sheaves the gatherer can take whole sheaves or at least parts of sheaves, which consist of many stalks of grain. As mentioned earlier, this was not the customary practice in the fields of Beit Lehem. The expressions of kindness in Ruth's words ("After one in whose sight I may find favor"), which the boy omits in his report to Boaz, emphasize that, from the supervising boy's perspective, what the girl saw before her was only the reapers and the grain, and no act of grace was involved at all.²⁸

reveals also his positive evaluation of Ruth and his elation over her personality" ("Minor Characters," 79). He detects in the supervising boy's words "covert criticism regarding Boaz's behavior towards Naomi and Ruth in Bet Lehem" (p. 80). In my view, the text makes no indication of such criticism, and, as will soon become clear, the covert criticism in the boy's words is directed at Ruth and not at his master.

²⁷ Moshe Garsiel, "The Literary Structure, Plot Development and Narrator's Intentions in the Scroll of Ruth" (in Hebrew), *Hagut Ba-Mikra* 3 (1979): 71. Cf. Avi Hurvitz, who writes that the supervising boy "speaks in an apologetic and confused manner because he is not sure whether the 'boss' will approve of the fact that the overseer has given Ruth his permission to stay . . . inside the house reserved specifically for Boaz's workers" ("Ruth 2:7—A Midrashic gloss?" ZAW 95 [1983]: 122–23).

²⁸ This difference assumes particular significance in light of the secondary meaning of Ruth's words to Naomi, as the narrator uses her words about "the one in whose sight she may find favor" and turns it into a central motif in the chapter (Campbell, *Ruth*, 96). Thus, the boy, who omits this expression from Ruth's remarks, does not conform to the general trend of creating closeness between Boaz and Ruth, serving instead as someone who separates them. See also Sasson (*Ruth*, 42–43), who claims that the expression "to find favor" is always mentioned in a context in which the beneficent is already known, and he thus concludes that here, too, Ruth is thinking about Boaz (who is mentioned in v. 1) when using the expression. Hubbard (*Book of Ruth*, 138 n. 13),

Further support for this reading may be drawn from the name the boy uses in identifying Ruth to Boaz: "Moabite damsel"! Zakovitch takes note of this unflattering reference and writes, "The text presents Ruth at the lowest point of the social ladder. From here on, she can only rise."²⁹ I agree that Ruth is presented as one at the "lowest point of the social ladder," but, *pace* Zakovitch, I think it is not the "text" that presents her in such a manner but the supervising boy. The boy identifies her with this degrading description in order to cause his master to dissociate himself from Ruth. The designation of Ruth as a "Moabite" receives emphasis in the boy's words through the double repetition of her origin ("Moabite damsel . . . country of Moab").³⁰

In light of this, it is likely that the boy's subsequent remarks similarly express his reservations toward Ruth: "So she came, and hath continued even from the morning until now, save that she tarried a little in the house" (2:7). This is a most difficult verse, which has received various interpretations.³¹ The most common reading interprets this clause as a description of Ruth's unique diligence, emphasizing that she worked almost a complete day without stopping.³² But in light of the boy's insinuations, as discussed, one must wonder whether the boy compliments Ruth for her diligence or perhaps warns his master, the field's owner, of this woman, who has been gathering grain for an entire day on his account.

By paying close attention to the changing frames of reference in the narrative, we can explain the difficult verse that has been discussed (7). The difficulty concerning Ruth's request to gather among the sheaves is easily resolved, for, as mentioned, this request is expressed only from the supervising boy's perspective, and not by Ruth herself.

With this approach, one can trace the literary role served by the boy in the narrative. Like the other minor characters, the boy is to illuminate the character of

however, disagrees and claims, correctly, that since it is the narrator who mentions Boaz in v. 1, not Ruth or Naomi, it is difficult to assume that Boaz is present in the consciousness of these two characters during their discussion. The reader, however, can sense the narrator's allusions through the combination of these two clauses (v. 1 and v. 2).

²⁹ Zakovitch, *Ruth*, 71.

³⁰ Cf. Hubbard, *Book of Ruth*, 137.

³¹ "The last words of v. 7 are the most obscure in the entire book" (Hubbard, *Book of Ruth*, 150). D. R. G. Beattie claims that this part of the verse is a "midrashic gloss" ("A Midrashic Gloss in Ruth 2,7," *ZAW* 89 [1977]: 122–24). Hurvitz, however, rejects this and claims that in these words the boy is presented as confused and apologetic ("Ruth 2:7," 122–23). For more on this issue, see D. R. G. Beattie, "Ruth 2,7 and Midrash," *ZAW* 99 (1987): 422–23; Michael Carasik, "Ruth 2,7: Why the Overseer Was Embarrassed," *ZAW* 107 (1995): 493–94.

³² "This is commonly interpreted as, 'she came and stood on her feet and gathered stalks of grain from early morning till now, and only a short while ago did she stop and go sit in the house (= a booth that serves as a place of rest and shelter for the reapers).' According to this interpretation, the boy emphasizes to Boaz Ruth's diligence" (Yair Zakovitch, *The Scrolls* [in Hebrew; Olam Ha-Tanakh; Tel Aviv: Davidzon-Ati, 1994], 88).

the protagonist.³³ Boaz, who speaks kindly to Ruth (“my daughter”), is portrayed as a uniquely kind character, particularly against the background of the boy’s reservations regarding this Moabite girl. Yet, unlike other minor characters in the story (Orpah in ch. 1 and the redeemer in ch. 4), the supervising boy advances the plot and influences Boaz’s behavior. Several scholars have suggested that the chapter is built on a “reversed,” or “chiastic,” structure, but they disagree about how the chapter should be divided and its precise structure. I will present the two central opinions on the issue, and then offer a third option.³⁴

A. Boyd Luter and Richard O. Rigsby suggest that the chapter is built on a chiastic structure with four components in each half:³⁵

- A SECTION 1: Introducing Boaz, the channel of grace; the situation needing grace; and the action: chancing into Boaz’s field setting up opportunity for grace.
- B SECTION 2: Gracious, kind greeting by Boaz.
- C SECTION 3: Ruth identified by head worker and her extraordinary request for grace.
- D SECTION 4: Boaz begins to grant favor; Ruth’s question.
- D’ SECTION 5: Boaz’s answer; Ruth requesting continued favor.
- C’ SECTION 6: Boaz’s extraordinary invitation and Ruth’s protection from the other workers.
- B’ SECTION 7: Ruth, recipient of Boaz’s generosity.
- A’ SECTION 8: Recounting to Naomi her “luck” in Boaz’s field.

Another suggestion is mentioned by Bush, dividing the chapter into two halves, each consisting of two sections linked by a chiastic relationship:³⁶

³³ I do not intend here to conclude definitively that the boy should be perceived as a “minor character” rather than “background” or “extra” in the plot (a common role in biblical narrative; see Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 23). However, since this boy advances the plot—as I will soon demonstrate—it is possible to consider him an actual minor character. As for the role of the minor character in biblical narrative, see Uriel Simon’s important study “Minor Characters in Biblical Narrative” (in Hebrew), *The Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (1979): 31–36; Polack, *Biblical Narrative*, 255–61. Regarding minor characters in Ruth, see, e.g., Zakovitch, *Ruth*, 7–8.

³⁴ For an additional approach (also claiming a chiastic structure), see Yehuda T. Radday and John W. Welch, “The Structure of Ruth” (in Hebrew), *Beit Mikra* 24, no. 2 (1979): 184–85; Yehuda T. Radday, “Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Narrative,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (ed. John W. Welch; Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981), 72–73.

³⁵ A. Boyd Luter and Richard O. Rigsby, “The Chiastic Structure of Ruth,” *BBR* 3 (1995): 49–58. They emphasize that the unit clearly begins with 2:1 as evidenced by the syntax of the sentence. This is already mentioned by Hubbard, *Book of Ruth*, 132.

³⁶ Bush, *Ruth*, 110.

Narrative Introduction (v. 4a)

- A Conversation between Boaz and his workers about Ruth and her gleaning (vv. 4–7).
- B Conversation between Boaz and Ruth: he grants her exceptional privileges and explains why (vv. 9–13).
- B' Actions involving Boaz and Ruth: He grants her exceptional privileges at the noon meal (v. 14).
- A' Conversation between Boaz and his workers about Ruth and her gleaning (vv. 15–16).

Narrative Conclusion (v. 17a)

In my opinion, the inner structure of the chapter is indeed a reversed structure, but it should be arranged differently. Each half consists of seven components, and the structure is not chiasmic, but rather concentric, meaning that both halves revolve around the central axis of this scene:

- [A 1:22 Background and setting: "So Naomi returned . . . and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest."]
- B 2:1 Presenting Boaz as a relative: "and his name was Boaz."
- C 2:2 Ruth and Naomi at home: "Let me now go to the field."
- D 2:3 Ruth's arrival at the field and the gleaning of the grain: "And she went, and came and gleaned in the field."
- E 2:4–7 Boaz and the reapers: "gather after the reapers among the sheaves."
- F 2:8–9 Boaz's words to Ruth: "when thou art athirst, go unto the vessels, and drink of that which the young men have drawn."³⁷
- G 2:10 Ruth's words to Boaz: "Why have I found favor in thy sight?"
- H 2:11–12 Boaz's words about Ruth's grace toward Naomi and the reward she deserves from God.
- G' 2:13 Ruth's words to Boaz: "Let me find favor in thy sight."
- F' 2:14 Boaz's words to Ruth: "Come hither, and eat of the bread."
- E' 2:15–16 Boaz and the reapers: "Let her glean even among the sheaves."

³⁷ For an arrangement of Boaz's comments into a small chiasmic structure, see Linafelt, *Ruth*, 33.

- D' 2:17 Ruth continues to glean the grain: "So she gleaned in the field until evening."
 C' 2:18 Ruth's return to Naomi's home: "and went into the city."
 B' 2:19–22 Naomi reveals to Ruth that Boaz is a relative: "The man's name with whom I wrought today is Boaz."
 A' 2:23 Conclusion and setting: "unto the end of barley harvest and of wheat harvest; and she dwelt with her mother-in-law."

The frame of the chapter, as Campbell has already noted, is the dialogue between Ruth and Naomi at their home. Ruth leaves Naomi and returns to her at the end of the scene.³⁸ An interesting wordplay is implied within this frame (A, B, C–A', B', C').³⁹ At the beginning the text has, "So Naomi returned (וַתָּשָׁב),⁴⁰" and at the end it says, "She dwelt (וַתֵּשָׁב) with her mother-in-law." This wordplay is part of a wider wordplay between these verbs, which encompasses the complete story, as Robert Alter has already noted.⁴¹ In the present context, the association between these two verbs lowers the reader's expectations. The reader innocently assumes that after Ruth "returns" with Naomi and meets Boaz in the field, she will be granted the privilege to "dwell" with him; but, at least for now, she continues to "dwell" with her mother-in-law.⁴¹ At the same time, however, the reader's expectations begin to build. In ch. 1, the reader meets Ruth, who "clings" to her mother-in-law (1:14); now, at the end of ch. 2, Ruth clings to Boaz's girls (2:23). It is as if the narrator seeks to suggest to the reader that Ruth is indeed drawing nearer to the one who will redeem her, the one to whom she will cling for the rest of her life.

Campbell also notes the link between v. 1 and v. 19, both of which mention Boaz's name and the fact that he belongs to Elimelech's family.⁴² It is the reader who first receives this information, which Ruth learns only later. As mentioned above, these links constitute only the frame of an elaborate concentric structure. The cen-

³⁸ Campbell, *Ruth*, 109.

³⁹ I do not necessarily disagree with those who claim that the unit begins with 2:1. However, the end of the previous scene serves as background for the present scene and must, therefore, be taken into account in the context of the structure of the unit.

⁴⁰ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 58–60. This phenomenon, of a literary structure that places words with similar sounds but different meanings parallel to one another, is widespread both in prophetic literature (Jonathan Grossman, "'Structural Ambiguity' in Ezekiel 33–38" [in Hebrew], *Beit Mikra* 49 [2004]: 194–224) and in biblical narrative (idem, "Ambiguity in the Biblical Narrative and Its Contribution to the Literary Formation" [Ph.D. diss., Bar Ilan University, 2006], 112–23).

⁴¹ Garsiel demonstrates how every scene in the book of Ruth is built in this manner. During the scene, readers assume that the tangle of the plot is going to be unraveled, but at the end of the scene they are disappointed to find a new complication. See Garsiel, "Literary Structure," 66–83.

⁴² Campbell, *Ruth*, 109.

tral axis of the structure features Boaz's words to Ruth, in which he mentions Ruth's unique kindness toward her mother-in-law (a central motif of the plot),⁴³ and God, as the one who will reward Ruth for her kindness.

This structure is itself worthy of an independent discussion; for the present, I would like to address only the association between v. 7 and v. 15. As mentioned, a number of scholars note that, since it is only in v. 15 that Boaz allows Ruth to glean among the sheaves, "it is incongruous to have Ruth request and receive permission to glean among the sheaves here [in v. 7]."⁴⁴

I have already pointed out that indeed Ruth never asked for such permission and that v. 7 presents only the boy's perception of Ruth. Verse 15, however, has also been misunderstood. Hubbard is correct in noting that in this verse Boaz speaks not to Ruth but to his workers: "Boaz commanded his young men, saying, 'Let her glean even among the sheaves.'"⁴⁵

According to the concentric structure of this unit, this dialogue between Boaz and his workers (element E') corresponds to the previous dialogue between Boaz and the supervising boy (element E). Thus, the literary design of Boaz's grace reaches its peak: Ruth indeed gleans "among the stalks of grain"—as she had told Naomi in the beginning and as the narrator describes her actions. Boaz, however, expands the boundaries of her gleaning to a place that is usually not meant for

⁴³ Boaz's remarks contain two allusions to the book of Genesis, which also contribute to the unique beauty of his words. First, the reader is reminded of Abraham, who also left his parents and country to go to an unknown land ("Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house unto the land that I will show thee [Gen 12:1]). In this comparison, Ruth's character is illuminated against the background of the father of the Israelite nation, which adds to the positive assessment of her conduct. Moreover, Abraham left his homeland because of a divine command, while Ruth relocates voluntarily, motivated by human grace (Phyllis Trible, "A Human Comedy," in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978], 166–99). Second, Boaz's words remind the reader of the second story of creation: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife" (Gen 2:24). When reading Boaz's words, the reader finds a passage parallel to the first clause ("leave his father and his mother") and wonders whether there will be a passage parallel to the second clause ("and shall cleave unto his wife"). As mentioned, the scene concludes with this verb ("cleave"), which is then transferred to "Boaz's girls," rather than to Boaz himself. Many writers have noted these associations. Yefet Ben Eli interpreted Boaz's comments to mean, "You came to a foreign country, to the place of religious principles, as did Abraham our father, who left his ancestors and relatives for the love of religion" (cited in Zakovitch, *Ruth*, 76). Garsiel viewed the comparison to the creation story as a means of glorifying Ruth's character: in the story of creation, a man leaves his father and mother in order to cling to his wife, while Ruth clung to her husband's mother after his death, when no hope could be seen in the future ("Literary Structure," 69).

⁴⁴ Campbell, *Ruth*, 94.

⁴⁵ Hubbard, *Book of Ruth*, 176. The narrator emphasizes this by first describing Ruth's actions ("And when she was risen up to glean") and then immediately thereafter presenting the introduction to Boaz's command ("Boaz commanded his young men, saying . . ."). The reader expects to hear Boaz's words to Ruth, but Boaz instead directs his words to his workers, not to Ruth.

gleaning (“among the sheaves”), and he does so, as the structure of the scene reveals, in reaction to the supervisor boy’s remarks.

In other words, the boy thought that with slight exaggeration he could persuade his master to impose restrictions on the Moabite girl who had recently arrived and begun descending on the field. Boaz, however, not only chooses not to impose restrictions but uses the boy’s words to expand his kind gestures to Ruth further. It is not coincidental that Boaz adds, “Let her glean even among the sheaves, and put her not to shame . . . and rebuke her not” (2:15–16). Evidently, Boaz is well aware of the atmosphere surrounding the boy and his workers.⁴⁶

In summary, the key to resolving the difficulty in interpreting Ruth 2:7 lies in the changing frames of reference in the chapter. This verse reflects the perspective of the supervising boy, who has reservations regarding Ruth and her behavior in the field. The narrator presents the boy as a minor figure whose role is to illuminate the character of Boaz. Indeed, the structure of the chapter presents the boy’s reservations opposite Boaz’s abundant kindness toward Ruth, allowing her to glean even among the sheaves and instructing his workers not to prevent her from doing so.

⁴⁶ Regarding the concern for Ruth’s safety in the field (in terms of the relation between Boaz’s words in v. 9 and Naomi’s words to Ruth in v. 22), see David Shepherd, “Violence in the Fields? Translating, Reading, and Revising in Ruth 2,” *CBQ* 63 (2001): 444–61.