

The Function of Double Entendre in Ruth Threeⁱ
Journal of Translation & Textlinguistics Vol. 7 No. 1 (1995): 19-27.

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ABSTRACT

This article provides evidence for the existence of double entendre in Ruth three, explains its function as a device to maintain tension, and examines the challenge of translating the figures of speech employed.

In the book of Ruth there are three principle characters: Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. Ruth and Boaz are portrayed as righteous people, people who show *hesed* [חֶסֶד] 'loving kindness' to others. A subplot of the story is whether they will yield to temptation. This adds tension to the story, this tension reaching its highest point in the middle of chapter 3. Besides helping to make for a good story, the tension reflects the struggle between good and evil, with good triumphing. Chapter 4 provides the audience with another example of the victory of good.

Setting and Events

Although neither the author of the book nor the date of composition is stated, we may assume that, whenever it was written, the original audience was familiar with the setting of the story, that is, the history and culture of the period of the judges and the euphemisms which the author used.

The setting helps to build tension in the first three chapters. The story is set during the rule of the judges (1.1), a period well known as a time of lawlessness.¹ The last three chapters of Judges show how bad conditions finally became. There are hints of this lawlessness in Ruth. In 2.9 Boaz tells Ruth that she should remain close to his workers and that he will warn (/has warned) his men not 'to molest' her (*ng'*) [נגע]. In 2.22 Naomi tells Ruth to stay with Boaz's female workers so that she will not be 'attacked' (*pg'*) [פגע].

In chapter 3 the tension increases. Naomi informs Ruth that Boaz will be working at the threshing floor that night (3.2). Night is considered to <p. 20> be a time for sinful, not for righteous deeds. Threshing floors were well known for being the scenes of sinful behavior² Naomi instructs Ruth to make herself attractive. She is to bathe, put on perfume and her best (?)³ clothes (3.3). She is to wait until Boaz finishes eating and drinking, presumably wine, watch where he lies down, and after he is asleep, secretly go over to him, uncover his feet, and lie down. This is not the normal behavior for a righteous widow and ordinarily would be a dangerous course to follow. It also may be that the author wants the reader to think about

¹ Cf. Hubbard (1988:84); Slotki (1946:36–37, 41).

² Cf. Hubbard (1988:201), "But an important point to remember during the next scene is that the popular mind associated threshing floors with licentiousness."

³ The Hebrew word for 'her clothes' is *šimlōtak* [שִׁמְלֹתֶיךָ]. (The *ketiv* 'what is written' in the text, has the singular form of the noun. The *qere* 'what is to be read' instead has the plural form). Commentators and translators are divided as to the exact meaning here. Opinions range from 'wedding garments' to 'everyday clothes'. Some, following the *ketiv*, other Hebrew manuscripts, and the Septuagint, read the word as singular and translate it as 'mantle'. They equate this with the outer garment which Boaz calls *mitpahat* [מִטְפָּחַת] (3.15).

women who were in similar situations, for example, Tamar⁴ (Genesis 38) and perhaps even Lot's daughters (Genesis 19), one of whom was the mother of the Moabites.

The author may have been trying to increase the sense of secrecy and darkness by changing the way the main participants are referenced at the threshing floor (3.6–15). In fact in this chapter the names of Boaz and Ruth are used very sparsely.

In the dialog between Ruth and Boaz (3.9–15) neither is referenced as subject except for the obligatory subject marking on the verb. (The different gender markings on the verb are sufficient to distinguish the speakers.) In the conversation between them in chapter 2 (verses 8–14) Boaz's name is used each time he speaks.

Boaz is not mentioned by name after 3.7. The proper noun is used to indicate that he is the subject of a verb only once in the chapter (3.7). He is referred to as 'the man' three times (verses 8, 16, 18). In chapter 2 Boaz is on the scene from v.4 to v. 16. He is the subject of seven verbs, and his name is used as the subject six times.

Ruth's name is only mentioned once in chapter 3. This is when she identifies herself to Boaz (v. 9). In chapter 2 her name is not used as often as Boaz's name; for example, during her dialog with Boaz it is never used as the subject of a verb. Although in chapter 2 Ruth's name is only used as the subject of a verb twice, it is mentioned a total of four <p. 21> times. Ruth is referred to as 'my daughter' four times in chapter 3. If it were not the case that Ruth is often referred to by kinship terms elsewhere, that she identifies herself to Boaz by name, and that Boaz's name is also rare in this chapter, I would suspect that the author is trying to downplay Ruth's personal identity and to emphasize her role in the kinship system.⁵

It is uncertain whether Boaz is alone that night. The author does not mention explicitly that any of Boaz's workers are with him at the threshing floor. If he is alone, then the intimacy of the setting would be heightened and contribute to the feeling that no one will know if they sin. However, evidence for Boaz's workers being present is found in Boaz's speech in 3.14. 'Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.' Some claim that Boaz is addressing this speech to his workers who are offstage. Others take 'mr [אמר] here to mean 'think' instead of 'say'. If he is talking to his workers, who have spent the night helping him guard the grain, then it would lend extra significance to Naomi's warning in 3.4 to watch where Boaz lies down. It would have been disastrous for Ruth to lie down next to the wrong man.⁶

Ruth follows Naomi's plan. She goes down to the threshing floor and waits while Boaz eats and drinks. Then Boaz, feeling merry, lies down. Ruth notes where he lies down, goes over to him, uncovers his feet, and lies down. At midnight Boaz wakes up. Either he 'rolls over', 'bends forward', or 'feels around'.⁷ He is surprised to find a woman at his feet. After some discussion of marriage, he instructs her to lie down until morning. She lies down at his feet. While it is still dark he gives her a large gift, and she leaves before anyone can observe her.

⁴ Note the reference to Tamar in 4.12.

⁵ [Naomi may be central. REL, editor.]

⁶ Cf. Hubbard (1988:203).

⁷ The translation depends on the meaning of the niphal form of *lpt* [לפת] in 3.8.

Double Entendre

Chapter 3 is full of double entendres, most of which can be euphemisms for sexual terms. There are so many that I contend that this use was not an accident. The author purposefully uses them to increase tension.⁸ <p. 22>

yd' [ידע] (verses 3, 4, 11, 14, 18) normally has the meaning 'to observe', but can be a euphemism for 'to have sexual' intercourse with; cf. Genesis 4.1, 19.8.

škb [שכב] (verses 4, 4, 4, 7, 7, 8, 13, 14) normally has the meaning 'to lie down' but can be a euphemism for 'to have sexual intercourse with'; cf. Genesis 30.15, 19.32.

bw' [בוא] (verses 4, 7, 7, 14, 15, 16) normally has the meaning 'to come in' but can be a euphemism for 'to have sexual intercourse with'; cf. Genesis 16.2; Ruth 4.13.

glh [גלה] (piel) (verses 4, 7) normally has the meaning 'to uncover' but can mean 'to have sexual intercourse with'; cf. Leviticus 18.6; Deuteronomy 27.20.

margēlôt [מַרְגְּלוֹת] (verses 4, 7, 8, 14) is derived from rgl which normally has the meaning 'foot' but can be a euphemism for 'genitals'; cf. 2 Kings 18.27 qere (margin reading), Deuteronomy 28.57; margēlôt [מַרְגְּלוֹת] literally means 'place of the feet' (outside of Ruth the word is only used in Daniel 10.6 where it may mean 'legs'⁹).

wayyîṭab libbô [וַיֵּיטֵב לִבּוֹ] (v. 7) literally means 'his heart was good/happy' and may just mean 'he was merry'; it also can mean that 'he was drunk'; cf. 1 Samuel 25.36; Esther 1.10.

hālak 'aḥar [הִלַּךְ אַחֲרַי] (v. 10) literally means 'to go after' and may mean 'to go after in the pursuit of marriage'; it also can mean 'to go after (in the pursuit of fornication)'; cf. the Targum on this verse, Proverbs 7.22.

Very few of these double entendres would function as such apart from the setting. In fact only 'uncover the feet' has the ability to stand alone as it is used in chapter 3. In verse 3 yd' [ידע] is used in the niph'al stem, but this stem never seems to have the euphemistic meaning. However, the frequent use of these words in combination with the setting indicates that they are functioning as double entendres.

Missing the Whole Point

The author of Ruth so successfully leads the reader to expect a sexual affair that some people have been misled and have missed the whole point of the story. One message of the book is that Ruth and Boaz maintained their righteousness and so demonstrate that the godly can live above their culture. But some readers view chapter three as an example of sacred prostitution:¹⁰ Ruth was a temple prostitute and the <p. 23> threshing floor was a cultic site; Ruth and Boaz were involved in a fertility rite; and before she left, Boaz gave grain to her as her hire.

Cyrus H. Gordon, in an article comparing Hebrew and Eblaite, decided to follow the ketiv in Ruth 4.5, qānîṭî [קָנִיתִי] 'I have acquired', instead of the qere, qānîṭâ [קָנִיתָ] 'you have acquired'. "Boaz and Ruth spent a night together secretly in conjugal embrace (3.14), thus cementing their union through one of the three ways in which a man acquires an eligible woman in marriage (Mishna Qid 1.1)."¹¹

These are only a couple of examples in which scholars have been misled concerning what happens in chapter 3. If Ruth and Boaz had sinned that night on the threshing floor, the historical events of the story might not have been much different, but the meaning of the

⁸ Cf. Hubbard (1988:196); Campbell (1975:131–132).

⁹ Cf. Campbell (1975:121).

¹⁰ Cf. Campbell (1975:7); Hubbard (1988:9–10); and de Waard and Nida (1973:94) for references.

¹¹ Gordon (1987:29) Qid = Qiddushin

story would have been very different. Ruth and Boaz would not have emerged as the antithesis of the lawless characters common to this period.

Translation Challenges

Chapter 3 of Ruth is what makes translation such an exciting undertaking. A good translation of it must contain a strong element of suspense. Will Ruth and Boaz sin? However, the translator must not overdo the suspense and thereby imply that they did sin. It is like walking a tightrope. A translator must check with the receptor language audience in order to ascertain their reaction to chapter 3.

Some of the ancient translators seem to have faced this dilemma. In 3.4, the Syriac omits the part about 'uncovering his feet', and in 3.7 omits Boaz's drinking. Instead of lying at his feet she falls at his feet. The Septuagint (at least some manuscripts) shows a similar tendency in 3.7 where it omits Boaz's drinking and Ruth's lying down. One possible explanation for the differences between the ancient versions and the Hebrew text is that the versions were trying to sanitize the text.¹² (An interesting change in the other direction is one made by the Targum¹³ in verse 10. To the phrase 'go after young men' it adds 'to commit fornication with them'.)¹⁴ⁱⁱ

Campbell in the translation accompanying his commentary translates *margēlōt* [מַרְגְּלוֹת] as 'legs' in verses 4 and 7. "The question is whether the storyteller meant to be ambiguous and hence provocative. It seems to me that he did; therefore the intentional ambiguity of the translation 'legs', which leaves open the question of how much of his legs ..."¹⁵

James Moffatt translates *margēlōt* [מַרְגְּלוֹת] differently and inconsistently, as 'waist' in verses 4 and 7 but as 'feet' in verses 8 and 14. 'Then she crept in noiselessly, uncovered his waist, and lay down there ... there was a woman lying at his feet!' (Ruth 3.7b, 8b).

Campbell makes a good effort to preserve the ambiguity and therefore the tension. Moffatt, however, misses the whole point. Ruth does not uncover Boaz's waist, she uncovers his feet. If the ambiguity cannot be preserved, then the innocuous intended meaning should be used.

Mundhenk and de Waard (1975:420–421) report the following situation:

"Should the Bible Society really be drawing attention to the pornographic parts of the Bible by publishing them as separate portions? Perhaps it was not expressed in exactly this way, but this was certainly the question behind the concern and doubts. The Bible Society of India had decided to publish a book as a special portion aimed at women, in connection with the new UBS emphasis on this "50 per cent of the population". But the book involved was not the Song of Solomon; as some may have already guessed—it was the book of Ruth. These worried translators were not giving theoretical objections about what it might sound like if they translated it. They had just finished putting the book into their own languages, in the best way they could, and it was their own languages, and it was their own work they were having serious reservations about distributing. At first their questions only hinted at what they were thinking: "It would be all right if we could just distribute to adults, but what if the young people get hold of it?" Eventually the real problem became clear. Quite frankly, the plot of the book as it would certainly be

¹² Cf. de Waard and Nida (1973:50, 52, 95).

¹³ "Except for occasional paraphrases, its Aramaic translation of the book follows the Masoretic text quite closely..." Hubbard (1988:3).

¹⁴ Hubbard (1988:214); Campbell (1975:124).

¹⁵ Campbell (1975:121).

understood by readers in these languages, would sound something like this: A young lady, urged on by her mother-in-law, dresses herself up as attractively as possible, and goes sneaking off at night to climb into bed with a man who is her relative. After she seduces him, he agrees to marry her, and he begins to scheme out a way to manage events so as to make their marriage possible."

The rest of this excellent article covers parts of Ruth which may give the wrong impression and presents possible ways to convey the right meaning.

Kenneth Taylor, in the *Living Bible*, makes a concerted effort to avoid ambiguity. In verse 4, Naomi says, '... He will tell you what to do about marriage.' In verse 7, Boaz finishes a good meal; drinking is not mentioned. Taylor does a good job of conveying the meaning of the chapter but has removed most of the tension.

The *Modern Language Bible* manages to add a couple of double entendres, but they probably are unintentional and are unfortunately in the wrong spot (3.16, 18, emphasis mine).

"On her return, Naomi asked her, 'How did you *make out*, my daughter?' She told everything the man had done ... 'Wait quietly, my daughter,' she rejoined, 'until you learn how the *affair* turns out ...' "

No special effort was made in the Choctaw translation of Ruth to increase the tension in chapter 3 by using double entendres or other figurative devices. During the checking process readers were shocked to discover that Ruth would visit a man in a deserted place after dark and lie down at his feet. They were even more shocked when she proposed marriage. It was felt that there was no need to increase the tension any further. The details of the story itself left the outcome in doubt, that is, whether Ruth and Boaz would sin or not. The doubt was resolved (correctly) by the end of the chapter.

Biography

Harry Harm has a B.A. in classical Greek from the University of Maryland Baltimore County, an M.A. in linguistics from the University of Texas at Arlington, and has taken course work toward a Ph.D. He has been a member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics since 1979. He and his wife, Geri, are serving in Mississippi as consultants to the Choctaw Bible Translation Committee.

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ⁱ Transliteration has been improved and the Hebrew has been added in square brackets throughout the document (2017). Page numbers have been added in angle brackets <> so that accurate citation is possible.

ⁱⁱ Added 2017/12 – Ruth 3.10 Targum & translation (Italic type marks differences with MT.)

ואמר בריכא את קדם יי ברתי אוטבת טבותיך בתראי מן קדמאי דאיתגיירת ובתראי דעבדת גרמיך כאיתא דנטרא
ליבם עד זמן דיירבי דלא למהך בתר רובין למעבד זנו עמהון אם מסכן אם עתיר:

He said, "May you be blessed from before the Lord, my daughter. You have made your latter good deed better than your former one, *the former being that you became a proselyte and the latter that you have made yourself as a woman who waits for a minor brother-in-law until the time that he is grown up*, in that you have not gone after young men *to commit fornication with them*, whether poor or rich.

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