

# Two Comparative Notes on the Book of Ruth

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A number of recently published inscriptions and studies of the ancient Near Eastern context enlighten our understanding of the Book of Ruth. This study will investigate two such items: daily food ration data and the new “Widow’s Plea” inscription.

## 1. *Ration Texts—Ruth 2:17*

In Ruth 2:17 the text stresses the large quantity of grain that Ruth threshed from the first day of her gleaning in the field of Boaz—an *ephah* of barley (*k<sup>e</sup>ʿēpāh šeʿōrīm*).<sup>1</sup> Commentators, with the exception of J. Sasson,<sup>2</sup> usually give some kind of conversion figure for an *ephah* and end at that. K. Nielsen in her commentary concludes: “Of course, the important thing is not to find out exactly the actual weight but to be overwhelmed by Boaz’s generosity to Ruth.”<sup>3</sup> While the text is obviously giving this data in order to demonstrate Boaz’s *hesed* towards the two widows, Ruth and Naomi, what would be the practical, real-life implications of the particulars? Certainly this data about the significant amount of grain gleaned by Ruth is not given to the reader in order “to add to her list of virtues that she was as strong as an ox.”<sup>4</sup> It must have had some tangible, utilitarian value.<sup>5</sup>

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1. Talmon’s suggestion that the preposition *k<sup>e</sup>* before *ʿēpāh* may be an example of *kaph veritatis* indicating exactitude is based on a supposed usage in the phrase *kymm* in the Mešad Ḥashavyahu (Yavneh Yam) ostrakon (KAI 200, line 5); see S. Talmon, “The New Hebrew Letter from the Seventh Century B.C. in Historical Perspective,” *BASOR* 176 (1964), 29–38, esp. 33. But its use in that inscription is not certain; see J. Renz, *Handbuch der Althebräischen Epigraphik* (Darmstadt), 1:325, n. 3.

2. In a one-sentence comment, Sasson links the interpretation of the verse to the data from Mari, but not to all the Ration Lists evidence. He states: “Given the fact that at Mari of the Old Babylonian period, the ration of a male worker rarely exceeded one to two pounds per day, we are impressed by Ruth’s ability to gather enough to last her and her mother-in-law a few weeks”; J. M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield, 1989), 57. Hubbard follows Sasson; R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth, NICOT* (Grand Rapids, 1988) 79. On the Mari data, especially the “king’s meal,” see L. Milano, “Food and Diet in Pre-Classical Syria,” in C. Zaccagnini, ed., *Production and Consumption in the Ancient Near East* (Budapest, 1989) 213–29; and J.-J. Glassner, “Mahlzeit,” in *RLA* 7/3–4.259–67.

3. K. Nielsen, *Ruth. A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, 1997), 61–62.

4. E. F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth*, AB 7 (Garden City, NY, 1975), 104.

5. This is not a statement on the genre of the Book of Ruth (for which see Sasson, *Ruth*, 197–221; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 42; and F. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, WBC 9 [Dallas, TX, 1996], 52). Rather, this detail is important and relevant for the “story” of Ruth to work; A. Berlin, “Poetics in the Book of Ruth,” *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, 1983), 83–110.

One of the positive contributions of the French *Annales* school has been its emphases on “history from below” and “total history.”<sup>6</sup> Hence, whether that historiographic movement has been acknowledged or not, this has led to a renewed interest in the ration texts found throughout the various periods of Mesopotamian history.

The best evidence for the diet of ordinary people in Mesopotamia comes from the Ration Lists. These lists are found throughout Mesopotamian history from the Early Dynastic period to the Neo-Babylonian period. They record allocations of barley (*hordeum vulgare*) and other cereals by religious and secular employers to their employees. The lists include an extensive range of professions from shepherds to weavers, from agricultural workers to brewers, even slaves. They include men, women, and children. The rations are recorded either as monthly or daily issues, although they can also be provided for a particular job (e.g., harvesting). There are always variations according to age and status.<sup>7</sup>

These Ration Lists give the portions in the Sumerian capacity measure of the šĪLA or the Akkadian qû.<sup>8</sup> While the measure varied somewhat during different periods and locations, the variance for these Mesopotamian measures seems to lie between 0.83 and 1.02 liters. As M. Powell has recently noted, the ancient norm for a daily food ration throughout the entire history of Mesopotamia seems to have been widely regarded as approximately 1 šĪLA or qû (≈ 1 liter), usually of barley.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, R. Ellison points out in her study of Mesopotamian alimentation (see the table of *Recommended Daily Nutritional Intakes* below), any adult male receiving more than 1.33 liters per day, and any adult female with more than 1 liter per day, had an energy intake as high or higher than that recommended by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) (3,000 calories for males and 2,200 calories for females). In fact, men with 1 liter (2,700 calories) and women with 0.83 liters (2,160 calories) probably have a sufficient energy intake, especially if allowances are made for smaller size and hotter climate.<sup>10</sup> Hence, as F. M. Fales notes, the 1 šĪLA/qû/liter allocation can be considered the minimum-survival daily nutritional dosage.<sup>11</sup> Such a diet that is based solely on barley rations would guarantee a relative wealth of energy (accompanied naturally by a marked nutritional imbalance over an extended period of time).<sup>12</sup>

Of the essential nutrients, the barley rations would supply adequate intakes of thiamin and niacin. The iron content could perhaps be low for girls and women, but adequate for men. The most serious deficiencies are vitamins A and C, and these

6. See E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Le Territoire de l'historien* (Paris, 1973–78), 1.23–37; J. Sharpe, “History from Below,” in P. Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, PA, 1992), 24–41.

7. R. Ellison, “Diet in Mesopotamia: the Evidence of the Barley Ration Texts (c. 3000–1400 BC),” *Iraq* 43 (1981), 35–45, esp. 37.

8. CAD Q, 288–91.

9. M. A. Powell, “Masse und Gewichte,” in *RLA* 7.457–517; “Weights and Measures,” in *ABD* 6.897–908. Also see I. J. Gelb, “The Ancient Mesopotamian Ration System,” *JNES* 24 (1965), 230–43; and “Measures of Dry and Liquid Capacity,” *JAOS* 102 (1982), 585–90.

10. Ellison, “Diet in Mesopotamia,” 38–39.

11. F. M. Fales, “Grain Reserves, Daily Rations and the Size of the Assyrian Army: A Quantitative Study,” *SAAB* 4 (1990), 23–34, esp. 29.

12. Milano, “Food and Diet in Pre-Classical Syria,” 228.

must be made up elsewhere. Insufficient vitamin C can cause scurvy.<sup>13</sup> The lack of vitamin A can produce blindness.<sup>14</sup> This may have been a significant factor in a number of the cases of blindness in the ancient Near East.<sup>15</sup>

The wheat rations would have been emmer wheat (*triticum dicocum*) which is low in gluten making it best suited for the basic flat loaves resembling pita bread.<sup>16</sup> Wheat rations would compare with barley rations in general nutritional value. Since vegetables were often grown in small personal gardens, rather than in the fields, and received special attention and irrigation,<sup>17</sup> it can be reasonably assumed that these were a major supply of vitamins A and C to supplement the barley and wheat rations.

Therefore, as M. Stol has recently observed, the ration recipients had a diet that contained adequate energy intake.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, this ancient Near Eastern data is reinforced by numerous studies in medieval and modern European history. These have demonstrated that rarely did the diet of an adult male doing heavy work—from whom there is a desire to ensure sufficient output—come down below 3,000 daily calories.<sup>19</sup>

In the Judahite context, this data is informative in understanding the import of the rations given to the *Kittîm* mercenaries of the Arad letters. J. Renz has recently been able to determine that this group—whether Greeks or Phoenicians<sup>20</sup>—numbered about 38 individuals.<sup>21</sup>

In the biblical text, the capacity measure of an *ephah* (<sup>ʔ</sup>*ēpāh*) was one-tenth of a homer (*hōmer*). This systemic feature is deducible from evidence in the Hebrew Bible (Exod. 16:36; Ezek. 45:11). Very likely the *imēru/hōmer* system was introduced in Mesopotamia by the Amorites in the late third millennium BCE.<sup>22</sup> Because the Mesopotamian *imēru* was clearly a West Semitic import, it is likely that the

13. Ellison notes that scurvy which developed during the winter months might be cleared up when the green vegetables appeared; "Diet in Mesopotamia," 39.

14. Technically, the deficiency of vitamin A is the main cause of xerophthalmia and keratomalacia—conditions which, if not halted, produce permanent blindness.

15. It is possible that the frequent use of the phrase IGI.NU.DU<sub>8</sub> "blind," usually taken to refer to prisoners of war who had been deliberately blinded, may refer to people who have been blinded or partially blinded by vitamin A deficiency (Ellison, "Diet in Mesopotamia," 39–42; and "Some Thoughts on the Diet of Mesopotamia from c. 3000–600 BC," *Iraq* 45 [1983], 146–50, esp. 149).

16. J. Renfrew, "Vegetables in the Ancient Near Eastern Diet," in J. M. Sasson, ed., *CANE* 1.191–202, esp. 195.

17. *Ibid.*, 193.

18. M. Stol, "Private Life in Ancient Mesopotamia," in J. M. Sasson, ed., *CANE* 1.485–501, esp. 496. This statement is clearly based on Ellison, "Diet in Mesopotamia," 43.

19. Milano, "Food and Diet in Pre-Classical Syria," 227.

20. The term *Kittîm* is found in the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Some scholars have argued that they are Greek or Cypriot mercenaries. See, e.g., Y. Aharoni with J. Naveh, "Hebrew Ostraca from Tel Arad," *IEJ* 16 (1966), 1–7; and P.-E. Dion, "Les KTYM de Tel Arad: Grecs ou Phéniciens?" *RB* 99 (1992), 70–97. Other scholars have argued on the grounds that Kition was a Phoenician city that the Arad *ktym* were Phoenicians. See, e.g., Z. Herzog, M. Aharoni, A. F. Rainey, and S. Moshkovitz, "The Israelite Fortress at Arad," *BASOR* 254 (1984), 1–34, esp. 31; A. F. Rainey, "Arad in the Latter Days of the Judean Monarchy," *Cathedra* 42 (1986), 16–25, esp. 25 [Hebrew]; and M. Heltzer, "Kition According to the Biblical Prophets and Hebrew Ostraca from Arad," *Report of the Department of Antiquities Cyprus, 1988 (Part I)* (Nicosia, 1988), 167–71.

21. Renz, *Handbuch der Althebräischen Epigraphik*, 1.375–78.

22. Powell, "Masse und Gewichte," 500.

norms of the Hebrew system, also deriving out of the common West Semitic context, was similar to this *imēru/hōmer* system.<sup>23</sup> Thus early Hebrew norms for the *hōmer* may not have been very different from the contemporary Mesopotamian capacity measures: Mesopotamian *qû* → *sūtu* → *imēru* ≈ Hebrew *ōmer* → *ēpāh* → *hōmer* respectively.<sup>24</sup>

The *hōmer* was derived from the “assload”—the weight that one ass can carry. This “assload,” Powell notes, “lies somewhere in the 90 kg range, fixing the assload of barley at ≈ 150 liters or the assload of wheat at ≈ 120 liters.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, even allowing for uncertainties and upward adjustment by redefinition of norms, the “natural” assload can hardly have exceeded 200 liters.<sup>26</sup> Corresponding to their Mesopotamian counterparts, the probable parameters of the pre-exilic Hebrew Bible dry measures from smallest to greatest were:

|              |                  |   |              |   |                |
|--------------|------------------|---|--------------|---|----------------|
| Mesopotamian | <i>qû</i> (SĪLA) | → | <i>sūtu</i>  | → | <i>imēru</i>   |
| Hebrew       | <i>ōmer</i>      | → | <i>ēpāh</i>  | → | <i>hōmer</i>   |
| Modern       | 1–2 liters       | → | 10–20 liters | → | 100–200 liters |

The application of this capacity measure data to the Book of Ruth is complicated by the uncertainty concerning the book’s date of composition. Unfortunately, there is no consensus concerning the book’s date, with some scholars preferring a pre-exilic date and others a postexilic date.

Problems of actual capacities arise due to differences between pre- and post-exilic sources. Many of these are due to the postexilic identification of the *hōmer* with the *kōr* and the inability of ancient authors to see that different structures and norms distinguished pre-exilic metrology (primarily decimal structures) from postexilic metrology (strongly influenced by sexagesimal patterns and Babylonian norms).<sup>27</sup> Consequently, the larger capacity measure for an *ephah* that is sometimes listed in commentaries (i.e., 36.4 liters) is a measure based upon postexilic and later sources. This obviously would produce a *hōmer* (364 liters) that no single donkey could carry! But then, the ancient links to the original *imēru/hōmer* system at this point were being lost. Often the equation of an *ephah* with a 36.4 liter capacity is based on a derivation from the Persian *maris*.<sup>28</sup> While this accords well with Josephus’ measures for the *bat* (*Antiquities* 3.8.3; 8.2.9), it produces an *ephah* of unrealistic weight for Ruth to carry, unless she made more than one trip from the threshing to Naomi’s house.<sup>29</sup> If a post-exilic *ephah* is in view, then the actual amount gleaned is a significantly greater amount than the pre-exilic amount.

23. Powell, “Weights and Measures,” 903.

24. Ibid., 903–5. Because of diachronic and political circumstances, it seems likely that there were a number of *homer* norms in the pre-exilic period, although these probably remained within the general range described here.

25. Ibid., 903. The difference in capacity measures is due to the difference in grain weights.

26. Loc. cit.

27. Loc. cit.

28. E.g., W. Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth, Das Hohe Lied, Die Klaglieder, KAT*, 2nd ed. (Gütersloh, 1962), 60.

29. Such a scenario, however, seems to be diminished as a possibility in light of the story’s description of Naomi’s spontaneous reaction at Ruth’s arrival back home.

Whatever the case, the ancient norm for a daily food ration seems to have been widely regarded as  $\approx 1$  liter, usually of barley.<sup>30</sup> It should be remembered that 0.83 liters can be sufficient for women (see above discussion). Therefore, using the pre-exilic capacity measure, Ruth's *ephah* equaled about 10–20 liters of barley which was enough for the two women to eat for a little more than a week.<sup>31</sup> Using the post-exilic capacity standard, Ruth's gleanings were enough for the two women to subsist for two and a half weeks.

But according to Ruth 2:23, Ruth continued to glean in Boaz's fields "until the barley and wheat harvests were finished." According to Deut. 16:9–12 and the Gezer Calendar,<sup>32</sup> the time period from the beginning of the barley harvest to the end of the wheat harvest was normally two months, concluding at Pentecost. If Ruth averaged roughly the same total each day (i.e., one *ephah*), and worked the entire two months, she would have gleaned a considerable amount of barley and wheat that would have fed the two women, at the minimum pre-exilic rate, approximately two-thirds of a year, or at the maximum pre-exilic rate, more than an entire year. With a postexilic extension of the capacity measure data, the two women would have had enough from Ruth's gleanings over the two month period to eat for two years.<sup>33</sup>

In any case, regardless of the date of composition for the book, the ancient hearers of the story of Ruth were certainly well versed in the agricultural world of the Levant and no doubt sensitive to food rationing issues. Thus it is most likely that the ancient hearers would have perceived the import of this gleaning detail in Ruth 2:17 as heightening the generosity of Boaz towards the two widows on a scale greater than modern readers of the story have even begun to perceive.

## 2. Ruth and "the Widow's Plea"

The recently published "Widow's Plea"<sup>34</sup> evokes comparison and contrast to the Book of Ruth. To facilitate discussion the inscription, in transliteration and translation, are given:<sup>35</sup>

(1) *yb'r'kk 'l yhw' bš'l'm.*

*w<sup>c</sup>t . yšm<sup>(2)c</sup> . ʔdny . h'šr<sup>1</sup> ʔt ʔmt'k<sup>1</sup>*  
*mt<sup>(3)</sup> ʔyšy .*

30. In other words, one *SILA* or *qû* throughout the entire history of Mesopotamia (Powell, "Weights and Measures," 904). For a full discussion, see Milano, "Food and Diet in Pre-Classical Syria," 201–71; and Fales, "Grain Reserves," 23–34.

31. An observation first made by Sasson, *Ruth* (see n. 2 above).

32. According to this extrabiblical Hebrew inscription (lines 4–5), a month was devoted to harvesting barley and a month was devoted to harvesting wheat. This inscription is clearly a twelve month calendar of the agricultural year, in spite of some persistent disclaimers' comments. See the discussion and bibliography in D. Sivan, "The Gezer Calendar and Northwest Semitic Linguistics," *IEJ* 48 (1998), 101–5; and O. Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel* (Winona Lake, IN, 1987), 31–44.

33. Storage for this amount of grain, however, may have presented a problem.

34. P. Bordreuil, F. Israel, and D. Pardee, "Deux ostraca paléo-hébreux de la collection Sh. Mousaieff," *Semitica* 46 (1996 [1997]), 49–76, esp. 61–76, plates 7–8; "King's Command and Widow's Plea. Two New Hebrew Ostraca of the Biblical Period," *NEA* 61/1 (1998), 2–13; and H. Shanks, "Three Shekels for the Lord. Ancient Inscription Records Gift to Solomon's Temple," *BAR* 23/6 (1997), 28–32.

35. Recently the ostrakon's authenticity has been questioned. See I. Eph'al and J. Naveh, "Remarks on the Recently Published Moussaieff Ostraca," *IEJ* 48 (1998), 269–73. See also A. Berejund and A. Schüle, "Erwägungen zu den neuen Ostraka aus der Sammlung Moussaieff," *Zeitschrift für Althebräistik* 11

*l<sup>2</sup> bnm .*

*whyh . ydk . <sup>(4)c</sup>my .*

*wntth . byd . <sup>2</sup>mtk . <sup>2</sup>t . h<sup>(5)</sup>nḥlh <sup>2</sup>šr . dbrth . l<sup>c</sup>ms<sup>(6)</sup>yhw .*

*w<sup>2</sup>t . šdh . ḥḥm . <sup>2</sup>š<sup>(7)</sup>r bn<sup>c</sup>mh . ntth . l<sup>2</sup>h<sup>(8)</sup>yw .*

<sup>(1)</sup>May Yahweh bless you in peace.

And now, may <sup>(2)</sup>my lord, the commander, hear your maidservant:

<sup>(3)</sup>My husband is dead;

(and there are) no sons.

And let your hand be <sup>(4)</sup>with me;

and may you give into the hand of your maidservant the ancestral <sup>(5)</sup>estate that you promised to Amas<sup>(6)</sup>yahu.

And now, the wheat field whi<sup>(7)</sup>ch is in Na<sup>c</sup>amah, you have given (or: may you give)<sup>36</sup> it to his <sup>(8)</sup>brother.

Besides the obvious parallel with the story of Naomi (lines 1–4), there are a number of instances of similar vocabulary to Ruth 4 (lines 4–8). In addition, the use of the term <sup>2</sup>*āmāh* in the inscription (lines 2, 4) seems to illuminate Ruth's usage of the term in her nocturnal approach to Boaz (Ruth 3:9).

The editors of the “Widow's Plea” rightly point out the fact that an <sup>2</sup>*āmāh* is the feminine parallel to the masculine term <sup>c</sup>*ebed* as confirmed by the marvelous parallel in the Meşad Ḥashavyahu inscription (KAI 200). There have been, however, a number of scholars who have argued that there was no significant difference between an <sup>2</sup>*āmāh* and a *šiphāh*.<sup>37</sup>

Obviously there was semantic overlap between the two terms.<sup>38</sup> Both terms can be used interchangeably in certain contexts as a term for “female slave (i.e., any female who is not ‘free’).”<sup>39</sup> Both can also be used figuratively as a term for self-abasement. But such near synonymy does not rule out the possibility that there are contexts in which some nuance of difference may be present.<sup>40</sup>

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(1998), 58–73. While the arguments of Eph<sup>c</sup>al and Naveh may raise questions concerning the inscription's authenticity, they do not—as they admit—prove that it is a forgery. In fact, these same arguments—in particular the biblical and epigraphic parallels—in many ways could be used to argue—and often are used as arguments for authenticity in the cases of other inscriptions—for the genuineness of this ostrakon. The abruptness and enigma caused by the last sentence (lines 6–8) may indicate genuineness. Would a forger think to insert this statement?

36. It is possible that *ntth* in line 7 has the same volitional nuance of *wntth* in line 4 (as observed by Eph<sup>c</sup>al and Naveh, “Remarks,” 269).

37. For example, Ch. Cohen, “Studies in Extra-Biblical Hebrew Inscriptions: I. The Semantic Range and Usage of the Terms <sup>2</sup>*māh* and *šphh*,” *Shnaton* 5–6 (1978–79) [1982], xxv–liii. For a discussion of the different views, see Sasson, *Ruth*, 53. While *āmāh* occurs in virtually all Semitic languages, as well as in extra-biblical inscriptions, *šiphāh* is restricted to Hebrew. But as yet *šiphāh* is not attested in extra-biblical Hebrew inscriptions.

38. See, e.g., 2 Sam. 14:6–19 where *šiphār<sup>k</sup>kā* appears to be parallel to <sup>2</sup>*mātō*. It is noteworthy, however, that the only two occurrences of <sup>2</sup>*mātō* are found in the more formal indirect speech/thought of the widow (vv. 15–16). Thus the wise woman of Tekoa refers to herself as “your *šiphāh*” when describing her plight but as “your <sup>2</sup>*āmāh*” when presenting her request.

39. Cohen, “Studies,” xxxiv.

40. See the discussion in H. Avalos, “Legal and Social Institutions in Canaan and Ancient Israel,” in J. M. Sasson, ed., *CANE*, 1.615–31, esp. 625.

<sup>2</sup>*Āmāh* seems to be used to emphasize a slave's feminine qualities (need for protection, weakness, sexual attractiveness, etc.), while *šiphāh* seems to be used when the female is viewed as a possession and a laborer.<sup>41</sup> Both terms can be used as self-designations. When it is used this way, <sup>2</sup>*āmāh* appears to suggest a female petitioner's weakness and need for help or protection when presenting a request before a more powerful male, never before another female. When *šiphāh* is used as a self-designation of obeisance, it seems to signify the woman's subservience and readiness to serve or obey instructions.<sup>42</sup>

It appears that the term <sup>2</sup>*āmāh* may have also been used at times figuratively to describe women of higher social status. This seems to be the case particularly in a number of extra-biblical uses. Thus it is used to describe a woman who was the wife of a high government official (the <sup>ḥ</sup>*šr* <sup>l</sup>*hbyt*)<sup>43</sup> in the inscription of the "Royal Steward."<sup>44</sup> It is also used in a seal of a woman named Shelomith who is the wife of Elnatan, the governor of Judah.<sup>45</sup> Both the <sup>2</sup>*āmāh* of the <sup>ḥ</sup>*šr* <sup>l</sup>*hbyt* and Shelomith, the <sup>2</sup>*āmāh* of the governor, are very likely women of higher social status. In these contexts, <sup>2</sup>*āmāh* may be used as a metonymy for wife or an honorific title. Finally, <sup>2</sup>*āmāh* appears in our "Widow's Plea" inscription, being used twice as the appropriate, polite designation for a woman presenting a discretionary petition to a higher official or judge.

In 1 Sam. 25:41, according to Berlin,<sup>46</sup> Abigail is an <sup>2</sup>*āmāh* but wants to further reduce herself to a *šiphāh* vis-à-vis David. It appears that *šiphāh*, when used distinctively, is the more deferential term since it refers to women belonging to the lowest rung of the social ladder.<sup>47</sup>

In Ruth 2:13, Ruth initially refers to herself as Boaz's *šiphāh*, although she does not really have even this status (she is officially a *nokriyāh*, "foreign woman"). She refers to herself in this way to emphasize her complete unworthiness and her role

41. I. Riesener, *Der Stamm ʿbd in Alten Testament. Eine Wortuntersuchung unter Berücksichtigung neuerer sprachwissenschaftlicher Methoden*, BZAW 149 (Berlin-New York, 1979), 76–83.

42. R. Schultz, "<sup>2</sup>*Āmāh*," and "*Šiphāh*," in W. A. VanGemeren, ed., *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, 1997), 1.418–21 and 4.211–13.

43. On the "<sup>ḥ</sup>*šr* <sup>l</sup>*hbyt*," see S. C. Layton, "The Steward in Ancient Israel: A Study of Hebrew (<sup>2</sup>*āšer*) <sup>ḥ</sup>*al-habbayit* in Its Near Eastern Setting," *JBL* 109 (1990), 633–49.

44. KAI 191; Renz, *Handbuch der Althebräischen Epigraphik*, Jer(7):2, 1.264–65. Abercrombie points out that this is an example of a "paired burial" common in Iron Age tombs. These are usually an adult male and female lying side by side in a supine and fully extended position. The female buried in this tomb of the "Royal Steward" was obviously a woman of high status buried with her high official husband; see J. R. Abercrombie, "A Short Note on a Siloam Tomb Inscription," *BASOR* 254 (1984), 61–62.

45. E. Meyers, "The Shelomith Seal and the Judean Restoration: Some Additional Considerations," *EI* 18 (1985), 33\*–38\*; idem, "The Persian Period and the Judean Restoration: From Zerubbabel to Nehemiah," in P. D. Miller et al., eds., *Ancient Israelites Religion. Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (Philadelphia, 1987), 509–21. Williamson notes the likely identification of the Shelomith of this seal with the Shelomith of 1 Chr. 3:19. He suggests that the rarity of women named either in genealogies or on seals may be explained if Shelomith held some official position. See H. G. M. Williamson, "Exile and After: Historical Study," in B. T. Arnold and D. W. Baker, eds., *The Face of Old Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids, 1999; in press).

46. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 88–89.

47. Ibid., 89. Riesener feels that the usage of *šiphāh* by Abigail indicates her willingness to pass into David's possession (*Der Stamm ʿbd im Alten Testament*, 80).

and intent as laborer, since she does not know what the response of Boaz will be to this new Moabitess in his field. She is not yet even remotely established within her new social context.

But later in her nocturnal visit (Ruth 3:9), Ruth refers to herself as an <sup>ʿ</sup>*āmāh*. She uses the term that is appropriate in the context of a request of marriage<sup>48</sup> to a *gibbôr ḥayil* like Boaz. The use of this self-designation may indicate the woman's utter dependence on the addressee's favor to grant her request.<sup>49</sup>

This new ostrakon also raises a question concerning the levirate marriage in ancient Israel. H. Shanks puts it this way:

The inscription is puzzling. According to the law of levirate marriage, a man must marry his brother's widow if his brother died childless (see Deuteronomy 25:5–6). Why wasn't the husband's brother, who had already received the wheat field in Na<sup>ʿ</sup>amah, required to do his duty by marrying his brother's widow? Alas, the ostrakon does not tell us.<sup>50</sup>

There are at least seven possible reasons that the levirate is not mentioned in the ostrakon:

1. The widow is beyond child-bearing age and thus the levirate is impossible to implement. Unfortunately we have no way of knowing if this were the case or not for the inscription's widow.
2. While on the basis of the biblical Book of Ruth many scholars have assumed that the laws pertaining to marriage and redemption of land were necessarily intertwined, it may be, as H. Avalos has observed, that the author of Ruth has intentionally distorted these two institutions primarily to advance and strengthen a plot that focused on the fortunes of widowed women.<sup>51</sup> Thus there would be no reason for the levirate to apply in this case. If, however, R. Westbrook is correct in his analysis of the levirate—namely, that the levirate was indelibly linked to the *naḥ<sup>al</sup>lāh* as is evident from the exegesis of the relevant passages,<sup>52</sup> then there are good reasons to see the two institutions as linked together.
3. The levirate was not practiced any longer in Judahite society at the time of the ostrakon's writing (i.e., the time of Josiah, according to its editors). Certainly, at some point the levirate ceased to be practiced. And if the state were breaking down the old traditional kinship groups,<sup>53</sup> then it is possible that by the end of the monarchic period the levirate was disappearing. However, it is

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48. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 211.

49. Schultz, “<sup>ʿ</sup>*āmāh*,” 1.420.

50. Shanks, “Three Shekels,” 32.

51. Avalos, “Legal and Social Institutions,” 616. In fairness to Avalos, he is not necessarily advocating this interpretation, but citing it as a caution in the interpretation of the levirate.

52. R. Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law*, JSOT Supp. 113 (Sheffield, 1991), 69–89; and “The Law of the Biblical Levirate,” *Revue Internationale des Droits de l'Antiquité* 24 (1977), 65–87.

53. See B. Halpern, “Jerusalem and the Lineages in the Seventh Centuries BCE: Kinship and the Rise of Individual Moral Liability,” in B. Halpern & D. W. Hobson, eds., *Law and Ideology in Monarchic Israel*, JSOT Supp. 124 (Sheffield, 1991), 11–107.

very difficult, if not impossible under present circumstances, to prove that the levirate was no longer being practiced.

4. It may be that widows could, in fact, inherit land in ancient Israel and that the biblical text simply does not adequately note this. T. Thompson and D. Thompson register this possibility when they argue that normally no provisions were made for widows, yet “they do not say the wife cannot inherit if the husband, before he dies, chooses to make her his heir.”<sup>54</sup> Hence, if this is the case, the ostrakon evinces a situation in which arrangements have been made beforehand for the *naḥ<sup>a</sup>lāh* to pass to the widow, but the *śar* has not executed the estate properly as yet, although he has, in the case of the wheat field of Na<sup>c</sup>amah, executed part of the inheritance to the deceased’s brother.<sup>55</sup> The widow’s petition would be more like the worker’s plea in the Mešad Ḥashavyahu letter, an appeal for justice in the fulfillment of what had been promised.

However, in the biblical texts, the widow, along with the fatherless and the *gēr* (“foreign sojourner”) typified the powerless in ancient Israel (Exod. 22:21–24; Deut. 10:18, etc.). The prophets describe their abuse by those in power (Jer. 7:6; Isa. 1:17; 10:2; Mal. 3:5). It seems that a woman’s economic well-being was directly related to her link with some male.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, as Lewis has pointed out, the story of the Tekoite widow in 2 Samuel 14 “works” only if women do not inherit. If women inherit, the story loses much of its force.<sup>57</sup>

5. The widow’s brother-in-law has refused to perform the levirate for some reason.<sup>58</sup> According to Deut. 25:7–10, this was a possibility, although if this were the case here, one would have expected the widow to bring this to the *śar*’s attention. The passage in Deuteronomy details the process of shaming the brother-in-law who “has no desire (*ḥāpēš*) to marry his brother’s widow.” But the passage is silent on what happens to the widow and the *naḥ<sup>a</sup>lāh*.<sup>59</sup> Presumably, she is free to remarry someone else within the *mišpāḥāh* and the

54. T. Thompson and D. Thompson, “Some Legal Problems in the Book of Ruth,” *VT* 18 (1968), 79–99, esp. 97. Burrows argues that the Book of Ruth “assumes the practice of inheritance by widows”; M. Burrows, “The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth,” *JBL* 59 (1940) 448. Beattie comments: “a childless widow would, taking precedence over her husband’s lateral male relations, customarily inherit her husbands’ [sic] estate” (emphasis mine); D. R. G. Beattie, “The Book of Ruth as Evidence for Israelite Legal Practice,” *VT* 24 (1974), 256.

55. Unless the verbal form in the last sentence is understood volitionally “may you give.” See n. 36 above.

56. P. S. Hiebert, “Whence Shall Help Come to Me?: The Biblical Widow,” in P. L. Day, ed., *Gender and Difference* (Minneapolis, 1989), 134–37, esp. 137. Morgenstern stated: “The widow of the deceased man went with the property as a definite part of the estate . . . the widow is regarded as an inalienable part of the estate”; J. Morgenstern, “The Book of the Covenant, Part II,” *HUCA* 7 (1930) 173–75.

57. T. J. Lewis, “The Ancestral Estate (*naḥ<sup>a</sup>lat* <sup>ʿ</sup>*lōhīm*) in 2 Samuel 14:16,” *JBL* 110/4 (1991), 597–612, esp. 611.

58. Perhaps like the *p<sup>ʿ</sup>lōnī* <sup>ʿ</sup>*almōnī* of Ruth 4:1–6, he is worried about endangering his own *naḥ<sup>a</sup>lāh*.

59. For the concept of the *nḥl* in Syro-Mesopotamia at the end of the Bronze age, see D. Arnaud, “Le vocabulaire de l’héritage dans les textes du moyen-Euphrate à la fin de l’âge du Bronze récent,” *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici* 12 (1995), 21–26.

land remains in a temporary, transitional state until this remarriage. The Hebrew Bible is silent on what happened to the *naḥ<sup>a</sup>lāh* during the interim between the death of the husband and the ceremony in Deut. 25:7–10, as well as the interim between the ceremony and the time of remarriage.

6. Some type of special arrangement has been made in this case by Amasyahu—the widow's deceased husband as the ostrakon's editors have suggested.<sup>60</sup> Hence the widow was requesting the *śar* for a temporary usufruct of the *naḥ<sup>a</sup>lāh*. They state:

The wife of the deceased is requesting a temporary suspension of legal transfer of her husband's property to those who were legally entitled to receive it; her request is based on the claim that the husband's brother has taken possession of one part of the property and that he cannot therefore claim a state of need similar to her own.<sup>61</sup>

In such a case, this special arrangement may have superceded the levirate.

However, this interpretation is problematic since it is not clear on what ground such a special arrangement has been based. While Moses modifies the law concerning inheritance in the case of the daughters of Zelophehad, he does so, according to the tradition in Numbers, on the basis of Yahweh's command (Num. 27:7–10). Does the *śar* have this kind of authority? Ideally in the ancient Near East, the king was the protector of the widow, the orphan, and the poor—that is, the powerless in society. And it was the *śar*, who by extension of the royal authority, was responsible for this as well.

7. The levirate would not apply in this case since the *naḥ<sup>a</sup>lāh* of her husband's and brother-in-law's father had already been divided between the two brothers. The levirate would apply only up to the point of the division of the father's *naḥ<sup>a</sup>lāh*.

If one understands the levirate as Westbrook has described it in his *Property and the Family in Biblical Law*, then the levirate would not apply in this case. If the land has already been divided, then the brothers were no longer “living together” (cf. Deut. 25:5). If one of them dies without issue, then the surviving brother inherits *as heir of the deceased brother, not as heir of the deceased father*. Since the land was divided and the deceased brother would be listed as an owner having title (*šēm*), there would be no reason to implement the levirate. It would be unnecessary to generate the legal fiction of title through the birth of a levirate son since the deceased brother had realized title to the land before his death.

This solution, however, is not free of problems. If Amasyahu died without issue, then why hasn't the surviving brother as heir of the deceased brother already inherited the estate of the deceased? On what grounds has Amasyahu arranged commitments from this *śar* concerning the *naḥ<sup>a</sup>lāh*? And why has

60. Bordreuil, Israel and Pardee, *NEA* 61/1 (1998), 10–11.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 11. In regard to special arrangements for a widow made by the husband in anticipation of his death, and for the occasional need for judicial intervention to obtain the widow's settlement in such cases, see M. T. Roth, “The Neo-Babylonian Widow,” *JCS* 43–45 (1991–93), 1–26, esp. 7–14.

the *śar* given the wheat field in Na<sup>c</sup>amah to Amasyahu's brother (if there were a commitment to a special arrangement)?<sup>62</sup>

Finally, the ostrakon raises another question: "Did Naomi have a legal option that she chooses not to exercise? And if she had one, why wouldn't she use it? A comparison with the widow of Tekoa is perhaps helpful here. If both the widow of Tekoa and the widow of this ostrakon could appeal to a higher authority, why can't Naomi?<sup>63</sup> Is it because the former instances (the widow of Tekoa and the widow of the ostrakon) live during the monarchy when such appeals were more possible? If this is the case, wouldn't this have raised a question in the minds of hearers/readers of the Book of Ruth (i.e., would they have not wondered too why Naomi does not make appeal to a clan chieftain, elder, or *śar*). Of course, Naomi's case may have been different to the point that an appeal was not possible (i.e., maybe the *śādēh*, "field," of Elimelech having been sold previously before the departure from Bethlehem to Moab effectively eliminated the grounds for appeal since only in the context of a *gō<sup>7</sup>ēl*'s action could there be remedy for her situation).

### Conclusion

To what extent can one expect a short story that has something of a folkloristic air to it to convey social, legal, and economic institutions in an accurate, realistic manner? Frequently, biblical and ancient Near Eastern materials have been used to attempt to argue for a particular date of composition for the Book of Ruth or its historicity.<sup>64</sup> This article has not attempted to do this. Rather the two comparative points discussed in it have assumed that the ancient Near Eastern materials can be helpful in the *elucidation* of the biblical text because they are data—in an important sense—from the "real world" out of which the story of Ruth arose. Even in the most folkloristic of tales, there are elements of the story that "work" in the real world of the original audience. The accurate/inaccurate, realistic/unrealistic qualities of an ancient story are sometimes best judged by documents from a historically literary context close to that story's.

While the two notes discussed here do not solve the interpretive problems in the Book of Ruth, they do help us re-address some of the issues. And this very process is helpful because it enhances our ability to discern some of the intricate nuances that

62. Or why is the widow requesting that the wheat field in Na<sup>c</sup>amah be given to Amasyahu's brother (if *wntth* is volitional; see n. 36 above)?

63. The story of the widow of Tekoa (2 Samuel 14), the Mešad Ḥashavyahu ostrakon and the Widow's Plea ostrakon seem to share some genre similarities. They all evince elements of extrajudicial petitions for justice, seeking an exceptional ruling. On some of the generic qualities of extrajudicial petitions, see F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "The Genre of the Mešad Ḥashavyahu Ostrakon," *BASOR* 295 (1994), 49–55; and R. Westbrook, *Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Law*, Cahiers de la Revue Biblique 26 (Paris, 1988).

64. See the fine discussion in S. Niditch, "Legends of Wise Heroes and Heroines," in D. A. Knight & G. M. Tucker, eds., *The Hebrew Bible and its Modern Interpreters* (Minneapolis and Atlanta, 1985), 445–63, esp. 451–56. She rightly points out that such items as genre, legal information, and theology cannot be used definitely to date Ruth.

may have been active in the legal systems and cultural mores in ancient Israelite society in so far as a story like Ruth may relay them.

Recommended Daily Nutritional Intakes<sup>65</sup>  
(Food and Agricultural Organisation, FAO, 1974)

|              | <i>Calories</i> | <i>Protein</i><br><i>g</i> | <i>Calcium</i><br><i>mg</i> | <i>Iron</i><br><i>mg</i> | <i>Thiamin</i><br><i>mg</i> | <i>Riboflavin</i><br><i>mg</i> | <i>Niacin</i><br><i>mg</i> | <i>Vit. A</i><br><i>iu</i> | <i>Vit. C</i><br><i>mg</i> |
|--------------|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Adult Male   | 3,000           | 37.00                      | 400–500                     | 5–9                      | 1.20                        | 1.8                            | 19.8                       | 5000                       | 30                         |
| Adult Female | 2,200           | 29.00                      | 400–500                     | 14–28                    | 0.90                        | 1.3                            | 14.5                       | 5000                       | 30                         |

Nutritional Value of Selected Barley Rations  
(assuming 1 šĪLA/qû ≈ 1 liter)

| šĪLA/qû per day | <i>Calories</i> | <i>Protein</i><br><i>g</i> | <i>Calcium</i><br><i>mg</i> | <i>Iron</i><br><i>mg</i> | <i>Thiamin</i><br><i>mg</i> | <i>Riboflavin</i><br><i>mg</i> | <i>Niacin</i><br><i>mg</i> | <i>Vit. A</i><br><i>iu</i> | <i>Vit. C</i><br><i>mg</i> |
|-----------------|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 2.00            | 5,400           | 145.50                     | 750                         | 60                       | 5.70                        | 3.0                            | 108.0                      | 0                          | 0                          |
| 1.33            | 3,600           | 97.00                      | 500                         | 40                       | 3.80                        | 2.0                            | 72.0                       | 0                          | 0                          |
| 1.00            | 2,700           | 72.75                      | 375                         | 30                       | 2.85                        | 1.5                            | 54.0                       | 0                          | 0                          |
| 0.83            | 2,241           | 60.38                      | 311                         | 25                       | 2.37                        | 1.2                            | 44.8                       | 0                          | 0                          |
| 0.66            | 1,800           | 48.50                      | 250                         | 20                       | 1.90                        | 1.0                            | 36.0                       | 0                          | 0                          |
| 0.33            | 900             | 24.25                      | 125                         | 10                       | 0.95                        | 0.5                            | 18.0                       | 0                          | 0                          |

65. Both tables are adapted from Ellison, "Diet in Mesopotamia," 40–41 with additional update.