

Reading Ruth

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In the following pages we want to make some short remarks on the book of Ruth. The following points will receive attention: the literary construction, the syntax, some difficult morphological formations. In relation with these points the date of origin and the aim of the work will be discussed.

1. The literary construction

The book of Ruth stands on its own among the classical Hebrew stories and texts, although there is, of course, the relation with king David mentioned in iv 17, 22. As a story it forms a complete entity, which may be studied, and has been studied, as such.

1.1. OVERVIEW OF CONTENTS AND TEXTDIVISION

1.1.1. CHAPTER ONE

The first chapter describes, as far as the action is concerned, the journey of a family from *Bethlehem* to *Moab*, because of a famine, followed by the marriages of the two sons in that family to two Moabite girls, the deaths of the three men concerned, the father and the two sons, in the end followed by the return from *Moab* to *Bethlehem* of *Naomi* with one of her daughters-in-law, viz. *Ruth*. Through the choice of the narrator to give a more prominent place to certain parts of this rather commonplace story it is made apparent that his interest was not focussed on how the journeys were made, but rather why. At the same time there is much room for the discussion of *Naomi's* difficult position and the reason for its occurrence. Seventeen of the twenty-two verses of this chapter are used for dialogue, in the first place between *Naomi* and her daughters-in-law (8-14), then between *Naomi* and *Ruth* (15-18), and in the last place between *Naomi* and the women of *Bethlehem* (20-21). The last verse shows that the chapter division concurs with the build-up of the story, as it gives, on the one hand, the recapitulation of the most important point made in the first chapter, *Naomi* and *Ruth* returning from *Moab* to *Bethlehem*, while, on the other hand, the adjunct of time at the end is an inobtrusive introduction of the following chapter.

1.1.2. CHAPTER TWO

The second chapter relates the chance meeting of *Ruth* and *Boaz*. *Boaz* shows his personal interest in *Ruth*, who is forced to collect ears of grain to provide for herself and her mother-in-law. In this chapter too the dialogue is highly important. Only in the verses 1, 3a, 17, 18 and 23 the narrator is speaking directly. In the verses 3a, 17 and 18 this is made necessary by the switch from one dialogue to another, while in the first and last verse the information is less directly linked to the dialogue. The first verse contains some information which gives the right framework for the next part of the story and the concluding verse is, as in the first chapter, a recapitulation of the chapter as a whole, while at the same time some information is given which links this chapter to the following chapter: 'and she lived with her mother-in-law' presents *Naomi* in the forefront for the next stage of the story.

1.1.3. CHAPTER THREE

In chapter three is related that *Naomi* indicates *Ruth* how she may induce *Boaz* to concern himself about the poor widow *Ruth* (and through her about *Naomi* herself). The main characters in the story are well-known by now, so we start this chapter in medias res, with a dialogue. Only four of the eighteen verses of this chapter are not used for dialogue. As is the case with the beginning of this chapter, the concluding verse also contains dialogue, so that this chapter is left without introductory material and likewise without recapitulation. The transition from this chapter to the next therefore gives more the impression of speed than the earlier transitions from one chapter to the next.

1.1.4. CHAPTER FOUR

The fourth chapter contains the climax of the story, complete with happy ending. *Naomi*'s plan explained in the preceding chapter proves to be successful. This success is twofold: in the first place the acquisition of *Elimelech*'s inheritance by *Boaz*, completed by the marriage of *Boaz* and *Ruth*, and secondly the birth of a son from this marriage. The transition between these two is cunningly placed in the mouth of the inhabitants of *Bethlehem* (11). As in the first two chapters, the conclusion of this part of the story is a remark of the narrator, in which he connects this story to *David* (17). Also in this chapter dialogue is highly important: apart from the description of the situation in the first verse only the verses 13 and 16

contain important descriptive material.

1.1.5. THE RELATION OF THE FOUR CHAPTERS

The basic structure given by the four chapters, even though, of course, this division is of a late date, may be summarised as in fig. 1.

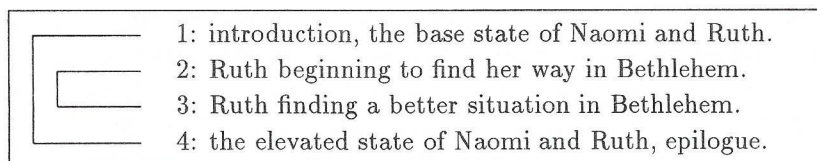


Fig. 1.

This concentric structure of the whole book is matched by several structures of the same type in the smaller elements.

2. The structure of the smaller entities

2.1. CHAPTER ONE

2.1.1. THE FIRST ELEMENT OF CHAPTER ONE

We have just remarked that the first chapter, although relating the journey from *Judah* to *Moab* and back again, is not concerned with the journey as such. The division of attention makes clear that in fact only the journey back from *Moab* forms part of the story. The first five verses are used for the introduction, the journey to *Moab* and the highly dramatical period *Elimelech's* family stays there. The start of the return journey until the arrival in *Bethlehem* takes seventeen verses to be told. The introduction only gives information which is necessary to understand why certain people travel from *Moab* to *Bethlehem*. As the famine in verse one serves to explain the presence of *Naomi* in *Moab*, it is not illogical to suppose that the announcement of the end of the hunger period forms part of the introductory material.

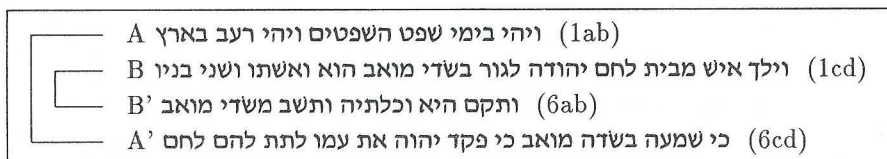


Fig. 2.

The repetition of the verb שׁוּב in verse 7, echoing verse 6, links this verse to the preceding remarks. It is the conclusion of the introduction. Note that the crucial dialogues in this story start in verse 8. At the same time, as the journey to *Judah* is of great importance for the story, this verse forms the transition from the first to the second smaller entity. The first thing which catches our attention is the partly concentric construction of these verses: verse 6 is a clear counterpart of the first verse. Comparing these two verses we find a concentric construction, see fig. 2. In this structure A and A' relate about the famine and its end, B and B' mention the journey to and from *Moab*. Note that within this structure the elements B - B' are also linked in a concentric construction, Ba and Ba' speaking of the journey to resp. from *Moab*, Bb and Bb' mentioning the people concerned, see fig.3.

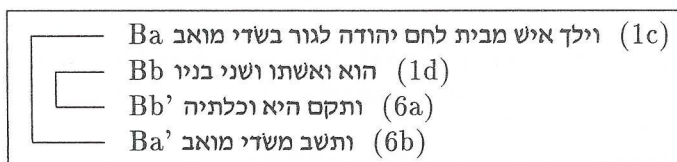


Fig. 3.

The central part of this entity forms an easy linear construction. The whole construction may be presented as in fig. 4. The seventh verse, which does not belong to this concentric construction, contains the recapitulation of the important point made in the first entity, viz. the return from *Moab*,



Fig. 4.

while at the same time it introduces the subject of the second entity, viz. *Naomi* with her two daughters-in-law on their way to *Judah*.

2.1.2. THE SECOND SCENE OF CHAPTER ONE

After the introduction in the verses 1 to 7 the second greater entity encompasses the rest of the first chapter. This entity may be divided into three smaller elements.

The first of these smaller elements shows us *Naomi* trying to induce her daughters-in-law to stay behind in *Moab*, and the success she has with *Orpah*. *Naomi* is speaking twice in this scene: first in the verses 8 and 9, at the end of which there is an emotional reaction of her daughters-in-law, then in the verses 11 to 13, which are again followed by an emotional reaction of *Orpah* and *Ruth*. Both descriptions are followed by the result of *Naomi's* words indicated by the narrator. The construction is linear as in the central part of the introduction, but the relation of verse 9c-e to 14a-d is concentric, see fig. 5.

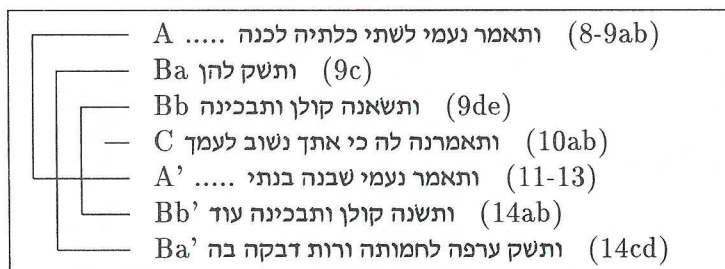


Fig. 5.

Although the reply of the two daughters-in-law, in verse 10, is rather short in comparison with *Naomi's* entreaties, the author gives this remark pride of place in the centre of this scene. Note that the two Moabite women, who were central in the introduction, are also the central agents of these verses. The two speeches of *Naomi* are each other's counterparts. In the first one *Naomi* speaks of the good future, which awaits her daughters-in-law in *Moab*. They are entitled to some retribution from the side of the Lord because of their correct behaviour towards the deceased and herself, and *Naomi* expresses her hope that they will be well with their own family, or better, in a new marriage. When *Naomi* speaks again she explains the difficulties they may face in *Bethlehem*, as she will in no way be able to guarantee her daughters-in-law a family life necessary in a normal society.

As in her first speech *Naomi* gives for a reason the way the Lord behaves towards her. The second speech is the longer one, which fact emphasizes the greater importance given to the second plea of *Naomi*. Furthermore it is expressed as an undeniable fact and not, as the first one, a wish. This difference is the origin of the less attractive construction, in which one longer element of the second speech in itself has a repetitive linear construction. The relation between the two speeches may be graphically shown as is done in fig. 6. Note how in this second, longer, speech of *Naomi* the tension is built up by the fourfold repetition of alliterative introductory elements: העוד / והיו, כי, גם, הלחן; this is strengthened by the elements a - a', b - b', repeating resp. ψ and λ . These alliterative constructions add extra coherence to the second speech. The repetition of roots characterising the first and second speech of *Naomi* (הלך, שוב) complete this scene. This type of construction, which is not normally built around a central clause, leads to a climax, which is to be found in C'-D', preceded by the internal climax in c''-d'''. So this scene on the one hand stresses the remark of the daugh-

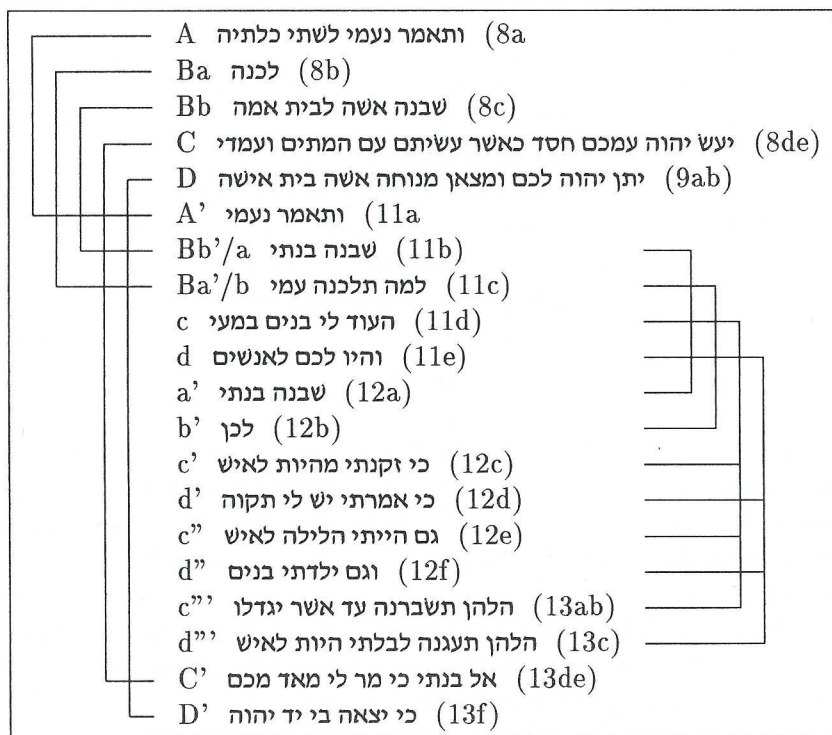


Fig. 6.

ters-in-law: 'we will go with you' and on the other hand the emotional appeal to them by *Naomi* to stay in *Moab*.

2.1.3. THE THIRD SCENE OF CHAPTER ONE

This scene contains *Ruth's* answer to *Naomi's* preceding speeches, which succeeded in inducing *Orpah* to return to her family in *Moab*. *Ruth's* words are introduced by a short speech of *Naomi*. These introductory words relate this scene to the preceding one. The construction of this scene again is a concentric one, which may be presented graphically as shown in fig. 7. This scene culminates in the central statement: "Your people are my people, your God is my God". The impact of these remarks is heightened as a result of the short poetic formulation chosen by *Ruth*. Note also the relation between E and B and the fact that this central point is a counterpart of the central remarks in the first scene. In three statements a climax is reached in E - E'. In 10ab *Orpah* and *Ruth* say: "we go with you to your people"; in verse 15b, but only in relation to *Orpah*, who is not herself speaking, the notion 'people' is extended with God(s) in a negative remark, while in 16ef the series culminates in a positive statement of *Naomi* herself, also mentioning 'people' and 'God'. We get the impression that the author, without saying it himself in so many words, and even without putting the words into the mouths of his characters, wants to convey the point that the difference between *Orpah* and *Ruth* lies in the fact that *Ruth* is prepared to accept the God of Israel as her personal God.



Fig. 7.

2.1.4. THE FOURTH SCENE OF CHAPTER ONE

In the last scene of the first chapter the arrival of *Ruth* and *Naomi* in *Bethlehem* is described. One of the main characters in the book is mentioned here for the first time, viz. the people of *Bethlehem*, here represented by the women from this place. The construction of this scene is less complicated than that of the preceding scenes. Again the author chooses for a basically concentric construction, which in the centre is a little imbalanced because of the difference in importance between *Naomi* and the women of *Bethlehem*. *Naomi*'s remarks are partly linear, B'a - B'b // B'a' - B'b', with a central element in between, viz. B'c - B'c', see fig. 8. Note the variation: the two outside elements, B'a and B'b', contain two finite verbal forms, against the inside ones, B'b and B'a', containing only one.



Fig. 8.

This central element contains (in one or two clauses, depending upon the grammatical analysis) *Naomi*'s description of her life until that moment. Interesting is the change in subject, in the form הלכתי *Naomi* is subject, expressing that it was she herself who chose to leave *Bethlehem*, while in השיבני the Lord is subject, which indicates that it was not her own choice to return to *Bethlehem*, at least not in this way. The last words of the chapter, 22b, do not really form part of this scene, but echo the first verse - leaving *Bethlehem* during a famine versus returning to B. during the barley harvest - and so they enclose the whole chapter. At the same time, as we have seen already with some other concluding verses, this half verse forms the introduction of the next scenes in the following chapter by mentioning

the barley harvest. The relation of the four scenes of the first chapter is a concentric one as shown in fig. 9.

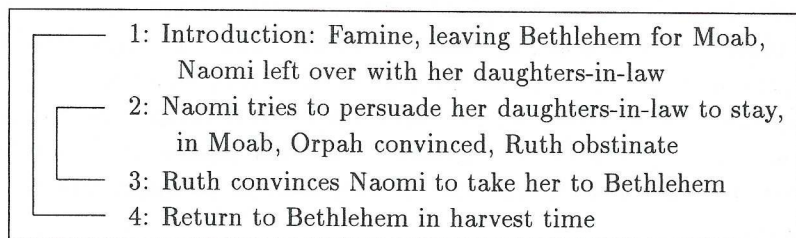


Fig. 9.

2.1.5. RELATIONS BETWEEN THE SCENES

To conclude the remarks on chapter one we will point to some other interesting relations between the elements of this chapter. Certain roots play an important role to connect these elements. Compare e.g. the use of the roots *הלך* and *שוב*. The importance of both is aptly expressed by their use in the central part of the third scene (fig. 8 B'c, verse 21a: *הלך* - B'c', verse 21b: *שוב*), where they are repeated from the second and the last element but one of the introduction (fig. 4 B, verse 1c: *הלך* - B', verse 6b: *שוב*). The same roots are highly prominent in the second scene (fig. 6 Ba, Ba' (= b), b', verse 8b, 11c, 12b: *הלך* - Bb, Bb' (= a), a', verse 8c, 11b, 12a: *שוב*). Note how the outlook changes all the time: in the verses 8b / 8c and 12a / 12b *הלך* and *שוב* point to the same direction, while in 11b / 11c and 21a / 21b they point in the opposite direction.

2.2. CHAPTER TWO

In the second chapter we first encounter the fourth of the main characters of the book, apart from *Naomi*, *Ruth* and the people of *Bethlehem*: *Boaz*. This fact is stressed in the first line in a nominal clause. Then follow the dialogues in which *Ruth* is depicted as the poor widow collecting a small fare for herself and her mother-in-law.

2.2.1. THE FIRST SCENE OF CHAPTER TWO

In the first few verses the dialogue is used to introduce *Ruth* as working in the field of *Boaz*. The construction is of a type we have already seen in the first chapter (cf. e.g. the verses 1-6): a concentric outside shell filled in with a few linear connected lines: we find, that although the first verse of this chapter logically is the introduction of the rest of the book of *Ruth*,

it also forms a direct part of the introductory scene of the second chapter, see fig. 10. Two remarks must be made about this very small dialogue. In the first place it should be noted that the author finds reason to give a central place to the remark of *Naomi*: Go my child. Though *Ruth* is the acting person, it is here and in the rest of the story *Naomi* around whom the story really is centered. In the second place it is interesting to see how the linear connection of D - D' already shows that *Boaz* is the one who will show favour to *Ruth*, although this is only said in so many words in the next scene.

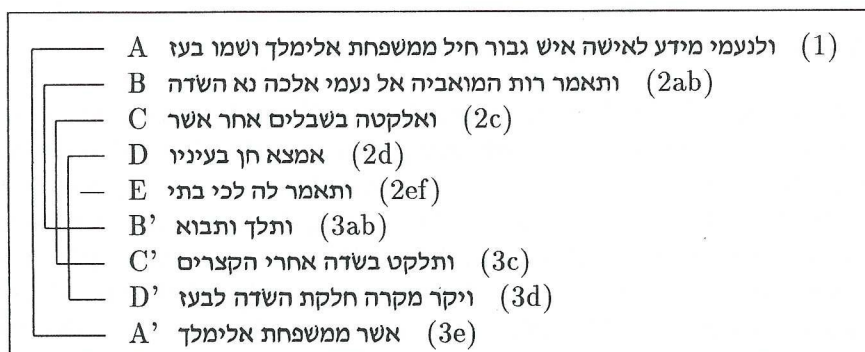


Fig. 10.

2.2.2. THE SECOND SCENE OF CHAPTER TWO

The character mentioned in the concentric shell of the first scene is the main character of this scene (verses 4-7): *Boaz* speaking with his workforce in the field. It is rather difficult to find an acceptable linear or concentric structure in these verses. It is most probable to suppose that verse 5a, mentioning the one set over the harvesters, is to be paired with verse 6a, where he is mentioned again. This means that the words in verse 5b form the centre of this scene, see fig. 11.

The text elements preceding and following this central remark seem to be formal counterparts only: in the first part *Boaz* speaks to the harvesters, and in the second one the one set over the harvesters speaks to *Boaz*. However, there may be some further points in this scene, which are not mentioned as such but follow from the construction. In the first part *Boaz* is introduced as coming from Bethlehem, as against *Ruth* in the concluding



Fig. 11.

part as coming from *Moab*. *Boaz* is introduced as active, the subject of the verb in 4a, and 4b, coming and speaking, while *Ruth* is more or less passive, as her activities are only told the reader by a third party. Then *Boaz* is depicted as a pious man greeting his people with a blessing, as against *Ruth* who is described as a poor maiden. Note that this scene is in several respects a counterpart of the first scene of this chapter. In the first scene the central theme is *Naomi* giving *Ruth* leave to gather ears on a field that is being harvested. In the second scene *Ruth* is asked about by *Boaz* while she is working. In the first scene *Boaz* is introduced at the beginning, as he is again in the second scene. Both scenes are concluded by a description of *Ruth* gathering ears in the field. The connection between these two descriptions is stressed by a chiastic relationship: coming + gathering in 3ab / 3c versus gathering + coming in 7bc / 7d.

2.2.3. THE THIRD SCENE OF CHAPTER TWO

This first acquaintance at a distance of *Boaz* and *Ruth* is followed by direct contact. In the relation of this contact the author stresses two points: the special interest of *Boaz* for *Ruth*, and *Ruth*'s position far below that of *Boaz* (note the expression בְּנִי in verse 8b and in 2f). In this scene *Boaz* is becoming a more active antagonist, which comprises the verses 8-14 of this chapter. The following structure may be proposed, see fig. 12.

The construction of D - D' is in itself linear, both speeches of *Ruth* ending with a strong contrast emphasized by the words וְאֵנִי. Note further how the two parts Da - Db are connected by the repetition of forms of a root נָכַר, with contrasting meaning. The fact that we sometimes differentiate between a root נָכַר I 'to be unknown' and נָכַר II 'to recognize' (thus e.g. the dictionaries of Gesenius and Koehler-Baumgartner) has, of course, no

influence on the impact of the literary device used. In a comparable way the contrast between Da' - Db' is enhanced by the use of שפחתך, indicating the poor widow *Ruth*, and שפחתך, indicating the female servants of *Boaz*, who, because of the contrast, are depicted as people in good circumstances.



Fig. 12.

Note also how the central element, which stresses the good behaviour of *Ruth* in the past and the compensation that awaits her because of her trust in the God of *Israel*, comprises, apart from the introduction ויען ויאמר לה (11a-b), a repetition of a series of three elements, see fig. 13.

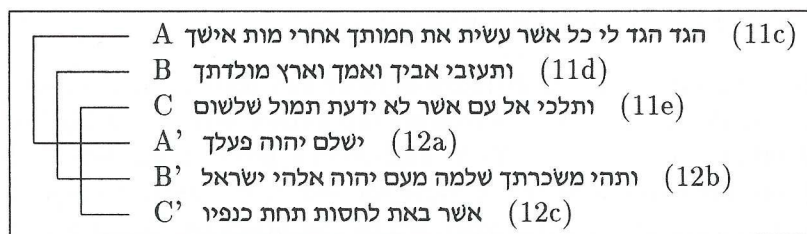


Fig. 13.

In A the action of *Ruth* is described in general terms, in A' the same is done with God's reaction, the relation stressed by the word פעלך. In B the action of *Ruth* is indicated more specifically as leaving family and motherland, וארץ מולדתך, while in B' the Lord is explicitly indicated as the God of *Israel* אלהי ישראל, so that the difference between *Moab* and *Israel* is

stressed. In C and C' again the action of *Ruth* is indicated, now in terms of going somewhere, the first time in a negative formulation, the second time again in relation to the God of *Israel* whom *Ruth* has accepted now. The difference becomes especially clear by comparing לא ידעת (note the use of the negation) and לחסות.

2.2.4. THE FOURTH SCENE OF CHAPTER TWO

In this scene *Boaz* and *Ruth* are depicted, he in the act instructing his servants to be extra nice to *Ruth*, she working in the field and, as a result of *Boaz's* instructions, collecting quite an amount of barley. The structure of the verses 15 to 17 may be represented as in fig. 14.

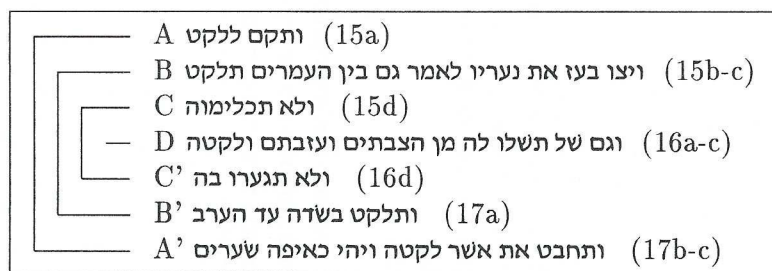


Fig. 14.

This scene, in which the elements A - B - D - B' - A' are connected by forms of the root לקט, depicts how *Boaz* contrives a good result of *Ruth's* gathering. In A *Ruth* starts her work, while in A' the result of the work is measured. In B *Boaz* orders his servants to be especially friendly to *Ruth*, as a result of which she works in *Boaz's* field without moving elsewhere. The fact that poor people were expected to move to the fields of other owners follows from the two remarks made by *Boaz* in the verses 8 and 9: וגם לא תעבורי מזה וכה תדבקין עם נערתִי and אל תלכי ללקט בשדה אחר. In B' the success of this scheme is related: *Ruth* stays in the same field for the whole day. In C and C' *Boaz* twice urges his servants not to rebuke *Ruth* in any way. This leaves D as the central notion of this scene: not only does *Boaz* give *Ruth* the chance to gather ears in his fields the whole day, to which she was entitled if not by law then by custom, but he lets her work among the sheaves and even orders to pull out from the bundles to increase her production for the day.

2.2.5. THE FIFTH SCENE OF CHAPTER TWO

In the last scene of this chapter *Ruth* and *Naomi* are together again. The

theme of this scene is the reaction of *Naomi* on what has happened to *Ruth* during the day. The structure may be depicted as in fig. 15.

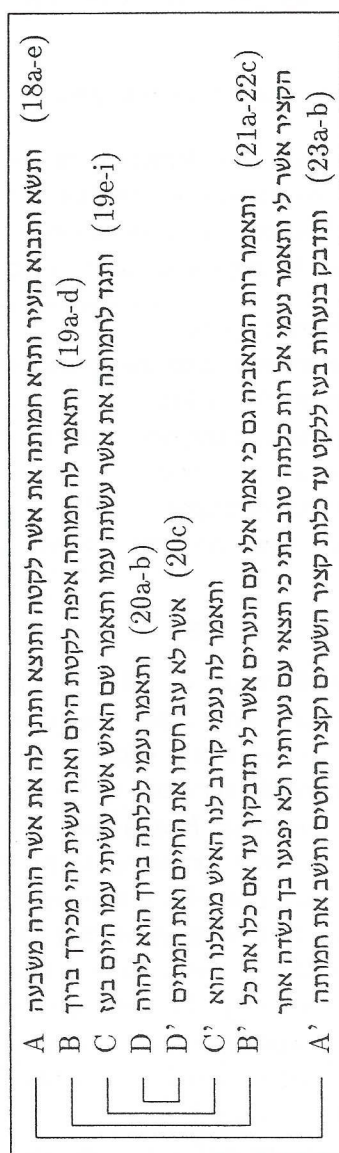


Fig. 15.

Although the construction may seem a little unbalanced, the relation of the different elements seems to be beyond doubt. A and A' relate actions of *Ruth*, the first one being the result of the preceding scene, and introducing *Naomi* again, the second one the result of the dialogue related in the rest of the scene. In B *Naomi* asks about *Ruth*'s work, which is described in more detail in B'. In C *Boaz* is introduced, while in the corresponding element C' his relation to *Naomi* and *Ruth* is indicated. The central element D - D' expresses the feelings of *Naomi*. It is important that here again in a central element a religious note is struck, as is the case in the scenes 3 and 4 of the first chapter and in scene 3 of chapter 2.

2.2.6. RELATIONS BETWEEN THE SCENES

The five scenes in the second chapter also show a marked structural relationship, mainly because of the people playing a role in them (see fig. 16). It is interesting to see how this concentric construction strengthens the importance of the first face to face encounter of *Boaz* and *Ruth*.

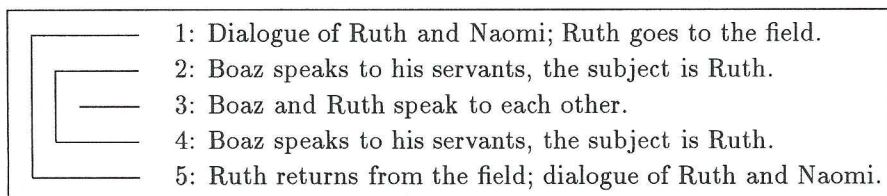


Fig. 16.

(To be continued)