

On The Road from Moab to Judah: Intersecting Economic and Sexual Struggles in Ruth 1:6-22

No Caminho de Moabe a Judá: Interseções das Lutas Econômicas e Sexuais em Rute 1:6-22

En el Camino de Moab a Judá: Intersecciones de las luchas económicas y sexuales en Rut 1:6-22

Abstract

In this paper I read the episode on the road from Moab to Judah, as described in Ruth 1:6-22, to intersect economic and sexual struggles of ambiguous or indecent people. I argue that the story in Ruth 1:6-22 offers resources for resistance in disguise. I first read the story using narrative and socio-historical approaches to see how economics and sexual identity intersect in the story. I then look at how the episode in Ruth 1:6-22 can be used as a resource for economic and sexual resistance of ambiguous or indecent sexualities and/or different gender identities. I conclude my paper with a suggestive Biblical resource for change.

Keywords: Ruth; Economics; Sexuality; Resistance; Contextual Bible Study.

Resumo

Neste artigo leio o episódio da estrada de Moabe a Judá, conforme descrito em Rute 1:6-22, para intersectar as lutas econômicas e sexuais de pessoas ambíguas ou indecentes. Argumento que a história em Rute 1:6-22 oferece recursos para resistência disfarçada. Primeiro, leio a história usando abordagens narrativas e sócio-históricas para ver como economia e identidade sexual se intersectam na narrativa. Em seguida, examino como o episódio em Rute 1:6-22 pode ser usado como recurso para resistência econômica e sexual de sexualidades ambíguas ou indecentes e/ou identidades de gênero diferentes. Concluo meu artigo com um recurso bíblico **sugestivo para mudança**.

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Palavras-chave: Rute; Economia; Sexualidade; Resistência; Estudo Bíblico Contextual.

Resumen

En este artículo leo el episodio del camino de Moab a Judá, según se describe en Rut 1:6-22, para entrelazar las luchas económicas y sexuales de personas ambiguas o indecentes. Sostengo que la historia en Rut 1:6-22 ofrece recursos para la resistencia disfrazada. Primero leo la historia utilizando enfoques narrativos y sociohistóricos para ver cómo la economía y la identidad sexual se entrelazan en la narrativa. Luego, examino cómo el episodio en Rut 1:6-22 puede ser utilizado como recurso para la resistencia económica y sexual de sexualidades ambiguas o indecentes y/o identidades de género diferentes. Concluyo mi artículo con un sugerente recurso bíblico para el cambio.

Palabras clave: Rut; Economía; Sexualidad; Resistencia; Estudio Bíblico Contextual.

Introduction

African Biblical scholarship uses a variety of tools to engage with critical issues impacting on society, including non-conforming aspects of sexuality. The reality of gender diversity and different sexualities is shaking the church and society on the continent. There is no consensus about how issues related to sexuality should be transacted. This has been a motive of conflicts, discrimination, marginalization, exclusion, hatred, assassinations and other criminal and moral offenses to the victims of this sexual dispute. However, ambiguous and indecent² people often suffer the pain imposed by the established heteronormative structure, which is also supported by the divine through Religion (including the church).

The book of Ruth is one of those fascinating stories in the Hebrew Bible that offer resources for resistance in contexts of marginalization and hostility. In different episodes of the narrative, the book of Ruth not only highlights interlocking systems of oppression, but also leaves signs of hope, through resistance in disguise. One of the episodes that highlights this fascinating reality in the narrative is Ruth 1:6-22. The story presents some intersections between economic and sexual systems, and it offers signs of resistance, through some ambiguous actions and/or performances of the characters. Within this reality, I employ the concepts of Intersectionality as presented by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), in-frapolitics of the powerless as coined by James Scott (1990) and struggle as developed by Itumeleng J. Mosala (1989) to frame my paper.

² This term is borrowed from Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000:89) to describe people who are located as strangers or the other due to their sexual orientation. She suggests that liberation theology should include sexual stories when standing for the poor and the oppressed (Althaus-Reid 2000:5).

Intersectionality is a concept often traced back to Black feminism in the United States of America emphasizing the interconnectedness of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality (Muirhead et al., 2020, p. 465). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, p. 140) has used the concept of intersectionality to argue that “Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender.” Her point of departure is that Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways and that the contradiction arises from the assumptions that their claims of exclusion must be unidirectional (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). Therefore, she suggests that Black liberationist politics and feminist theory should consider the intersectional experiences of those whom the movements claim as their respective constituents (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 166). A similar idea (from a feminist perspective) has been presented by Anna Carastathis (2014, p. 304) who argues that “oppression is not a singular process or a binary political relation, but is better understood as constituted by multiple, converging, or interwoven systems.” In other words, the marginalization of anybody should not be viewed because of one problem, but as a combination of many and interrelated problems that generate their oppression. We find this interconnectedness in Ruth 1:6-22 as well as in different African realities, including my Mozambican context. This means that the concept of intersectionality functions as the lens through which the interconnectedness between economics and sexuality is shown throughout my paper.

The concept of infrapolitics of the powerless is borrowed from James C. Scott (1990, p. 138) as a shorthand to convey the idea that we are dealing with an unobtrusive realm of political struggle³. For Scott (1990, p. xii) “every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a hidden transcript that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant; and the powerful, for their part, also develop a hidden transcript representing the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed.” This means that both the dominant and the oppressed classes create their own hidden transcripts or way of being that only make sense within their respective hidden environment. The infrapolitics of the powerless is the hidden transcript of the subordinate group and is not just behind-the-scenes griping and grumbling; it is enacted in a host of down-to-earth, low-profile stratagems designed to minimize appropriation (Scott, 1990, p. 188). In other words, the language and performance of dominated groups are from below and covered by communitarian reality. The hidden transcript of the subordinate group is a form of resistance in which the victims minimize the problem of their marginalization without putting them in more danger. The biblical material preserved in Ruth 1:6-22 reflects a hidden language of the sub-

³ The starting point in Scott (1990:17)’s formulation is his “effort to understand the politics of resistance by poor Malay peasants to changes in rice production that systematically worked to their disadvantage.”

ordinate people or communities or groups of people in ancient Biblical world. So, the infrapolitics of the powerless guides the process of searching resources for change from Ruth 1:6-22.

I also borrow the idea of struggle, from Itumeleng J. Mosala (1989, p. 6) who has argued that the category of struggle at all levels and through various phases of black history should be taken as the key hermeneutical factor when using the Bible as a social class resource. This is because, “the texts of the Bible are sites of struggle” (Mosala, 1989, p. 185). And “the category of struggle becomes an important hermeneutical factor not only in one’s reading of his or her history and culture but also in one’s understanding of the history, nature, ideology, and agenda of the biblical texts” (Mosala, 1989, p. 9).

I begin my paper with a narrative and socio-historical analysis of Ruth 1:6-22 to unveil the intersection between sexual struggle and economic struggles. Ruth 1:6-22 presents all the narrative elements, including “events, characters, and settings, and their interaction as the plot” (Malbon, 1992, pp. 26-27). The socio-historical method “focuses on the social, economic, legal, cultural and religious factors and how they influence the understanding and meaning of [this] specific text” (Igba & Stoker, 2018, p. 2). Then I found out how Ruth 1:6-22 can be a valuable resource for resistance, in contexts of marginalization and hostility of bodies because of some interlocking systems of oppression, rooted on issues of economics and sexuality. I conclude my paper with a suggestive Biblical resource for change, based on Ruth 1:6-22.

1. Intersecting Economic and Sexual Struggles in Ruth 1:6-22

Economics and sexuality are two different concepts usually explored separately in the book of Ruth. In fact, the intersection between them has not been explored fully by biblical scholars. On one hand, biblical scholars pay attention to the economic dimension of the narrative while ignoring its sexual dimension (Siquans, 2009; Masenya, 2004, 2013; Ramaribana, 2013; Mtshiselwa, 2016). On the other hand, scholars interrogate sexual dimensions of the book while paying little attention to its economic dimensions (Stahlberg, 2008; Krutzsch, 2015). In other words, scholars tend to pay attention to one aspect while ignoring the other. Nevertheless, economics and sexuality stand at the forefront of marginalization and exclusion in different African realities (including my Mozambican context). Therefore, my aim in this section of my paper is to intersect economic struggles and sexual struggles in the episode of the road from Moab to Judah as presented in Ruth 1:6-22. I first unpack both the economic and sexual struggles, then intersect the two struggles in the narrative.

1.1 Economic Struggle

The episode of the road from Moab to Judah is a story of (economic) struggle. This can be attested by the returning of Naomi to Judah for food (Ruth 1:6-7). According to Ruth's narrative, Elimelech died after a certain period of their staying in Moab, and his sons (who had married Moabite women) also died after ten years, leaving their wives Ruth and Orpah as widows (Ruth 1:3-4). This was, indeed, the deepest tragedy imaginable in the Ancient Near East (De Villiers, 2017, p. 39). Men in ancient Israel were the ones providing for their families, and it is assumed that Elimelech and his sons also were responsible for economic provision while they were still alive in the land of Moab. But their death (Elimelech, Mahlon and Killion) complicated the economic situation of the female characters (Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth) who could not enjoy the economic provision of their husbands and/or sons. This was a new family formed by three devastated women who had to cope with their agony, as well as face desperate situation since there were no men to take care of them (De Villiers, 2017, p. 39).

Though it is not clear how the economic survival of widows was in Moab, it seems that the Ancient Near Eastern law provided some sort of protection to this social category. In fact, ancient Near Eastern societies were required to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak and forbidden from handing over the orphan to the rich and the widow to the mighty or delivering the poor into the hands of the rich (Eph' Al-Jaruzelska, 2020, p. 198). Though the ancient Near Eastern concept of justice protected the weak (including widows), it seems that Naomi and her daughters-in-law did not fully enjoy the economic benefits of this regulation. And this is evidenced by Naomi's plan to return home after hearing that "the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them" (Ruth 1:6). This returning to Bethlehem suggests that Naomi (and her daughters-in-law) had few chances to capture economic opportunities in Moab. And going to the land of Judah was the best option available for them in that context.

Before she departed from Moab, Naomi commanded her daughters-in-law to return to their parents and start life afresh (Ruth 1:8-13). In other words, economic concern for her two widowed daughters-in-law compels Naomi to urge them to leave and return to their mother's house so that they might find security through remarriage (Mason, 2015, p. 5). In Naomi's view, heterosexual marriage was the only option left for the two other widows (Ruth and Orpah) to secure their economic situation⁴. However, the two widows (or Naomi's daughters-in-law) reacted differently to Naomi's view. One of them (Orpah)⁵ kissed her mother-in-law goodbye but Ruth (Mahlon's widow) refused to return and chose to go with Naomi to the land of Bethlehem (Ruth 1:14-18). This attitude of Ruth could be described as an act of loyalty not only to her mother-in-law, but

⁴ I will come back to this intersection in section 1.3 below.

⁵ The analysis about Orpah's attitude needs another paper. So, I deliberately not discuss in this work.

also to the God of Israel. Indeed, through her choice to remain with her mother-in-law, Ruth in turn shows *hesed* (care and concern) to Naomi and to the entire family that she became part of through her choice to marry Naomi's son (Mason, 2015, p. 7). Therefore, Ruth is cited by scholars like Madipoane Masenya (1998, p. 82) as an example of a devoted daughter-in-law "who risks her life by venturing into an uncertain future, not for the sake of her husband but because of her commitment to a widow".

Though loyalty is suggested by biblical scholars it could be said that economic struggle also encouraged Ruth to return with Naomi, since the economic provision in Bethlehem seemed to be better compared to that of Moab. In fact, if life in Moab was better than that in Bethlehem (or Judah), possibly Ruth would not have decided to return to Judah with her mother-in-law. Probably she would have decided to remain in Moab like Orpah and look for other economic possibilities in her homeland, as suggested by Naomi. But the reality shows that going to the house of bread was the best option for her. This means that her return not only is a show of loyalty but also a determined overstatement for the sake of her future economic stability. Hence, the episode of the road from Moab to Judah is a story of economic struggle, involving widows, women, strangers or indecent people.

1.2 Sexual Struggle

According to Althaus-Reid (2000, p. 126) "the role of sexual stories in theology has been to repeat and reinforce (hetero) sexual imaginations beyond naturalization processes by divinizing them, but also by concealing the questioning of reality and obstructing the creative imagination to find alternative ways of life." This attitude is based on what Brett Krutzsch (2015, p. 542) calls "hetero-presumptive", referring to readings of the text that are informed by the assumption that men are attracted to women and vice versa. Consequently, other possible sexual voices in the Bible are ignored or suppressed by theologians or biblical interpreters. However, Ruth 1:6-22 provides scholars and biblical interpreters with opportunities to argue for the presence of non-heterosexual love and commitment in the Bible (Krutzsch, 2015, p. 543). This is because the text is full of ambiguities in terms of sexual performances and behaviors of some of its characters.

The relationship between Ruth and Naomi can be suggested as clear ambiguity in terms of sexuality in the narrative. These two characters are introduced in Ruth's narrative holding on traditional heterosexual roles. Naomi is a mother-in-law while Ruth is a daughter-in-law (Ruth 1:4-7). But the situation seems to change when Naomi decided to send back her daughters-in-law (Orpah and Ruth) to their families before her departure to Judah for food (Ruth 1:8-13). According to this narrative, Orpah seems to have understood the reasons why Naomi did not want to go with them to Bethlehem, but the attitude of

Ruth shows an opposite direction. In other words, Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye while Ruth clung to her (Ruth 1:14).

The Hebrew Bible describes the attitude of Ruth towards Naomi as *dabad*, which is often translated as clinging, cleaving, or staying close. This word is the same in Genesis 2:24 (when a man leaves his parents and cling to a wife), and some scholars suggest the verses underscores the bond, potentially romantic, that is forged between Ruth and Naomi (see Krutzsch, 2015, p. 544). This romantic suggestion of the word *dabad* also can be supported by Ruth's response to Naomi when she was insisted on going back to her family (Ruth 1:15). Ruth says: "don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you; where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay; your people will be my people and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there I will be buried; and may the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me" (Ruth 1:16-17). Based on this response it could be argued that Ruth's love for her mother-in-law Naomi reflected an extraordinary loyalty (Stahlberg, 2008, p. 464). Indeed, Ruth's response is presented in a form of declaration often used in (heterosexual) marriage ceremonies; therefore, opening space for ambiguities in terms of her sexuality.

According to Krutzsch (2015, p. 543) Ruth's declaration can be read as an admission of a deep romantic connection between the two female characters, or at least of love that Ruth feels for Naomi if it is not reciprocated. In addition, L. Cushing Stahlberg (2008, p. 464) states that "these declarations are directed toward someone of the same sex" as an encouragement to some interpreters looking for models of same-sex love in the biblical text. Ruth 1:6-22 does not mention a lesbian relationship between Ruth and Naomi, but their ambiguous relationship suggests other possible sexualities not accepted or silenced in ancient Israel. In other words, there is a possibility of non-heterosexual feelings and attraction in these two female characters (Ruth and Naomi). In fact, "if Ruth had declared such unwavering loyalty to Boaz, which she never does, the language of those verses could easily be used as evidence of love and devotion between the male and female protagonists" (Krutzsch, 2015, p. 543).

The episode of the road from Moab to Judah presents Ruth struggling for sexual identity. She seems to portray different sexual orientations in different settings of the text. In fact, looking at different spaces of the narrative, it becomes unclear whether Ruth was attracted to male or female or to both. And this places Ruth under the category of sexual indecency, sitting her within a sexual struggle. Her sexual ambiguity or indecency was included within legal prohibitions of ancient Israel about same-sex practices. In fact, sexual prohibitions focused exclusively on male-male intercourse, and other forms of same-sex sexualities are not mentioned (Carr, 2000, p. 4). The absence of a death penalty for lesbians has been understood because of the lack of penetration, but it seems more likely that the law covering homosexuality was inclusive

(Crenshaw, 2010, p. 276). This means that the prohibition of same-sex practices in Israel was more concerned about penetration and not necessarily a romantic attraction between different bodies. Consequently, the law does not say much about lesbians or other sexual practices that did not involve penetration. But this does not prevent Ruth from experiencing sexual struggle because she cannot enjoy her sexuality free of stigma.

1.3 Interconnecting Economic and Sexual Struggles

The road to Bethlehem is the space where the story in Ruth 1:6-22 takes place, when Naomi and Ruth were preparing to go to Judah, after hearing the rumor of bread now available in Bethlehem (Ruth 1:6). At this point Naomi persuades her daughters-in-law (Orpah and Ruth) to return home and find rest in the home of another husband (Ruth 1:9). For Naomi, Orpah and Ruth should give their bodies to men for them to secure their economic stability. Naomi's suggestion reflects a context controlled by a dominant heteronormative economic structure, where the economic shape is male oriented. In fact, all the family members in the Ancient Near East were subordinate to the paterfamilias, to whom belonged the decision-making authority in all matters (Volkmar, 2011, p. 107). This means that women were persons having inferior rights and receiving protection and sustenance only by their familial affiliation (Volkmar, 2011, p. 107).

According to Ilona Rashkow (2022, p. 151) biblical law rests upon a strict patrilineal principle of inheritance that prevents the transfer of land via the daughter to the clan of her husband. In the same line of thought, V. Ndikhokele Mtshiselwa (2016, p. 2) points out that "the need to transfer continuity and ownership of productive land to a husband or son enables the view that the legitimate authority and access to land was exclusive to men." This means that women in Israel were often excluded from the inheritance of the land. The only inheritance rights given to women in the Bible are when there are no sons (Rashkow, 2022, p. 151). And women "solely benefited from the ownership and use of productive land through their relationship with a male figure" (Mtshiselwa, 2016, p. 2). This male figure could be a husband or a father. As a result, some women were forced to transact their bodies for economic survival, and not necessarily because they were sexually attracted to men. This means that there were little options for those bodies who were not willing to penetrate others or to be penetrated. Thus, Naomi sees marriage as the only viable option to secure the economic stability of Orpah and Ruth. In other words, marriage was not just for sexual pleasure, but also a mean for economic stability, especially for women and ambiguous people.

The heteronormative marriage suggested by Naomi legitimates the economic privilege of male bodies, the economic dependence of female bodies and the economic exclusion and/or silence of ambiguous or indecent bodies.

In fact, male sex could be poor because of the general economic constraints of the nation while female sex could be deprived due to both the general economic problems of Israel and the economic dependence on male sex. But ambiguous characters could be poor because of economic exclusion and/or silence practiced by the established heteronormative economic structure of post-exilic Judah. The story in Ruth 1:6-22 presents Ruth (possibly Naomi too) struggling for both economic and sexual integration. The ambiguities (in terms of sexuality or sexual orientation) of these characters of the episode would have given them little opportunities to benefit from the economic outcomes of the land since they were viewed by patriarchy [and heterosexuality] as distinctly others and distinctly secondary (Mollenkott, 2000, p. 19).

The episode of the road from Moab to Judah is a document of struggle, where characters (like Ruth) struggle for integration, in terms of both economics and sexuality. This means that, oppression in Ruth 1:6-22 “is not a singular process or a binary political relation, but is better understood as constituted by multiple, converging, or interwoven systems” (see Carastathis, 2014, p. 304). In other words, one condition of oppression leads Ruth (and other indecent characters) to experience multiple situations of marginalization. So, the claims of struggle in Ruth 1:6-22 must not be “unidirectional” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149), but a combination of struggles against interconnected (Muirhead et al., 2020, p. 465) or interlocking or intersecting (West, Zwane & Carlos, 2023, p. 590) systems of oppression rooted on issues of economics and sexuality.

2. Hidden Language of Resistance in Ruth 1:6-22

James C. Scott (1990, p. 19) has suggested the concept of *infrapolitics* of subordinate groups to designate a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name. This often happens when powerless or marginalized people get tired of obeying systems that generate oppression but cannot challenge them publicly for fear of attack or condemnation. In such situations, societies experience acts of insubordination or the *infrapolitics* of the powerless (Scott, 1990, p. xiii). This means that oppressed people will have two languages or performances: one for the public and the other for the hidden.

Ruth 1:6-22 suggests a hidden discourse, making use of “disguise, deception, and indirection while maintaining an outward impression, in power-laden situations, of willing, even enthusiastic consent” (Scott, 1990, p. 17). In other words, Ruth 1:6-22 is understood in this paper as an *infrapolitics* of the powerless within the context of economic and sexual marginalization of ambiguous or indecent characters. This means that the episode of the road from Moab to Judah is a form of resistance in camouflage. In fact, the context⁶ in which this litera-

⁶ More probably in post-exilic Judah, a context dominated by an ideology of exclusion against economic and sexual indecencies or ambiguities (Janzen 2022:4).

ture emerged was hostile to ambiguous or indecent sexualities, and the author could not publicly tell a story about a woman who is perverting the established heterosexual structure of ancient Israel. This story in Ruth 1:6-22 speaks about intersection between economic and sexual struggles. And within the context in which this story was produced, it is more probable that the hearers would have loved to listen the story of women struggling economically than hearing the story of two women having a romantic expression in a context where these types of affections were not accepted by legal and moral regulations of ancient Israel. Nevertheless, these struggling (economically and sexually) people created a discourse or performance of resistance through “politics of disguise and anonymity that take place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors” (Scott, 1990, p. 19). This is a tactical prudence to ensure that marginalized people rarely blurt out their hidden transcript directly, but by taking advantage of the anonymity of a crowd or of an ambiguous accident, they manage in a thousand artful ways to imply that they are grudging conscripts to their performance the public transcript of compliance (Scott, 1990, p. 15). And this is a reality reflected in Ruth 1:6-22.

Ruth is introduced with an illicit (and ambiguous) sexual identity (Siquans, 2009, p. 447) in this episode of the road from Moab to Judah, as presented in Ruth 1:6-22, to convince the reader that a Moabite woman [with ambiguous or indecent sexuality] is not dangerous at all but can be a valuable member of Judahite society (Siquans, 2009, p. 449), with freedom to express her economic and sexual preferences free of stigma. This must have been a tremendous shock and embarrassment to the dominant class, and probably the story was not heard with comfort by the temple community. Indeed, the romantic declaration of a woman to another woman in the life of Israel was detestable to the descendants of the exile, who would have created mechanisms of silencing this story. To the understand the temple community, the author(s) of this episode is (are) turning their world upside-down (see Scott, 1990, p. 166). Though the wishes of the dominant often prevail, they never control the stage absolutely (Scott, 1990, p. 4). In such circumstances, subordinate groups must find ways of getting their message across, while staying somehow within the law (Scott, 1990, p. 138). In other words, marginalized groups always find ways to resist in a clandestine space, and when the critique reaches the dominants, it results in embarrassment and subversion. This resistance often is preserved and propagated through rumor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms (Scott, 1990, p. 19). Though the context in which the story in Ruth 1:6-22 was hostile to ambiguous or indecent sexualities, the narrative has survived since its oral presentation or performance until its written stage, including retelling, multiple editings and canonical processes. This shows its potential in terms of resistance in contexts of hostility, including economic and sexual marginalization of ambiguous or indecent bodies.

The story of Ruth 1:6-22 is told as euphemism to embarrass and subvert the exclusive heteronormative structure and suggest an alternative community in Israel. In other words, it is used to obscure something that is negatively valued or would prove to be an embarrassment if declared more forthrightly (Scott, 1990, p. 53). This way of resistance would have interested oppressed listeners (or readers) but also prevent more harm is done to them as the victims of this hostility. This means that the infrapolitics of the powerless is discerned as a life-affirming resource for resistance in disguise in contexts of economic and sexual marginalization of ambiguous or indecent bodies in Africa (including my Mozambican context). Through this form of resistance, the dominant groups have no control of indecent actions and their respective spaces. In short, oppressed people find safety while resisting marginalization. This means that indecent sexualities (including their heterosexual allies) can read the episode of the road from Moab to Judah in Ruth 1:6-22 as a form of resisting discourse. Such a re-reading of this biblical story can be done through Contextual Bible Studies (CBS) within organized communities of faith to suggest or foster construction of alternative and inclusive communities, in terms of economics and sexuality.

3. Biblical Resource for Change

Contextual Bible Study is a process of reading the Bible with marginalized communities. There are many and different ways of reading the Bible which can be called Contextual Bible Study, but I am referring here to the way in which the Ujamaa Centre⁷ engages the Bible with underprivileged groups of society. The Ujamaa CBS (Contextual Bible Study) emerged because of collaboration between CEBI (*Centro de Estudos Biblicos* or Centre for Biblical Studies) in Brazil and the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development & Research in South Africa, that begun in the 1980s (West, 2015, p. 235). Within the South African context «CBS was important because it was a tool that could be used to engage and convince people of the injustice of apartheid, especially in a context where apartheid was religiously sanctioned» (Nadar, 2009, p. 388).

However, today CBS has been widely used to resist different struggles in different contexts of the world, such as economic, sexual, religious struggles, amongst others. In fact, CBS emphasizes the presence of a significant “resistance theology” in the Bible (West, 2022, p. 12). This means that CBS⁸ is widely recognized as one form (amongst others) of resisting interlocking system of

⁷ The Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research is located within the School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal, in South Africa. Through research and community-based work, Ujamaa unveils the interlocking systems of oppression as well as allowing marginalized communities to engage these intersecting systems of oppression, through theological and biblical resources (including contextual bible studies).

⁸ For more information about CBS resources one can visit the Ujamaa Centre’s Website (<http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za>).

oppression within faith-based organizations or institutions and communities. This is a context in which CBS resources for change is constructed in this paper, from the episode of the road from Moab to Judah as presented in Ruth 1:6-22 to resist the economic and sexual marginalization or exclusion of ambiguous or indecent sexualities in hostile contexts (including contemporary Mozambique). This CBS offers the capacity of resistance in disguise to avoid more harm is done to these marginalized sectors of society.

Following the praxis of the Ujamaa Centre, this CBS resource for change starts in plenary with some liturgical procedures (singing and praying) and with the participants introducing themselves to each other. The process of introducing the participants must be guided by an exercise often used at Ujamaa Centre in which the members of the group mention their names and say something about the first letter of their names. For instance, if a person is 'Susan', the person can call him/herself 'sweet Susan'. Then, the process is repeated by all the participants to easily memorize the names of their colleagues. This moment is very crucial and must be carefully handled to create trust in the group. Here the participants must feel comfortable and not ashamed to share their ideas, based on their experiences. Now the discussion begins with the reality of the community.

1. *Listen to Ruth 1:6-22 carefully, being read aloud.*

The reading of the text can be done in different languages or different translations and by different people. If possible, a dramatic reading can be suggested, where different people in the group take on the roles of different characters in the narrative.

2. *What is this text about?*

This question is briefly discussed in pairs to explore the agency and contribution of the participants. The answers to this question are given randomly in the plenary, while the facilitator writes the answers on board or newsprint, depending on what is available. Some of those who will share in plenary can also experience interesting or painful experiences shared in their respective small groups that may deserve attention and reflection from the bigger group. Having discussed question 2, the participants are divided into small groups (5 or 6 members) to discuss the following questions.

3. *Why did Naomi decide to return to Judah? What makes her hesitant to return with Ruth and Orpah?*

4. *How does Naomi think Ruth and Orpah must overcome the problem of poverty?*

These questions allow the group to discuss the heteronormative structure of post-exilic Judah. This means that the facilitator must know something about the infrapolitical reading of Ruth 1:6-22. If necessary (depending on the type of the group), the facilitator can give an input, explaining that the story is a form of resistance in disguise. This input can be given immediately after the questions have been read (or presented) in plenary so that these questions are discussed with this assumption in mind. Then, the study moves to the following questions.

5. *What influences Naomi's understanding of the intersection between economics (poverty) and sexuality (marriage)?*
6. *How does Ruth respond to Naomi's suggestion? What alternative solution does this response suggest in terms of the economic and sexual struggles of women, strangers, ambiguous and indecent people in the context of the text?*

Question 5 leads the participants to understand the reasons behind Naomi's attitude towards the Moabite women. This is a reading behind the text or a socio-historical dimension of the text. Question 6 begins the concept of resistance through Ruth's agency. In this question participants discuss how Ruth's agency suggests alternative possibilities in terms of economic and sexual struggles of marginalized people. The two questions are also discussed in small groups and then presented in plenary. After that, the study shifts back to the community to understand how the story can be used to shed some lights to their struggle. This is done through the discussion of the questions that follow.

7. *Do you have people like Ruth in your context, who are marginalized because of their condition of being strangers or in some way 'indecent' (for instance women, foreigners, strangers or people with different or ambiguous sexualities)? Give examples.*
8. *What prevents ambiguous or indecent people in your context from being accepted into the economic and sexual life of the community?*
9. *In what ways can this text be used to resist the interlocking systems of marginalization of ambiguous or indecent people in your context? These systems can be economic, sexual, etc.*

10. *What are you going to do in your own community or faith-based institution as a response to this Bible study?*

These last questions of the CBS resource invite the participants to think about solutions that are possible to be done without causing more harm to (marginalized) ambiguous or indecent people. When the discussion is concluded, the facilitator or anyone (assigned the role) can present some concluding remarks to end the study. If possible, the study can end with a prayer.

Conclusion

I began my paper looking for intersections between economic and sexual struggles on the episode of the road from Moab to Judah, as presented in Ruth 1:6-22. I presented the intersections between economic and sexual struggles in the story, pointing out that Ruth (and possibly Naomi too) is a struggling character in terms of both economics and sexuality. However, this story of the road from Moab to Judah has the potential to resist in disguise if it is read as an infrapolitics of the powerless (or hidden language of the marginalized). This infrapolitical reading of Ruth 1:6-22 offers a potential of resistance while preventing more harm is done to (marginalized) ambiguous or indecent sexualities. This reading can be done through Contextual Bible Study, suggested in this paper as a Biblical resource for change.

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