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Reading Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55 in the light of the landless and poor women in South Africa: A conversation with Fernando F. Segovia and Ernesto 'Che' Guevara

Author:
V. Ndikhokele N. Mtshiselwa[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa, South Africa

Corresponding author:
V. Ndikhokele N. Mtshiselwa,
mtshivnn@unisa.ac.za

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Recent statistics in South Africa shows that women mostly experience poverty as compared to their male counterparts. In the context of the experience of poverty by women, several Old Testament scholars have convincingly explored the theme of poverty in the Hebrew Bible. In her contextual rereading of the Naomi-Ruth Story, Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) links the issue of poverty to the theme of land. Also, from the historical-critical and partly, the contextual approach to ancient texts, Esias E. Meyer argues that Leviticus 25:8–55 holds liberating possibilities for women who are invisible in such a text. Based on the argument made by the preceding scholars, firstly, this article argues that in the context from which the texts of Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55 emerged, some women were both landless and poor. Secondly, it is argued in this article that the context of these texts carries a striking resemblance to the situation of women in modern South Africa, as many women do not own productive land and are poor. Thirdly, this article poses the question: What implications do the ideologies of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara and the hermeneutical approach of Fernando F. Segovia to ancient texts bear on the reading of Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55 in South Africa?

Introduction

After the birth of a son Ruth disappears in the Ruth scroll. In a text that promises to offer land redistribution and socio-economic justice there is also no mention of women. Thus, the invisibility of women in Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55 is visible. This article argues that in the context from which the texts of Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55 emerged some women were both landless and poor. Thus, the original intention of the preceding texts is inseparable for the issue of landlessness and poverty. In addition, it is argued in this article that the context of these texts carries a striking resemblance to the situation of women in modern South Africa, as many women do not own productive land and are poor. In the end, and more importantly, this article poses the question: What implications do the ideologies of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara and the hermeneutical approach of Fernando Segovia to ancient texts have on the reading of Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55 in South Africa? The theoretical and methodological approaches adopted in this article stand in continuity with feminism as the liberation of women is advocated in our contextual reading of the Hebrew Bible. To this end, I now address the issue of landless and poor women in South Africa in order to articulate the social location from which Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55 will be read.

Landless and poor women in South Africa

Recent statistics reveal that 56% of women in South Africa live in poor households in contrast to 51.8% of men (Stats SA 2012:71). Within that 56% of women; 63.8% constitute African women; 4.7% is made up of white women; 21% is made up of Indian and/or Asian women; and 35.5% constitute mixed race women (Stats SA 2012:71). It seems clear that in post-apartheid South Africa, black women are the most affected by socio-economic injustice. That the issues of poverty, food security, access to land, and agrarian reform are linked is indisputable (Modise & Mtshiselwa 2013:359–378). Thus, the reality of poverty and landlessness on the part of women has served as a basis for reflection, and more specifically in the fields of social sciences and political sciences. In the context of politics, the state of the nation address presented by President Zuma for the 2013–2014 financial year has been criticised for the way it renders 'women invisible in relation to rural development and agrarian reform' (Watson *et al*. 2014:40). Also, not only were women once again notably absent in the 2015 address, the address was equally oblivious to the known challenges and discrimination that women face in relation to land and poverty. As Odeny (2013:7) excellently

observed, 'customary and traditional practices also result in landlessness in cases where women are denied inheritance rights to parents' land and are evicted from the marital home after divorce or being widowed because of HIV or AIDs and other related deaths'. Put differently, cultural norms which perpetuate patriarchy continue to place women on the margins in the context of agriculture. The persistent patriarchy denies women the access to, control over, and inheritance of land (Bob, Bassa & Munien 2013:142)

No doubt, as Kongolo (2011:352) observed, 'women's land rights and access to land are at the core of women's livelihoods in rural South Africa' (cf. Bob 2008:120). It is also noteworthy that from the 30% of the population involved in farming in one of the provinces in South Africa, Northern West Province, women are mostly managers and/or mere labourers (Kongolo 2011:353). At first glance, this evidence appears attractive as it shows that women are presently employed in South Africa. Although patriarchy is oppressive, in this case, however, it presents itself as caring because women are provided with a source of income. It must be noted that access to credit and ownership of land still remains unobtainable for women. Also, Mosala's (1991:40) view that the colonial and apartheid systems dispossessed the Africans of their land and created out of them a wage class with nothing but their labour power to sell' holds in the case of landless and poor women. The patriarchal society of South Africa has created out of women a wage class with nothing but their labour power to sell. Many a woman continues not to own productive land. It may be argued also that the colonial and apartheid system created the landlessness and poverty of women in South Africa, with respect to the issue of access to land, as Kongolo (2011) remarks:

> Generally, the South African experience reveals that, although some few male small farmers do not have access to credit, the majority (about 80%) do have access to agricultural credit as compared to the majority of female farmers. Male farmers have not only access to credit, but also access to land, inputs, seeds, extension service, and training ... Unequal access to land, inputs such as seeds and fertiliser, and credit constrains women's agricultural productivity. (p. 356)

Based on this remark, not only does the unequal access to productive land show the oppression of women, it also reveals the manner in which patriarchy is persistent. In the scene of providing the previously disadvantaged black people in South Africa with resources and land, women are invisible. Furthermore, Cross and Hornby's (2002:41) argument that 'women's access to land and control over the use of land has largely (although not exclusively) been mediated through their relationship to a male household head, whether a husband, brother, son, or other male relative' is conclusive. It is thus no surprise then that this argument makes sense because in a patriarchal context, such as South Africa, where men are in a position of power, women's benefit from the use of productive land is mainly dependent on the relationship with a male figure. As mentioned earlier, the reality of poverty and landlessness of women has been articulated in the fields of social sciences and political sciences. Notwithstanding the preceding articulation, the need for research that stands in continuity with the contributions of Meyer and Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) on the topic of women and land is unquestionable in the discipline of Old Testament studies. The topic is a rarely explored one within Old Testament scholarship, and more particularly in the South African context. Thus, we now turn to the texts of Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55.

Landless and poor women in Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55

The Hebrew Bible is not a religious document without its difficulties, as it could be oppressive to certain people. Thus, if not read with a view of highlighting the way women are oppressed in ancient texts, Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55 has a potential of being oppressive to modern readers. It is critical therefore that we probe whether or not some women were landless and poor in the context from which the texts under consideration here emerged.

The Ruth 4 text

Brenner (2013:309) has decisively argued that 'the Ruth scroll, beyond romance, is all about land and land ownership and their material and other rewards. The scroll's plot centres on harvest and harvest time, in agriculture as in the human social community'. This argument holds true because the land is at its epicentre in the Book of Ruth, revealing the original intention of the text.

Exclusive legitimate authority on land allocation

With respect to the legitimate authority on land allocation, Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) has made a convincing argument. For her, the many reapers in Boaz' field (cf. Rt 2:4–7), who are a majority, do not possess the productive land, whereas a male minority, like Boaz (cf. Rt 4:3ff.), had access to more land (Masenya [ngwan'a Mphahlele] 2013a:1). The preceding observation has led her to submit that the aforementioned minority appeared to have had legitimate authority on land allocation. In addition, the legitimate authority on land allocation seems to have been exclusive to men. 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. The son needed to be born (cf. Rt. 4:7).

Interestingly, the exclusive legitimate claim to the land by men is connected somehow to women, even if the text repeatedly suggests that land inheritance was regulated via males. In Ruth 4 the materialistic concern for land ownership bears a distinct feature because 'the two spheres of marriage among kin (*go'el*) and land redemption among kin come together' (Sakenveld 1999:59). Thus, it becomes clear that women solely benefited from the ownership and use of productive land through their relationship with a male figure. Regarding the issue of land ownership, women seem to have been powerless in ancient Israel. Naomi appears to

be in a position of power as the text states that land was in the 'hands of Naomi' (cf. Rt. 4:5, 9). However, the male figures in the story certainly have more authority with regard to the allocation of land. Interestingly, elsewhere in the post-exilic literature, the noun מִיָּד 'hand' is either translated or used to refer to 'power'. In Proverbs 18:21 the noun is translated as 'power' to articulate the power of the tongue. Slightly different, in 2 Kings 13:5 the noun refers to the power of the Arameans. It may thus be reasonable to argue that the noun מִיַּד 'hand' presents a Naomi who had some power, but who is subjected to the authority of men. These men possess the legitimate authority on land allocation.

Distancing women from land ownership

Ruth 4:3 presents the productive land as belonging to Elimelech. In this instance, the land ownership is distanced from Naomi, a woman who could not legitimately own land in the post-exilic Yehud context. Disturbingly, the close connection between the productive land and women in vv. 9 and 10 renders women as a property, rather than a human being who also needed to have a right to own productive land. This holds true because the qal perfect verb קָנִיתִי 'bought' which is in a first person singular state that is used to refer to the procurement of productive land (cf. v. 9), is equally used in the case of Ruth (cf. v. 10). I am not convinced by the translation of the preceding verb as 'acquire' (cf. NRS) as it hides the manner in which Ruth was viewed as a property. In the post-exilic text of Leviticus 25:28, 30, 50, 51, one that is widely accepted as related to Ruth 4, the stem קָנָה is rendered as 'bought or purchased' (cf. Fischer 1999:39; Masenya [ngwan'a Mphahlele] 2004:46–59, 2010:269). The manner in which the latter verb is translated in Leviticus 25 supports the view that Ruth is viewed as a property – the productive land – which is purchased by Boaz.

Privileged but oppressed – a case of Naomi and Ruth

As Boer (1999:170) perceived, Naomi appears to be a privileged woman in the Ruth scroll. Although Ruth had a right and an opportunity to leave Naomi as Orpah did, it does seem that Naomi assimilated Ruth. On this point, unlike Boer, Brenner (1999:159–160) puts it clearly that Ruth becomes a so-called foreign worker who works for Naomi. The view that Ruth worked for Naomi underscores the view that Naomi was an employer and thus privileged. Furthermore, considering that Boaz bought the productive land from Naomi it may thus be reasonably argued that she was a privileged woman. Boer's view that Naomi is a privileged woman seems to be making some sense. However, even if Naomi appears to be a privileged woman, she remains oppressed because of the way in which the patriarchal system in post-exilic Yehud did not permit her to be a legitimate owner of the productive land.

Furthermore, Ruth too may be viewed as a privileged woman because she was employed to work in the fields. In Ruth 2:9, Boaz direct Ruth to glean with the Israelite women workers, revealing the way women were viewed as employees rather than owners of productive land. Interestingly, Brenner (1999:160) argues that Ruth may be viewed as not an agricultural worker as she was neither employed by Boaz nor received a wage from him. However, that Ruth accrued benefits from working at the field, is indisputable. Thus, Ruth may undoubtedly be viewed as one who received some sort of compensation for the work she performed. In the field she joined the working-class women who were employed by Boaz. On the issue of women and social class, Brenner (1999) has said:

> But ultimately the factor of class, of social background, and wealth or its lack, and the resultant personal status involved, is the decisive determinant. Hence, finally, Ruth might be a prime example of this reality: a low-class foreign woman, a worker without property, will become invisible in the host community. (pp. 161–162)

Based on this statement, an ambiguity is observed. On the one hand, the view that Ruth was privileged because she was an employee and that she had food security may hold. However, on the other hand, although she was a worker, as Brenner rightly submits, she was both landless and invisible later in the text of Ruth. Although there is a consensus among scholars on the disappearance of Ruth in chapter 4, there is however a variant. Boer (1999:164) holds that 'once the process of marriage is under way she disappears' in the story, whereas Brenner (2013:308) observes 'Ruth's disappearance from the scene after she gives birth to a son'. On this point, I support Brenner's view. The statement וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן 'and she bore a son' in Ruth 4:13 presents Ruth's last appearance in the text as opposed to the statement וַתְּהִי־לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה 'and she became his wife' which is presented earlier in the same verse. In addition to the linguistic observation made here, that the birth of a son who will legitimately inherit the productive land, as regulated by patriarchy, is core support for my inclination to Brenner's view. So, instead of being mainly privileged, Ruth is oppressed in the text to a point that as soon as she gives birth to a 'male' figure who will own land, she is relegated to a position of invisibility and left with no land of her own.

As mentioned earlier, the evidence of the redemption of land and poverty in the Book of Ruth also links Leviticus 25 to Ruth 4 (Masenya [ngwan'a Mphahlele] 2004:46–59, 2010:269). Regarding such a link, Fischer (1999) remarks:

> It is difficult to reconstruct the concept of redemption in the book of Ruth. In buying Naomi's strip of field (4:3–9), Boaz is obviously referring to the regulation of Lev 25:23–24 that aims at preserving the share of land for impoverished landowners. The redemption (Lev 25; cf. Jer 32, from v. 8) is nowhere connected with the levirate in the Torah. Both laws relate to each other by referring to the inalienable claim to an estate in the Promised Land, which is to be guaranteed through kin solidarity. (p. 39)

Based on the link between Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25 that is alluded to in Fischer's remark, we now turn to the text of Leviticus 25:8–55.

The Leviticus 25:8–55 text

The section on 'Loss of land because of poverty (vv. 25–28)' responds to the challenges of poverty and landlessness in

post-exilic Yehud. One would have expected the clause in verse 25 כִּי־יָמוּךְ אָחִיךָ 'If your brother becomes poor' to be gender inclusive. Instead, in its bias it assumes that sisters, that is, women were not poor. Furthermore, the clause assumes that the challenge of land dispossession did not affect women. Against the view that women did not own land, Eskenazi (1992:25–43) argues that in post-exilic Yehud, women could inherit property. The phrase אֲחֻזַּת נַחֲלָה 'property as an inheritance' in Numbers 27:7 and 36:2 provides textual evidence for this argument. However, on account of the patriarchal nature of the post-exilic Yehud context, it is argued that women were viewed as men's property and were thus not allowed to inherit property (Masenya [ngwan'a Mphahlele] 2013b:146). Notwithstanding Eskenazi's position which is supported by textual evidence, in relation to Leviticus 25:8–55 Masenya's (ngwan'a Mphahlele) view is compelling. Leviticus 25:8–55 is silent about women owning land and this fact confirms the argument that in the patriarchal post-exilic Yehud, women probably could not own land. Additionally, for the authors of Leviticus 25:8–55, only males could make claims to the land (Meyer 2005:282). The insertion of 'sisters' by the authors of the Holiness Code (H) to render the clause as 'if your brother and sister become poor' would not only be a gender sensitive move, but it would have addressed the reality of poverty as well. Poverty affects both men and women, and not just one's 'brother' as H presupposes in verse 25. Thus, one can assume that the section on 'Loss of land because of poverty (vv. 25–28)' particularly H's v. 25 in its present form would not enjoy an affirmative reception among women in both post-exilic Yehud and post-apartheid South Africa. From an African liberationist perspective, the most compelling response by H to the challenge of poverty and landlessness should have been a gender sensitive one.

Furthermore, in *Women and the Cry for Justice in Old Testament Court Narratives: An African Reflection*, Olojede (2013:764–767) shows her reader the case of a woman who not only experienced hunger, that is, poverty, but also loss of land. The Deuteronomistic Historian (DH) recounts that the Shunemite woman cried out to the king for her land in 2 Kings 8:1–6. However, 'it is remarkable that the women approached the king (or the prophet) to state their case and to demand not only retributive but distributive justice' (Olojede 2013:767–768). Eventually, according to the DH, the land that belonged to the Shunemite woman was redistributed to her. Olojede's contribution is valuable here because it confirms that in the history of the Israelites, women not only owned productive land they also experienced poverty. On the other hand, it is strange that in the Jubilee legislation, H in particular is silent about the poverty and landlessness of women as the text exclusively addresses the poverty of a 'brother' which means 'men'. In the context in which women like the Shunemite woman lost land and subsequently became poor, H's exclusion of women in the Israelite Jubilee legislation would be viewed as patriarchal.

From Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55 to South Africa via Fernando Segovia and Ernesto 'Che' Guevara

Segovia (1995:324) calls for an ideological reading of the ancient text that is enthused by a worldview that is 'concerned, therefore, not only with questions of an other world, of gods and spirits and their relationship with human beings, but also with questions central to the human world as such – questions of socio-economic class and socio-political status, gender and race, social structures and cultural conventions, and so forth'. In reading Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55, the implication of Segovia's call is this: an interpretation which would be relevant in South Africa is one that is mindful of the reality of the landlessness and poverty of women. That Segovia's (2014:37) Latino and/or a biblical criticism 'posit the community as the foundation, optic, and objective of interpretation – imbued by an overriding awareness of marginalisation, a clarion call for solidarity and liberation, and an unwavering appeal to ideals of social justice', adds a curious dimension to the interpretation of the text under consideration here.

Significantly, worthy of note are the striking similarities between the experiences of women in South Africa and in both the texts of Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55. Firstly, the evidence of patriarchy in the texts investigated here and modern South Africa is incontestable; secondly, many a woman is landless and poor; thirdly, women are relegated to being working-class citizens without productive land; fourthly, men who are the minority have access to land, whereas women who are a majority do not have access to the land. Based on the parallels between the ancient texts and modern South African context, an interpretation that stands in continuity with Sevogia's Latino and/or a biblical criticism is the one that first and foremost problematises Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55. These texts do not offer liberating possibility for the poor that would address the challenge of landlessness and poverty of women. However, when the patriarchal and oppressive nature of Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55 is highlighted, as it is the case in the present study, a step towards a liberative reading of these texts would have been made.

In contrast to Segovia, Guevara is radical in the articulation of the ideals of social justice. I must admit, Guevara was certainly no advocate of the rights of women *per se*. However, women fit within the compass of his broader concern for the struggle of the poor masses in Cuba. Guevara (1987a:78–79, 104) makes it clear that the struggle of the people in Cuba aimed primarily 'at changing the social form of land ownership; in other words, the guerrilla fighter is above all an agrarian revolutionary. He interprets the desire of the great peasant masses to be owners of the land ...'. Although the texts of Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55 as well as the discourse on land in South Africa do not advocate an agrarian revolution that primarily aims to address the landlessness and poverty of women, the reality of the experiences of women, however, necessitates a revolution in South Africa.

Rather than being sedated by the fact that some women are provided with employment in the ancient texts and modern South Africa, enthused by a need for the liberation of women in post-exilic Yehud and post-apartheid South Africa, a proposal for an agrarian revolutionary protest against the aforementioned experiences of women may be put forward. Unlike Guevara, I am here not proposing violent ways such as warfare to address patriarchy, but a peaceful protest.

Conclusion

I can find no better words than those of McKinlay (1999) to summarise the argument of this article on the Ruth scroll:

> Many marginalised voices of women tell this story, and tell it differently. Some tell it as a story of a woman driven to survive, of a woman heard through submissive speech, *I am Ruth your servant* (3:9), through male-validated relationship, *and now my daughter* (3:11), through marriage, through male property rights, through the birth of male heir. (p. 156)

Just like the Ruth scroll, and more specifically Ruth 4, the text of Leviticus 25:8–55 reveals the experience of patriarchy that perpetrated the landlessness and poverty of women in post-exilic Yehud. Both the preceding texts are problematic because they do not offer liberating possibilities for women. Furthermore, it has been shown that the context of Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55 carry a striking resemblance to the situation of women in post-apartheid South Africa. No doubt, the ideologies of Guevara and Segovia's hermeneutic bear significant liberative implications for the reading of Ruth 4 and Leviticus 25:8–55 in South Africa. Although Guevara's ideals involve violence they also exhibit liberating possibilities for the oppressed people, more so when adopted with peaceful intent of protesting an oppressive system such as patriarchy. Thus, the possibility of an agrarian revolutionary protest that aims at addressing the landlessness and poverty of women is proposed rather than put forward firmly.

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