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## Hesed in the Book of Ruth and Its Implications for African Christians

### *Hesed dans le livre de Ruth et ses implications pour les chrétiens africains*

Julius Ndishua<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

*The Hebrew word רַחֲמִים hesed (loving-kindness, grace, patience and mercy) is a recurring theme in the book of Ruth that reveals the attributes of God towards hurting people. Christians are trapped in a world that has little or no value for human sanctity, particularly in Africa. The rise of religious conflicts, persistent drought, constant insurgency, climate change, human rights violations, political instability, and economic decline are some recurring causes of why people either relocate or migrate today. Many migrants become refugees within their country of origin or a neighbouring country. For many of them, the hope of returning to their communities or ancestral land is often far-fetched. This research seeks to defend that hesed, in the book of Ruth, reveals the goodness of God towards the hurting and marginalised in society, which can be extended to the downtrodden in Africa. The researcher used a narrative approach to analyse his data. The findings reveal that the hesed of God is much needed today, and it is the sole source of hope and comfort for the hurting in Africa and Cameroon in particular.*

**Keywords:** African, Christian, *hesed*, implications, Ruth

#### Résumé

*Le mot hébreu רַחֲמִים hesed traduit : ‘bonté’, ‘grâce’, ‘patience’ ou ‘miséricorde’ est utilisé de manière récurrente dans le livre de Ruth pour parler des actions de Dieu envers les personnes en détresse. Les Chrétiens se retrouvent parfois confrontés à un monde qui tient peu ou pas du tout aux valeurs de la sainteté de la vie ; et plus particulièrement dans l’Afrique contemporaine. De nos jours, la recrudescence des conflits religieux et des insurgences de tous genres, les violations des droits humains, l’instabilité politique, le déclin économique, ainsi que les défis liés à l’environnement tels que le changement climatique et la sécheresse persistante, sont autant d’événements qui poussent des personnes en détresse à changer de localité ou à migrer. Plusieurs migrants deviennent alors des réfugiés dans leurs propres pays, ou cherchent refuge dans des pays voisins. Pour plusieurs d’entre eux, l’espoir de retourner dans leurs communautés d’origine est loin d’être un acquis. Cette recherche a pour but de démontrer que le mot hesed tel qu’il est employé dans le Livre de Ruth nous révèle la bonté de Dieu envers les personnes en détresse et marginalisées de la société, et que la manifestation de cet attribut divin s’étend aux couches méprisées de la société Africaine. Cette recherche utilise la méthode narrative pour analyser les données. Les résultats de la recherche révèlent que le hesed de Dieu est plus que désirable de nos jours, en tant que seule source d’espoir et de réconfort pour les opprimés au Cameroun et partout en Afrique.*

**Mots clés :** Afrique, Chrétiens, *hesed*, implications, Ruth

#### Introduction

The Hebrew word רַחֲמִים *hesed* is presumably one of the overarching theological themes in the book of Ruth. The word *hesed* that could mean ‘love, mercy, grace, kindness, goodness, benevolence, loyalty, or covenant faithfulness communicates the mind of God for His people (Block, 1999, 607; Campbell, 1996, 65). The expression of *hesed* in the book of Ruth is noticed at both the human and the divine levels. The commitment of Ruth to Naomi in Ruth 1:16-17

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and Boaz's actions to Ruth and Naomi are a few examples. The kindness of the LORD is introduced in Ruth 1:8-9 (Hill and Walton, 2009, 207). Murray Gow (2007) suggests that "the word *hesed* contains gracious element: in a human relationship it mainly describes exceptional acts of human to another, meeting an extreme need outside the normal run of perceived duty, and arising from personal affection or goodness. God shows such kindness to humans in his grace and mercy" (Gow, 2007, 707). Paul Wegner (1996, 615), William Sanford LaSor (1996, 615), Hill and Walton (2000, 207), and Samuel Long (2014, 14) agree with Gow (2007,707) that God's gracious guidance is the focus in the book of Ruth although Phyllis Trible (1992) believes that the word "*Hesed* and *baruk* are the central theme in Ruth. *Hesed* means faithfulness in action and attitude. *Baruk* bestows the God-given blessing of life upon another" (845). In this context, the description of human action that goes beyond its limit is termed an act of grace. If one, out of personal affection in a relationship, offers more than expected to a fellow mate, it becomes an act of grace. The act of grace among humans might not be as the act of grace from God. Gow (2007) situates prayer and blessing as one of the theological themes in Ruth while Trible (1992) situates kindness and blessing as the theological themes in Ruth. However, the word *hesed* in the context of Ruth connotes faithfulness, loyalty, graciousness, kindness, and mercy in action and attitude from an individual to a friend or a relative (Trible 1992, 845). The expression of *hesed* is presumably the overriding theological purpose in the book of Ruth. *Hesed* in the book of Ruth demonstrates the goodness of God towards a people who least expected it. The main thrust of this paper is that the *hesed* of God remains the hope of the hurting and underprivileged in society. The paper addresses the background of the book of Ruth, the theological themes in the book of Ruth, the nature of *hesed* in Ruth, draws some implications, and concludes.

### **Background to The Book of Ruth**

The book of Ruth is situated within the time of the Judges. It begins with a claim that Israel was at peace with the Moabite. The account of unrest between the nation of Israel and Moab betrays the peace deal that is recorded in Judges 3:12-30 (Hinson, 1974, 70). This does not cancel the fact that King David, later on, sought refuge in the land of Moab, as recorded in 1 Samuel 22:3-4. Some believe that King David had it easy because he was of the lineage of Ruth and was accepted to stay in the land. Others think that the narrator included Ruth's story to defend the course of men who were married to foreign women (Hinson, 1974, 70).

Additionally, the Moabites were considered an enemy nation to Israel. During the reign of the Judges, it is observed that they oppressed the people of Israel. It took the intervention of the LORD through the leadership of Ehud (Judge 3) to overpower the Moabite (Hill and Walton, 2009, 250). This brief account of the Moabite's actions toward the Israelites during the Judges' time is the only insight that tells who these Moabites were. Hill and Walton (2009) uphold that the people of Moab and Israel were relatives. The Moabites are descendants of Lot, the nephew of Abraham (Gen. 19:37), who lived across the Dead Sea. Moses and the people of Israel suffered an attack by the hand of the Moabites (Num. 21-25). However, they treated David kindly during the days of Saul (1 Sam. 22:3-4). The account of the Moabites indicates that they were hostile toward Israel during the era of Moses and, at some point, were friendly towards the Israelites. Having discussed the background to the book of Ruth, the theological themes of Ruth are addressed below.

### **Theological Themes in the Book of Ruth**

The focus of this section is to state the various theological themes in the book of Ruth. The book includes many of them. Some of the most salient are discussed below:

**Prayer and Blessing**

The significance of prayer and blessing is one of the theological aspects of Ruth. The aspect of prayer or blessing as a significant part of the theology of Ruth is developed based on the evaluative theological dialogue that occurs in the book of Ruth (Gow, 2007, 206). The proponents of this view (Murray Gow and Rebera) believe that the prayers mentioned in Ruth 1:8-9; 1:20-26; 2:11-12; 3:10; 2:19-20; 3:10-11; 4:11-12; 4:14-15 are samples of prayers and blessing with ultimate fulfilment in the marriage of Ruth with Boaz, and the genealogy that leads to David (Gow, 2007, 206). The theology of providence is equally another possible theological theme in Ruth.

**Providence**

The theological theme of providence is discerned from the food supply in Ruth 1:6. Yahweh's reversal of the famine is observed as the cause for Naomi to return home with Ruth. Gow (2007) is convinced that divine and human activities are concurrences in the book of Ruth. The interaction between Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz was under the sovereignty of God, who proceeded to work things out through human agents (Gow, 2007, 706). Similarly, Wegner (1996) opines that "the book of Ruth furnishes a panorama of God's sovereignty in everyday life, especially in the three most important needs of ancient Near East (ANE) people: food, marriage and children" (694). The issues of food, marriage, and children are felt as a need. These felt needs are common to every generation and culture. Famine, childlessness, and marriage crises were common in the ANE. The occurrence of famine, childlessness, and marriage are possible areas of concern in today's Africa. The reversal motif as a theology of Ruth is another essential theme in the book of Ruth.

**The Reversal Motif**

The reversal motif in the book of Ruth focuses on the movement from emptiness to fulfilment. Gow (2007, 707) believes that the emptiness and fulfilment begin with the death of Elimelech and his two sons. The tragic incident leaves Naomi and the daughters-in-law as widows and childless. However, the restoration of hope for Elimelech's family marks the fulfilment of life at the end of the story. Naomi's needs were met through Ruth's instrumentality and Boaz's generosity.

**Conversion/Inclusion**

The marriage between Elimelech's sons and the young Moabite ladies introduces the concept of ethnicity in the book of Ruth. The subject of ethnicity is an exciting concept of the book, especially when Ruth appeared in Bethlehem as a foreigner (Ruth 1:22; 2:3, 6, 10, 21; 4:5). Ruth did not yield to Naomi's persuasion to return to her homeland. Rather she pledges her allegiance to Naomi in life and death, declaring "your God shall be my God" (Ruth 1:16). Gow (2007) submits that "Ruth became a convert of Yahwism. Whenever Ruth's Moabite origins are mentioned in the story, there are kin terms linking her to her Judahite family. She is described as the daughter-in-law of Naomi." (Gow, 2007, 707). The writer commends the narrator for including a young Moabite woman in the story. The place of women is the next point of discussion.

**The Place of Women**

The story of Ruth is mainly in the hands of female characters. The story begins with Elimelech, his wife, and sons. The death of Elimelech and his sons leads to Naomi and Ruth becoming the main characters in the story, and Boaz is given third place. The female characters receive the more prominent role, heightened by the fact that Ruth proposes marriage to Boaz. The story is a reminder of how women can succeed in an environment that restricts their roles (Gow, 2007, 707).

### **Davidic Messianic Role**

The marriage of an Israelite to a Moabite and the genealogy of David are important elements in understanding the book of Ruth and hence, to defend the claim of the Davidic line to the throne. The story becomes messianic, partially fulfilled in a Davidic monarchy, but widened out to embrace a future descendant of David who brings God's blessings to the whole world (Gen. 12:1-3; Matt. 1; Rom. 1:3) (Gow, 2007,707). Matthews and Moyer (1979) assert that "the book of Ruth contains three major elements: (1) the theme of levirate obligation; (2) A segment of the Davidic genealogy; (3) an assimilation ritual, allowing foreigners to become a part of the Israelite community" (Matthew and Moyer, 1979, 234). *Hesed* is the overriding theological purpose in Ruth - discussions between the characters and the possible outcome centre on it. The traces of *hesed* in the book of Ruth is addressed below.

### **Traces of *Hesed* in the Book of Ruth**

The focus of this section is to trace aspects of *hesed* in the book of Ruth. *Hesed* is described and used in this paper in concurrence with grace, mercy, and patience to express God's goodness to humanity.

### **The Expression of *Hesed* in the Phase of Distress or Misery**

The experiences that one goes through in a moment of distress or misery vary according to location, the period, and the surrounding circumstances that are involved in it. The expression and expectations of individuals in moments of distress are often not the same. The issue of famine was a distressing moment for Elimelech's family. The option they chose was to relocate to Moab, where Elimelech and his two sons died, leaving their wives and mother as widows. The famine that took Naomi and her family away from the land was over when God visited the land with food. Naomi returns to Bethlehem alongside Ruth, the daughter-in-law, as widows.

Additionally, the expression of frustration and bitterness is common in distress when one feels abandoned or rejected by God or people. Naomi, in a dialogue with her daughters-in-law, expresses a sense of frustration and bitterness. However, conscious of what Yahweh does, Naomi pleads with Yahweh to be gracious to Ruth and Orpah (Block, 1999, 607; Campbell, 1996, 65).

The experience of widowhood can best be explained by those currently going through it. If marriage is the only source of stability and refuge for most spouses in this current society as it was in the ANE, then losing one spouse means many things (Arnold and Beyer, 2015, 162). The community might put a structure in place to show solidarity to vulnerable people, but the effort might not be sustained for too long. However, in Israel, widows were legally allowed to glean from any farm within the land as a livelihood. If a woman depended on her husband or son for a livelihood, Naomi and Ruth could not do otherwise but rely on the grace of God.

In distress, the presence of a fellow mate or friend is of utmost importance. God probably managed Naomi's distress through the instrumentality of a committed and dynamic woman, Ruth. Yahweh surrounded Naomi with people who were generous and kind to her. Ruth stood with Naomi as a faithful companion. The close relative Boaz made available food for Naomi most of the time (Ruth 2:20). The bitterness of heart was probably turned to joy with the coming of a grandchild for Naomi, as recorded in Ruth 1:20; 4:16-17. Naomi became a great-grandmother of excellence to a godly generation of significant people in the history of Israel (Longman III and Dillard, 2007, 150).

The story in Ruth is closely related to that of Joseph in the book of Genesis. The unfolding of the stories in both narratives suggests that the grace of God through providence, although hidden to the physical eye, was in control of the situation. The family of Elimelech was

privileged to raise one of the most significant and respected figures in the history of the Old Testament (Longman III and Dillard, 2007, 150). Naomi and Ruth are famous in the history of the Old Testament, not because they were more suitable than the rest of the people during their time; rather, they found favour in the grace of God. The redemptive plan of Yahweh was in progress through the line of Judah. In Lafort's et al. (1996) opinion, "the son born to Naomi is more than just God's gift to continue her family line. He also begins the history of God's rule through the dynasty of David. In this way, the book ties into the Bible's main theme of redemptive history" (525). This assertion is linked to the promise that was declared to Abraham. Any circumstance in the life of the bearer of this truth could not possibly truncate the promise.

The famine was only a means through which Yahweh was unfolding His plan, although it was painful and distressful. In Ruth 4:14-15, the child born is considered to be Naomi's child. Brevard Child (1979) suggests that "attributing the child to Naomi rather than Mahlon (Ruth 4:17) climaxes a major theological theme, even though it runs counter to parts of the levirate law which formed the background of the story" (565). The community at the time attributes the child to Naomi more than the mother, Ruth. There is no reason for this interplay in the storyline. Yahweh's grace is noticed in Ruth's life, as explained in the next section of this paper.

### **The *Hesed* of God in the Life of a Young Widow**

Ruth, by birth, was a young woman from the land of the Moabites. Ruth demonstrated true faith in Yahweh. The confession of faith in Yahweh probably indicates that Ruth's hope and trust in Yahweh's benevolence was unwavering. The statement in Ruth 1: 16-17 is described by Matthew and Moyer (1979) as "a classic example of an assimilation ritual, a ceremony that requires a person to renounce his or her former condition or status" (234). Loyalty is a possible measure to check the beliefs and practices of an individual. Ruth's expression of loyalty to Yahweh describes the extent to which grace could reach. The vow in this context is similar to the vow that slaves who chose to remain with their masters after putting in the six years of 'debt-servitude' were required to do as recorded in Exodus 21:2-6 and Deuteronomy 15:16-17 (Matthew and Moyer, 1979, 235; Jan Christian Gertz et al., 2012, 589). Ruth's demonstration of faith in Yahweh communicates God's grace to the Gentiles world. The plan to save the nations as promised in Genesis 12:1-3 was a reality in the life of a Gentile woman. The grace of God in this context meant everyone, irrespective of tribe, was privileged to receive the same grace from God.

The anxiety of a young widow might heighten at some point if she does not have a child of her own. Ruth was without a husband or a child of her own. The probability of having a husband, not to mention a child, was unthinkable. Ruth was a diligent, loyal, and hardworking young woman who showed robust concern towards Naomi. This concern led Naomi to think of possible options to meet Ruth's needs (Ruth 2:6-7, 11-12, 17-18, 22-23; 3:5, 10). She turned to the law of levirate marriage as an option.

The law of levirate marriage allowed the nearest male relative to impregnate the widow of a deceased brother and take her as a wife. The levirate law was designed to provide an heir for the dead and take care of the widow until her son was up to the age he could take responsibility (Gen. 38:7-11). Michael D. Coogan (2006) suggests that the "society was patriarchal, with women dependent on their male relatives, in this case, husband and sons" (227). Naomi and Ruth, in this prose, are noticed to have employed all necessary means to ensure they had a son and the joy to live on in the community as any other person. These two ladies took advantage of the patriarchal system. The value of a child, especially a male child in the ANE, was of utmost importance.



It was customary for widows to be cared for by their sons. In other words, it was important for a woman to have given birth to a son who would support the mother in her old age (House, 1992, 233). The law equally allowed a widow who had a son and was of childbearing age to bear children. The deceased husband's brother was supposed to bear a son with her (Deut. 25:5-10). Moreover, the dead man's family could only purchase land owned by the dead. The practice was a measure to ensure that family property was secure and posterity guaranteed for the next generation (House, 1992, 234). One imagines how a foreign woman could survive in such a context as a widow without a son, not to think of adopting the religion of a foreign nation like in the case of Ruth. Ruth's decision was not going to be an easy task, given the context of the Israelites (House, 1992, 234). Ruth might have considered remaining with her people after the death of her husband if she wanted, but her confession of Yahweh proved otherwise. She was probably convinced that Yahweh was better than the gods her people worshipped. However, her faith in Yahweh was irresistible and irrevocable.

Matthew and Moyer (1979) suggest that "Naomi, who was beyond childbearing age, sends Ruth to Boaz to ask him to serve as a 'levirate', guardian (Ruth 3:1-5)" (234). Naomi certainly understood the rudiment of the levirate law and its application. She was indeed a school of the levirate law in her context. The option to make use of it was probably at her disposal. The kinsman or a son born was one of the source of joy a young widow seeks to acquire besides the constant presence of Yahweh. The theme of family continuity and the value of preserving the people's customs remained an essential component among the Israelites. The elders of the land sanctioned Naomi's action.

Roland Kenneth Harrison (1969) opines that "Boaz treated Ruth with great kindness, and at the end of the harvest Naomi persuaded Ruth to appeal to the protection of Boaz, who stayed all night in the harvest field (Ruth 3:1-7)" (1059). The generosity of Boaz and the fact that he is mentioned as a close relative to Elimelech, as recorded in Ruth 2:18; 3:17, describes him as one Yahweh used to extend assistance to Naomi and Ruth. However, Naomi observes the unnamed redeemer as unwilling to perform the rite and the tradition of the people, as recorded in Leviticus 25:25, 47-48 (Harrison, 1969, 1059). Naomi urged her daughter-in-law to consider Boaz as a possible option kinsman redeemer.

Ruth meticulously observed the steps and path that Naomi prescribed to her to meet Boaz on the threshing floor. Once there, she did not hesitate to table a plea to Boaz. Like the gate, the threshing floor was equivalent to the walled towns and cities. The people used it to conduct business transactions and handle legal issues (Judg. 6:36-40; 2 Sam. 24:18-25). However, one of its primary functions was to provide a place where the seed was separated from the grain. The service of the entire community during harvest was concentrated around the threshing floor. At this harvest time, distribution to those that matter was done; for instance, field owners expected their share and any dispute was settled (House, 1992, 236).

Ruth found favour before Boaz as she gleaned in his field. Boaz was aware of all that Ruth had done for the mother-in-law Naomi (Ruth 2:11). Thus, the blessing Boaz bestowed on Ruth is similar to that of Naomi in Ruth 1:8b-9. Their testimony for Ruth was a plea for Yahweh to deal kindly with her. Better still, they asked Yahweh to reward Ruth for her sympathetic character toward Naomi. In Naomi's declaration, she summoned Yahweh to act like Ruth.

Nevertheless, in the context of Boaz, no such comparison is made in the course of declaring the blessing upon Ruth. Naomi's blessing was declared for Ruth and Orpah, while in the case of Boaz, it was for Ruth. Also, Boaz believed Yahweh was kind and would show kindness to Ruth. To further strengthen this assertion, Tiessen quotes Nielson, who opines that "Boaz's prayer for Ruth is a possible central truth in this chapter that can be termed as a summary of

the book of Ruth. The prayer is an affirmation of the fact that anyone who seeks shelter from Yahweh would have it” (Nathan Thiessen <http://www.directionjournal.org/39/2/theology-of-ruth-dialectic-of-15/10/18>). This assertion falls short on the count that Naomi’s statement may not fit. The conclusion might be correct if it was limited to Boaz’s understanding that it is rooted in Yahweh. Ruth eventually received the blessing of a husband, a child, and a significant lineage, the lineage of David, the king, as mentioned in Ruth 4 (Elwell, 1996, 694). The discourse continues with an unnamed redeemer, who relinquishes his right to Boaz.

### **The Unnamed Redeemer Relinquishes His Right to Boaz**

The custom expected that the relative or the redeemer takes over the deceased brother’s wife and impregnate her to have a child who would bear the name of the deceased brother. The unnamed redeemer in Ruth 4:1 showed no interest in keeping the family lineage. The redeemer might have been preoccupied with the concern of his property.

The discourse in Ruth 4 is hinged on the rite of levirate marriage. The main characters are Boaz, the unnamed redeemer, and the elders at the gate. The levirate rite states that the individual with the responsibility to redeem is supposed to be a blood relative. Besides, the individual was equally expected to have enough money to purchase the forfeited inheritance (Ruth 4:10). Most of all, the individual equally was expected to show some willingness to buy back the proposed land (Ruth 4:9). Lastly, it was anticipated that the relative marries the wife of the deceased relative (Ruth 4:10) (Archer, 1968, 259).

Since the unnamed redeemer was not viable, not ready, and unwilling to perform the rite due him, Boaz took over and became Ruth’s husband. Yahweh blessed the union with a son. The women in the community joined Naomi to praise Yahweh for providing a redeemer. The redeemer became a blessing to both Naomi and Ruth. Naomi was noticed to be the mother, more than Ruth. God’s redemptive plan through Abraham can be traced to the life of the significant children through this family line. Gow (2007) submits that “as part of the lineage of the Davidic king, the story becomes messianic in character, widened out to bring blessing to the whole world through a future descendant of David (Gen. 12:1-3; Matt. 1; Rom. 1:3)” (707). The promise of salvation through the coming Messiah was probably envisaged by Yahweh and weaved into the story by the narrator. The hope for humanity was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The gospel was envisaged through the Elimelech family many years before its actualisation. This research highlights some implications for African Christians as observed in the next section.

### **Implications for African Christians**

The focus of this section is to draw some implications from God’s manifestation of *hesed* on Naomi, Ruth and Boaz for the Christians in Africa. The implications are subdivided into two parts, namely, the church and the individual members.

#### **Implications for the Church**

The church of God is presumably the instrument that Yahweh can use to correct societal ills. In a community where life and property, human rights violations are normal, indiscriminate killing seems to be on the increase; bribery and corruption in the judicial and military sectors are not reprimanded, injustice and abuse of the law have become a regular practice, the church whose apostolic role is to speak out the evil in the community as a watchdog is seemingly silent in some part of Africa. Some African churches might not be able to courageously confront the abovementioned evils because the same practice is evidenced in their midst. The leadership of the churches in Africa would perform their pastoral care and love toward the refugees, migrants and their families if ethnocentric and discriminative attitudes as well as nepotism were addressed in their midst.

**Implications for Individual Members**

The decision that Ruth took to stand by Naomi depicts solidarity in practice. The attitude of Naomi and her role in bringing Ruth and Boaz together demonstrates the heart of a concerned individual and a sense of responsibility from a mature woman for the common good of a fellow member. The generosity of Boaz and the willingness to share beyond his limit is a model. Just as Naomi, Ruth and Boaz contributed to the welfare of individual members sacrificially; this ought to be the same for this current generation. Each congregation is gifted with people capable of doing great things for fellow members. If greed, envy, jealousy, unhealthy competition, and gossip are ignored and dealt with, the congregation would experience growth within and beyond the bounds of the church.

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined the concept of *hesed* in the book of Ruth. *Hesed* was evidenced in the lives of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. The famine was a means through which the *hesed* of God was demonstrated in their lives. The return of Naomi to Bethlehem, Ruth getting pregnant, and the child being born are examples of *hesed* demonstrated toward people who least expected such benevolence. The community is challenged to uphold peace and practice good governance to avert mass exodus; the church is urged to perform her pastoral duties to the helpless and refugees; and individual members would cause the church to grow through the instrumentality of personal efforts in reaching out to the needs of others in society. God's *hesed* that was evidenced in the lives of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz in the book of Ruth can serve as an example to encourage the marginalised in society to hope in Yahweh, who never abandons his people.

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