


# Her influence: The constructive roles of women in the lives of Moses and Boaz

**Author:**Mlamli Diko<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of African Languages, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Mlamli Diko,  
dikom@unisa.ac.za

**Dates:**

Received: 04 July 2024

Accepted: 24 Aug. 2024

Published: 02 Dec. 2024

**How to cite this article:**

Diko, M., 2024, 'Her influence: The constructive roles of women in the lives of Moses and Boaz', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1), a3238.  
<https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.3238>

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This article critiques the constructive roles of women in the lives of Moses and Boaz applying feminist biblical criticism as a theory. By critiquing the significant yet often downplayed contributions of women such as Jochebed, Miriam, Ruth and Naomi, the aim is to provide a more inclusive and multifaceted understanding of their roles in different biblical texts. In the process, feminist biblical criticism, as a theory, unmask the pervasive influence of sexism in both the biblical texts and their interpretive traditions, contesting traditional readings that subjugate women's voices and agency. Ultimately, this article makes two notable findings. Firstly, the central role of Jochebed and Miriam in ensuring Moses' survival and rise to leadership underscores how their actions were fundamental to the unfolding of Israel's history. Secondly, the proactive agency of Ruth and Naomi demonstrated through their strategic decisions and mutual support, facilitated social and familial redemption and thereby transformed Boaz's life and legacy. These notable findings underline the indispensable contributions of women in the two biblical figures and call for a (re)consideration of their roles in biblical history and contemporary contexts. Inevitably, I conclude that by reclaiming the voices and experiences of women, this article advocates for a more unprejudiced (re) interpretation of sacred canon, promoting gender justice and inclusivity in contemporary religious and cultural practices.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** Examining the constructive roles of women challenges male-orientated interpretations in theology and intersects with literary, historical, sociological, gender and cultural discourses, advancing inclusive and non-partisan understandings of biblical texts.

**Keywords:** feminist biblical criticism; women; Moses; Boaz; roles; contributions.

## Contextual background and introduction

The Bible, as one of the most influential and celebrated narratives in history, offers a wealth of accounts that have modelled cultural, religious and ethical perspectives across centuries. Among these biblical narratives and accounts, the stories and realities of Moses and Boaz stand out, not only for their metaphysical spiritual significance but for the remarkable roles that women played in shaping their lives. In contemporary contexts, where gender roles and the contributions of women and young girls are critically probed, debated and valued, (re)visiting these classical stories and realities, that is, the stories and realities of Moses and Boaz in this context, offers renewed perspectives and inspiration. This is based on the report by Friedman (1987:479) who indicates that many ancient biblical narratives or texts feature powerful female figures and contributions that have been historically downplayed or underappreciated. In view of this indication, bringing these biblical texts to the fore challenges enduring stereotypes and provides role models for women and young girls in contemporary contexts. With special reference to male-orientated or patriarchal contemporary societies, Diko (2024:6) argues that they continually rest on long-standing gender norms and perceptions that place men in dominant roles and women and/or young girls in subordinate ones. It is for these concerning reasons that it is crucial to underscore historical examples of powerful and influential women, and not necessarily excluding young girls, in an attempt to demystify these established male-orientated or patriarchal norms, interrogating the legitimacy of the current gender dynamic forces. Having said that, Masenya (2005) cautions that (re)examining history, with a particular focus on biblical history, to include often overlooked female contributions could be viewed as a threat to traditional historical narratives that have recurrently minimised or unheeded the roles and contributions of women and young girls. In the end, this could lead to accusations of historical revisionism, where existing power structures could resist the inclusion of these narratives and experiences.

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As a consequence of this claim, I must emphasise that unearthing biblical narratives of powerful women provides contemporary role models for women and young girls, which inspires and empowers them to pursue leadership roles and challenge gender prejudices or biases. Over and above these scholarly views, it is critical to observe that Muzenda (2020) is of the view that politically, highlighting women's historical contributions supports gender impartiality movements and policies that seek to advance women's rights, liberation and transformation. Ultimately, this women's support leads to political resistance from groups invested in maintaining male-orientated or patriarchal power dynamic forces. This is where the African continent becomes affected and relevant. This is based on the reality that showcasing historical female figures inspires current and future generations of women and young girls to aspire to leadership roles and careers traditionally ruled over by men. Considering this reality, this empowerment may lead to increased female participation in various fields, including political discourses, business and management (see Dreyer 2011; Kgatla 2019).

From a biblical and theological perspective, Clemence (2022:33) suggests that downplaying the scholarly (re)examination of women's constructive influence is problematic for various reasons. In explaining this claim, Clemence (2022) makes it clear that the Bible contains numerous accounts of influential women whose roles are integral to the Bible. These women include Deborah, a judge and leader (Jdg 4–5); Ruth, whose loyalty and faith are exemplary (Book of Ruth); Esther, who saved her people (Book of Esther) and Mary, the mother of Jesus, central to the New Testament (NT) narrative (Gospels). Having said that, I must point out that discounting or minimising their constructive contributions distorts or erases the biblical scripture's message and leads to fragmentary theological understanding. In addition to this challenge, scholarly examination guarantees that interpretations remain realistic to the biblical texts. Nevertheless, downplaying women's constructive roles could result in prejudiced or biased interpretations that neglect significant components of biblical teachings, with a focus on women's and young girls' roles. For instance, in Genesis 1:27, both men and women are created in the image of God. Despite this fact, overlooking women's effect suggests a diminished reflection of God's image in women, contradicting this foundational theological principle. The contemporary challenges of this ignorance could be intricate as they underscore the ostracism of women and young girls within religious contexts and fortify broader societal patterns of gender disparities. Confirming this assertion, Masenya (2012:209) puts forward that when influential institutions like religious organisations propagate gender prejudice, they normalise such prejudices in other areas of society such as education, workplace, health, legal system and more.

No wonder, therefore, Diko (2024a:8) suggests that the Bible advocates for justice, love and equality (also see Mi 6:8; Gl 3:28). However, subjugating women's contributions contradicts these ethical imperatives, propagating injustice

and imbalance. By the same token, women played significant roles in the early Christian communities, such as Phoebe, a deacon (Rm 16:1), and Priscilla, a teacher (Ac 18:26). With this assertion in mind, ignoring their constructive contributions undermines the historical reality of the early Christian church and its inclusive nature. In a nutshell, downplaying the scholarly scrutinisation and revisitation of women's constructive influence in biblical and theological discourses is sensitive and problematic owing to the fact that it undermines the integrity and morality of scriptural interpretation, theological understanding, ethical teachings, church tradition, practical church life and the church's mission (Eke 2023; Francis & Village 2022). This is the reason why it is important to acknowledge and value women's constructive contributions in enriching the faith community and aligning more closely with biblical principles of justice and liberty.

Bearing this contextual background in mind, particularly concerning challenges faced by women and young girls as well as their constructive roles, this article has two aims to address. Firstly, it is to critique the constructive roles of women in the lives of Moses and Boaz, concentrating on how their contributions influenced the development, leadership and accomplishments of these biblical figures. The rationale behind this aim is induced by the reality that by unearthing the comprehensive roles of women such as Jochebed, Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter and Ruth, this scholarly discourse uncovers the significant yet often overlooked influence women had, and still do, in configuring the destinies of Moses and Boaz. In addressing this aim, the ultimate goal is to denounce traditional interpretations and highlight the importance of women's constructive contributions to biblical narratives and theological principles, including contemporary contextualisations. Secondly, the aim is to explore the theological and historical significance of women's roles in the stories and realities of Moses and Boaz and how their actions mirror and uphold the biblical principle of gender liberty. The rationale behind this aim is to unmask the roles of women in these biblical figures, highlighting their vital contributions and ensuring a more accurate reflection of biblical dogmas that affirm the equal creation of men and women in the image of God. In addressing this aim, the ultimate goal is to promote a more inclusive understanding of biblical narratives and support contemporary efforts towards gender justice within religious and societal contexts.

As outlined earlier, the motivating factor for this scholarly dialogue lies in the necessity to recognise and unmask the significant yet underappreciated contributions of women in biblical texts and in contemporary contexts. This is based on the premise that traditional interpretations of biblical texts have persistently marginalised female 'characters',<sup>1</sup> overlooking their agency and impact. It is on the grounds of this challenge that I contend that by (re)examining the constructive roles of

1. For the purposes of this article, the term 'characters' is not used in the modern literary sense of fictional or real people with distinct personalities and roles within a literary narrative. Instead, the biblical reference to individuals focusses more on their actions, roles and moral qualities rather than the detailed, nuanced portrayals that are often associated with characters in contemporary literature.

women in the lives of pivotal biblical figures like Moses and Boaz, this article seeks to provide a more multifaceted and inclusive understanding of these stories, underlining the critical roles women play in shaping religious and cultural history. In the case of Moses, women such as his mother Jochebed, his sister Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter play central roles in ensuring his survival and eventual emergence as a leader of the Israelites. Jochebed's act of hiding Moses, Miriam's vigilance by the riverbank and Pharaoh's daughter's compassion collectively facilitate Moses' journey from a vulnerable infant to a prominent leader (see Ex 2:1–3; Ex 2:4; Ex 2:5–6; Ex 2:7–10). Accordingly, unmasking these women's constructive contributions underscores the interconnectedness of their actions and Moses' destiny, challenging patriarchal or male-orientated discourses that could curtail their significance. To the same extent, in the biblical narrative of Boaz, the proactive and courageous actions of Ruth and Naomi are instrumental in bringing about social and familial redemption. This pronouncement is based on the premise that Ruth's decision to glean in Boaz's fields and her bold marriage proposal demonstrate her agency and determination, while Naomi's guidance and support highlight the importance of female mentorship and solidarity. Ultimately, Boaz's recognition of Ruth's worth and his subsequent actions mirror a transformative engagement with gender subtleties, where mutual respect and partnership prevail. In any case, it is imperative to acknowledge that this scholarly discourse applies feminist biblical criticism as a theory of interpretation and discussions to address its two aims. This theory is explained in the next section.

## Theory: Feminist biblical criticism

Feminist biblical criticism is a theory that scrutinises the Bible from a *feminist perspective*, aiming to uncover and critique the ways in which various biblical narratives reflect, consolidate or challenge patriarchal structures and gender prejudices. Typically, a feminist perspective meticulously critiques the power dynamic forces, social structures and cultural norms that propagate gender inequality, advocating for the recognition and empowerment of women's voices, ideologies, experiences and contributions (Tudor 2023:293). This theoretical perspective strives to disintegrate patriarchal or male-orientated systems and promote gender equity across all areas of society (Tudor 2023:291). With special reference to feminist biblical criticism, it underlines the experiences, contributions and roles of women in biblical texts, continually overlooked or subjugated in traditional interpretations. In the domain of scholarship, the goal of applying this theory is to reclaim women's voices and perspectives, offering a more inclusive and equitable understanding of the biblical scriptures. Having said that different scholars detail the viral matrixes and intricacies of this theory. For instance, Resane (2021:4) suggests that it uncovers patriarchal or male-orientated structures and gender biases, investigating how women are depicted in the Bible and exploring themes such as agency, power dynamic forces and representations of femininity. Adding to Resane (2021), Wood (2017:7) is of the view that this theory highlights the multiplicity of women's experiences within the biblical texts, recognising that women

in the Bible occupy a wide range of roles, from prophets and leaders to marginalised figures. In other words, feminist biblical criticism is a form of scholarly inquiry ingrained in the consciousness that sexism characterises both the biblical text and the institutions that claim and interpret it in the past and present. This particular assertion is provocative owing to the fact that feminist biblical criticism denounces entrenched interpretations that have historically sidelined women's voices, revealing the pervasive influence of sexism within both the biblical texts and their interpretive traditions. Inevitably, I put forward that doing so opens up new and contemporary avenues for comprehending and (re)interpreting these primitive narratives in ways that cultivate gender balance and inclusivity, offering fresh insights and perspectives that have significant implications for contemporary religious and cultural practices.

Bearing these explanations in mind, it is fascinating to observe that Styler (2007:69) suggests that feminist biblical criticism intersects with other scholarly disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, gender studies and literary discourses, to provide multifaceted perspectives into the social and cultural contexts of biblical narratives. Unequivocally, this is true given that Diko (2023) contends that feminist biblical discourses acknowledge the importance of intersectionality, recognising that gender intersects with other dimensions of identity, such as race, class, sexuality and disability, to shape individuals' experiences and interpretations of biblical scripture. Therefore, it stands to reason to argue that feminist biblical criticism is not solely concerned with critique; it also pursues to edify and celebrate the voices of women in the Bible, reclaiming their narratives, experiences and contributions. This view denotes that by amplifying women's voices, feminist biblical scholars empower contemporary critics to engage with the Bible in ways that reverberate with their own experiences and values, ultimately buttressing more inclusive and egalitarian religious communities. With these claims in mind, I propose that feminist biblical criticism be understood as one that reclaims the Bible by (re)interpretation and reminding scholarly and non-scholarly critics of women-positive passages, that is, passages that in their very essence have a positive view of women. Over and above this proposal, these women-positive passages serve as powerful reminders of the variegated roles and experiences of women in biblical texts (Milne 2012). They include stories of daring women leaders like Deborah and Esther, as well as accounts of women who demystify societal norms and expectations, such as Ruth and Mary Magdalene. This implies that by bringing attention to these biblical passages, feminist biblical (re)interpretations pursue to counterbalance the predominantly male-centred focus of traditional interpretations and provide a more balanced and inclusive comprehension of the Bible. As a direct consequence of this, the question that remains unanswered is, how is feminist biblical criticism applied to the examination of the constructive roles of women in the lives of Moses and Boaz?

With particular reference to Moses, understanding the historical setting of his time helps to recognise the significance

of the actions of women like Jochebed (Moses' mother), Miriam (his sister) and Pharaoh's daughter. These women's actions, according to Römer (2015:241), ought to be viewed against the backdrop of a society where women's roles were habitually confined to the private sphere. By the same token, a close reading of Exodus divulges the crucial roles women played in Moses' early life. For example, Jochebed's defiance of Pharaoh's edict, Miriam's protective vigilance and Pharaoh's daughter's compassion and boldness in adopting Moses are pivotal biblical moments that configure his destiny. In view of these observable events, feminist biblical criticism interrogates how traditional expositions downplay or ignore the decisive actions of these women, framing them as passive or secondary characters. Therefore, by (re)examining their constructive roles, one observes how their determination and wisdom were and still are instrumental in God's purposive plan. It is on the grounds of this that Römer (2015) suggests that reclaiming the narratives of Jochebed, Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter positions them as *active agents* in salvation history, not merely background biblical figures. In the end, this (re)reading and its scholarly discourses emphasise their strategic and courageous decisions that guaranteed Moses' survival and leadership. As a matter of fact, Chisale (2020:5) attests that reflecting theologically and biblically on these women's roles intensifies a profound comprehension of divine action through diverse agents, contesting doctrines that could restrict women's roles in religious life and leadership in contemporary contexts. On the other hand, with particular reference to Boaz, probing the historical and cultural context of the Book of Ruth, where Ruth's loyalty, initiative and strategic actions within the framework of levirate marriage customs highlight her crucial role in the narrative and its socio-cultural implications (Diko 2023; Sugihyono 2023).

Over and above this reality, in the Book of Ruth, textual scrutiny draws attention to Ruth's proactive and bold decisions, her journey to Bethlehem, her gleaning in Boaz's field and her night-time encounter with Boaz on the threshing floor, demonstrating her agency and pivotal role in the lineage of King David. No wonder, therefore, Landman (2005) and Rebera (1985) argue that feminist biblical criticism critiques the male-orientated perspective that regards Boaz as the sole redeemer and hero, instead highlighting Ruth's initiative and resilience, which are crucial to the narrative's progression and ultimate gratification of divine purpose. On account of this view, reclaiming Ruth's narrative and voice, one could regard her not just as a loyal daughter-in-law but as a key figure in God's redemptive history, whose actions directly influence the lineage of King David and ultimately, the messianic line. In a nutshell, feminist biblical criticism, when applied to the lives of Moses and Boaz, reveals the essential and constructive roles women played in biblical texts. Inevitably, by applying it to this phenomenon (constructive roles of women on men), I unearth an affluent, more inclusive understanding of the Bible, where women's constructive contributions are recognised and honoured. This not only amplifies human comprehension of biblical narratives but supports the ongoing quest for gender justice

in both religious and secular contexts. Other significant scholarly discourses that explore and develop feminist biblical criticism include Ackermann (1993), Landman (1995), Masenya (1997), Olojede (2009) and Diko (2024a). These scholars vary in tune, unmasking women's and young girls' challenges and victories in different biblical and theological contexts. Nonetheless, given that the theory of interpretation and discussions have been explained, it is prudent to now focus on the thrust of this scholarly discourse, hence the next section.

## Interpretation and discussions

This section contains two sub-sections. The first sub-section concentrates on the constructive roles of women in the life of Moses, while the second sub-section focusses on Boaz using the same phenomenon. It is important to bear in mind that feminist biblical criticism as a theoretical framework is applied in both the sub-sections.

### Moses<sup>2</sup>

Feminist biblical criticism is a theory that pursues to highlight and probe the roles, experiences and representations of women in biblical narratives, as previously outlined. Bearing this explanation in mind, when applying this theory to the life of Moses, one observes that several women play central and constructive roles in his life. These women include his mother Jochebed, his sister Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter (often identified as Bithiah in later Jewish tradition) (Gericke 2004:33; Kadari 2022:204) and his wife Zipporah. Each of these women contributes significantly and remarkably to Moses' viability, identity and mission, acting in ways that contest or circumvent the patriarchal norms of their time. For example, Jochebed, Moses' mother, demonstrates remarkable courage and resourcefulness. This is based on the reality that when Pharaoh decrees that all Hebrew male infants be killed, Jochebed hides Moses for 3 months (Ex 2:1–3). Thus, her actions are pivotal in ensuring Moses' viability (Ex 2:3). On account of this view, I argue that Jochebed's defiance of Pharaoh's edict and her ingenuity in protecting her son exemplify her as a protector and a preserver of life. This act of civil disobedience not only saves Moses but also sets the stage for the liberation of the Hebrew people by protecting the future leader who eventually leads them out of Egypt.<sup>3</sup> In this biblical context, feminist biblical criticism underlines

2. Moses was indeed fortunate. Known as the 'friend of God', he had the unique privilege of speaking with the Lord face to face. However, without the divine placement of six extraordinary women in his life, Moses might not have survived to lead the Israelites out of Egypt or through the wilderness. For this reason, we should all take time to reflect on the pivotal moments in our lives where God placed someone to intervene and save us from adverse circumstances or poor choices. Even perilous times contribute to our spiritual growth. God used six righteous and courageous women to save Moses in extremely dangerous situations, ensuring his survival and future leadership. Moses, to his credit, honoured these women in his narrative.

3. When Moses was born, his mother sensed there was something special about him. Perhaps Jochebed recalled the prophecy that the people of Israel would remain in Egypt for 400 years (Gn 15:13). In this instance, she would have equalled Mary and other young women in NT times, who were praying they could be the mother of the Messiah. However, at three months, when his cries were too noticeable, she had to make a new plan. Jochebed did just as Pharaoh decreed: put him in the Nile. Only she made him a floating basket, a miniature ark, just like Noah's (Gn 6:14; Ex 3:2). She was determined to give him every chance. Hebrews 11:23 says: 'By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's edict'.

how Jochebed's maternal instinct and bravery defy the oppressive structures of her society, proving the vital role of women's aversion and agency in the survival and liberation of their people. Having said that, it is important to observe that Jochebed's role as a protector of Moses had four implications as outlined and suggested by Zucker (2017). Firstly, socially, Jochebed's actions defied the oppressive decree of Pharaoh, underscoring the resilience and agency of subjugated communities within ancient Egyptian society. Secondly, economically, her decision to hide Moses had implications for her family's livelihood, as defying the ruler's orders resulted in punitive measures. Thirdly, politically, Jochebed's act of civil insubordination is a form of resistance against tyrannical authority, contributing to the narrative of liberation and freedom from oppression. Fourthly, culturally, her courage and resourcefulness subverted traditional gender roles by placing a mother at the forefront of a significant act of defiance, challenging the notion of women's subservience in patriarchal or male-orientated societies. Keeping in mind these four implications by Zucker (2017), I propose a fifth implication, arguing that theologically, her faith in God's protection and providence reinforces the theme of divine intervention and deliverance, underscoring the spiritual dimensions of her actions. This is because, in the face of a ruthless edict demanding the death of Hebrew male infants, her daring choice to save her son was not merely a human act of maternal instinct but also a demonstration of her profound spiritual conviction. Therefore, this action underscores a belief in divine intervention; the idea that God would one way or another protect and deliver Moses, despite the seemingly insurmountable dangers.

With these assertions in mind, I additionally contend that women in contemporary contexts could draw several valuable lessons from Jochebed's story as interpreted through feminist biblical criticism. This is based on the reality that her conviction and resourcefulness serve as a reminder of the power of maternal instinct and the lengths to which a mother would go to protect and preserve the life of her child. This underlines the significance of nurturing and protecting one's loved ones, even in the face of adversity. This view is supported by Tripp (2021) who indicates that Jochebed's act of civil disobedience underscores the significance of standing up against injustice and oppression, even when it seems daunting or risky. In other words, her insubordination of Pharaoh's order demonstrates the potential for individuals to challenge unjust authority and contribute to movements for social transformation and liberation. It is for this reason I maintain that her experiences, as reflected in the Bible, denounce traditional gender roles by depicting a woman as a central figure in a position of resistance and liberation. In doing so, this could inspire women in contemporary contexts to assert their agency and oppose societal expectations that seek to obstruct their autonomy and potential. Beyond these scholarly debates, I put forward that it would be problematic not to apply Jochebed's principles in contemporary contexts owing to the reality that they offer valuable perspectives that empower women and young girls. This implies that glossing

over or dismissing these principles downplays the cruciality of maternal instinct, resilience and activism, which are essential qualities that women could draw upon in navigating their complex lives and advocating for themselves and others, especially young girls or children. In the process, failing to recognise the cruciality of contesting injustices and oppressive structures propagates systems of disparity and limits the potential for social change, transformation and progress.

It is for this reason that Masenya (1995:151) strongly argues that by embracing these constructive principles, women regenerate their agency and contribute to creating more equitable and just societies. Inevitably, it stands to reason to accept that for contemporary contexts, Jochebed sets a powerful and constructive example in biblical and theological history as a woman who confronted oppressive authority and risked her own safety to protect and preserve the life of her child, Moses. This means that her story and experiences delineate the importance of motherhood in the face of catastrophe. By the same token, Jochebed's act of civil insubordination demystifies outdated gender roles by depicting a woman as a central figure in a position of confrontation and liberation. This being the case, it highlights the agency and potential for women and young girls to pursue constructive change and contribute to movements for social transformation. In theological terms, Jochebed's example underscores the significance of standing up against injustice and oppression, even when it seems intimidating or risky and serves as a reminder of the ethical imperative to protect and uphold the dignity and rights of all individuals, particularly the most vulnerable (Diko 2024b:8; Muhanguzi 2011:714).

In addition to the constructive role of Jochebed, it is critical to appreciate the constructive role of Miriam. In this regard, Miriam, Moses' sister, plays an important role in his early life. This is because after Moses is placed in the Nile River, Miriam watches over him and intervenes when Pharaoh's daughter finds him. During the course of this, she suggests finding a Hebrew woman to nurse the child, thereupon ensuring that Moses is raised with a consciousness of his Hebrew identity (Ex 2:4-7).<sup>4</sup> With this assertion in mind, I put forward that Miriam's instant thinking and boldness in approaching Pharaoh's daughter underscore her as an active agent in Moses' life. This is because, by immediately suggesting her mother as a nurse for Moses, Miriam ensures not only his survival but also that he remains connected to his Hebrew legacy during his formative years (Ex 2:7-8). From a feminist biblical criticism, Miriam's actions demonstrate agency and wisdom, highlighting how women in the biblical text work behind the scenes to influence significant events. This denotes that Miriam's decision to approach Pharaoh's daughter demonstrates her strategic

4. In this context, being nursed and cared for by a Hebrew woman ensures that Moses is exposed to Hebrew culture, language and religious traditions from an early age. This connection to his origins is vital for his sense of identity and belonging. Similarly, growing up with a consciousness of his Hebrew identity allows Moses to empathise with the plight of the Israelites. This consciousness fuels his later actions and decisions as he leads his people out of bondage in Egypt.

thinking and willingness to take risks in order to protect her brother Moses.

In doing so, she not only guarantees Moses' survival but positions herself as a key player in his upbringing and eventual leadership. On the grounds of this fact, I contend that this act challenges male-orientated ethical codes that relegate women to the sidelines and emphasise the significant and constructive contributions that women make to the unfolding of biblical texts. In this regard, one ought to interrogate the significance of strategic thinking for women and young girls in contemporary contexts. This is based on the proposition that strategic thinking empowers women and young girls to take charge of their lives and make informed decisions (Aliamutu & Mkhize 2024:91). This imparts that by anticipating potential challenges and opportunities, women and young girls could navigate intricate situations effectively. This is the reason I pointed out earlier that Miriam's decision to approach Pharaoh's daughter is a powerful example of strategic thinking, especially in contemporary contexts. As a matter of fact, her calculated risk ensured Moses' survival and positioned her as a key influencer in his life, demonstrating that women are pivotal in leadership and decision roles. In view of these pronouncements, it must be added that while Moses is recurrently credited as the central figure in the realities and challenges of the Israelites' liberation from Egypt, Miriam's role as his sister and protector is equally essential and should be credited. Having said that, women and young girls who think strategically contribute significantly to societal development. Whether in business, politics, science or the arts, strategic thinkers influence and shape policies, drive innovation and lead organisations (Masenya & Ramantswana 2012:611). As a consequence of this reality, by accepting the contributions of women like Miriam in historical and religious contexts, contemporary society could better appreciate the diverse talents and perspectives women bring to the table.

Above all, Nel (2017) is optimistic that women and young girls who reason strategically contribute to contemporary theological practices and thoughts. Unequivocally, this is correctly given that by recognising the strategic contributions of women in biblical texts, contemporary theological practices progressively support and encourage women in leadership roles within religious contexts. In the end, this practice advances gender equality and enriches ministry with diverse perspectives (Biernot & Lombaard 2017). By the same token, women's strategic thinking and scholarly contributions shape or configure contemporary theology by offering immaculate interpretations of scripture, emphasising inclusivity and dismantling patriarchal or male-orientated structures. It is for this reason that Diko (2023) underlines that women's theological scholarship highlights the roles of women in sacred texts, promoting a more holistic understanding of theology. In addition to this view, women's strategic contributions motivate faith-based activism engrossed in social justice, human rights and community

development. This means that their theological reflections encourage actions that address contemporary societal challenges from a faith perspective. No wonder, therefore, Masenya (2012) argues that women's strategic roles in theology emphasise the importance of relational and communal dimensions of faith, fostering spiritual practices that prioritise empathy, collaboration and holistic welfare.

In the same vein, it is significant to underline that Pharaoh's daughter, who is unnamed in the biblical text but later called Bithiah in Jewish tradition (Gericke 2004:33; Kadari 2022:204), plays an indispensable and constructive role in Moses' survival and upbringing. This is on the grounds that by rescuing Moses from the Nile River and raising him as her own, she acts with compassion and defiance of her father's genocidal decree (Ex 2:5-6). Concerning the Pharaoh's genocidal decree, this is what Adelman (2024) concludes:

Pharaoh's genocidal decree is highly problematic in contemporary contexts for several reasons, particularly in light of his daughter's actions in rescuing and raising Moses. His order to kill all Hebrew male infants is a gross violation of human rights, reflecting the extreme oppression and devaluation of human life based on ethnicity. Today, such actions are crimes against humanity. Therefore, this decree highlights the dangers of state-sanctioned violence and the importance of protecting vulnerable populations. Additionally, the courageous defiance of Pharaoh's daughter serves as a powerful reminder of the moral responsibility individuals have to resist unjust legal frameworks and protect the innocent, even when such actions go against prevailing governmental decrees. (p. 71)

With this aforementioned scholarly claim, I contend that by liberating Moses, Pharaoh's daughter acts out of compassion and moral courage, directly opposing her father's cruel policy. In consideration of this compassion and moral courage, this act epitomises the ethical stance that individuals ought to take against unjust legal frameworks or orders, buttressing the role of personal integrity and moral responsibility in opposing oppressive systems. For this reason, it stands to reason to predicate that her decision to defy her father's order and save Moses showcases the power of women and young girls to resist and subvert patriarchal and tyrannical orders. Consequently, this biblical account empowers women and young girls and underscores their potential to act as agents of change, liberation, visionaries and transformation, denouncing traditional gender roles and advocating for justice and compassion in the face of oppression. On the other hand, the genocidal policy mirrors the risks of authoritarian rule and the destructive impact of unregulated power (Naseri 2021:43). With special reference to contemporary contexts, it serves as an injunction against authoritarian regimes and the importance of upholding democratic values, human rights and the rule of law to prevent such atrocities. In particular, the challenge of authoritarian regimes and power dynamic forces is relevant for the contemporary African continent given that it provides a stark reminder of the dangers of authoritarianism and unregulated power, as previously outlined.

Owing to this reality, the Pharaoh's genocidal policy serves as a cautionary account, exemplifying the catastrophic consequences that could result from the concentration of power in the hands of a few individuals or groups – Pharaoh in this biblical context. In support of this assertion, Schatzberg (1993:447) puts forward that in many African countries, the legacy of colonialism, apartheid and the persistence of authoritarian regimes contributed to ongoing struggles for democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Having said that, by drawing attention to these risks and emphasising the cruciality of maintaining democratic values and institutions, this biblical example serves as an injunction for contemporary African societies to remain vigilant and proactive in safeguarding against the erosion of human rights and freedoms. It underscores the necessity for strong institutions, accountable governance and active citizen participation to prevent the recurrence of such atrocities. Similarly, the relevance of this example extends far beyond the African continent to the global community, buttressing the universal importance of promoting democratic governance and human rights as essential safeguards against tyranny and oppression. This is important to underline given that in an era marked by rising authoritarianism and threats to democratic norms, the lessons drawn from this historical context serve as a reminder of the ongoing struggle for liberation, justice and dignity for all.

In a nutshell, the constructive roles of women in the life of Moses, as critiqued through the theory of feminist biblical criticism, unravels a profound and intricate contribution to his survival, identity and mission. As pointed out earlier, Jochebed, Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter each symbolise elements of courage, resourcefulness, compassion and strategic thinking, which collectively shape Moses into the liberator of the Hebrew people. Ultimately, these women's actions, though performed in the shadows of a male-orientated society, are crucial to Moses's existence and experiences and demonstrate the indispensable influence of women in theological and historical contexts. In particular, Jochebed's defiance of Pharaoh's edict underscores the power of maternal impulse and the significant impact of civil insubordination against unjust legal frameworks. Her ingenuity and bravery not only save her son but also challenge the societal ethical codes that sought to silence and coerce her. Equally, Miriam's vigilant protection and strategic intervention ensure Moses is raised with a consciousness of his legacy, highlighting the central role of women in preserving and transmitting cultural and religious identity. By the same token, Pharaoh's daughter's compassionate act of rescuing Moses exemplifies moral courage and the potential for individuals to resist and subvert authoritarian orders. This is based on the fact that her willingness to defy her father's genocidal policy elucidates the capacity of women to act as agents of change, advocating for justice and compassion in the face of oppression.

## Boaz

As previously outlined, feminist biblical criticism unmask the Bible through the perspectives of gender equality, interrogating traditional interpretations that may marginalise

or overlook the constructive contributions and agency of women and young girls. Bearing this assertion in mind, applying this theory to the narrative and experiences of Boaz and the women in his life, particularly Ruth and Naomi, opens up an affluent dialogue about the constructive roles of women in biblical texts and their contemporary implications. In this article, it is important to recall that the inclusion of contemporary implications is central owing to the fact that by intersecting the biblical text with contemporary issues, one makes the biblical accounts more relevant and accessible to contemporary audiences. Ultimately, this helps bridge the gap between ancient stories and experiences and present-day concerns, advancing a thoughtful understanding and engagement with the biblical text. After all, what would biblical and theological discourses be without being *integrated* and *designated* for contemporary contexts?

In any event, in the Book of Ruth, Boaz is depicted as a wealthy landowner in Bethlehem, and Ruth, a Moabite widow, comes to glean in his fields (Rt 2:1–3). Bearing this biblical context in mind, I argue that Boaz's 'depiction' as a wealthy landowner and Ruth as a vulnerable Moabite widow highlights a significant power disparity between them. In patriarchal or male-orientated societies, such power differentials lead to exploitation or the propagation of unequal relationships (Wahid & Legino 2023:107). As a result of these power disparities, Ruth's necessity to glean in Boaz's fields for sustenance underscores her underprivileged position, dependent on the goodwill of a male landowner for her survival. Ultimately, this dynamic resonates with contemporary challenges of social and economic disparity, where subjugated individuals, especially women and young girls, continually find themselves reliant on those in positions of greater power and privilege. This is the reason Diko (2023:619) proposes that Ruth's biblical text and her experiences offer a critical reflection through which to investigate the entrenched structural imbalances that destructively affect women and other vulnerable groups today. Above all, it is imperative to put forward that the intersection of Ruth's gender, widowhood and ethnicity obscures her position within the biblical narrative and underscores the ways in which systems of oppression intersect and compound each other. It is for these reasons Styler (2007) reports that Ruth's realities highlight the intersecting forms of intolerance and repression experienced by women from sidelined communities, challenging simplistic (re)interpretations that overlook these complexities.

In contrast to these debates, it is significant to underline that despite Ruth's setbacks, her proactive decision to glean in Boaz's fields to provide for herself and her mother-in-law, Naomi, sets the stage for the unfolding narrative (Rt 2:2–3). In doing so, Ruth demonstrates resourcefulness and initiative, which not only ensures their immediate survival but also creates opportunities for future stability and blessing, eventually leading to her marriage to Boaz and the continuation of Naomi's family legacy. Thus, Boaz's response to Ruth's presence is crucial in understanding his character and the

constructive roles of women in his life. One notable dimension is Boaz's recognition of Ruth's agency and worth. This is observable in Ruth 2:11–12 in which Boaz says to Ruth:

I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband – how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

In this biblical account, Boaz not only acknowledges Ruth's sacrifices but also blesses her for her actions, viewing her as a woman of courage and integrity. Keeping this assertion in mind, I contend that Boaz's acknowledgement of Ruth's agency and value demonstrates his respect for her as a woman with autonomy and dignity. In fact, Fewell and Gunn (1989:47) concur in purporting that by affirming Ruth's actions and sacrifices, Boaz acknowledges her as a daring and honourable individual, worthy of admiration and blessing. Consequently, this recognition elevates Ruth from a mere beneficiary of charity to a respected and valued member of the community. Presumably, this is the reason Masenya (2012:207) suggests that this recognition is important for contemporary contexts as it underscores the value of proactive agency and resilience, underlining how individuals facing catastrophe could contribute meaningfully and informatively to their communities. Over and above this claim, it also challenges societal norms by demonstrating that trivialised individuals, when given opportunities, could transcend their restrictive circumstances and attain respect and integration within their communities. Having said this, I must put forward that embracing the dynamic actions of Boaz's acknowledgement of Ruth's agency and worth in contemporary contexts holds significant implications for advancing gender impartiality and social justice. This is based on the premise that Boaz's recognition of Ruth as an autonomous and dignified individual offers a powerful model for contemporary societies in addressing and overcoming systemic disparities. In so doing, Boaz's and Ruth's biblical experiences demonstrate the transformative potential of affirming the agency and worth of marginalised individuals, particularly women and young girls, within a community. It makes sense, therefore, that Gouws (2014) cautions as follows:

Downplaying the recognition and agency of women and young girls is problematic because it diminishes the significant impact of recognising and affirming the agency and worth of marginalised individuals, particularly women and young girls. Ignoring these contributions reinforces oppressive structures and overlooks the transformative potential that comes from empowering those often sidelined in both historical and contemporary contexts. It also perpetuates gender inequality by failing to acknowledge the important roles women have played and continue to play in societal development. Furthermore, it restricts the community's growth and progress by not fully leveraging the diverse talents and perspectives that marginalised individuals bring. (p. 22)

These aforementioned claims point to the fact that Boaz's recognition of Ruth's actions and sacrifices exemplifies the

importance of acknowledging and celebrating the autonomy of women and young girls in contemporary contexts and beyond. This is because, in many contemporary contexts, women and young girls still face significant obstructions to achieving full autonomy and respect, recurrently being undervalued and underestimated in various spheres of life, including the workplace, political arenas and domestic spaces (Gouws 2014:23). In view of this indication, Boaz's behaviour sets a precedent for contemporary leaders and communities to value and respect *the constructive contributions and decisions of women*, promoting an environment where women are undeniably seen as equal partners and contributors. This particular respect for autonomy is crucial for advancing a society where gender equality is not just an ideal but a practised reality. In addition to these observations, Boaz's actions mirror ethical leadership and social responsibility, demonstrating how those in positions of power potentially make a constructive impact by recognising and supporting the agency of others, with special reference to women and young girls. This is particularly relevant in today's contemporary contexts, where leaders across sectors are called upon to address challenges of prejudice and injustice. One would recall that ethical leadership involves more than just charitable acts; it requires an incumbency in nurturing environments where all individuals are valued and thrive. This is the reason I argued earlier that Boaz's example serves as a blueprint for leaders to follow, underscoring the importance of recognising the inherent worth and potential of every individual. In support of this scholarly observation, this is what Beattie (1974) concludes:

Boaz's recognition and blessing of Ruth's actions show how leaders inspire and uplift others by valuing their contributions and supporting their efforts, thereby promoting a more inclusive and compassionate community. This example illustrates that true leadership involves empowering others and acknowledging their efforts, which can lead to greater societal harmony and progress. Therefore, by following Boaz's model, leaders today can create environments where everyone's potential is recognized and nurtured. (p. 253)

With a particular focus on the constructive role of Ruth in the life of Boaz, it must be acknowledged that her boldness in proposing marriage to Boaz as outlined in Ruth 3:9 challenges traditional gender roles and demonstrates her agency in moulding her own destiny. This is important in contemporary contexts as it empowers women and young girls to take initiative and assert control over their lives, promoting gender equality and challenging societal ethical codes. Nonetheless, Boaz's subsequent actions in marrying Ruth and redeeming Naomi's land in Ruth 4:9–10 highlight the constructive roles women play in shaping familial and social structures. In contemporary contexts, using feminist biblical criticism, Boaz's actions in marrying Ruth and redeeming Naomi's land underscore the significant and constructive roles women play in configuring familial and social structures (see Cohen 2021; Masenya 2010; Rowley 1947). In this regard, Ruth's proactive approach in securing her and Naomi's future denounces the conventional passive roles assigned to women in biblical texts. These conventional passive roles



include obedient wives who are portrayed as submissive and compliant to their husbands' authority, such as Sarah to Abraham; mothers who are primarily valued for their role in childbearing and nurturing, like Hannah praying for a son; daughters who are depicted as passive figures, controlled by their fathers, like Lot's daughters and women victims who are shown as casualties of circumstances or actions, such as Dinah in Genesis.

This implies that by proposing marriage to Boaz, Ruth not only asserts her agency but strategically ensures the continuation of her deceased husband's lineage and the economic security of her family. It is for this reason that Masenya (2010:17) and Kgatle (2019:3) agree that this ideology disrupts or fragments patriarchal norms by delineating how women could drive key events and decisions that have profound social and familial implications, highlighting their capacity for leadership and influence. Beyond this observation, I earlier argued that Boaz's recognition and response to Ruth's initiative amplifies the centrality of women's roles. This denotes that by marrying Ruth and redeeming Naomi's land, Boaz validates Ruth's actions and acknowledges her integral role in preserving the family's legacy. This interaction mirrors a more egalitarian partnership where the contributions and agency of women are venerated and valued. In contemporary feminist discourses, these experiences inspire a (re)examination of women's and young girls' roles in both historical and modern contexts, advocating for greater recognition and inclusion of women's and young girls' contributions to societal and familial structures. In the process, it underscores the potential for redefining gender roles and promoting equality, validating that women's active participation is central to shaping and sustaining communities.

Over and above these scholarly dialogues, from feminist biblical criticism, Ruth's and Boaz's narrative and experiences subvert male-orientated norms by depicting women as active agents in their own lives, capable of making significant contributions to their families and communities; such as in the case of Boaz's household. During the course of this, it is significant to embrace Ruth's loyalty to Naomi, her resourcefulness in providing for their needs and her courage in seeking a better future to challenge the notion of women as passive objects or mere accessories to men's stories, experiences and ideologies. Bearing these scholarly assertions in mind, contemporary implications of this biblical account resonate solidly and unreservedly with feminist concerns about women's autonomy, agency and economic empowerment. This is based on the presupposition that Ruth's example motivates women to assert themselves, pursue their goals and resist societal expectations that limit their potential. Boaz, in turn, serves as a model of allyship, recognising and affirming women's worth and contributions. Therefore, in a world where gender imbalance lingers, the story of Boaz and Ruth offers a powerful narrative of solidarity, mutual respect and partnership between men and women. It challenges scholars and non-scholars to (re)

evaluate traditional interpretations of biblical narratives and strive for a more inclusive and egalitarian society where women's voices are heard and their agency is respected. With this interpretation and discussions in mind, it is prudent to now observe the concluding remarks in the next final section.

## Concluding remarks and future scholarly implications

In contemporary contexts, one should care about women's and young girls' constructive roles given that recognising and valuing their contributions leads to more inclusive, equitable and effective communities. In fact, empowering women to participate comprehensively in all areas of society advances innovation, drives economic growth and enhances social cohesion and consciousness. In critiquing the constructive roles of women in the lives of Moses and Boaz, I uncovered profound perspectives on how female agency, courage and wisdom have configured pivotal biblical figures. For example, Jochebed's brave decision to hide Moses and Miriam's strategic intervention ensured Moses' survival and his eventual role as a liberator of the Israelites. By the same token, Ruth's initiative and loyalty, along with Naomi's guidance, played central roles in their mutual redemption and the continuation of Boaz's lineage. These biblical narratives and experiences underpin the essential contributions of women, challenging traditional passive roles and highlighting their capacity to influence and transform their communities. Inevitably, recognising these contributions is crucial not only for a fuller understanding of biblical texts but also for appreciating the potential of women to drive societal progress in contemporary contexts. In closing, future scholarly discourses may further explore and (re)interpret other biblical narratives through the theory of feminist biblical criticism, revealing additional overlooked or undervalued roles of women, thereupon complementing human understanding of scriptural narratives and their applications today. These concerted efforts could advance a more inclusive and comprehensive perspective on biblical texts, highlighting the significant contributions of women and young girls throughout sacred history.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Author's contribution

M.D. is the sole author of this research article.

### Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors.

## Funding information

This article received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

The details concerning the data of this article are explained and available in the article.

## Disclaimer

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