Jacqueline Vayntrub

Like Father, Like Son: Theorizing Transmission in Biblical Literature

Behind the literary form of testament and expressions memorializing the dead is a concept of how objects, rights, and speech pass from one generation to the next: transmission. This essay examines two interrelated phenomena that give filial succession in the biblical and Ugaritic literature its contours: first, the discourses surrounding inevitable bodily death; and second, father-to-son transmission of objects, entitlements, and instruction. Reading closely Isaac's deathbed blessing in Genesis 27, the Ugaritic tale of Aqhat, and Ruth's devotion to Naomi, the essay argues that acts of filial devotion and obedience are closely connected to cultural expectations of "truth," the faithful correspondence of speech to action.

Keywords: transmission, testament, succession, command and fulfillment, obedience.

In his essay, "Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife – A Biblical Complex," Herbert Chanan Brichto writes "The most obvious starting point for a discussion of the biblical concept of the afterlife is Sheol, the abode of the dead."¹ One way to speak of life after death in ancient Israel is to describe a change in where – and how – a person's body occupies space. When one ceased to be physically upright among the living, they would be brought down below, to dwell among the dead. The phrase used to indicate the death of a patriarch or king, *wayyiškab* ... *im 'ābōtāyw*, "He lay with his fathers," speaks to a change in the body's physical position in the world. Formerly vertical and above ground, the individual now occupies space horizontally and underground. In ancient Israel, family members were frequently buried with their kin.² But the fate of bodies in ancient Israelite mortuary practice is only one piece of the puzzle. We must also consider how the dead continued to exist in the sense of responsibility of the living. As Elizabeth M. Bloch-Smith writes,

1 H. C. Brichto, "Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife – A Biblical Complex," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 44 (1973): 6.

2 E. M. Bloch-Smith, "The Cult of the Dead in Judah: Interpreting the Material Remains," *JBL* 111 (1992): 217–218.

the role of the dead in the imagination of the living family is connected to the material fact that the dead family occupies space beneath their feet on their land: “the ancestral dead with supernatural powers, resid[e] in the tomb [...] a physical claim to the patrimony.”³

Connected to this is an important distinction Jon Levenson makes with respect to *where* the dead go: Sheol is not the “normal” place of the dead. He explains that Sheol is a place where one’s *unfulfilled* life is perpetuated.⁴ But for one who has lived a full life, “prolongation ... comes ... not in the form of residence in a place ... but in the form of descendants.”⁵ This prolongation, Levenson writes, “also comes in the form of the survival of the descendant’s ‘name.’”⁶ Notably, survival after one’s physical body has died depends upon living relatives to perform care of the body and memory of the dead individual.⁷ Consider Jacob’s command to his son Joseph as his time was approaching in Gen 47:29b–30:

“Be devoted and faithful to me (*wē‘āsītā ‘immādi ḥesed we’emet*), do not bury me in Egypt. I will lie down with my ancestors, you will carry me from Egypt and bury me.”
And [Joseph] said, “I will do according to your instructions.”

The passage conveys Joseph’s duty to carry out the wishes of his dying father. But these acts of post-mortem care are not merely acts of kindness. They ensure the stability of the family line from one generation to the next. The son who cares for his father and succeeds him will, in turn, be cared for by his son, who will succeed him.⁸

Expressions of succession in the Hebrew Bible and its connection to mortuary practices have already been explored by scholars. What remains

3 Ibid., 222. For this specific phrase, see J. D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 74.

4 According to Levenson, what we see in the texts with respect to Sheol is “a tension between an older notion of Sheol as the ultimate destination of all mankind, on the one hand, and a bold and younger affirmation of the LORD as savior, on the other.” *Resurrection and the Restoration*, 75.

5 Ibid., 78.

6 Ibid.

7 Bloch-Smith, “The Cult of the Dead,” 223–224. See also S. L. Sanders, “The Appetites of the Dead: West Semitic Linguistic and Ritual Aspects of the Katumuwa Stele,” *BASOR* 369 (2013): 444. But see Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration*, 62.

8 Following Levenson’s cautions not to read ancestor worship into the biblical texts when we see scant evidence of its widespread practice, the nature of the focus on dead relatives in ancient Israelite culture should be understood to lie in the inheritance and enjoyment of promises made by Yahweh to preceding generations and continuously potent in the experience of the living, *Resurrection and the Restoration*, 66.

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for further investigation is the complex of ideas that lies behind succession. This essay looks at two interrelated phenomena that give succession in the biblical texts its contours: (1) the discourses surrounding inevitable bodily death; and (2) father-to-son transmission of objects, entitlements, and instruction. Reading biblical and ancient Near Eastern expressions of transmission closely will show how acts of filial devotion and obedience are closely connected to cultural expectations of “truth,” the faithful correspondence of speech to action.

First, I consider the connections between mortal anxiety and transmission in the story of Isaac’s deathbed blessing to Jacob in Genesis 27 and in the Ugaritic tale of Aqhat. These narratives expose a concern lying at the heart of the phenomenon of succession: does the transmission of rights and responsibilities from father to son alleviate the anxiety of individual death? Outlining this concern, I connect the idea of trans-generational survival articulated in these stories to a literary pattern found in both biblical and Ugaritic narrative texts. This pattern, known as “command and fulfillment,” uses the same words to command action from a character as the words used to report the character’s completed action. I suggest that in stories whose themes focus on succession, this literary pattern reinforces an underlying cultural value for trans-generational stability. Looking at metaphorical expressions of speech transmission in Proverbs, I further connect command and fulfillment to underlying concepts of truth and deception in speech and social dimensions of father-to-son instruction. Finally, I turn to the book of Ruth to consider how the related phenomena of instruction and filial succession are evoked in this story through the relationship between Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth. The story is shaped by the similar themes to that of Genesis 27 and the Ugaritic tale of Aqhat. In this case, however, the same themes of filial duty and stability across generations are evoked for claims of matrilineal transmission.

Fictions of Succession

We might never know the full scope of what ancient Israelites believed happened to individuals when they died. But we do have texts and material objects that variously depict a set of ideas about survival beyond bodily death, often through the lens of a male ruling class. This evidence broadly suggests that life was conceptualized across multiple generations of a family and essentialized in the person of the *pater familias*, the male head of the household.⁹ To a certain extent, personhood is understood to be corporate:

9 Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration*, 78; Suriano, “Remembering Absalom’s

after bodily death, the memory and name of the individual is kept alive through a variety of practices performed by living family members. Texts and material culture indeed suggest that one strategy for surviving death in this culture was to conceive of individual life within a corporate identity of a family across generations past, present, and future. One would be memorialized through the devotional acts of living family members. Other texts and material objects suggest a somewhat different strategy for surviving death – if one had the means and social capital. In biblical narratives we observe the possibility for individual achievement as a strategy for surviving death, in the creation of objects and texts bearing the name of the memorialized person. In 2 Sam 18:18, the narrator tells us Absalom has no son to memorialize him. Instead, Absalom erects a *maššēbā* – an object that stands upright – to bear his name and memorialize him. The pillar stands in the place of a son who would occupy the space of the upright and living.¹⁰

Indeed, as Levenson notes, the dead can survive among the living through the perpetual invocation of their name and corresponding deeds, through the devotion of sons and in an implicit agreement that their own sons will do the same.¹¹ But the dead can decline to participate in an eternal chain of filial obligation, and instead depend upon objects in the space of the living to bear their name and the memory of their deeds. Reading biblical and ancient Near Eastern narratives closely, we might observe that these strategies for survival beyond bodily death exist in tension with each other. The son can become his father by assuming his rights, responsibilities, achievements, and iniquities. Or, he might rely on objects and texts to memorialize his name and individual accomplishments.¹²

These two strategies are generated through a shared concern for the memory of individuals through the preservation and invocation of their name. Absalom laments that he does not have a son who will *hazkîr šēmî*, “invoke the memory of my name.” A pillar bearing Absalom’s name, the biblical author appears to claim, can perpetually perform this task without the speak-

Death in 2 Samuel 18–19: History, Memory, and Inscription,” *HeBAI* 7 (2018): 127–155; idem, *A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); K. van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Ugarit and Israel: Continuity and Changes in the Forms of Religious Life* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 48; Brichto, “Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife,” 23 ff.

¹⁰ Suriano, “Remembering Absalom’s Death.”

¹¹ Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration*, 78.

¹² Suriano, “Remembering Absalom’s Death”; idem, “Dynasty Building at Ugarit: The Ritual and Political Context of KTU 1.161,” *Aula Orientalis* 27 (2009): 105–123; S. L. Sanders, “Naming the Dead: Funerary Writing and Historical Change in the Iron Age Levant,” *Maraav* 19 (2012): 18.

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ing voice of a living son. Behind Absalom's concern for memorialization through invocation is a concept of how objects, rights, and speech pass from one generation to the next – a concept we might identify as transmission.

Survival from one generation to the next, through the devotion of sons to their fathers in death and their subsequent succession in the place of their fathers, is a fictional *ideal* which is articulated, problematized, and reshaped in the narratives of Isaac's deathbed blessings in Genesis 27 and the Ugaritic tale of Aqhat. In reality, sons do not actually become their fathers – certainly there are changes from one generation to the next. But as depicted in these stories, the phenomenon of filial succession also assumes a necessary fiction of unchanging character and behavior across generations.

The fiction that character traits remain stable from father to son is that same notion which allows for trans-generational punishment. Jeremiah and Ezekiel both challenge the idea that sons inherit the rewards and punishments due to their fathers, along with their material property and entitlements. They cite the principle of trans-generational punishment in the form of a saying:¹³

The fathers eat sour grapes but it is the teeth of the sons which are made dull.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel are not its only voices of critique. Qohelet also challenges this underlying idea by speaking to the incoherence of a principle in which one individual “earns” material wealth but another who did not will enjoy this wealth:

A man to whom God gives riches, property, and wealth, and he wants for nothing, but God does not allow him to enjoy them, because a stranger enjoys it (*kî 'iš noḳrî yô'kālennû*). This is a futility, it is a terrible ill. (Ecc 6:2–3)

The “stranger” (*'iš noḳrî*) in this passage is not someone outside the family, however. It is precisely *not* the man who himself earned the riches. We know this from the context, for in the following statement, the speaker speaks of the futility of begetting “a hundred.” If this person does not enjoy the fruits of his own labor, Qohelet says, the stillborn is better off than he. Who could this stranger be, other than the son who inherits his father's wealth?

In an earlier passage, Qohelet states explicitly that the fruits of one's labor are the direct result of their own character traits:

For sometimes a person who has toiled through (their) wisdom and knowledge and skill (*bēhoḳēmā ûbēda'at ûbēkišrôn*) must give his entire portion to (another) person who did not toil for it. This too is futility and a great evil. (Ecc 2:21)

13 Jer 31:29–30; Ezek 18:2. Translations my own unless otherwise indicated.

Qohelet's statements amount to a forceful rejection of principles underlying filial succession. Yet unlike Jeremiah and Ezekiel's critique, Qohelet formulates his challenge without explicitly stating that the son cannot become the father.¹⁴ Instead – much like Ezekiel does in chapter 18 – Qohelet exposes an incoherence in the trans-generational meritocracy: if successes (or failures, for that matter) are the result of immutable, God-given character traits, then these successes either belong to all individuals in the chain of succession or they belong to the *one* individual endowed with those character traits. The critique of trans-generational reward and punishment is especially devastating in the voice of Qohelet, a self-proclaimed former king, since the stability of dynasties rely especially upon fictions of succession.¹⁵ As we will see, the narratives of Genesis 27 and the Ugaritic tale of Aqhat assume a stable transmission of objects, entitlements, and instruction.

At Isaac's Deathbed

In Genesis 27, Isaac, who is about to die, gives a final blessing to his sons Jacob and Esau. Isaac calls for his eldest, Esau, to come before him and Isaac gives him the following command:

wē'attā šā' nā' kēlēkā telyēkā wēqaštekā wēšē' haššādeh wēšūḏāh lī šēdā
wa'āšēh lī maṭ'ammīm ka'āšer 'āhabti wēhābī'ā lī wē'ōkēlā ba'ābūr tēbārekā napsī
bēterem 'āmūt

And now, take your weapons, your quiver, and your bow and go out into the field and hunt **game** for me. Prepare me a dish such as I like and bring it to me **so that I might eat in order that my *nefesh* might bless you** before I die. (Gen 27:3–4)¹⁶

14 Explicit discussion of fathers and sons appears absent from Ecclesiastes almost entirely. There are only two places in which the term “son” is used to indicate the actual filial relationship, in 4:8, in which the speaker refers to individuals without sons or brothers, and 5:13.

15 See Eccl 4:15, where he speaks of the “youth” who replaces the king. See M. J. Suriano, *The Politics of Dead Kings: Dynastic Ancestors in the Book of Kings and Ancient Israel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 140–148.

16 The term *nefesh* is conventionally translated as “soul” in English, but this translation masks a wealth of distinctions between inherited Western ideas and ancient Near Eastern concepts of the self, and since it is beyond the scope of this essay to resolve the problem, I leave the term untranslated. The *nefesh* is not Isaac's “soul,” but rather his voice-passage, the physical organ through which air flows in and out and supports the embodied voice. See R. C. Steiner, *Disembodied Souls: The Nefesh in Israel and Kindred Spirits in the Ancient Near East, With an Appendix on the Katumuwa Inscription* (Atlanta: SBL, 2015), 15; and Suriano, *History of Death*.

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Taking advantage of Isaac's diminished vision, Rebecca hears this and tells Jacob. She then issues her own command, in the expected form of a call to instruction:

wē'attā bēnī šēma' bēqōlī la'āšer 'ānī mēšawwā 'ōtāk
leḳ nā' 'el haššō'n wēqaḥ lī miššām šēnē gēdāyē 'izzīm tōbīm wē'e'ēseh 'ōtām maḥ ammīm
lē'ābikā ka'āšer 'āhēb
wēhēbē'tā lē'ābikā wē'ākāl ba'ābur 'āšer yēbārekḱā lipnē mōtō

Now, my son, listen to my voice as I command you.

Go to the flock and get me two choice kids, so I can make a dish from them for your father such as he prefers.

Then take (it) to your father to eat so that he may bless you before he dies. (Gen 27:8–10)

Rebecca's command comes in the form of an instruction, with an opening call to attention, *bēnī šēma' bēqōlī*, "My son, listen to my voice," and with the expected benefits of instruction, *ba'ābur 'āšer yēbārekḱā lipnē mōtō*, "so that he might bless you before he dies."¹⁷ She then instructs Jacob in the ruse necessary to deceive Isaac: he will dress himself in the skins to take on the hairy feeling of his brother. The narrator then reports Jacob's fulfillment of his mother's command in v. 14:

wayyēleḳ wayyiqqaḥ wayyābē' lē'immō watta'as'immō maḥ ammīm ka'āšer 'āhēb 'ābīw

He went and he got (them) and he brought (them) to his mother, and his mother made a dish such as his father preferred.

Jacob, having followed his mother's instructions, then presents his father Isaac with this dish, fulfilling Isaac's original request in v. 19:

wayyō'mer ya'āqōb 'el 'ābīw
'ānōḱi 'ēsāw bēḱōrekā 'āsītī ka'āšer dibbartā 'ēlāy qūm nā' šēbā wē'oklā miššēdī ba'ābūr
tēbārākanni napšekā

Jacob said to his father,

"It is I, Esau, your eldest. I have done as you commanded. Sit up and eat of my game so that your *nefesh* might bless me."

This is the second command which is fulfilled in the narrative of Genesis 27. The first, Jacob's faithful fulfillment to his mother's instruction, is reported by the narrator. The second is reported in Jacob's own voice. Following the story, it is the narrator's voice we are to believe, not Jacob's: in his claim to be Esau, Jacob's fulfillment of his father's command is rendered as a deception.

17 For a discussion of the components of instructions, including its formulaic call to attention and the claim to the instruction's benefit to the instructed, see M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 45.

The story is artfully marked by multiple upended categories. The hairless son, not the hairy one, comes before his father.¹⁸ Touch and smell – not sight and hearing – function as evidence for Isaac’s discernment between the two sons. Domesticated, not wild game is eaten. It is ultimately the mother’s command, not the father’s which is followed. And it is the younger son, not the eldest, who receives the blessing.

In his blessing, Isaac bestows Jacob with rule over nations broadly and the family more specifically. This blessing in vv. 28–29 frames a command that Jacob will hereby acquire Isaac’s central right and responsibility: *hěwēh gēbīr lě’ahēkā*, “Be lord over your brothers.”

wěyitten lēkā hā’ēlōhīm miṭṭal haššāmayim

ūmišmannē hā’āreš

wērōb dāgān wēṭīrōš

ya’abḏūkā ‘ammīm

wēyištaḥwu lēkā lē’ummīm

hěwēh gēbīr lě’ahēkā

wēyištaḥwū lēkā bēnē ’immekā

’ōrērēkā ’ārūr

ūmēbārākēkā bārūk

May God give you of the dew of heaven,

And of the fat of the earth,

And plenty of grain and wine.

May peoples **serve you**,

And nations **bow down to you**,

Be lord over your brothers,

And may your mother’s sons **bow down to you**,

Cursed be everyone who curses you,

And blessed be everyone who blesses you.

This central right and responsibility ensures Jacob’s material success, outlined in v. 28b: God will give him *miṭṭal haššāmayim*, “of the dew of heaven,” *ūmišmannē hā’āreš*, “and of the fat of the earth,” and he will thereby experience abundance, *rōb dāgān wēṭīrōš*, “plenty of grain and wine.”

When Esau returns for his blessing, Isaac cannot bestow upon him the *patria potestas* too. So Isaac gives him what remains: deprivation through subordination, with only the possibility of rejection of that subordinate state – notably, using the same terms used in Isaac’s blessing to Jacob, *mišmannē hā’āreš*, “of the fat of the earth” *ūmiṭṭal haššāmayim*, “and of the dew of heaven.”

18 See S. Niditch, *My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man: Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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hinnê mišmannê hā'āreš yihyeh mōšābekā
 ûmiṭṭal haššāmayim mē'al
 wē'al ḥarbēkā ṭihyeh
 wē'eṭ 'āhikā ta'ābōd
 wēhāyāh ka'āšer tārīd
 ūpāraqtā 'ullō mē'al šawwā'rekā

See, your dwelling shall be away from the fat of the earth,
 And away from the dew of heaven on high.

By the sword you shall live,
 And your brother you shall serve,

But when you leave,
 You shall break his yoke from your neck. (Gen 27:39–40)

The contrast between Jacob's blessing of success through rule and Esau's deprivation through subordination is cleverly achieved by distinct usages of the preposition *min* on the exact same collocations.¹⁹ In Isaac's blessing to Jacob, the *min* is partitive: God will give Isaac *miṭṭal haššāmayim*, "of the dew of heaven," and *mišmannê hā'āreš*, "of the fat of the earth." But in Isaac's blessing to Esau, the preposition is privative, marking loss: Esau will be forced to live *mišmannê hā'āreš*, "away from the fat of the earth," *ûmiṭṭal haššāmayim mē'al*, "and away from the dew of heaven on high." Isaac commands Jacob to "be lord over your brother," a perpetual role he is destined to occupy in his landed realm.

By contrast, Isaac tells Esau, "You shall serve your brother," a perpetual state also tied to his location, which Esau might transcend through changing location. The incorporation of an individual into a family line after death is closely connected to the occupation of land by the living and the dead.²⁰ Isaac's blessing to Jacob bestows upon him a right to grow wealthy off of the land and to rule over his family in the land, beneath which Isaac and his other ancestors would be buried. Esau's only blessing then, is to continue as a subordinate in the land or to leave it and the family altogether.

Like Jacob's "blessings" in Genesis 49, Isaac's deathbed speeches might be better characterized as assertive knowledge claims. In these speeches, Isaac identifies contrasting categories for his two sons and their corresponding outcomes.²¹ Jacob will rule in the land, and he will enjoy its fruits. Esau will be subordinate, and he can only leave and remain far from the land and its

19 Von Rad observed this, writing, "[The] effect [of Isaac's blessing to Esau] is especially bitter because it begins with almost the same words. The contrasting meaning is expressed only by the different syntactic use of one and the same preposition." G. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (rev. ed.; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 279.

20 Suriano, *History of Death*; Brichto, "Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife."

21 On Genesis 49 as a "collection of aphorisms" see von Rad, *Genesis*, 421.

riches. The *pater familias* is uniquely situated, in his dying moments, to bestow these blessings, and once spoken, they cannot be revoked. Genesis 27 is a story of succession through the transmission of the dying father's entitlements. But it is an unconventional one, upending the right of the first-born son to succeed his father.

Filial Succession in Aqhat

Similar to the story in Genesis 27, the Ugaritic tale of Aqhat presents filial succession as a conventional path to success. Unlike Jacob's story, Aqhat's tale does not include a struggle between brothers. The story opens with Dani'il's childlessness, a problem quickly resolved by the birth of his son, Aqhat. This basic plot masks a deeper concern – namely, the survival of the father through the transmission of objects and the transfer of his role as *pater familias* to his son. The related ideas of speech and object transmission and filial succession are woven through every dimension of this tale. Once Aqhat is born, the family's stability in the expected way – from one generation to the next – seems to be assured. But the story appears to present this conventional path of filial succession in order to dismantle it, offering an alternative through female characters in the story.²² In the story, Aqhat is presented with an alternative of true immortality, not trans-generational survival. But Aqhat refuses this alternative, and as a result, loses his life without securing his own heir. The survival of the tragic hero's remains beyond his bodily death – the proper recovery and burial of his corpse – is then ensured by the surprise appearance of the hero's sister, who had wisdom that clearly surpassed that of the tragic hero.

The first half of the story features a speech known as the “filial duties” passage. This speech explains to readers the son's function, which is to care for the father in life and death:²³

22 More detailed discussions of these arguments can be found in J. Vayntrub, “Transmission and Mortal Anxiety in the Tale of Aqhat,” forthcoming. A similar twist happens in T. Job, where Job transmits objects to his daughters and claims these objects to be superior to what was given to their brothers, 11:10.

23 This transcription and translation is quoted from Vayntrub, “Transmission and Mortal Anxiety,” forthcoming, which largely follows the vocalization, transliteration, and translation of KTU 1.17 I 26–33 published by P. Bordreuil and D. Pardee, *A Manual of Ugaritic* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 173–177. See also J.-M. Husser, “The Birth of a Hero: Form and Meaning of KTU 1.17 i–ii,” in *Ugarit, Religion and Culture: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Ugarit, Religion and Culture, Edinburgh, July 1994: Essays Presented in Honour of Professor John C. L. Gibson* (ed. N. Wyatt, W. G. E. Watson,

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²⁶ nšb . skn . ilibh .	bqds ²⁷ ztr . ‘mh
lārš . mššū . qṭrh	²⁸ l‘pr . dmr . āṭrh
ṭbq . lḥt ²⁹ nišh	grš . d . ršy . lnh
³⁰ āḥd . ydh . bšk[r]n .	m‘msh ³¹ [k]šb‘ . yn
spū . ksmh . bt . b‘l	³² [w]m‘nth . bt . il
ṭḥ . ggh . bym ³³ [tī]ṭ	rhš . npsh . bym . rṭ

One who raises up the stela of his father’s god,
 in the sanctuary the votive emblem of his clan;
 one who sends up from the earth his incense,
 from the dust the song of his place;
 one who shuts up the jaws of his detractors,
 one who drives out anyone who would do him in;
 one who takes his hand when (he is) drunk,
 one who bears him up when he is full of wine;
 one who supplies his grain(-offering) in the Temple of Ba‘lu,
 his portion in the Temple of ‘Ilū;
 one who rolls his roof when rain softens it up,
 one who washes his outfit on a muddy day.

The son helps his father make it home safely after a long night of drinking. He brings his offerings to the temple on his behalf. He attends his father regularly, keeping his roof neatly rolled and his garment freshly cleaned. But perhaps of greater importance is the son’s duty to take care of his father in death. These expectations are fronted in the very first line of the “filial duties” speech. The son sets up a monument in perpetuity and performs rituals of remembrance in his honor.²⁴ He protects his father’s reputation when the father’s voice has ceased to be able to do so himself. He functions as his voice. The list continues with acts of substitution performed while his father is still alive.

The list is a stylized set of responsibilities of a son, not intended to cover every dimension of filial devotion. Yet all these activities share a single quality: they are acts performed in the place of the father’s own actions.²⁵ The father’s physical presence in the world is replaced by an upright monument.²⁶

and J. B. Lloyd; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1996), 96; and D. P. Wright, *Ritual in Narrative: The Dynamics of Feasting, Mourning, and Retaliation Rites in the Ugaritic Tale of Aqhat* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 67–68.

24 Wright, *Ritual in Narrative*, 68.

25 See D. Pardee, “Marziḥu, Kispu, and the Ugaritic Funerary Cult: A Minimalist View,” in *Ugarit, Religion and Culture: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Ugarit, Religion and Culture, Edinburgh, July 1994: Essays Presented in Honour of Professor John C. L. Gibson* (ed. N. Wyatt, W. G. E. Watson, and J. B. Lloyd; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1996), 279; and Husser, “The Birth of a Hero,” 97.

26 See Pardee “Marziḥu, Kispu,” 28; idem, *The Ugaritic Texts and the Origins of West-Semitic Literary Composition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 90. The raising of the monument signifies the son’s continuation of the family cult.

His voice protecting his name and reputation is substituted by the voice of his son. His ability to walk, when incapacitated through intoxication, is assumed by his son. His donations to the temple are performed by his son, in substitution. Even the maintenance of his dwelling place and his garment are taken up by his son. These acts of devotion also ensure that the son will beget his own son to care for him, in an infinite chain of filial responsibility.²⁷

In the story, the speech is performed four times by four different characters.²⁸ First the god Ba'al gives this speech in counsel with the god 'Il, then 'Il does so in response to Ba'al's performance, then (presumably) a messenger in the form of a birth announcement to Dani'il, proclaiming the birth of a son, Aqhat, and then finally the speech is performed by the father Dani'il himself. Save the different pronominal suffixes, from third person, to second person, to first person, the speech remains unchanged from performance to performance. The placement of the filial duties speech within the plot, and its unchanging nature throughout its transmission from one speaking character to the next formulates a primary argument: the son is the guardian and ultimately the transmitter of the father's personhood in life and in death.

Once the transmission of the blessing and the promises of a son are completed in the first half of the story, the narrative continues with the son, Aqhat, who is now grown. A divine bow is given to Dani'il, the father, who gives this object to his son Aqhat. The goddess Anat covets the bow and offers Aqhat all manner of material success and even true immortality, *blmt* "deathlessness" in exchange for it. But Aqhat declines to part with the bow for any offer, accepting his fate: *mt.kl.amt wan.mtm.amt*, "The death of all I will die, I will also surely die."

In Aqhat's exchange with Anat, the story establishes a tension between two possibilities for survival beyond bodily death. The first possibility is the conventional path of father-to-son transmission and assumption of responsibility: objects, authority, and speech are passed from one to the next without alteration and the line continues forever. Through the voice of Anat, the story presents a second possibility: immortality of the divine realm. While this possibility is conventionally inaccessible to mortals, it is extraordinarily offered to Aqhat, who foolishly refuses it to remain within the system of filial devotion.

27 See Wright, *Ritual in Narrative*, 69

28 See also E. C. McAfee, "The Patriarch's Longed-for Son: Biological and Social Reproduction in Ugaritic and Hebrew Epic" (ThD diss., Harvard University, 1996), 68–69; and E. L. Greenstein, "The Role of the Reader in Ugaritic Narrative," in *A Wise and Discerning Mind: Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long* (ed. S. M. Olyan and R. C. Culley; Providence, 2000), 145.

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Edward L. Greenstein has pointed out that the characters in this story do not conform to their expected roles. Aqhat plays the dutiful son who refuses to give up the bow his father gave him, but loses his life in the process. The goddess Anat condemns Aqhat to death, but “seems to regret her impulsive behavior and weeps.”²⁹ And then we encounter a human woman who suddenly appears in the story: Dani’il’s daughter and Aqhat’s sister, Pughat. She appears as her brother’s blood avenger.

While the father Dani’il had sought survival through conventional means, through his son’s succession, suddenly the readers learn of the existence of a daughter. Aqhat’s rigid resistance to give up his inherited bow in exchange for immortality ironically costs him his life. His rigidity to norms is juxtaposed by his sister Pughat’s unconventional success at the end of the story. She appears to possess the wisdom to do right by the family and its name – she is called by the epithet “one who knows the course of the stars.”³⁰ As Greenstein argues, “In Aqhat, it is the foolish eponymous hero of the tale who presses for order and his transgressive sister Pughat who proves to be wise.”³¹

In this story, the mere existence of a son who performs acts of filial devotion is not sufficient to ensure survival of the trans-generational line: alternative strategies may be necessary. Unconventional acts of devotion by a female family member keep the family line intact. Father-to-son transmission is held up as an ideal, so long as it can be achieved successfully. In its extant form, the story appears to challenge this ideal in asking whether filial succession alone is reliable as a strategy for preserving the family across generations. In the ending as it presently stands, it seems that Pughat’s wisdom and character traits, acquired outside of a conventional system of father-to-son transmission, are what ultimately save the day.

“Neither add to it nor take away from it”: Stability in Transmission

Themes of filial succession and trans-generational survival in the tale of Aqhat are connected a literary pattern evident in the story’s presentation:

29 E. L. Greenstein, “Wisdom in Ugaritic,” in *Language and Nature: Papers Presented to John Huehnergard on the Occasion of This 60th Birthday* (ed. R. Hasselbach and N. Patel; Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2012), 77.

30 KTU 1.19.2.2–3, 7; 4.38. Greenstein, “Wisdom in Ugaritic,” 77.

31 Greenstein, “Wisdom in Ugaritic,” 77. See B. Margalit, “Lexicographical Notes on the ‘Aqht’ Epic (Part I: KTU 1.17–18),” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 15 (1983): 67; and J. F. Parker “Women Warriors and Devoted Daughters: The Powerful Young Woman in Ugaritic Narrative Poetry,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 38 (2006): 557–575.

command and fulfillment.³² In command and fulfillment, the reader observes correspondence between the instructions given from one character to the next. It is by means of this literary pattern that the filial duties passage is transmitted from one speaking character to another. In the story, the passage is first spoken by Ba'al to 'Il, then by a divine messenger to Dani'il, and finally by Dani'il himself. Joel Baden has observed that, in biblical narrative, the pattern of command and fulfillment is so ubiquitous that we could characterize it as "a standard feature" of these texts.³³

In Baden's description, the pattern appears in biblical narrative as "a command issued in the imperative [...] and then the immediate fulfillment of the command using the same verb, in the same *binyan*, in the waw-consecutive."³⁴ Of particular interest is Baden's observation that, "a significant concentration [these texts] are found specifically in the narrative of Jacob stealing Esau's blessing in Genesis 27."³⁵ We might more broadly define this device as the command of one character to another and the report of fulfillment of this command in the same terminology. We find its use both in biblical and Ugaritic narrative. In this literary pattern, the speaker's commands are reported – either by a narrator or by the obedient character – as having been fulfilled without changes in the interim. It is especially significant to observe how command and fulfillment stylistically manifests an idea lying at the heart of both of these tales: stable transmission from one generation to the next.

But there is a deeper concept which gives this literary pattern its force in the construction of these stories: the value for the faithful correspondence of speech to action. In biblical literature we encounter warnings to those reading or hearing instruction that they should maintain it intact as they had received it: they are commanded to neither add to nor subtract from it.³⁶ For example, in Deut 4:2, the Israelites are told to preserve God's commandments as transmitted to them:

32 See discussion of how this structures Aqhat tale in K. Kim, *Incubation as a Type-Scene in the Aqhatu, Kirta, and Hannah Stories: A Form-Critical and Narratological Study of KTU 1.14 I-1.15 III, 1.17 I-II, and 1 Samuel 1:1–2:11* (VTSup 145; Leiden: Brill, 2011).

33 J. S. Baden, "A Narrative Pattern and Its Role in Source Criticism," *Hebrew Studies* 49 (2008): 43.

34 Ibid., 41.

35 Ibid., 44.

36 Deut 4:2; 13:1; Prov 30:5–6; Ecc 3:14; Sir 18:6; 42:21. See M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 5; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 200; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18B; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 858–859; C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 174.

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lō' tōsipū 'al haddābār 'āšer 'ānōkī mēšawweh 'etkēm wēlō' tigrē'ū mimmennū lišmōr 'et
mišwōt yhw' 'ēlohēkem 'āšer 'ānōkī mēšawweh 'etkēm

Neither shall you add to what I command you, nor shall you take from it, keeping the commandments of Yahweh your God which I command you.

As Moshe Weinfeld and Michael Fox observed, these warnings are also found in ancient Near Eastern treaties and instructions with the same message: those who encounter the words of the treaty or instruction may neither add to nor subtract from them.³⁷

These warnings are generally understood as statements on the completeness of instruction and its revelation to the scribe, even a scribal principle of sorts. In a colophon, the scribe of the Late Babylonian Erra epic reports receiving revelation of the words in a dream that “he did not leave out a single line, nor did he add one to it.”³⁸ Ben Sira, too, in a praise of the completeness of God’s wisdom: “Nothing added and nothing taken away, he has no need in his understanding.”³⁹ But when we encounter a version of the formula in Prov 30:5–6, we see that these statements are not limited to their concern for the fullness of God’s revelation or even the fidelity of a text to its source:

kol 'imrat' 'ēloh' šērūpāh
māgēn hū' laḥōsim bō
'al tōšēp 'al dēbārāyw
pen yōkīah bēkā wēnikzābtā

The entirety of God’s speech is pure,
he is a shield for those who trust in him.
Do not add to his words
lest he rebuke you and you be discovered a liar.

Speech abiding by this principle is “true” in the sense that the speech is reliable to its source. Adding to or subtracting from instruction renders a transmission unfaithful. These statements, in their various formulations, point to a shared notion of “truth”: the faithful correspondence of speech to action, the correspondence of the *terms* of a command to its absolute fulfillment.

In Num 23:19 Balaam’s character claims that perfect correspondence of action to speech is a characteristic properly ascribed to the Israelite deity. Humans can aspire to this quality, but cannot master it as the deity does:

lō' 'iš 'ēl wīkazzēb

37 See M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 262; idem, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 200; Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 859.

38 Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 858, quoting Weinfeld’s translation of 5.43–44 in *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 262.

39 Sir 42:21. NETS: “He was neither added to nor diminished, and he needed no one as a counselor.”

*ûben'ādām wēyitnehām
hahû' 'āmar wēlō' ya'āseh
wēḏibber wēlō' yēqimennā*

God is not a man to be insincere,
a mortal to regret,
would he say and not act,
speak and not uphold?

The instructions and interspersed poems in Proverbs 1–9 also demonstrate a sustained concern for the dangers of what is often translated as “deceptive speech” or “smooth words.”⁴⁰ We might, however, more accurately understand deceptive speech with the metaphors of crooked paths so often associated with it. In Prov 2:15, wisdom will save one from “those whose paths are twisted and who are deviant in their ways,” a statement implicitly associated with the “smooth sayings” of the foreign woman in the subsequent verse. In 4:24 the relationship between deceptive speech and the path metaphor is made explicit: the speaker instructs the son, “Turn from twisted speech and distance yourself from devious utterances.” Translations have rendered the crooked path metaphor, when applied to speech, as deception: “devious utterances.”⁴¹

What we identify as “deception” might be more accurately characterized as speech whose correspondence to action is not a straight line. Like a crooked path, this speech is ineffective in producing what it claims.⁴² It is speech which commands, but fails to fulfill. Consider, for example, the father’s instruction to his son in Prov 1:10–18, where he warns the son about the dangers of joining a gang of criminals:

*bēnî 'im yēpattūkā ḥaṭṭā'im 'al tōbē'
'im yō'mrû lēkâ 'ittānû ne'erḥâ lēḏām nišpēnâ lēnāqî ḥinnām*

...

wēhēm lēḏāmām ye'erōbû yispēnû lēnapšōtām

My son, if sinners tempt you do not give in,
If they say, “Come with us, let us ambush for blood, let us lie in wait for an innocent for no reason”
[...]

40 For example, in Prov 2:16, wisdom will save one from *'iššā zārā*, “a strange woman,” and *noḳēriyyā*, “a foreign [woman],” who is characterized by *'āmārēhā heḫēliqāh*, “her smooth words.” See also Prov 5:3; 7:5, 21.

41 Fox notes that the meaning of *lēzûṭ* is unclear and etymology is problematic. The parallel to *'iqqēšûṭ peh* suggests a sense of deception.

42 Similarly, compare correspondence in blessing, as construed by Isa 65:21, “They shall build houses and dwell in them, they shall plant vineyards and enjoy their fruit,” with the lack of correspondence in futility curses, Deut 28:30, “If you build a house, you shall not live in it. If you plant a vineyard, you shall not harvest it.”

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They ambush for their own blood, and lie in wait for their own lives.

The manner in which the father couches this danger underscores the lack of correspondence between the claims made by the “sinners,” and the ensuing actions. The sinners say, *lêkâ ’ittânû ne’erbâ lēdām nišpēnâ lēnāqî hinnām*, “Come with us, **let us ambush for blood, let us lie in wait** for an innocent for no reason” (Prov 1:11). The father tells his son that there is no correspondence between their words and the ensuing actions: *wēhēm lēdāmām ye’ērōbû yišpēnû lēnapšōtām*, “**They ambush for their own blood, and lie in wait** for their own lives” (Prov 1:18). The lesson that ill-gotten gain will ultimately harm the criminals themselves is framed as a gap between what the criminals claim will happen and what actually happens to them. The ensuing result is *their* own loss of life. Indeed, *their blood*, and *their lives*, is precisely where the deviation occurs in the text between the sinners’ claims and the father’s reported result.

The literary presentation of command and fulfillment can be further connected to the manner in which transmission is articulated in instructions: from father to son. Any of the ten instructions in Proverbs 1–9 can serve as an example of the broad contours of the instruction genre wherein the father-speaker performs life-saving speech that the son-hearer passively receives and presumably retains in its entirety. The instruction in Prov 4:1–9 is of particular interest, since the father-speaker narrates the transmission of instruction from the previous generation and quotes his father’s own instruction:⁴³

For I was a son to my father, tender and singular before my mother,
He instructed me and said to me:
“Let your mind grasp my words, keep my commandments and live [...]”

Both Mesopotamian and Egyptian instruction texts demonstrate a combination of performance and transmission narratives. In those texts, the narrative frame of the speech from the father-instructor to the son-student is common; occasionally we also observe the additional element of the wisdom’s transmission either from previous generations or from deities.⁴⁴

⁴³ See Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 173. Cohen notes for the Late Bronze Age instruction text, *Šimā Milka* (the instructions of *Šūpē-amēli*), that the “role [of the son in the instruction] is merely generic – he is the son of a famous sage from whom he receives counsels of wisdom,” Y. Cohen, *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 117.

⁴⁴ The Mesopotamian *Instructions of Shuruppak*, the *Ballad of Early Rulers*, the so-called *Assyrian Collection*, and the Egyptian *Instruction of Prince Hardjedef*, *Instruction of Ptahhotep*, and *Instruction of Amenemope* all attest a performance narrative but do not include transmission in their framing. The Mesopotamian *Šimā Milka*, as discussed

Behind the transmission of instruction from a speaking father to a passive listening son lurks a material concept of speech. Speech items, and by extension texts, are described as objects acquired by the recipient without alteration.⁴⁵ These speech-items are attributed with life protecting properties, and at times, they are described as are amulets: objects fastened around one's neck, one's head, or one's fingers for their life-saving properties. For example, Prov 3:3 insists to the listening son, "Do not let devotion (*hesed*) and fidelity (*'emet*) forsake you, tie them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your mind." In Prov 7:3, the son is told, "Tie them [my words] around your fingers, write them on the tablet of your mind."

Returning to the instruction of Prov 4:1–9 with its description of the transmission of instruction across multiple generations, we note that there it is the *lēb* which "grasps" the father's words – just as one would grasp an object.⁴⁶ The *lēb* is depicted as a quasi-independent organ, and one of its functions appears to be the storage of speech-items.⁴⁷ This material description of speech perhaps also explains the multiple metaphors in biblical literature of the *lēb*, which is described variously as an inscribed tablet,⁴⁸ an immutable stone,⁴⁹ and as a repository for the collection of numerous speeches.⁵⁰

above, as well as the Egyptian *Instruction of Ankhsheshonq* attest both in their framing. Some include a response from the son at the end, such as the Egyptian *Instruction of Any*, an interesting feature of this genre which might be productively associated with the conclusion of the frame speaker in Ecclesiastes.

45 See L. L. Quick, "'To hear and to accept': A Word-Pair in the Tell Fakhariyah Bilingual Inscription," *JSS* 61/2 (2016): 413–429.

46 Prov 4:4. For example, a scepter, as in Amos 1:8.

47 On the composite nature of the body and the quasi-independence of organs, see B. Pongratz-Leisten, "Divine Agency and Astralization of Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism* (ed. B. Pongratz-Leisten; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 139–140; R. A. Di Vito, "Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity," *CBQ* 61 (1999): 227–228.

48 Jer 17:1; Prov 3:3; 7:3.

49 Frequently understood as a metaphor for obstinacy, one might understand the *lēb* in this case as an engraved stone whose inscription is then unable to be altered. See variously Ezek 3:7; 11:19; 36:26; Job 41:16; Exod 7:3; Ezek 3:7; Prov 28:14.

50 Consider Solomon's "breadth of mind," *rōḥab lēb*, in 1 Kgs 5:9, and his subsequent enumerated speech contained therein, in v. 13. In Ps 119:32, the authoritative instructions of the deity "expands [the] mind," *tarḥib libbi*. In Proverbs, the *lēb* stores speech and instruction (2:10; 4:21; 7:3) as well as abstract qualities associated with speech, such as plans (16:1) and counsel (20:5). The *lēb* appears to function as a space within the body where speech is produced and stored. I thank my student Anthony Lipscomb for making a number of these observations, as well as E. L. Greenstein, "The Heart as an Organ of Speech in Biblical Hebrew" (presented at the SBL Annual Meeting, Boston, MA, 17 November, 2017). See also T. Krüger, "Das 'Herz' in der alttestamentlichen Anthropologie," in *Anthropologische Aufbrüche: alttestamentliche und interdisziplinäre Zugänge zur historischen Anthropologie* (ed. A. Wagner; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).

Against this background, in the instructions of Proverbs 1–9 the father transmits his accumulated speech-items to his silent, attentive son. This transmission takes place through the ritual of instruction. The instruction represents a moment in which speech is transmitted from one generation to the next, similar to how a father might give his son an object like a bow or the symbolic entitlements attached to such an object. Conceptualized thus, filial succession depends upon the stable and intact transmission of objects, entitlements, and speech, operating on the fiction that sons acquire them intact, preventing change from one generation to the next. It is precisely this notion of ultimate stability in transmission that Qohelet exposes for its inability to attribute any lasting significance to deeds performed by individuals in their lifetimes. And he does so brilliantly, quoting the formulation of stable transmission: *’ên lēhōšîp ūmimmennū ’ên ligrōa*, “Nothing will be added and nothing will be taken from it.”

“A Son is Born to Naomi”: Matrilineal Succession in Ruth

The themes of succession, trans-generational survival, and obedience to instruction that we find in Genesis 27 and Aqhat are also central to the book of Ruth.⁵¹ The narrative is set in the time of the Judges – perhaps an appropriately chaotic period to situate a story of new power structures occupying defunct ones.⁵² Unlike the narratives we have already examined, Ruth is not a tale of *filial* succession. Rather, it is a story about a widowed daughter-in-law’s devotion to her mother-in-law. The tale opens with the imminent failure of the line of Elimelech. Many have observed the connections to the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38.⁵³ We should note an important dis-

51 Gunkel did not see a political ideology at work in Ruth, but what Nielsen describes as “simply a beautiful story about a widow’s faithfulness” (K. Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997], 21, who discusses H. Gunkel, “Ruth,” in *Reden und Aufsätze* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913], 88–89). Nielsen, by contrast, takes the genealogy at the ending as the impetus for understanding its message, to “establish the situation in which such a genealogy could be of benefit,” Nielsen, *Ruth*, 21. Neither reading forecloses the centrality of the themes of succession, trans-generational survival, and obedience.

52 J. C. Exum, “The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 410–429; S. Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

53 Gunkel, “Ruth,” 65–92; M. Burrows, “Levirate Marriage in Israel,” *JBL* 59 (1940): 23–33; D. A. Leggett, *The Levirate and Goel Institutions in the Old Testament: With Special Attention to the Book of Ruth* (Cherry Hill: Mack Publishing Company, 1974); D. R. G. Beattie, “The Book of Ruth as Evidence for Israelite Legal Practice,” *VT* 24

inction between the two stories.⁵⁴ In Genesis 38, although the expectations of levirate marriage fail in the strict sense – Tamar does not bear a child with a brother of her dead husband – the patriarch Judah remains alive to eventually beget a successor. In Ruth, this is patently not the case.

By the sixth verse of the narrative, all of the male kin have died: Elimelech and his two sons, fittingly named Mahlon and Chilion – “sickness” and “extinction.” The story tells of the plight of Naomi, the last living member of the immediate family, and her return to Judah from Moab. Commencing her journey, Naomi explains to her widowed daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, that they must return to their families. This scene recalls Judah’s command to Tamar after the death of his second son, Onan: “Remain as a widow in the house of your father until my son Shelah grows up” (Gen 38:11). The narrator reports Tamar’s fulfillment of this command, “Tamar went and remained in her father’s house.” Curiously, though, Naomi tells Ruth and Orpah to return not to their father’s house, but their *mother’s* house: “Go, return each one to the house of (your) mother” (Gen 38:11). When compared to Judah’s command to Tamar, Naomi’s imperative appears to say that in this story, one is not concerned not with *patriarchs*, but rather, with *matriarchs*, who might broker for them new marriages.

But both daughters-in-law resist her command and Naomi presses further:

Return, my daughters, why should you come with me? Do I still have sons within me who can be husbands for you? Return, my daughters, for I am too old to belong to a husband, for if I said to you, I have hope, that even tonight I will belong to a husband, even if I gave birth to sons, should you wait until they grow up, and should you keep yourself from belonging to a husband? No, my daughters, for I am more embittered than you, for Yahweh has struck me. (Ruth 1:11–13)

Naomi’s logic in this passage piques curiosity. She explains that her only hope for the continuation of the male line is to marry herself and produce sons, with whom the widowed daughters-in-law might be able to bear sons. She does not indicate that this husband must be a kinsman redeemer – perhaps this is assumed by the audience. In the world of the biblical authors an

(1974): 251–267; R. Wilson, “The Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research,” *JBL* 94 (1975): 169–189; S. Niditch, “The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38,” *HTR* 72 (1979): 143–149; C. M. Carmichael, *Women, Law, and the Genesis Traditions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979); E. W. Davies, “Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage,” *VT* 31 (1981): 138–144, 257–268; J. M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

54 See discussion of S. Chavel, *Oracular Law and Priestly Historiography in the Torah* (FAT 71; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 239.

audience might expect, at least from our reading of Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers 36, that a daughter can *only* inherit from her father in the case of no sons provided *she marries within the male line*.⁵⁵ Technically, Naomi cannot inherit the *property* of Elimelech, that right would belong to a hypothetical new husband, so long as he is a relative of Elimelech.

But Ruth nevertheless attaches herself to Naomi without the promise of the continuation of the male line – a kinsman of Elimelech's line will come later.⁵⁶ Ruth's pledge to Naomi is often read in traditional contexts as a declaration of "conversion" and attachment to a religious community.⁵⁷ Following broad scholarly rejection of this position, Ruth's speech is best characterized as a declaration of filial-like devotion and obedience to Naomi in her capacity of the head of the family:

Do not urge me to leave you, to turn away from you, for wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you lodge, I will lodge, your people will be my people, and your god my god, and wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. (Ruth 1:16–17)

Ruth not only professes obedience to Naomi during her lifetime. She has also promised to join Naomi in death – as a member of the corporate, trans-generational family in the grave. Ruth says to Naomi, as her final claim to obedience: "Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried."

Ruth concludes her speech with a promise to Naomi that not even death will separate them – she has eternally attached herself to Naomi's line. The Hebrew reads in v. 17b: *kō ya'āšeh yhw̄h lî wěḵōh yōšip̄ kî hammāwet̄ yaprîd bēnî ūbēnēk̄*. NJPS translates, "Thus and more may the LORD do to me if anything *but death* parts me from you," a translation which seems to follow an understanding not of the Hebrew, or for that matter, the Septuagint or Targum, but rather, what we find in the King James, which has "the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought *but death* part thee and me." We might

55 Num 36:6–9; See D.H. Aaron, "The Ruse of Zelophehad's Daughters," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 80 (2009): 1–38; S. Chavel, "'Oracular Novellae' and Biblical Historiography: Through the Lens of Law and Narrative," *Clio* 39 (2009): 1–27; idem, *Oracular Law*, 239 ff.

56 Boaz as a kinsman of Elimelech's line is specified both by the narrator in Ruth 2:1 and in the character's declaration of assuming the entitlements and responsibilities of Elimelech and his sons in 4:9.

57 Smith writes that "Much of Jewish tradition has viewed Ruth's words [Ruth 1:16–17] as an expression of conversion. Scholars who address this view largely reject it. Rudolph, Edward Campbell, and Adele Berlin, for example, mention the idea of conversion, which they resist in view of the relatively minor role that religious observance and belief play in the text." Mark S Smith, "'Your People Shall Be My People': Family and Covenant in Ruth 1:16–17," *CBQ* 69 (2007): 242–258, at 243–244. See also J. Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 100.

trace this translation back to the Vulgate, which has “*si non sola mors me et te separaverit*,” “if death alone does not separate me and you.”⁵⁸

This particular reading, derived from the Vulgate addition of *sola*, isolates death as an exception to Ruth’s devotion to Naomi. Read this way, *only* death will separate the two. However, this reading not only mischaracterizes the sense of the Hebrew, it also obfuscates what seems to be a central message of the story. Naomi and Ruth are not to be divided ever – not in life and perhaps more importantly, not in death. Love or kindness aside, the Ruth’s declaration has a much more concrete significance in ancient Israelite culture when read against the background of filial succession and mortuary practice: Ruth has joined Naomi’s trans-generational line. The crucial component of the family line is its survival *beyond* individual death, where individuals lie down with their fathers and are gathered unto them in the family tomb.

The Hebrew captures the eternal nature of Ruth’s declaration to Naomi: *kō ya‘āšeh yhwē lī wēkōh yōšip kī hammāwet yaprīd bēnī ūbēnēk*, “Thus and more may Yahweh do to me if death parts me from you.” Consider the immediately preceding statement in 17a: “Where you die I shall die and *there I will be buried*.” Ruth’s declaration is to go with Naomi physically and in her deeds, to dwell with her in life, for her people to be Ruth’s people, and for her god to be Ruth’s god, and finally to die with her, specifically *in same place of burial*. Ruth’s speech appears to configure Naomi as the *mater familias* of the now defunct Elimelech line, to whom eventually a child will be born in Naomi’s name.

Consider Ruth’s obedience to Naomi throughout the story. Upon Naomi and Ruth’s return to Bethlehem, Ruth asks Naomi for permission to glean in the field of Boaz, Elimelech’s kinsman, and Ruth goes with Naomi’s permission (Ruth 2:2–3). Ruth had, technically speaking, attached herself to Elimelech’s line, recognizing Boaz as a kinsman. In 2:21, Boaz tells her to stay in his field by his men. But Ruth reports back to Naomi, who provides Ruth with permission in the following verse. As Ruth reports to Naomi, Boaz had said to Ruth,

‘im hannē’ārīm ‘āšer lī tidbāqīn ‘ad ‘im killū ‘ēt kol haqqāšār ‘āšer lī

Stay close to my boys until they have completed all my harvest.

But Naomi’s instruction to Ruth is slightly different than Boaz’ words. She says,

⁵⁸ Notably, Vetus Latina does not attest this sense. There text reads: “*si non mors separaverit inter me et inter te*,” “if death does not separate me from you.” B. Gesche, ed., *Vetus Latina: Die Reste der Altlateinischen Bibel*, 4/5 *Ruth* (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 46.

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tôḥ bittî ki tēšē'î 'im na'ārôtāyw wēlō' yipgē'û bāk bēšādeh 'ahēr

It is better, my daughter, that you go out with **his girls**, and not be bothered in another field. (Ruth 2:22)

Not only does Naomi's instruction differ from that of Boaz precisely on gendered lines – that Ruth should not stay close to *hannē'arim*, “the boys,” but rather to *na'ārôtāyw*, “his girls” – but it is this part of Naomi's command which Ruth fulfills, according to the narrator's report:

wattiḏbaq bēna'ārôt bō'az lēlaqqēt 'ad kēlōt qēšir haššē'ōrim ūqēšir haḥittim wattēseh 'et ḥāmōtā

She stayed close to Boaz's **girls** gleaning until the completion of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest and she remained with her mother-in-law. (Ruth 2:23)

Ruth's obedience to Naomi's instruction is further highlighted as the story continues. Naomi counsels Ruth on how to approach Boaz at the threshing floor, and Ruth declares: “All that you say I will do” (Ruth 3:5). The narrator then reports in 3:6 that

wata'aš kēkōl 'āšer šiwwattā ḥāmōtā

[Ruth] did all that her mother-in-law had **commanded**.

Until this point, the narrator has only reported Naomi's interactions with Ruth as speech. Now the narrator describes this as command. The only other two times this verb is used in the book of Ruth is with Boaz as the grammatical subject. In the first instance, it is Boaz who commands the boys not to bother Ruth (Ruth 2:9). In the second instance, it is Boaz commanding the boys to allow Ruth to glean without their interference (Ruth 2:15). Boaz's commands to the boys working in his fields in chapter 2 thus anticipate the narrator's subsequent description of Naomi's commandment to Ruth in 3:15 regarding her actions on the threshing floor.

The use of the narrative pattern of command and fulfillment gives support, on the stylistic level, to a broad theme of the story: Ruth's filial-like obedience to Naomi. In 3:4, Naomi commands Ruth thus:

wihî bēšākēbô wēyāda'at 'et hammāqôm 'āšer yiškab šām ūbā't wēgillit margēlōtāyw wēšākābētēy wēhū' yaggid lāk 'et 'āšer ta'ašin

When he lies down, remember the place where he lies down, and go and **uncover his leg-area**, and lie down, and he will tell you what you are to do.

In v. 7, the narrator reports Ruth's fulfillment of this command using identical verbs:

wayyō'kal bō'az wayyēšet wayyitaḅ libbō wayyābō' liškab biqšêh hā'ārēmāh wattābō' ballāt wattēgal margēlōtāyw wattiškāḅ

Boaz ate and drank, and was happy, and he went to lie down at the edge of the grain pile and she came stealthily, and uncovered his leg-area and lay down.

It therefore follows that the story does not end with the explicit restoration of the male line of Elimelech. Indeed, in the genealogy given at the end of the story, it says of the son Obed that it is *Boaz* who begot him.⁵⁹ If one resolution of the story is the perpetuation of Elimelech's name, then this is not technically accomplished by the genealogy. Even more significant, perhaps, is the role the women play with respect to the birth the son of Boaz and Ruth – in particular, the role played by Naomi among the women. This section concluding the story, immediately prior to the genealogy, comes in 4:14–17. It is marked off by an *inclusio* of the speech of the women, who in vv. 14–15 bless Naomi, and who in v. 17, declare the child a “son of Naomi.” Their statement is tantamount to a declaration that the child belongs to *Naomi's* line, not to Elimelech's. This *inclusio* of the women's speech in frames Naomi's actions in v. 16:

Naomi took the child and laid him in her breast and she became his “foster mother” (*’ōmenet*).

Naomi has now incorporated not one, but two individuals into her family: first Ruth becomes like a son to her, and now Ruth's child as well. The significance of this statement centers on the meaning of the term *’ōmenet*. Does Naomi function symbolically as a wet nurse to the new heir?

Breastfeeding can symbolize a number of transmissions from mother to child, as Chapman demonstrates, one of which is kinship.⁶⁰ Chapman interprets Naomi's nursing of Obed to solidify *his* status as heir and successor in spite of Ruth's foreignness.⁶¹ But such a reading would not explain how the passage resolves the story's main crisis. If the story's main problem concerns the perpetuation the line of Elimelech – just as the story of Judah and Tamar concerns itself with the perpetuation of Judah's line – then what is the significance of Ruth's foreignness? Indeed, Tamar's origin was neither identified nor did it play any role in Genesis 38. One cannot ignore the potential implications of the concluding genealogy, which others have suggested resolves a question of King David's ancestry.⁶² But Ruth's foreign-

59 Nielsen, *Ruth*, 21; Wilson, “The Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research”; Schipper, *Ruth*, 185.

60 Chapman, *House of the Mother*, 125 ff.

61 *Ibid.*, 144.

62 Nielsen, *Ruth*, 21.

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ness does not appear to figure at all in the unfolding of the story and in the assumptions of levirate marriage and land redemption woven throughout.⁶³

We might turn to another of Chapman's insights through her study of ancient Near Eastern depictions of breastfeeding, namely, that "divine breast milk serves as the conduit for bestowing divine traits" for human kings.⁶⁴ The transmission of character traits and entitlements through breastfeeding appears to function analogously to a father's transmission of traits and entitlements to his sons. Such we saw in Isaac's transmission of lordship to Jacob and subjugation to Esau in Genesis 27. Naomi's "nursing" of Obed, if this indeed is the sense evoked by the term, may or may not alleviate concerns about Ruth's foreignness for the audience. However, we cannot ignore the symbolic work nursing, in its various evocations, seems to accomplish for Naomi's character. For the women declare that a son is born to Naomi – not to Elimelech or Boaz.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Like the tale of Aqhat, the story of Ruth works through a crisis of succession and trans-generational survival. In the case of Ruth, however, the story works through this crisis not through fathers and sons, but through mothers and daughters. This reversal of conventional paths of transmission generates further questions: Was this reversal merely conceptual? Representative of normative shifts, or perhaps, an author's ideological agenda in the wake of their contemporary political circumstances? These questions, however, lie beyond the scope of the present study. Here we simply observe the reshaping of notions of succession and transmission in the story and its literary pre-

63 Indeed she is dubbed "Ruth the Moabite" at several points in the narrative, but seemingly only for identification. In 1:22, Naomi is described as returning from Moab with Ruth the Moabite, in 2:2, the narrator describes her as Ruth the Moabite in dialogue with Naomi, who calls her בְּתִי, "my daughter." In 2:6 she is identified to Boaz by a servant as the Moabite girl who returned with Naomi, but Boaz seems to have no trouble with her foreignness, and again is identified as such by the narrator in 2:21. In 4:5 and 4:10, she is identified as Ruth the Moabite as part of the "package" in land redemption.

64 Chapman, *House of the Mother*, 130.

65 Chavel gives a helpful description of the child born of levirate marriage: "According to the terms of the law, the son of levirate marriage bears a dual affiliation [...] for the purposes of land inheritance [...] he belongs to his biological father, but genealogically, fictively, for the purposes of memory, it simultaneously falls to him to carry on the name of his father's brother," *Oracular Law*, 238.

sensation. The book of Ruth concludes with women onlookers who witness Naomi's plight and pronounce their judgement. These women bestow upon Naomi a blessing, that Ruth is better to Naomi than seven sons. Viewed through the women's pronouncements, the birth of Obed solidifies the post-mortem, trans-generational line, a line re-established through Ruth's acts of devotion to her mother-in-law. While Boaz also shows devotion, it is ultimately Ruth who is praised at the end.

We might recall that Jacob, in commanding Joseph to bury him not in Egypt but with his ancestors, expects devotion and faithfulness of his son: *wē'āšītā 'immādi ḥesed we'emet*, "Be devoted and faithful to me." Likewise, Ruth pledges her devotion to Naomi and demonstrates faithfulness in her obedience to Naomi's instructions.⁶⁶ The qualities of *ḥesed we'emet*, "devotion and faithfulness" are also ascribed to Yahweh in care for his people:

Yahweh, god of compassion and grace,
slow to anger,
great in devotion and faithfulness (*ḥesed we'emet*). (Exod 34:6)

What does it mean, in this culture, to possess the qualities of *ḥesed*, "devotion," and *'emet*, "faithfulness"? These two terms appear frequently in biblical literature as a pair,⁶⁷ and in this passage describing Yahweh's character, they frame his statement of trans-generational punishment and reward:

Protecting devotion (*ḥesed*) for the thousandth (generation),
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
not entirely clearing (the guilty),
making the father's transgression count for the sons, and for the sons' sons,
for the third and fourth (generations). (Exod 34:7)

"Devotion and faithfulness" are qualities that protect the family line. Ruth is said to be better to her than seven sons, because seven sons without the

66 In Ruth 1:8, Naomi wishes for Ruth and Orpah that Yahweh act with *ḥesed*, "devotion" towards them just as they had acted "with the dead and with me." Again, in 2:20, Yahweh is praised for his *ḥesed* towards the dead and the living. In 3:10, Boaz praises Ruth for her own act of *ḥesed*, presumably devotion towards the nearly defunct family line, which is demonstrated by her attachment to Boaz and not a man from a different family line promising a longer lifespan or greater material wealth. The term *'emet* makes no explicit appearance, though arguably the principle of faithfulness is demonstrated by Ruth's obedience to Naomi's instructions, in following through speech with action.

67 Usually in descriptions of the deity, but also used to characterize aspirational traits of humans. See Gen 24:27, 49; 47:29, as discussed at above; Josh 2:14; 2 Sam 2:6; 2 Sam 15:20; absence of these twin qualities in Hos 4:1; Mic 7:20; frequently in Psalms in praising qualities of the deity, in Ps 25:10 and elsewhere. In Proverbs, they are qualities to which students of wisdom should aspire: Prov 3:3; 14:22; 16:6; in, 20:28, they are protective qualities of a king.

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security of their own heirs cannot secure the future of the family line – but Ruth could. *This* ending to the story upends an expectation that it is *sons* who continue the family line, in life, but more importantly, in death.

Jacqueline Vayntrub
Yale Divinity School
409 Prospect Street
New Haven, CT 06511
United States
jacqueline.vayntrub@yale.edu