

# Notes on Ruth

2017 Edition

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## Introduction

### TITLE

This book received its title in honor of the heroine of the story. One writer argued that "Naomi" is the main character in the *plot*, "Boaz" is the main character in the *dialogue*, and "Obed" is the main character in the *purpose* of the book.<sup>1</sup> The name "Ruth" may mean "friendship," "comfort," or "refreshment." It appears to have been Moabite and not Hebrew, originally, though its etymological derivation is uncertain.<sup>2</sup> Another writer suggested it may derive from the Hebrew root *rwh*, meaning "to soak, irrigate, refresh."<sup>3</sup> After Ruth entered Israel, and especially after the Book of Ruth circulated, the name became popular among the Jews, and later among Christians. The same title appears over the book in its Hebrew (Masoretic), Greek (Septuagint), Latin (Vulgate), and modern language versions.

### DATE AND WRITER

It is safe to assume that the Book of Ruth was put in its final form after David became king in Hebron, in 1011 B.C., since he is recognized as a very important figure in the genealogy (4:17, 22). How much later is hard to determine. The Babylonian Talmud attributed authorship of the book to Samuel.<sup>4</sup> This statement reflects ancient Jewish tradition. If Samuel, or someone who lived about the same time as Samuel, wrote the book, the final genealogy must have been added much later—perhaps during the reign of David or Solomon. Modern critical scholars tend to prefer a much later date, on the basis of their theories concerning the date of the writing of Deuteronomy, which many of them say was written during or after the Babylonian Exile, and Joshua through 2 Kings, which they believe could not have been written before Deuteronomy. However, there is a trend among critics to date the book during the monarchy.<sup>5</sup> Most conservatives reject these critical theories as having no solid basis in the text or in history.

The writer is unknown to us, but he may have been Samuel, or one of Samuel's contemporaries—David, Solomon, or some other person. Daniel Block believed that a resident of the formerly Northern Kingdom, whose family had survived the Assyrian

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<sup>1</sup>Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, p. 588.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 587.

<sup>3</sup>Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, p. 94.

<sup>4</sup>*Baba Bathra*, 14b.

<sup>5</sup>John Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, p. 366.

conquest and deportation a century earlier, could have written it.<sup>6</sup> The Book of Ruth was attached to the end of the Book of Judges in the Hebrew Bible. Later, the Jews placed Ruth in the third major division of their canon, the *Kethubim* (Writings).

"In most Hebrew Bibles, Ruth occurs immediately after Proverbs and before Song of Songs in the Writings, the third section of the Tanak. This placement associates Ruth with Proverbs 31, the poem of the virtuous woman, and the Song of Songs, in which the woman takes the lead in the relationship."<sup>7</sup>

The Jews used the Book of Ruth in the liturgy of the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost).<sup>8</sup> This implies a common authorship or compilation between the two books of Judges and Ruth. The Babylonian Talmud supported this connection. Minor additions and changes may have taken place, under the superintending ministry of the Holy Spirit, after its original composition. However, the structure and unity of Ruth argue for it being the product of one writer, rather than a composite put together by many hands over a long time. A few writers have suggested that the writer was a woman—perhaps Naomi—since the story concerns two rather assertive women.<sup>9</sup> However, this suggestion is only speculation, since there is no solid data to support it.

### **SCOPE**

The writer said that the era in which the events recorded took place was during the period "when the judges governed" Israel (1:1). Many students of the book have concluded that the genealogy in 4:18-22 helps to identify *when* during this period Ruth lived. If the genealogy is complete, then Boaz lived during the seventh generation after Perez, the son of Judah, and Boaz was therefore King David's "great-grandfather." Lifespans during the patriarchal period were sometimes very long, so it may be safer to calculate back from David.

Conservative dates for David's lifetime are about 1041–971 B.C.<sup>10</sup> David was the "seventh" son born to his father "Jesse" (1 Chron. 2:12-15), who may have been born 35 years or more earlier. Boaz might have been born about 1150 B.C. and his son, Obed, by Ruth, about 1100 B.C. Since most of the events recorded in Ruth took place shortly before Obed's birth, we might conclude that these events happened around 1100 B.C. This would place Ruth living in Israel during the judgeship of Samson (ca. 1105–1085 B.C.) and the ministry of Samuel (ca. 1115–1021 B.C.).

Some scholars date Ruth as a contemporary of Gideon (ca. 1180–1140 B.C.).<sup>11</sup> Some do this because of Judges 6:3-4, which refers to a lack of food during Gideon's judgeship.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Block, p. 597.

<sup>7</sup>Trember Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 144.

<sup>8</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, "Ruth," in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 197.

<sup>9</sup>Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible—A Socio-Literary Introduction*, p. 555.

<sup>10</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 244; and Leon Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges*, p. 254.

<sup>11</sup>E.g., C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 466; John W. Reed, "Ruth," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 416; John J. Davis, in *A History of Israel*, p. 157; and Wood, p. 254.

<sup>12</sup>E.g., Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 275.

However, *that* shortage was not due to a famine, but to the yearly invasions of the Midianites. Moreover, it seems likely that there would have been several famines in Israel during the approximately 300-year period of the judges. Merrill believed that Ruth lived about 1200 B.C.<sup>13</sup> This would place her within the judgeship of Deborah (ca. 1230–1190 B.C.).

The problem with these calculations is that *four biblical genealogies* also list Boaz as "the son of Salmon," the husband of Rahab the harlot (Ruth 4:21; 1 Chron. 2:11; Matt. 1:5; Luke 3:32). Rahab was an adult when the conquest of the Promised Land began (ca. 1406 B.C.). Boaz then may have been born shortly after that. Merrill dated Joshua's death about 1366 B.C., and Wood placed it near 1390 B.C.<sup>14</sup> This would mean that the three generations—of Boaz, his son Obed, and his grandson Jesse—covered about 360 years (ca. 1400–1040 B.C.). This seems quite impossible.

Probably these genealogies are *incomplete*, and record only the names of outstanding individuals in David's family tree. It seems equally clear, however, that some genealogies in Scripture are *complete*, in view of how the writer worded them (e.g., Gen. 5 and 11). Consequently, exactly when within the period of the judges the events of Ruth occurred, remains a mystery.

### **PURPOSE**

Some scholars have concluded that the main theme of Ruth is *redemption*.<sup>15</sup> Whereas the book illustrates the theological concept of redemption beautifully, its primary purpose appears to have been to reveal how God often works providentially behind the scenes, bringing His will to pass.<sup>16</sup> *Twenty-three* of its 89 verses mention "God." Of these, only 1:6 and 4:13, which bracket the book, are the narrator's comments. All the rest appear in the characters' speeches. Contrast the Book of Esther, which also teaches the providence of God, but does not mention God even *once*.

"This is one of the only two books in Scripture which bear the names of women. Those two are Ruth and Esther; and they stand in marked contrast. Ruth is a young Gentile woman who is brought to live among Hebrews and marries a Hebrew husband in the line of royal David. Esther is a young Hebrew woman who is brought to live among Gentiles and marries a Gentile husband on the throne of a great empire."<sup>17</sup>

"The theological message of the Book of Ruth may be summarized as follows: God cares for needy people like Naomi and Ruth; he is their ally in this chaotic world. He richly rewards people like Ruth and Boaz who

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<sup>13</sup>Merrill, "Ruth," p. 199.

<sup>14</sup>Idem, *Kingdom of . . .*, p. 225; Wood, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup>E.g., Gray, p. 374.

<sup>16</sup>See David M. Howard Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*, pp. 128-29, 133-34; Ronald Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth*, pp. 3-19; Leon Morris, "Ruth," in *Judges and Ruth*, p. 242; Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, pp. 563-64; and Hubbard, pp. 39-42.

<sup>17</sup>J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 2:28.

demonstrate sacrificial love and in so doing become his instruments in helping the needy. God's rewards for those who sacrificially love others sometimes exceed their wildest imagination and transcend their lifetime."<sup>18</sup>

"The Ruth narrative provided a gratifying reminder that even in the darkest times God was at work in the hearts of His faithful remnant."<sup>19</sup>

Another important purpose was to validate David as "the true (first legitimate) king" of Israel (versus Saul).<sup>20</sup> References to David's genealogy open and close the book. Two other purposes are: (1) "to illustrate a concept of a kinsman redeemer," and (2) "to show that the scope of God's grace in the Old Testament included Gentiles."<sup>21</sup>

### **OUTLINE**

- I. Naomi's predicament ch. 1
  - A. The deaths of Naomi's husband and sons 1:1-5
  - B. Naomi's inability to provide husbands for Ruth and Orpah 1:6-14
  - C. Ruth's profession of faith in Yahweh 1:15-18
  - D. Naomi's weak faith 1:19-21
  - E. Hope for the future 1:22
- II. Naomi and Ruth's plans chs. 2—3
  - A. The plan to obtain food ch. 2
    - 1. God's providential guidance of Ruth 2:1-7
    - 2. The maidservant of Boaz 2:8-13
    - 3. Ruth's privileges and responsibility 2:14-16
    - 4. Ruth's blessing of Naomi physically 2:17-23
  - B. The plan to obtain rest ch. 3
    - 1. Naomi's plan to secure rest for Ruth 3:1-5
    - 2. Ruth's encouragement and Boaz's response 3:6-13
    - 3. Ruth's return to Naomi 3:14-18
- III. God's provision ch. 4
  - A. The nearer kinsman's decision 4:1-6
  - B. Boaz's securing of the right to marry Ruth 4:7-12
  - C. God's provision of a son 4:13-17
  - D. The genealogical appendix 4:18-22

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<sup>18</sup>The NET Bible note on 4:22.

<sup>19</sup>Reed, p. 416.

<sup>20</sup>Merrill, "Ruth," p. 198; and Keil and Delitzsch, p. 466.

<sup>21</sup>Davis, p. 157.

## MESSAGE

The Book of Ruth is one of the most fascinating and important short stories that anyone has ever written. As a piece of literature it is almost perfect. The German poet Goethe called it "the loveliest complete work on a small scale" ever written.<sup>22</sup> Alexander Schroder, a literary critic, wrote: "No poet in the world has written a more beautiful short story."<sup>23</sup> The eminent archaeologist W. F. Albright wrote: "The delicacy of the story of Ruth remains unsurpassed anywhere; Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law, the scene between her and Boaz in chapter 3, and the final episode with Naomi (4:14-17) are gems of world-literature."<sup>24</sup> Yet, as a revelation from God, it is equally impressive.

I would like to point out some of the *major revelations*, some of the *major values*, and some of the *major lessons* of this book. This will help us arrive at its message.

I believe that, among the many things the Book of Ruth reveals, four revelations are of major significance:

First, Ruth reveals God's *providence in providing a ruler* for His people.

God had *purposed to provide a ruler* over His people. The first indication of this in Scripture, is what God said to Abraham about His plans for his descendants. God's plan was to use Abraham's descendants to bring blessing to all humankind (Gen. 12:1-3). In the process, Abraham's descendants would enjoy God's blessing themselves. This is usually what happens. When we provide blessing for others, we normally receive blessing in return.

Later, God told Abraham that kings would come from him (Gen. 17:6; 35:11). Of course, many kings also came from the lines of Ishmael and Esau. However, other kings would come through the line of Abraham's descendants, that God chose to use in a special way, namely: through Jacob's posterity.

When Jacob uttered his inspired blessing on each of his descendants (12 sons plus Ephraim and Manasseh) who would become the heads of Israel's twelve tribes, he promised something special for *Judah*. A "great king" would come from Judah's branch of the family (Gen. 49:10). Judah would hold the leadership among the tribes, and a *Great King*—who would rule not only Israel—but the whole world—would come from him.

As history unfolded, David proved, by outward indicators at the time of his reign, to be "the king" that God had raised up, from the tribe of Judah, to lead His people and the nations round about Israel. Saul was not God's choice, as he was from the tribe of Benjamin, though God allowed the people to place Saul on the throne. David was His "chosen servant" and "son." David recognized this, as is clear in 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, and Psalm 89.

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<sup>22</sup>Morris, p. 229.

<sup>23</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, p. 466.

<sup>24</sup>W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, p. 23.

However, David did not carry out the will of God completely. He was not entirely faithful to God. So, later in history, God raised up one of David's descendants to be the "anointed one" and the fulfillment of the "king" prophecy.. Matthew wrote his Gospel to show that "Jesus Christ" was the completely obedient "Lion of the Tribe of Judah"—the "Messiah." He was the ultimate seed of Abraham, sent to rule Israel, and to reign over all people.

Thus the Book of Ruth reveals God's *providence* in providing David. "Providence" refers to God directing the circumstances of life so that His will is accomplished (cf. Esther).

A second major revelation of Ruth is the crucial characteristic in particular individuals—a *dynamic responsiveness of faith* toward God—whom God *uses* to bring His will to pass. This is not their natural condition, but a personal response of *faith* in God's person, power, and promises. Even though Ruth was a Moabitess, a childless widow, and poor, God used her to accomplish His purpose. His purpose was to provide a ruler over His people. He used her because she trusted in and committed herself to Yahweh (1:16-17). Her faith, in spite of her natural condition, made her usable by God. Faith always trumps nature as a prerequisite for usefulness by God.

A third major revelation in the Book of Ruth is God's faithfulness in providing *rest* for His people.

God had purposed to provide *rest* (security) for His people. At Mt. Sinai, God promised to lead His people out of the wilderness and into rest (Exod. 33:14). Moses reminded the generation of Israelites who crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land that, when they had defeated the Canaanites, God would give them rest (Deut. 3:19-20; 12:8-11; 25:19).

Joshua also reminded his generation that God had promised to give them rest (Josh. 1:13-15). At the end of the conquest, the Israelites were finally able to enjoy some rest (Josh. 21:44; 22:4; 23:1).

Unfortunately, in the period of the judges, because of the Israelites' departure from God, they were not always at rest. Only when God raised up a judge and delivered their enemies into their hands did the Israelites enjoy rest. Often they lacked food, they were in danger, and their family lives underwent disruption (Judg. 3:11, 30; 5:31; et al.).

That is the situation we discover in the Book of Ruth. Naomi and Ruth lacked food, they were vulnerable and in danger, and their families had broken up. It should be no surprise, then, when we read that Naomi desired "rest" for her daughters-in-law (1:9).

She and Ruth devised a plan to obtain food and safety, and so secure a degree of rest (2:2). Later, having gained food and safety through Boaz's generosity, they set about to secure *full rest* through the rebuilding of their family (3:1).

Finally, Ruth married Boaz, and bore a son who would perpetuate the family of Judah, as well as that of Boaz, Ruth, and Naomi (4:14-15). Boaz was the divinely provided *source*

*of rest* for Ruth. As Ruth trusted in and committed herself to Yahweh, God provided rest for her through Boaz.

Ruth was the divinely provided *source of rest* for Naomi, and for all Israel ultimately. She became God's instrument of blessing for her mother-in-law by providing food, security, and descendants. Moreover, she became God's instrument of blessing for all Israel, and even the whole world—by providing Obed, from whom came David, from whom came Christ.

Ruth became a model of what God intended Israel to be in the world: a "blessing to others" and "blessed herself." God was faithful to bring this to pass because Ruth exercised faith in Him. *Rest* is therefore God's "reward" for those who follow Him faithfully, as Hebrews 3 and 4 make clear.

A fourth major revelation in Ruth is God's grace in providing *redemption* for His people.

God had also purposed to provide *redemption* (purchase of freedom from slavery) for His people. He effected this for the nation of Israel as a whole with the 10 plagues, in the miraculous Exodus from Egypt and Red Sea crossing, and the destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. With those acts God purchased *the nation* for Himself.

God also made provision through the Mosaic Law, whereby *individual Israelites* could experience redemption, that is, enjoy freedom from various conditions that enslaved them. One of these provisions was the "kinsman-redeemer" law, that allowed a close relative to pay a price to free his fellow Israelite from some enslaving condition. Another was the "levirate marriage" provision, that enabled a widow to escape from her condition by remarrying her single brother-in-law. This man would then, under normal circumstances, raise up children who would perpetuate the name and line of his deceased brother. Another provision was the "redemption (buying back) of property" that had passed out of the control of a family. In Ruth's case, all of these provisions for redemption combined to set her free.

As history progressed, God's plan for the *personal redemption* of His own led to Jesus Christ, the ultimate Redeemer (or Kinsman-Redeemer), who paid the ultimate price. He did this so we might be free from the ultimate slavery, our slavery to sin.

The Book of Ruth reveals God's grace in providing "a redeemer." First, He provided Boaz, to redeem Ruth and Naomi. Then, through Ruth, He provided David to set Israel free. Finally, through David, He provided Jesus Christ to set the world free. Various forms of the Hebrew words translated "redeem," "redeemer," "redemption," and "kinsman-redeemer" appear about 20 times in this book, making *redemption* one of its key emphases.

God did not have to provide redemption. He did it out of the love of His own heart. That is *grace*. Furthermore, God did it *all*. There was nothing that the redeemed person could do to obtain his redemption, but to put his full *trust in* the person of his redeemer. That too is *grace*.

Putting all of these major revelations together, I would summarize the message of the book as follows: God works out His own purposes through human instruments. His purposes include a ruler, rest, and a redeemer. He brings these to reality supernaturally, sovereignly, and providentially. He uses people to do so: people who trust in Him, dedicate themselves to Him, and persevere in following Him faithfully.

Another writer has put the message this way: "The Lord is faithful in His business of loving, superintending, and providentially caring for His people."<sup>25</sup>

Next, we need to notice three major *values* of the Book of Ruth:

*Historically*, the book ties the *patriarchal period* to the monarchical period of Israel's history. It does not just go back to the period of the judges, or to the Mosaic era, but all the way back to Perez, the patriarch (4:18-22). This shows that *the Davidic dynasty was a fulfillment of the unconditional promises of the Abrahamic Covenant*. It did not rest on the conditional Mosaic Covenant.

*Morally*, the book demonstrates that *faith* and *purity* are possible even in a terrible cultural environment. Ruth's and Boaz's faith in God resulted in their excellent moral characters (2:1; 3:11). The power of their faith overcame their backgrounds and environments. They were part of the godly remnant in Israel in their day. This should give parents, who have to rear their children in ungodly environments, hope. Purity is possible in such situations.

*Doctrinally*, the book illustrates *redemption*. It also illuminates the *character of God*, particularly His providential working, His loyal love, and His boundless grace. Note these qualities in the Psalms, too.

Finally, what are the major *lessons* we should learn from the Book of Ruth?

First, God *uses* people who *trust* Him, and *commit* themselves to Him, to be a blessing to others. Boaz and Ruth probably did not live to see David's greatness, much less Jesus Christ's. However, God found in them people whom He could use to produce a David. Modern society is very "results conscious." We want instant success, and we grow impatient when we do not see God using us to bless others. We need to remember that we will not see all the fruit of our faith this side of heaven. G. Campbell Morgan wrote, "You may be God's foothold for things of which you cannot dream."<sup>26</sup>

Second, God *blesses* people who *trust* Him and *commit* themselves to Him. Ruth and Boaz were not only a blessing to others, but God personally blessed them. They received rest from God. God's blessing of Ruth came in the form of food, a family, and security. A loving and loyal wife of sterling character, and a son to carry on the name of his family, blessed Boaz's life. I do not know whether he considered Naomi a blessing or not, though I believe she was. One commentator wrote, "This is the best of all mother-in-law stories

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<sup>25</sup>Reed, p. 418.

<sup>26</sup>Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:1:144.



and should be told repeatedly."<sup>27</sup> Boaz also obtained an added portion of the Promised Land.

While God has not promised Christians the same kinds of blessings that He promised the Israelites, He has promised to bless us. Our present blessings are mainly *spiritual* (forgiveness, peace, joy, etc.), but we will receive both *spiritual* and *physical* blessings at the judgment seat of Christ, if not before. God will reward our faith as He rewarded the faith of Boaz and Ruth.

Third, *circumstances do not* make or break a believer. *Faith* does. Boaz was a wealthy man who lived in a spiritually apostate, morally corrupt environment. Nevertheless he overcame his temptations by faith in God. Ruth was a poor Moabite woman and extremely vulnerable. Yet she overcame her temptations by faith, too. From this we learn that circumstances are not determinative. They do not control our spirituality. Our attitude and relationship to God do. That is why it is so important that we maintain a daily intimate relationship with Him. No matter what circumstances we are up against, we can be overcomers like Boaz and Ruth by trusting in, committing ourselves to God, and following Him faithfully.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Reed, p. 417.

<sup>28</sup>Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:1:133-44.

## Exposition

### L. NAOMI'S PREDICAMENT CH. 1

As is often true in literature, the structure of the piece sometimes reveals the purpose of the writer. This is certainly the case in the Book of Ruth. The writer constructed the whole book with a chiasmic (crossing) structure.<sup>29</sup>

The pivotal point at the center of the writer's emphasis is the plan laid by Naomi and Ruth to obtain rest (3:1-8).

- A** Naomi too old to conceive (ch. 1)
- B** The possible redeemer introduced (2:1)
- C** Ruth and Naomi's plan begins (2:2)
- D** Ruth and Boaz's field (2:3)
- E** Boaz comes from Bethlehem (2:4)
- F** Boaz asks "Who's is that young woman?" (2:5-7)
- G** Boaz provides food for Ruth and Ruth brings one ephah of barley to Naomi (2:8-18)
- H** Naomi blesses Boaz (2:19)
- I** Boaz is the one in position to redeem (2:20)
- J** Ruth joins Boaz's workers (2:21-23)
- K** Naomi and Ruth's plan to obtain rest (3:1-8)
- J'** Ruth requests Boaz's protection (3:9)
- I'** Ruth asks Boaz to act as redeemer (3:9)
- H'** Boaz blesses Ruth (3:10)
- G'** Boaz promises to marry Ruth and Ruth brings six measures of barley to Naomi (3:11-15)
- F'** Naomi asks, "How did it go?" (3:16-18)
- E'** Boaz goes to Bethlehem (4:1)
- D'** Ruth and a field (4:2-12)
- C'** Ruth and Naomi's plan ends (4:3)
- B'** The redeemer not denied (4:14-16)
- A'** Naomi receives a son (4:17)

"What benefit does the definition of plot structure afford the interpreter of the text? Once the reader discovers the type of structure(s) of the narrative, and the locus of the defining element(s) in those structures, then he can more accurately reflect on the dynamic movement (or development) of the

<sup>29</sup>Lief Hongisto, "Literary Structure and Theology in the Book of Ruth," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23:1 (Spring 1985):23. See also A. Boyd Luter and Richard O. Rigsby, "An Adjusted Symmetrical Structuring of Ruth," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39:1 (March 1996):15-28.

narrative from one level to the next and then to its climax and denouement. This kind of literary analysis offers several practical benefits to the interpreter: (1) It reinforces and adds dimension to correct exegesis. (2) It highlights the artistry of the writer, and thereby the audience's appreciation for the aesthetic beauty of God's inspired text. (3) It prevents the interpreter's placing an improper emphasis on what may be only incidental to the development of the author's message. (4) It exalts the Lord by showing that He is the Master of history. (5) Once the structure is discovered and is shown to be theologically consonant with the rest of Scripture, that structure becomes a source of truth in and of itself. That is to say, the reader can discover truth not only through structure, but also in structure."<sup>30</sup>

The opening verse of the book reminds us of the leadership *vacuum* in Israel during the Judges Period that the Book of Judges reveals (cf. Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The closing verse reveals God's provision of the greatest leader that Israel had since that time (David). Therefore the book seems concerned with showing how God provided for His people, especially for their need for a strong national leader.

"In contrast to the Book of Judges, where the nation of Israel as a whole and most of the characters are portrayed as thoroughly Canaanized in heart and mind and deed, this story describes an oasis in an ethical wasteland."<sup>31</sup>

"The Book of Ruth is a pearl in the swine pen of the judges."<sup>32</sup>

Chapter 1 itself contains a chiasmic structure that reveals the main point of this part of the story:

- A** Famine (v. 1)
- B** Emigration from Bethlehem (v. 1)
- C** Naomi = pleasant (v. 2-5)
- D** Leaving Moab for Bethlehem (vv. 6-7)
- E** Naomi's speech (v. 8)
- F** Naomi kisses Orpah and Ruth good-bye (v. 9)
- G** All weep loudly (v. 9)
- H** Naomi's inability to conceive (vv. 11-13)
- G'** All weep loudly (v. 14)
- F'** Orpah kisses Naomi good-bye (vv. 14-15)
- E'** Ruth's speech (vv. 16-18)
- D'** Entering Bethlehem from Moab (v. 19)
- C'** Naomi = pleasant (vv. 20-21)
- B'** Immigration to Bethlehem (v. 22)
- A'** Barley harvest (v. 22)

<sup>30</sup>Reg Grant, "Literary Structure in the Book of Ruth," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:592 (October-December 1991):440.

<sup>31</sup>Block, p. 614.

<sup>32</sup>J. Vernon McGee, *Ruth: The Romance of Redemption*, p. 20.

The whole chapter centers around the fact that Naomi was too old to conceive.<sup>33</sup>

### **A. THE DEATHS OF NAOMI'S HUSBAND AND SONS 1:1-5**

". . . the first verse of Ruth implies that the book was written after the time of the judges."<sup>34</sup>

God had promised the Israelites that if they departed from Him, He would discipline them by sending *famine* on the Promised Land (Deut. 28:18, 23, 38-40, 42).<sup>35</sup> So the "famine" on Israel at this time indicated God's judgment for unfaithfulness. As Abram had migrated to Egypt as a result of a famine in his day (Gen. 12:10), so "Elimelech" migrated to ("went to sojourn in") "Moab" to obtain food for his family. Compare also Lot's migration in Genesis 13:1-13. There are many motifs presented in the patriarchal narratives in Genesis that reappear in Ruth.<sup>36</sup> This repetition seems to indicate that one of the writer's purposes was to present Ruth as another of Israel's notable matriarchs who, despite many natural barriers, provided important leaders for the nation by God's grace.

"They [this "prodigal family"] leave the house of bread ["Bethlehem"] and the house of praise ["Judah"] and they go over to eat out of a garbage can [i.e., Moab; "Moab is my washpot," Ps. 108:9]."<sup>37</sup>

"The story is never delightful when a member of the chosen seed leaves the Land of Promise and goes into the far country. It makes no difference whether he is Abraham going into Egypt to escape the famine or the prodigal son going to the far country and into the face of a famine there; the results are negative and the ending tragic. Elimelech should not have gone into the land of Moab, regardless of the conditions in the Land of Promise."<sup>38</sup>

Jacob, on the other hand, received a special revelation from God *directing* him to migrate from the Promised Land to Egypt (Gen. 46:1-4). Another view is that, since the writer did not draw attention to the famine, the migrations of Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion to Moab, and their deaths—he did not intend the reader to read significance into these details. He only intended to present them as background for the story of Ruth.<sup>39</sup>

Famines, according to the biblical record, usually advanced God's plans for His people, despite their tragic appearances (cf. Gen. 12:10; 26:1; 41—50; Exod. 1—20).<sup>40</sup> The chapter opens with a famine, but closes with a harvest (v. 22). Similarly, the whole book

<sup>33</sup>Hongisto, p. 22.

<sup>34</sup>*The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 441.

<sup>35</sup>See George M. Harton, "Fulfillment of Deuteronomy 28—30 in History and in Eschatology" (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1981).

<sup>36</sup>See Hubbard, pp. 39-41.

<sup>37</sup>J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 2:90.

<sup>38</sup>Idem, *Ruth: The Romance . . .*, p. 48.

<sup>39</sup>Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, p. 67.

<sup>40</sup>Hubbard, p. 85.

opens with a bad situation, but ends with a good one. God was at work, behind the scenes and in spite of circumstances, blessing His people in the times and events that this book recounts. The *restoration of seed* (food, husband, redeemer, and heir) is one of the main motifs in Ruth.<sup>41</sup>

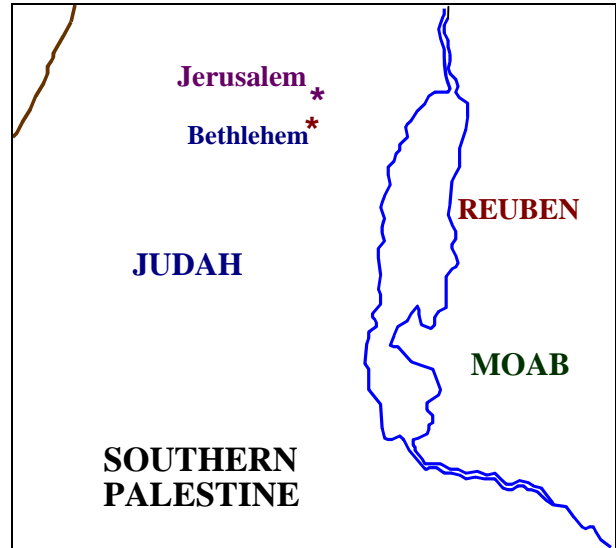
The fact that "Elimelech" (lit. "My God is King," or "God is King"—a theme of the book) was from "Bethlehem" (lit. "House of Bread," i.e., granary) is significant. "Elimelech" is a theophoric name, a name that combines a term for deity with another ascription. Elimelech's parents probably gave him this name hoping that he would acknowledge God as his king, but he failed to do that when he moved from Israel to Moab.

Two stories make up the appendix to the Book of Judges. The first of these is the story of Moses' grandson, Jonathan, who left *Bethlehem* to lead the Danites into idolatry (Judg. 17—18). The second is the story of the concubine from *Bethlehem*, who became the focus of discord in Israel, that resulted in civil war, and almost the obliteration of the tribe of Benjamin (Judg. 19—21). The Book of Ruth also features *Bethlehem*. God may have given us all three of these stories as a set, a trilogy, because King David would also be from Bethlehem.

In the two stories in Judges just referred to, we can see that the Israelites would have looked down on Bethlehem after those incidents. However, Ruth reveals how God brought *great blessing* to Israel out of Bethlehem—in the person of *David*. This is in harmony with God's choice to bring blessing out of those things that people do not naturally highly value.

Bethlehem in Ruth's day, therefore, did not have a good reputation. So it was not the environment in which David grew up that made him great, but his relationship with his God. That relationship, we learn from Ruth, was a heritage passed down to him from his ancestors, godly Boaz and Ruth.<sup>42</sup>

The unusual association of "Ephrathah" with Bethlehem here (v. 2) recalls the first use of both names describing the same town, called "Ephrath" in Genesis 35:16-19. There Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin.



<sup>41</sup>See Barbara Green, "The Plot of the Biblical Story of Ruth," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (July 1982):55-68.

<sup>42</sup>For further study of the "Bethlehem trilogy," see Merrill, *Kingdom of . . .*, pp. 178-88; or idem, "The Book of Ruth: Narration and Shared Themes," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142:566 (April-June 1985):131-33.

"Does this incident in which Benjamin is the occasion of the death of the patronymic's favorite wife at Bethlehem anticipate in some way the Saul-David controversy in which the Benjaminite again proves antagonistic to one who has Bethlehem associations?"<sup>43</sup>

". . . it is best to understand *Ephrathite* as the name of a clan. If this clan descended from Caleb [which seems probable since Caleb settled near there], the author may have identified this family as Ephrathite to picture it as an aristocratic one—one of the 'first families of Bethlehem.'<sup>44</sup> He thereby underscored the humiliating tragedy involved: the Vanderbilts have suddenly become poor sharecroppers. Worse yet, he cleverly disallowed any hope of a temporary visit."<sup>45</sup>

"Ephrathah" was probably also the name of an older settlement, that either stood near Bethlehem, or that became Bethlehem (cf. Gen. 48:7). Some scholars believe it was the name of the district in which Bethlehem stood,<sup>46</sup> or the name may reflect that *Ephraimites* had settled there.<sup>47</sup> This seems less likely to me. The unusual way of describing Bethlehem hints at connections to *David*, that become clear at the end of the book (4:22), since this is the way Bethlehem became known after David's appearance ("Bethlehem of Ephrathah" or "Bethlehem of the Ephrathites"; cf. 1 Sam. 17:12).<sup>48</sup>

It is also unusual in a patriarchal society that the writer described Elimelech as Naomi's husband (v. 3). This puts Naomi forward as the more important person of the two. Elimelech's death may have been a punishment for leaving the land rather than trusting God (cf. Lev. 26:38), though the text does not say so. Some have felt that Mahlon and Chilion lived shorter lives than usual because they married foreign wives.<sup>49</sup> It was not contrary to the Mosaic law for Israelite men to marry *Moabite* women (Deut. 7:1-3), but apparently they could not bring them into the congregation of Israel for public worship (Deut. 23:3-4).

The unusual names of both "Mahlon" (lit. "Sickly") and "Chilion" (lit. "Failing") seem to have been connected with the circumstances of their births. Mahlon may have looked "sickly" when he was born, and Chilion probably looked as though he was "failing" (dying). McGee called Naomi "Merry Sunshine."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Merrill, "The Book . . .", p. 133.

<sup>44</sup>See W. Fuerst, *The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Lamentations*, p. 10; Morris, p. 249; and A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, p. 103.

<sup>45</sup>Hubbard, p. 91.

<sup>46</sup>E.g., Charles F. Pfeiffer, "Ruth," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 272.

<sup>47</sup>E.g., F. B. Huey Jr., "Ruth," in *Deuteronomy-2 Samuel*, vol. 3 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 519.

<sup>48</sup>Bush, p. 67.

<sup>49</sup>E.g., Henry, p. 275.

<sup>50</sup>McGee, *Thru the . . .*, 2:90.

### **B. NAOMI'S INABILITY TO PROVIDE HUSBANDS FOR RUTH AND ORPAH 1:6-14**

God eventually withdrew the famine from Judah ("The LORD had visited His people in giving them food," v. 6), probably in response to His people's calling out to Him for deliverance (cf. Judg. 3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6; 10:10; 16:28). This verse proclaims one of the major themes of the story: Yahweh's gracious intervention.<sup>51</sup>

"Here is a central theme in the Bible: all of life is traced directly to the hand of God. To concentrate primarily on second causes may encourage us to seek to be manipulators of the system. It is concentration on the Great Cause which teaches us to live by faith."<sup>52</sup>

Naomi's words to her daughters-in-law are very important. Of the book's 85 verses, 56 of them are dialogue, indicating that dialogue is one of Ruth's dominant literary techniques.<sup>53</sup>

First of all, Naomi appealed to them to maintain their strongest earthly ties by returning to their mothers' families (v. 8).

"Return" in its various Hebrew forms, is a key word in Ruth (e.g., 1:6, 7, 8, 10, 15, 16, 22 [twice]; 2:6; 4:3). Ruth is a story of return to the Promised Land, blessing, and primarily return to the Lord. Naomi incorrectly believed, that there was more hope for her daughters-in-law by staying in Moab, than there was by going with her to God's chosen people and land.

"Naomi should have said to them what Moses said to his father-in-law, 'Come thou with us, and we will do thee good; for the Lord has spoken good concerning Israel' (Num. 10:29, KJV)."<sup>54</sup>

"I may be wrong, but I get the impression that Naomi didn't want to take Oprah and Ruth to Bethlehem because they were living proof that she and her husband had permitted their two sons to marry women from outside the covenant nation. In other words, Naomi was trying to cover up her disobedience."<sup>55</sup>

". . . the phrase 'mother's house' occurs in contexts having to do with love and marriage. It seems likely, then, that Naomi here referred to some custom according to which the 'mother's house'—probably her bedroom, not a separate building—was the place where marriages were arranged."<sup>56</sup>

<sup>51</sup>K. Sacon, "The Book of Ruth—Its Literary Structure and Themes," *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* 4 (1978):5.

<sup>52</sup>David Atkinson, *The Message of Ruth*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>53</sup>Hubbard, pp. 100-101.

<sup>54</sup>Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary/History*, p. 181.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid. Italics omitted.

<sup>56</sup>Hubbard, pp. 102-3. Cf. E. F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth*, pp. 64-65; and Huey, p. 521.

Second, Naomi prayed that Yahweh would pay back *loyal love* ("deal kindly," Heb. *hesed*), to Ruth and Orpah—since they had shown loyal love to their husbands and Naomi (v. 8).

"Here emerges a key theological assumption of the book: the intimate link between human action and divine action. In this case, human kindness has earned the possibility (even likelihood) of a God-given reward."<sup>57</sup>

Third, Naomi wished "rest" (Heb. *menuhah*) for her daughters-in-law, "in the household" of each one's *next* "husband" (v. 9). *Rest* was one of the great blessings God had promised the Israelites as they anticipated entrance into the Promised Land (Exod. 33:14; Deut. 3:20; 12:9-10; 25:19; Josh. 1:13, 15; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1; cf. Gen. 49:15; Exod. 16:23; 31:15; 35:2; Lev. 16:31; 23:3, 32; 25:4-5; Ps. 95:11; Heb. 3:11, 18). It refers to *security*, which in this case marriage would provide for Ruth (lit. "friendship") and Orpah (lit. "neck"), rather than freedom from work. Probably Ruth's parents named her hoping that she would demonstrate "friendship," which she did admirably. Perhaps Orpah's parents thought she had an attractive or graceful "neck" when she was born. Ironically, some of the later rabbis referred to her as "she of the turned neck," since she turned back to Moab (cf. Lot's wife).

After the two daughters-in-law refused to leave their mother-in-law (v. 10), which in Orpah's case was only a polite refusal but in Ruth's a genuine one, Naomi urged them again to "return" (v. 11). At this point Naomi explains why she is insisting that they return. She was "too old" to remarry, bear sons, and then wait another 20 or more years for those sons to grow up and marry them—their brothers' (Mahlon's and Chilion's) widows—and raise up seed. That seed would perpetuate the families begun by Mahlon and Chilion with Ruth and Orpah.

"Levirate marriage" was the practice of a single brother marrying his deceased brother's widow, in order to father children who would carry on the dead brother's name and extend his branch of the family tree. It was common throughout the ancient Near East and in Israel (cf. Gen. 38:8-10; Deut. 25:5-10).<sup>58</sup> The word "levir" comes from the Latin translation of the Hebrew term for brother-in-law. Naomi felt "too old" to remarry and bear sons who could provide loyal love and rest for Ruth and Orpah. (Had she forgotten what God had done for Sarah by enabling her to bear a son at age 90?) Consequently she urged her daughters-in-law to return home and start married life over with new Moabite husbands. She evidently did not even consider the possibility that *God Himself* could provide for them, if they sought refuge in Him *in Israel*. She was not presenting the God of Israel in a positive light or demonstrating much faith in Him.

<sup>57</sup>Hubbard, p. 104. "Kindly" or "kindness" (Heb. *hesed*) is also a key word in Ruth (cf. 2:20; 3:10).

<sup>58</sup>See *The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Marriage," by J. S. Wright and J. A. Thompson, pp. 786-91; Dale W. Manor, "A Brief History of Levirate Marriage As It Relates to the Bible," *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* NS20 (Fall 1982):33-52; Donald A. Leggett, *The Levirate and Goel Institutions in the Old Testament with Special Attention to the Book of Ruth*; and Atkinson, pp. 86-98.



It was harder for Naomi than for Ruth and Orpah (v. 13), because, while Ruth and Orpah had hope of marrying again and bearing children, Naomi did not—in view of her advanced age. She bitterly regarded her situation as a judgment from God ("the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me," v. 13; cf. Gen. 30:1-2; 42:36).

Naomi was *bitter* rather than *broken*. Actually her situation in life was the result of the decisions she and her husband and sons had made, when they chose to leave the Promised Land. She did not realize that God would yet graciously bless her with a descendant through Boaz. Boaz would father a son, who would carry on the name and lines of Ruth's dead husband, and Naomi's dead husband—and from whom would come King David and King Jesus the Messiah!

"Ruth and Orpah demonstrate the two kinds of members in the church—the professors and the possessors. Orpah made only a profession of faith and failed at the climactic moment; Ruth possessed genuine faith, which produced fruit and works."<sup>59</sup>

Ruth "clung" to Naomi, whereas Orpah just "kissed" her goodbye. The Hebrew word for "clung to" is *dabaq*, which elsewhere refers to the ideal closeness that can only be experienced in a marriage relationship (cf. Gen. 2:24).<sup>60</sup> Thus Ruth determined to stick to her mother-in-law as closely as a husband would cleave to his wife (cf. James 1:27).

"It is a mistake to make the purpose of raising an heir to the deceased head of the family the exclusive purpose of each of the protagonists at every point and so dismiss the equally valid and legitimate concern of these women to find for themselves the security of home and husband—the only identity their patriarchal world afforded them."<sup>61</sup>

### **C. RUTH'S PROFESSION OF FAITH IN YAHWEH 1:15-18**

Ruth concluded that her prospects for loyal love and rest (vv. 8-9) were better if she identified with Israel than if she continued to identify with Moab. She had come to admire Israel's God, in spite of Naomi's present lack of faith. Elimelech and his family had evidently earlier fulfilled God's purpose for His people while living in Moab. They had so represented Yahweh that Ruth felt drawn to Him, and now, faced with a decision of loyalty, she chose to trust and obey Him rather than the gods of Moab. Ironically, Ruth the *Moabitess* exercised *faith*, while Naomi the *Israelitess* lived *by sight*. Ruth trusted God and obeyed the Mosaic Covenant, but Naomi did not.<sup>62</sup>

Ruth was a descendant of Lot, who chose to leave the Promised Land because he thought he could do better for himself elsewhere (Gen. 13:11-12). The "cities of the valley" (Gen.

<sup>59</sup>McGee, *Ruth: The Romance . . .*, p. 61.

<sup>60</sup>Huey, p. 522.

<sup>61</sup>Bush, p. 97.

<sup>62</sup>See Charles P. Baylis, "Naomi in the Book of Ruth in Light of the Mosaic Covenant," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161:644 (October-December 2004):413-31.

13:12), including Sodom and Gomorrah, lay outside (to the east of) the territory that God originally promised Abram (Gen. 12:7). Later God revealed that He would give Abram's descendants even more land including the Jordan Valley (Gen. 13:14-15; 15:18; et al.).

Ruth now reversed the decision of her ancestor, and chose to identify with the promises of Yahweh, that centered in the Promised Land.<sup>63</sup> The ancients believed that a deity had power only in the locale occupied by its worshippers. Therefore to leave one's land (v. 15) meant to separate from one's god.<sup>64</sup>

The place of a person's grave in ancient Near Eastern life was very significant (cf. Gen. 23; 25:9-10; 50:1-14, 24-25; Josh. 24:32). It identified the area he or she considered his or her true home. So when Ruth said she wanted to "die" and "be buried" *where Naomi would die and be buried* (v. 17), she was voicing her strong commitment to the people, land, and God of Naomi (cf. Luke 14:33). Naomi's life may have influenced Ruth to trust in Naomi's God. The name for God in verse 20, "the Almighty" (Heb. *sadday*, transliterated "Shaddai"), was the one God had used to reveal Himself to the patriarchs in Genesis (Gen. 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25; cf. Exod. 6:3).

"Significantly, though the oath formula normally has Elohim, Ruth invoked the personal, covenantal name *Yahweh*—the only time in the book in which she does so. Since one appeals to one's own deity to enforce an oath, she clearly implies that Yahweh, not Chemosh, is now her God, the guardian of her future. Hence, while the OT has no fully developed idea of conversion, vv. 16-17 suggest a commitment tantamount to such a change. As a result, one expects the story subsequently to reveal some reward from Yahweh for this remarkable devotion. . . .

". . . Ruth's leap of faith even outdid Abraham's. She acted with no promise in hand, with no divine blessing pronounced, without spouse, possessions, or supporting retinue. She gave up marriage to a man to devote herself to an old woman—and in a world dominated by men at that! Thematically, this allusion to Abraham sets this story in continuity with that one. Thus, a sense of similar destiny hangs over Ruth's story. The audience wonders, May some larger plan emerge from it, too?"<sup>65</sup>

"There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel."<sup>66</sup>

God had always welcomed non-Israelites into the covenant community of Abraham's believing descendants. Even in Abraham's day, his non-Hebrew *servants* who believed underwent circumcision as a sign of their participation in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17). At Sinai, God explained again that the Israelites, as priests, were to bring other

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<sup>63</sup>See Harold Fisch, "Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History," *Vetus Testamentum* 32:4 (1982):427.

<sup>64</sup>Huey, p. 523.

<sup>65</sup>Hubbard, pp. 120-21.

<sup>66</sup>P. Trible, "Two Women in a Man's World: A Reading of the Book of Ruth," *Soundings* 59 (1976):258.

people to God (Exod. 19:5-6). Ruth now confessed her commitment to Yahweh, Israel, and Naomi—a commitment based on her faith in Yahweh.<sup>67</sup>

Verses 15-18 are a key to the book, because they reveal why God blessed Ruth as He did.

#### **D. NAOMI'S WEAK FAITH 1:19-21**

Naomi had experienced both blessing and loss since she had left Bethlehem. When she returned home, she again chose to emphasize her hardships: "The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." She had forgotten God's faithfulness and His promises to bless all Israel (Gen. 12:1-3, 7), her tribe in particular (Gen. 49:8-12), and all the godly in Israel (Deut. 5:7-10). But her emptiness (v. 21) was only temporary. Her pessimism at this point contrasts with Ruth's optimism (vv. 16-18).

Ruth's faith was strong (vv. 19-21), but Naomi's was weak (vv. 16-18). Consequently, Ruth was optimistic while Naomi was pessimistic. If someone expects the worst, he or she may not be expecting God to be faithful to His promises to bless. Negative thinking does not honor God. It betrays lack of faith. This is something many Christians need to work on. Many people have grown up in negative environments, and they need to learn to view life through the "lens" of "faith in God's promises."

"In Israel, names were not just labels of individuality but descriptions of inner character which in turn were presumed to influence the person's conduct. . . . Recall Jacob ('schemer'; Gen. 27:36); Nabal ('fool'; 1 Sam. 25:25); Jesus ('savior'; Matt. 1:21). Similarly, to receive a new name signified a change in character and destiny (i.e., Abram to Abraham, Gen. 17:5-8; Jacob to Israel, Gen. 32:29 [Eng. 28]; Simon to Peter, Matt. 16:17-18; Saul to Paul, Acts 19 [sic 13]:9)."<sup>68</sup>

"Naomi" means "my pleasantness." Her parents must have given her this character-trait name, hoping that she would become a pleasant person in God's sight. "Mara" means "bitterness." Naomi no longer regarded herself as "pleasant," but "bitter," as a result of what had happened to her. One of the unique features of the Book of Ruth is that every person's name that appears in it, and even the lack of a proper name (4:1), is significant.

Frederic Bush viewed Naomi's *faith* (attitude toward God) differently:

"Naomi here does not evidence little faith; rather, with the freedom of a faith that ascribes full sovereignty to God, she takes God so seriously that, with Job and Jeremiah (and even Abraham, Gen 15:2), she resolutely and openly voices her complaint. With this robust example of the honesty and forthrightness of the OT's 'theology of complaint,' our author depicts in somber and expressive hues the desolation, despair, and emptiness of the

<sup>67</sup>See Thomas L. Constable, "A Theology of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 110.

<sup>68</sup>Hubbard, p. 124, and n. 19.

life of a woman 'left alone without her two boys and without her husband' (v 5) in a world where life depends upon men."<sup>69</sup>

The biblical writer highlighted Naomi's and Ruth's *vulnerability* by featuring women prominently in chapter 1. There are no men to provide for and protect them in view. Women are the main characters throughout this chapter, including "the women [of] Bethlehem" who speak for the town (v. 19). Naomi failed to see that Yahweh had *not* brought her back home "empty" (v. 21). She appears to have forgotten that Ruth, who had pledged herself to care for Naomi as long as she lived, had *returned with her* (v. 22). "Ruth" was, and would yet prove to be, a tremendous blessing from the Lord. At the time, Naomi considered Ruth insignificant, but the women of Bethlehem later corrected her faulty view of Ruth's worth (4:15).

### **E. HOPE FOR THE FUTURE 1:22**

This summary sentence not only concludes chapter 1, but also prepares the reader for the remaining scenes of the story. Naomi had left Bethlehem "pleasant" (Heb. *na'em*), but returned "bitter" (v. 20). She had left with Elimelech, one source of blessing in her life, but returned with Ruth, who would become another source of blessing for her. She had left during a *famine*, but she returned to Bethlehem (lit. "House of Bread," *the place of blessing*) at the "beginning" of *harvest*. This is probably a reference to the "barley harvest," which began the harvest season in April in Israel.<sup>70</sup>

Throughout the book, the writer frequently referred to Ruth as "Ruth the Moabitess" (1:22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10). This is one way in which he drew attention to the fact that God used even a non-Israelite, from an enemy nation, to bring blessing to Israel. The key to Ruth being this source of blessing emerges in the first chapter: it was her faith in Yahweh and her commitment to His people (1:15-18). Throughout human history, this has always been the key to God using people as His channels of blessing. It is not their origins or backgrounds, but their faith in and commitment to Yahweh and others, that make them usable.

Warren Wiersbe saw three common mistakes that people make in this chapter: trying to run from our problems (vv. 1-5), trying to hide our mistakes (vv. 6-18), and blaming God for our trials (vv. 19-22).<sup>71</sup>

## **II. NAOMI AND RUTH'S PLANS CHS. 2—3**

Chapter 1 sets up the background for chapters 2—4, which constitute the heart of the book. Chapter 1 presents a problem, but chapters 2—4 provide the solution. The key to the solution, on the human level, was the planning of Naomi and Ruth.

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<sup>69</sup>Bush, pp. 95-96.

<sup>70</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, p. 476; Davis, p. 162.

<sup>71</sup>Wiersbe, p. 182.

There are really two plans, one to obtain food, the immediate physical need of the two women (ch. 2), and one to obtain a male heir, the long-range covenant-related need of the women's extended family (3:1—4:17).

### **A. THE PLAN TO OBTAIN FOOD CH. 2**

Chapter 2 has its own chiasmic structure<sup>72</sup>:

- A Ruth and Naomi (2:2-3)
- B Boaz and the reapers (2:4-7)
- C Boaz and Ruth (2:8-14)
- B' Boaz and the reapers (2:15-16)
- A' Naomi and Ruth (2:17-22)

Boaz's conversation with Ruth is the focus of this section. The chapter also shows how Ruth was received in Bethlehem as a "Moabitess."

#### **1. God's providential guidance of Ruth 2:1-7**

The motif of God's "providence," or His working out His own plan through the circumstances of life, which runs through the Book of Ruth, is especially strong in this pericope.

The writer introduced "Boaz" (lit. "Quickness," or paraphrased: "eager, strong, and ready to serve") as a "kinsman" (lit. "acquaintance" or "friend," Heb. *myd'*) "of Elimelech."

"According to the rabbinic tradition, which is not well established however, Boaz was a nephew of Elimelech."<sup>73</sup>

Scholars debate the etymology of Boaz's name because it is obscure (cf. 1 Kings 7:21), though most of the suggestions are similar. Keil and Delitzsch believed Boaz's name means "alacrity" (promptness, or eager and speedy readiness), whereas J. Vernon McGee and Warren Wiersbe wrote that it means, "in whom is strength."<sup>74</sup> The Nelson Study Bible says that it means "Swift Strength."<sup>75</sup>

Boaz lived up to this personality trait name, which his parents evidently gave him at birth, hoping that he would provide swift strength for many people. Some wag suggested that before Boaz met Ruth he was "ruthless."

Boaz was, by virtue of his family relationship, someone who was eligible to perpetuate Elimelech's line, the larger of Naomi and Ruth's needs. He was also wealthy ("of great wealth"), which obviously meant he could provide food and physical protection for

<sup>72</sup>See W. S. Prinsloo, "The Theology of the Book of Ruth," *Vetus Testamentum* 30:3 (July 1980):334.

<sup>73</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, p. 447.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.; McGee, *Ruth: The Romance . . .*, p. 70; Wiersbe, p. 185.

<sup>75</sup>*The Nelson . . .*, p. 444.

Naomi and Ruth, their immediate need (v. 1). The same Hebrew words (*'ish gibbor hayil*), translated "man of great wealth," later described Ruth (3:11) and, earlier, Gideon (Judg. 6:12). Here, for the first time in the book, a man appears in a major role.

Ruth's plan to secure "favor" (v. 2) was a plan to obtain food. She did not realize how *favored* ("woman of excellence," 3:11) she would become. God commanded farmers in Israel not to harvest the corners of their fields, so that the poor and needy, such as aliens, widows, and orphans, could "glean" enough food to live (Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22).

The "reapers" were free Israelites who hired themselves out to do this work for a stipulated payment.<sup>76</sup> As both an alien and a widow, Ruth qualified for gleaning. She submitted her plans for Naomi's approval and received her blessing ("Go, my daughter.")

Ruth "happened" to glean in Boaz's field, from the human viewpoint (v. 3), but, as the story unfolds, God's hand of blessing obviously guided Ruth's choice to go to that particular "portion of the field" (cf. Prov. 3:5-6; Matt. 2:1-8).

". . . the author's real meaning in 2:3b is actually the opposite of what he says. The labelling [*sic*] of Ruth's meeting with Boaz as 'chance' is nothing more than the author's way of saying that no human intent was involved. For Ruth and Boaz it was an accident, but not for God. The tenor of the whole story makes it clear that the narrator sees God's hand throughout. In fact the very secularism of his expression here is his way of stressing that conviction. It is a kind of underplaying for effect. By calling this meeting an accident, the writer enables himself subtly to point out that even the 'accidental' is directed by God."<sup>77</sup>

Boaz's love for God and other people, those qualities most important in a human being from God's perspective (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18; cf. Matt. 22:37-39), are obvious in this record of his dealing with his employees ("May the LORD be with you," v. 4). There was no labor management tension here, since Boaz treated his workers with kindness and consideration.

"Significantly, the two greetings form a chiasm with the name Yahweh at its beginning and end. Hence, the exchange dropped a subtle hint which followed up the 'luck' of v. 3: in a simple, undramatic way, it affirmed the presence of Yahweh in this scene. . . . Thus, by this simple device the narrator reminded his audience that, though offstage, Yahweh was nevertheless within earshot"<sup>78</sup>

Ruth's character, too, was of *high quality*, as the reaper foreman reported ("she came and has remained [worked] from morning until now," v. 7), and as Boaz later testified he had learned earlier ("All that you have done for your mother-in-law . . . has been fully

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<sup>76</sup>Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, 1:76.

<sup>77</sup>Hals, p. 12. See also Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "A Rhetorical Use of Point of View in Old Testament Narrative," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 195:636 (October-December 2002):409.

<sup>78</sup>Hubbard, pp. 144-45.

reported to me," v. 11). We should probably understand the last part of verse 7, "she has been sitting . . . for a little while," to mean that Ruth had rested only a very short time.<sup>79</sup> In other words, Ruth was a hard worker.

## **2. The maidservant of Boaz 2:8-13**

Boaz called Ruth his "(my) daughter" (v. 8) because she was considerably younger than he (3:10), and because of his affection for her. He explained why he felt as he did for her in the following verses (9, 11-12). Normally, the poor would move from one landowner's field to another landowner's field in order to glean. However, Boaz graciously made Ruth one of his own "maidservants" (vv. 8-9, 13), so she would not have to leave his field, and so he could provide for her needs more easily and fully.

"Boaz is hereby instituting the first anti-sexual-harassment policy in the workplace recorded in the Bible."<sup>80</sup>

The *foreigner* Ruth the Moabitess was integrating nicely into Israelite society, as her spiritual ancestors Sarah and Rebekah had done (cf. Gen. 20:6; 26:29). One of the benefits she enjoyed as a maidservant was drinking *drawn water* (i.e., water drawn from a well and stored in "water jars," v. 9). Water was a great blessing in the parched Near East.

Why was Boaz *blessing* ("favoring") her (lit. with "grace," "favor," or "acceptance"; Heb. *hen*)? Ruth wanted to know "why" (v. 10). The Israelites did not normally treat "foreigners" this way during the period of the judges. Boaz explained that it was not her nationality, but her unselfish love for Naomi ("All that you have done for your mother-in-law . . .," v. 11), and her trust in Yahweh ("the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge," v. 12), that had moved him to bless her.

". . . Boaz's kindness toward Ruth simply reciprocated hers toward Naomi. He was, indeed, a true son of Israel: he treated foreigners kindly because Israel itself knew the foreigner's life in Egypt."<sup>81</sup>

Verse 12 makes clear that Ruth was trusting in Yahweh, and that her trust had become public knowledge in Bethlehem. Boaz used a figure of speech called a "zoomorphism" ("God . . . under whose wings"), comparing an aspect of God to an animal. The Hebrew word translated "wings" here, *kenapayim*, reads "skirt" in 3:9 (cf. Deut. 32:11; Ps. 36:7; 57:1; 91:4).

"Union of the individual believer with God is therefore expressed in the same way as union between man and wife."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Morris, p. 273.

<sup>80</sup>Block, p. 660.

<sup>81</sup>Hubbard, pp. 164-65. Cf. Atkinson, pp. 67-68.

<sup>82</sup>Arthur H. Lewis, *Judges and Ruth*, p. 115.

Ruth had found the "favor" she had sought (vv. 2, 13). She was now not a lowly gleaner, but a privileged maidservant. Her "lord," Boaz, would take care of her physical needs. However, she was an *unusual* maidservant ("I am not like one of your maidservants"), because she was a poor foreigner, and an alien widow.

### **3. Ruth's privileges and responsibility 2:14-16**

Boaz treated Ruth generously and courteously, yet she continued to glean. Her maidservant status did not provide her with sufficient income so she could abandon her gleaning. By allowing her to work, Boaz preserved Ruth's dignity; by providing generously for her, he lightened her duties. The fact that Boaz permitted Ruth to eat with his household servants was another blessing from the Lord. Boaz's abundant grace reminds us of God's. It was an attribute of his godliness.

### **4. Ruth's blessing of Naomi physically 2:17-23**

At the end of the day's work, Ruth "beat out" and winnowed the grain she had "gleaned." She had collected about three-fifths of a bushel ("an ephah") of "barley": "the equivalent of at least half a month's wages in one day" (v. 17).<sup>83</sup> Ruth also took the food she had, "left [over]" from lunch, back to Naomi (v. 18; cf. v. 14).

Naomi twice "blessed" Ruth's benefactor (vv. 19-20): First, she prayed that Yahweh would *bless* Boaz, who had been a source of blessing to her and Ruth. Every prayer in this book is a prayer of blessing, and God answered every one of them.<sup>84</sup>

Second, Naomi also identified Boaz's "kindness" as *loyal love* (Heb. *hesed*; "May he be blessed of the LORD who [Boaz] has not withdrawn his kindness"; v. 20). Previously she had asked God to deal "kindly" (*hesed*) with Ruth and Orpah, for their having dealt "kindly" with her husband, her sons, and herself (1:8). Boaz had proved to be God's agent in extending kindness to Naomi and Ruth, and indirectly to their husbands (2:20).

When I was growing up, there was a man in our church who regularly contributed, anonymously, to the support of a widow in the congregation. Each month he would make a donation earmarked for her. She never knew where these gifts were coming from. The only reason I know this was that my dad and this man were good friends, and he shared what he was doing with my dad. He was a modern Boaz.

"For Naomi, who at 1.20-21 delivers a scathing indictment of Yahweh as her oppressor, to declare the munificence of his *hesed* conduct at 2.20 without any redress is to scuttle the plot and reduce everything that follows to a disappointing anticlimax. The vindication of Yahweh is not to be found in the utterances of Naomi but in the utterances of the women in 4.14 to whom Naomi addressed her indictment in 1.20-21."<sup>85</sup>

<sup>83</sup>Hubbard, p. 179. Cf. Huey, p. 532.

<sup>84</sup>Hals, pp. 4, 7.

<sup>85</sup>B. Rebera, "Yahweh or Boaz? Ruth 2:20 Reconsidered," *The Bible Translator* 36 (1985):324.



The beauty of Ruth's character shines forth in verses 21 and 23. Ruth did not view Naomi's and her relationship with Boaz (Naomi had said: "This man is our relative, he is one of our closest relatives") as a way out of her own responsibility to provide for herself and her aged mother-in-law ("she stayed close by the maids . . . to glean until the end of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest"). Instead, she rejoiced that she could continue to discharge her duty in safety (v. 23).

The "wheat harvest" followed the "barley harvest" by a month and a half (v. 23). The Feast of Unleavened Bread, in late March or early April, inaugurated the barley harvest. The Feast of Firstfruits, coming seven weeks later in late May or early June, terminated the wheat harvest. Ruth must have been out in the fields for six or seven weeks.<sup>86</sup>

Chapter 2 marks God's initial blessing on Ruth for her faith in Yahweh. She received His blessing, and she herself became a channel of blessing to Naomi. So far God's blessing had been the provision of food and safety. These blessings came through Boaz, another channel of blessing, because of his faith in Yahweh—seen in his fear of God and his love for people. Even more abundant and more significant blessings were yet to come.

### **B. THE PLAN TO OBTAIN SEED CH. 3**

Having obtained food and safety, Ruth and Naomi could look beyond their immediate physical needs to their greater need. Whereas Ruth took the initiative in proposing a plan to obtain food (2:2), Naomi now suggested a plan to get rest (security) for Ruth (3:1-5). As I pointed out, this second plan, that Naomi laid out and Ruth agreed to, is at the structural center of the Book of Ruth. It is the decision to which chapters 1 and 2 lead up, and from which chapters 3 and 4 unfold.

Chapter 3, like chapter 2, revolves around a dialogue between Boaz and Ruth.

- A Naomi and Ruth (vv. 1-5)
- B Boaz and Ruth (vv. 6-15)
- A' Naomi and Ruth (vv. 16-18)

#### **1. Naomi's plan to secure rest for Ruth 3:1-5**

Naomi had expressed a desire back in Moab that each of her daughters-in-law might find "rest" (1:9). The Hebrew word reads "security" in the NASB and "a home" in the NIV, but its meaning in other parts of the Old Testament is "a place or condition of rest."<sup>87</sup> Naomi's concern for Ruth extended beyond her physical needs, of food and safety, to Ruth's deeper need for a husband, and hopefully, a son.

God had promised to bless His people with many descendants (Gen. 12:1-3), and the hope of every Jewish woman was that God would so bless her. If Ruth was able to marry Boaz and have a son, Naomi likewise would enjoy blessing, since Ruth's son would perpetuate Elimelech's branch of the family. Yet Naomi's concern appears to have been

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<sup>86</sup>See Block, p. 677.

<sup>87</sup>See my note on 1:9.

primarily for Ruth's welfare in marriage, since Ruth had proved to be such a blessing to her.

Bush argued repeatedly that there is no indication in the text, that an aspect of Naomi and Ruth's hope was that Ruth would bear a child who would perpetuate the line of her first husband.<sup>88</sup> But it seems likely that children played a role in the hope that these women entertained, in view of how ancient Near Easterners regarded children, even though the writer made no mention of this hope. It was common for Hebrew parents to arrange marriages for their children (cf. Judg. 14:1-10).<sup>89</sup> One writer suggested that Naomi was simply telling Ruth how to follow the custom of a bride preparing for her wedding (cf. Ezek. 16:9-12).<sup>90</sup>

"A significant theological point emerges here. Earlier Naomi had wished for these same things (1:8-9). Here human means (i.e., Naomi's plan) carry out something previously understood to be in Yahweh's province. In response to providentially given opportunity, Naomi began to answer her own prayer! Thus she models one way in which divine and human actions work together: believers are not to wait passively for events to happen; rather, they must seize the initiative when an opportunity presents itself. They assume that God presents the opportunity."<sup>91</sup>

"After Ruth's first husband died, I suppose she put on widow's weeds and made no attempt to make herself attractive. But now Naomi realizes somebody is interested in Ruth, and so she tells her to get out that little bottle of perfume that she'd packed away and to use it generously. I can even suggest to you the name of the perfume that she used—'Midnight in Moab.' And I want to tell you, that was an exotic perfume! And so Naomi says, 'Anoint thee.'"<sup>92</sup>

The plan that Naomi proposed was in harmony with Israel's laws and social conventions. She was not suggesting anything improper, much less immoral.<sup>93</sup> While it is true that in the phrase "uncover his feet" (v. 4) the "feet" can be a euphemism for the sexual organs,<sup>94</sup> Naomi was certainly not suggesting that Ruth should remove Boaz's trousers!<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>Bush, p. 147, et al.

<sup>89</sup>Reed, p. 424.

<sup>90</sup>Wiersbe, p. 191.

<sup>91</sup>Hubbard, p. 199.

<sup>92</sup>McGee, *Thru the . . .*, 2:108.

<sup>93</sup>See Allen P. Ross, "The Daughters of Lot and the Daughter-In-Law of Judah: Hubris or Faith in the Struggle for Women's Rights," *Exegesis and Exposition* 2:1 (Summer 1987):79; and Block, pp. 685-86.

<sup>94</sup>Gray, p. 394.

<sup>95</sup>For an advocate of the sexual view, see P. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 182, 198, n. 23. For a feminist interpretation of the Book of Ruth that sees quite a bit of self-interest and sexual preoccupation in the main characters, see Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*.

"We do not deny the sexual innuendo; but that may simply be a refinement of the motif of the Tamar story (Gen. 38), which from this point onwards and possibly in the intention of Naomi, is the prototype for Ruth."<sup>96</sup>

Naomi was probably telling Ruth to remove the blanket or cloak (v. 15) covering Boaz's legs and feet while he slept at the threshing floor. She would then ask him to cover *her* with it (v. 10). This was evidently a historical custom, and a symbolic way of requesting Boaz's protection as her husband (cf. Deut. 22:30; 27:20; Ezek. 16:8; Mal. 2:16).<sup>97</sup> It was an encouragement to pursue the possibility of marriage.

"Touching and holding his feet was an act of submission."<sup>98</sup>

Why did Naomi suggest this method of encouraging Boaz? Evidently other methods were not possible or preferable.

"But why it should be done in this way we do not know. Nor do we know whether this was a widely practiced custom or not. It is not attested other than here."<sup>99</sup>

Ruth again submitted to the counsel of her mother-in-law, under whose authority she had placed herself (v. 5; cf. 2:2). Throughout the Book of Ruth, the heroine is submissive to the authority of the Israelites. This reflects her commitment to following Yahweh and His chosen people.

It may appear, by Western cultural standards, that Ruth was inappropriately aggressive. However, Boaz had previously indicated his strong affection for her (2:11-17), and she was only encouraging him to pursue his interest in her.

"Here is a servant demanding that the boss marry her, a Moabite making the demand of an Israelite, a woman making the demand of a man, a poor person making the demand of a rich man. Was this an act of foreigner naïveté, or a daughter-in-law's devotion to her mother-in-law, or another sign of the hidden hand of God? From a natural perspective the scheme was doomed from the beginning as a hopeless gamble, and the responsibility Naomi placed on Ruth was quite unreasonable. But it worked!"<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup>Gray, p. 394.

<sup>97</sup>P. A. Kruger, "The Hem of the Garment in Marriage: The Meaning of the Symbolic Gesture in Ruth 3:9 and Ezek 16:8," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 12 (1984):86. See also John Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, p. 395; Davis, p. 165-66; and Block, p. 691.

<sup>98</sup>*The Nelson . . .*, p. 446.

<sup>99</sup>Morris, p. 287.

<sup>100</sup>Block, p. 692.

## 2. Ruth's encouragement and Boaz's response 3:6-13

Ruth carried out Naomi's instructions exactly, further demonstrating her loyal love to her mother-in-law, and her actions thereby encouraged Boaz to pursue the possibility of marriage (vv. 6-9).

"As he [Boaz] was evidently a man of property, who employed many reapers, and did not work himself, it must have been some urgent reason that would induce him to sleep in the open field among his workmen. No doubt it was because he could not trust his servants; and what he did must be done now. The owner, or some faithful agent, has to remain at the floor day and night."<sup>101</sup>

"We have on various occasions seen the summer threshing-floors in the open country, and the owners sleeping at them to prevent stealing, just as the wealthy Boaz did when Ruth came unto him."<sup>102</sup>

Boaz's response to Ruth's actions is as remarkable as what she did.

"Note that the threshingfloor was a public place and that these incidents all took place in the open. Both men and women were lying about the threshingfloor. Entire families were gathered there. There was not much privacy connected with such circumstances, but it was the custom of the day and was not considered immodest or even questionable. This was a happy family gathering in the spirit of a religious festival. . . .

"Instead of bringing him before the public eye and forcing him to perform the part of a *goel* [kinsman redeemer], she was giving him the opportunity of rejecting or accepting the office of *goel* quietly."<sup>103</sup>

Evidently Ruth assumed, or at least hoped, that Boaz was the closest living single male relative of her husband Mahlon (cf. 4:10). As such he would have been able to marry her if he desired to do so. She was inviting him to exercise the legal right of her *levir* (brother-in-law). The Hebrew phrase translated "spread your covering [wing] over your maid" (v. 9) is an idiom referring to marrying (cf. v. 10; 2:12; Deut. 22:30; 27:20; 1 Kings 19:19; Ezek. 16:8; Mal. 2:16).

In narrative genre such as the Book of Ruth, an appreciation of the historical background is important for unlocking the meaning of the text. The Old Testament nowhere lists marriage as a *duty* of a "kinsman-redeemer." Therefore Ruth's request seems to go beyond Boaz's obligations in that role. However, there are indications that the duties of the *go'el* went beyond what the law stipulated, namely, the redemption of property and enslaved relatives. This was the spirit of the law if not its letter.

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<sup>101</sup>W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, 1:518. Paragraph division omitted.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 2:511.

<sup>103</sup>McGee, *Ruth: The Romance . . .*, pp. 92, 94.

"The word's metaphorical usage suggests that he also may have assisted a clan member in a lawsuit (Job 19:25; Ps. 119:154; Prov. 23:11; Jer. 50:34; Lam. 3:58). Further, if one assumes that the picture of Yahweh as *go'el* reflects Israelite legal customs, the *go'el* also was an advocate who stood up for vulnerable family members and who took responsibility for unfortunate relatives. [Footnote 10: Gen. 48:16; Exod. 15:13; Job 19:25; Ps. 119:154; Prov. 23:10-11; Isa. 43:1; 44:22, 23; 48:20; 52:9; 63:9; Jer. 50:34; Lam. 3:58; cf. Ps. 72:12-14. Note also that a *go'el* could be a baby, hence referring to future help, and a "restorer of life" and "sustainer of old age" (Ruth 4:14-15).] In sum, it seems likely that the duty of *go'el* was a broad one—indeed, far broader than the redemption acts taught in Lev. 25 and those typical of the levirate. Evidently it aimed to aid clan members, both the living who were perceived to be weak and vulnerable and the dead. Indeed, it may be particularly significant for the book of Ruth that two of the duties concern actions on behalf of the dead (Num. 5:8; 35:12, 19-27; etc.)."<sup>104</sup>

"The lives of genuinely good people are not governed by laws but character and a moral sense of right and wrong. For Boaz Yahweh's covenant with Israel provides sufficient guidance for him to know what to do in this case."<sup>105</sup>

Why did Boaz not immediately initiate a proposal of marriage? Evidently for two reasons: he assumed Ruth wanted to marry a younger man, someone closer to her own age (v. 10), and he was not the closest eligible male relative (v. 12). Perhaps Boaz was a nephew of Elimelech's, and a brother of Elimelech's was still living in Bethlehem.<sup>106</sup>

The blessing motif surfaces again as Boaz wished God's blessing on Ruth for her kindness to him ("You have shown your last kindness to be better than your first," v. 10). Evidently her "first kindness" was her willingness to stay near Boaz, by serving as his maidservant and by gleaning in his fields. Her "last kindness" was her willingness to marry him, and thereby provide Naomi with an heir—even though Boaz was an *older* man. Ruth assumed this familial obligation to Naomi of her own free will.

"Kindness" is loyal love (Heb. *hesed*, v. 10). This motif also appears again here. Previously Naomi had prayed that God would "deal kindly" with her daughters-in-law, just as they had "dealt" with her (1:8). Then she had prayed that Boaz would experience Yahweh's blessing for his loyal love to Naomi, Ruth, and their husbands (2:20). Now Boaz blessed Ruth, and acknowledged that she had been God's channel of blessing to him out of *loyal love* to him ("May you be blessed of the LORD, my daughter. You have shown your last *kindness* to be better . . .," emphasis supplied).

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<sup>104</sup>Hubbard, pp. 51-52.

<sup>105</sup>Block, p. 696.

<sup>106</sup>Davis, p. 167.

Boaz's description of Ruth as a woman of "excellence" (v. 11, NASB) or "noble character" (NIV, Heb. *hayil*) is interesting, because the same Hebrew word describes Boaz in 2:1. *Hayil* means a person of wealth, character, virtue, attainment, and comprehensive excellence. As such, Ruth was worthy to be the wife of Boaz. They were two of a kind. The word *hayil* also describes the ideal woman in Proverbs 31:10 (cf. Prov. 12:4; 19:14).

Boaz now promised to marry Ruth—if the nearer kinsman ("closer relative") chose not to exercise his right to do so (v. 13).<sup>107</sup>

"Not to carry through his commitment after invoking the Lord's name would have been a violation of the third commandment (Exod 20:7)."<sup>108</sup>

What the *nearer kinsman's* decision involved becomes clear later in the story (4:3-5). Even though Boaz wanted to marry Ruth, he did not violate the Mosaic Law in order to do so. His submission to God's *Law* reflected his submission to *God*. We see here another reason why he was called an "excellent" man by the writer (2:1).

There were several requirements that a man had to meet in order to qualify as a kinsman—redeemer: (1) He had to be a near kinsman. (2) He had to be willing to redeem. (3) He had to be able to redeem. (4) He had to be free himself. (5) He had to be able to pay the price of redemption.<sup>109</sup>

### **3. Ruth's return to Naomi 3:14-18**

Ruth had risked danger by sleeping on the "threshing floor" (v. 14). Other people might have seen her and assumed that something bad was taking place. Evidently some of Boaz's reapers were aware of her presence, but Boaz told them to keep Ruth's presence there a secret ("Let it not be known that the woman came . . .," v. 14).

"He knew that if it became known, town gossips would put the worst construction on the incident, just as some modern commentators do, thereby destroying Ruth's reputation and perhaps his own."<sup>110</sup>

Boaz had previously given Ruth "an ephah" of barley to carry back to Naomi in addition to her gleanings (2:7). This time he gave her "six *measures*" of barley (v. 18). The Hebrew text reads, literally, "six of barley," the word "measures" having been supplied by the translators. What "measure" the writer meant is therefore unclear.

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<sup>107</sup>McGee, *Ruth: The Romance . . .*, pp. 115-76, wrote an extended discussion of the qualifications of a redeemer. See also Bush's excursus on the relationship between Ruth's request and the question of levirate marriage, pp. 166-69.

<sup>108</sup>Huey, p. 538.

<sup>109</sup>McGee, *Thru the . . .*, 2:118.

<sup>110</sup>Huey, p. 539.

If it was the "ephah," Ruth would have had to carry three and three-fifths bushels (over 200 pounds) in the cloak (shawl, NIV). This seems very unlikely. Perhaps the measure was a "seah" (one-third of an ephah), in which case Ruth carried about one and one-fifth bushels, or about 60 to 95 pounds of grain: "an amount that would certainly be possible for a strong young peasant woman, accustomed to such burdens, to carry."<sup>111</sup> Perhaps the total measure was six "scoops," made with both hands, or with a utensil used at the threshing floor.<sup>112</sup>

It seems probable, in any event, that Boaz was even more generous on this occasion than he had been previously. As before, Boaz's gift of barley was a token of God's blessing on Ruth, and on Naomi through Ruth.

"The seed to fill the stomach was promise of the seed to fill the womb."<sup>113</sup>

The theme of "rest" concludes this chapter (v. 18), as it began it (v. 1). Boaz would not "rest" . . . "until" he had provided *rest* for Ruth ("until he has settled it today"), the "rest" Naomi had sought for her. Until then, Ruth could only "wait." Her *waiting* was a demonstration of her faith, and a foretaste of the rest she would enter into shortly.

Likewise, Christians must *wait now—until* our Redeemer brings our *redemption to completion*—when we shall rest finally and fully in His presence. Redemption is *His* work for us. Many writers have noted the parallels between Ruth and the church, the bride of Christ, and between Boaz and Christ.<sup>114</sup>

Chapter 3 is all about how Ruth might find rest. The solution to her need was her marriage to Boaz, that we saw planned in this chapter, but will finally see realized in the next.

". . . taken as a whole, the chapter taught that God carries out his work through believers who seize unexpected opportunities as gifts from God."<sup>115</sup>

### **III. GOD'S PROVISION CH. 4**

The climax of this fascinating story, and the resolution of the problem lying in the way of Ruth's union with Boaz and realization of rest, become clear in this chapter. Naomi and Ruth's plan (3:1-5) comes to a successful completion.

"This chapter focuses on three persons: a bridegroom, a bride, and a baby."<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>111</sup>Bush, pp. 178-79.

<sup>112</sup>Block, p. 698.

<sup>113</sup>B. Porten, "The Scroll of Ruth: A Rhetorical Study," *Gratz College Annual* 7 (1978):40.

<sup>114</sup>See, for example, McGee, *Ruth: The Romance of Redemption*; and George E. Gardiner, *The Romance of Ruth*.

<sup>115</sup>Hubbard, p. 230.

<sup>116</sup>Wiersbe, p. 197.

### A. THE NEARER KINSMAN'S DECISION 4:1-6

The main "gate" of cities like Bethlehem, in the ancient Near East, was the place where people transacted official business (cf. Gen. 19:1; 2 Sam. 15:2-6; 1 Kings 22:10; Amos 5:10, 12, 15).

"In ancient cities the 'gate' was a short passageway through the thick city wall which provided the town an entrance and exit. A series of small alcoves lined the passage, and the whole gate area served as both bazaar and courthouse. There the ancients gathered to buy and sell, to settle legal matters, and to gossip. Hence, 'gate' here represented the city as a whole (*the whole town*), not a specific legal body like a 'town council.'"<sup>117</sup>

The writer did not preserve the name of the nearer kinsman ("close relative," v. 1; cf. 1 Sam. 21:2; 2 Kings 6:8). He wrote that Boaz greeted him as "such a one" (AV, better than "friend," NASB, NIV; Heb. *peloni almoni*). Probably God did not record the man's name in the text, as a kind of judgment on him, for refusing to perpetuate the name of his deceased relative by redeeming Ruth (cf. Deut. 25:10).<sup>118</sup> The reason the writer withheld his name was not that it is simply unimportant, because he could have made no reference to it at all, if that was the case.

". . . he who was so anxious for the preservation of his own inheritance, is now not even known by name."<sup>119</sup>

The Mosaic Law did not specify the need for "10 . . . elders" to decide such cases (v. 2). Perhaps this number was customary. In any case, Boaz chose his jury so the nearer kinsman's decision would legally stand.<sup>120</sup> The presence of 10 elders would also have put some social pressure on the kinsman to do what was right.

"In a time when few written records were kept, attestation by a number of witnesses made transactions legally secure."<sup>121</sup>

The text does not reveal the precise relationship of the nearer kinsman and Boaz to Ruth. This was unimportant to the writer. One important point was that both men possessed legal qualifications to redeem Ruth, and to raise up seed (produce offspring) in the name of her dead husband. Another important aspect was that the nearer kinsman had the first rights of acceptance or refusal, and Boaz had the second rights.

Redeeming the property of a relative in financial distress, and marrying a near relative's widow to perpetuate his name and family in Israel, were separate procedures. Leviticus 25:25-28 legislated the redemption of property, and Deuteronomy 25:5-10 regulated

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<sup>117</sup>Hubbard, p. 216.

<sup>118</sup>Bush, p. 197.

<sup>119</sup>J. P. Lange, ed., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 2: *Numbers-Ruth*, "The Book of Ruth," by Paulus Cassel, p. 46.

<sup>120</sup>Bush, p. 199.

<sup>121</sup>Huey, p. 544.



levirate marriage. The actions did not always go together.<sup>122</sup> In this case, Boaz wanted to do both things.<sup>123</sup>

Boaz raised the issue of redeeming Naomi's "land" first (vv. 3-4). For the first time in the story, we learn that Naomi controlled (owned, inherited, and or possessed the rights to) some property. In spite of this, she and Ruth were poor, or else Ruth would not have had to glean. Naomi may have wanted to sell her property to raise cash for living expenses, though the Law specified that it had to be sold within her husband's tribe. We can only speculate about why Naomi was poor enough to require redemption, even though she controlled property:

Perhaps she had annexed ownership of this land while she was in Moab, and therefore derived no income from it.<sup>124</sup> Perhaps someone had taken possession of the property (such as a squatter) when Naomi's family moved to Moab.<sup>125</sup> Or she may have had to mortgage her late husband's property in order to survive.<sup>126</sup> She may have been acting as "the guardian" of her husband and sons' property rights, and was now ready to dispose of their land. Or possibly the issue may have been *acquiring the right of holding*, and using her property without wasting its profits until the next Jubilee Year.<sup>127</sup>

We should not interpret Boaz's reference to Elimelech, as the "brother" of the nearer kinsman and himself (v. 3), to mean that they were necessarily "blood brothers." The expression in Hebrew, as well as in English, is a broad one meaning "friend." Elimelech may well have been their "blood brother," but the expression does not require that. Since these three men were relatives, there is a good possibility that the "field" Naomi wanted to part with bordered on the lands of the other two men.<sup>128</sup>

The nearer kinsman desired Naomi's land, and at first was willing to buy it from her (v. 4). Why the nearer kinsman had to *marry* ("acquire") Ruth, if he decided to buy Naomi's property, is not clear in the text. The Mosaic Law did not command that "levirate marriage" should accompany the redemption of family property whenever it seemed appropriate. Perhaps the following explanation provides the solution to this problem.

"He [the close relative] must have reasoned that in order to buy Naomi's land he would have to invest a part of the value of his own estate, or inheritance. Then should he father a child of Ruth's that son would in Mahlon's name, not his own, become the heir of land which he bought with money from his own estate. He seemed willing to redeem Naomi's property if it should not hurt him financially, or if he might possibly gain

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<sup>122</sup>Jack Sasson, "The Issue of *Ge'ullah* in *Ruth*," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 5 (1978):60-63.

<sup>123</sup>Donald A. Leggett, *The Levirate and Goel Institutions in the Old Testament with Special Attention to the Book of Ruth*, pp. 209-53.

<sup>124</sup>Hubbard, p. 54.

<sup>125</sup>Howard, p. 138.

<sup>126</sup>Merrill, "Ruth," p. 200.

<sup>127</sup>Block, p. 710.

<sup>128</sup>Morris, p. 300.

by it, but he could not accept the responsibility if it should eventuate in a diminution of his own resources and a consequent injustice to his own heirs."<sup>129</sup>

When the nearer kinsman chose to purchase Naomi's land, the writer identified him as the *nearest* kinsman ("closest" relative, v. 6; cf. v. 3). Since he *was* the *nearest* kinsman, he was certainly under a moral, if not a legal, obligation to marry the wife of his deceased relative, if he could (Deut. 25:5-6).<sup>130</sup> According to custom, his refusal to do so would have brought disgrace on him (Deut. 25:7-10). Huey believed that none of the disgrace of this regulation was present in Boaz's dealings with the nearer kinsman.<sup>131</sup> The Mosaic Law required levirate marriage only when the male was legally able to marry his brother's widow. If he already had a wife, obviously he could not do so. Otherwise, the Law would be requiring him to become a polygamist!<sup>132</sup>

". . . it had become a traditional custom to require the Levirate marriage of the redeemer of the portion of the deceased relative, not only that the landed possession might be permanently retained in the family, but also that the family itself might not be suffered to die out."<sup>133</sup>

"Ruth was the only one who could raise up a son to inherit the estate of Elimelech. Therefore, she was not only an important link in the chain of genealogy, but she sustained certain rights over the property which Boaz was discussing with the other kinsman. To redeem the property therefore would involve the *goel* in the affairs of the foreigner from Moab. The one who redeemed the estate would have to redeem Ruth also, as she and her affairs were legally bound up in the field of Elimelech. This was the legal technicality upon which Boaz was depending for his victory."<sup>134</sup>

The desire to "raise up the name [for] the deceased" was one of the major motivations in Boaz's action. Boaz wanted to *honor* "Mahlon" by perpetuating ("raising up") his "name" in Israel.<sup>135</sup> The writer did not overtly *condemn* the nearer kinsman for doing what he did, but by withholding *his* name, he put him in a bad light. In contrast, the writer focused on Boaz as acting with extraordinary loyal love.

The fact that the genealogy at the end of the book (4:21) connects Boaz and Ruth's son with "Boaz"—rather than Mahlon—does not mean he failed to perpetuate Mahlon's line and reputation. The son (Obed) would have been eligible to inherit property from both Mahlon and Boaz. In their social system, the Israelites would regard Obed as the son of

<sup>129</sup>Herbert Bess, *Systems of Land Tenure in Ancient Israel* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1963), p. 78. Cited by Davis, pp. 168-69.

<sup>130</sup>Block, p. 715.

<sup>131</sup>Huey, p. 544. See also Bush's excursus on the nature of the transaction that Boaz proposed in verses 3-5a, pp. 211-15.

<sup>132</sup>See J. R. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, p. 251. Bush, pp. 221-23, provided an excursus on levirate marriage in the Old Testament.

<sup>133</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, p. 482. See further their helpful discussion of the transfer of property on pp. 488-90.

<sup>134</sup>McGee, *Ruth: The Romance . . .*, p. 109. See also Block, pp. 716-17; and Reed, p. 426.

<sup>135</sup>See Oswald Loretz, "The Theme of the Ruth Story," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 22 (1960):391-99.

both men. *Naturally* he was Boaz's son, but *legally* he was both Boaz's and Mahlon's son, as well as Elimelech's descendant.

"The same person could be reckoned genealogically either in different family lines or at different places in the same line. In this case, Obed was probably reckoned to Boaz (and, ultimately, to Judah) for political reasons; at the same time, for theological reasons (i.e., to show the providence behind David's rise), he was also considered to be Elimelech's son."<sup>136</sup>

Faced with the *double* financial burden, of buying the field and marrying and providing for Ruth (and Naomi?), the nearer kinsman declined Boaz's offer ("I cannot redeem . . .," v. 6). Note that he said he *could* not rather than *would* not redeem it. The reason he gave was that he would "jeopardize [his] own inheritance." "His inheritance" evidently refers to the inheritance *he would pass on to his descendants*, not an inheritance he might receive from an ancestor. He did not want Ruth's future son to inherit the field, but only his own family.

"In the declining of the kinsman to marry Ruth, and so rehabilitate the family of his kinsman Elimelech, we have a further analogy with the Tamar tradition in Gen. 38, where Judah's son Onan, for selfish reasons, refused to 'give offspring to his brother' (Gen. 38:9)."<sup>137</sup>

Hubbard concluded that the obligation to *marry Ruth* as well as purchase the land, must have been a *legal* one, either known throughout Israel or unique to Bethlehem.<sup>138</sup> He regarded the unnamed kinsman redeemer's change of mind "the book's thorniest legal problem."<sup>139</sup>

". . . the surprise element must be something other than the obligation to marry a deceased's widow since the kinsman probably expected that. While certainty is impossible, a careful reading of 4:3-5 suggests that the new information was the sudden, unexpected substitution of Ruth for Naomi as Elimelech's widow. The progression of thought would be as follows. Cleverly, Boaz steered the conversation away from Ruth to focus on legal matters concerning Elimelech and Naomi in vv. 3-4. If the thought of a marriageable widow associated with the land crossed the kinsman's mind at all, he probably assumed her to be Naomi. Advanced in age beyond child-bearing, she posed no threat to his prospective profitable purchase. The alluring proposition offered him double returns for a small investment. He would not only increase the size of his own holdings but also enhance his civic reputation as one loyal to family. Future profits from the land would offset any expense incurred in caring for Naomi;

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<sup>136</sup>Hubbard, pp. 62-63.

<sup>137</sup>Gray, p. 399.

<sup>138</sup>Hubbard, p. 58.

<sup>139</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

indeed, given her awful suffering, one might not expect her to live much longer anyway. In any case, there was no risk of losing his investment to the claims of a future heir. A required marriage to Ruth (v. 5), however, was a very different matter. Much younger, she might bear several sons, the first eligible to claim Elimelech's property as his heir, others perhaps to share in the kinsman's own inheritance (v. 6). That possibility made the investment all too risky and perhaps even flustered him . . . The profit to be turned would be his only until the child acquired Elimelech's land, probably on attaining adulthood. Further, the care of a younger, obviously robust wife (cf. 2:17-18) meant considerably more expense than anticipated. Hence, he willingly waived his redemption rights in favor of Boaz (vv. 6-8)."<sup>140</sup>

McGee pointed out that this nearer kinsman, whom he called "Old Barefoot," is similar to the Mosaic Law in that neither could redeem.<sup>141</sup>

### **B. BOAZ OBTAINS THE RIGHT TO MARRY RUTH 4:7-12**

Probably the practice of *standing on land* one possessed led to the custom of using the "sandal" as a symbol of possession in land transactions (v. 7; cf. Gen. 13:17; Deut. 1:36; 11:24; 25:8-10; Josh. 1:3; 14:9).<sup>142</sup>

". . . whatever right he had to tread or go upon the land, he conveyed and transferred it, upon a valuable consideration, to the purchaser . . ."<sup>143</sup>

". . . the fact that the narrator had to explain ancient customs to the intended readers in 4:7 indicates that the book was not written at the time of the events."<sup>144</sup>

Many scholars believe that it was the *nearest kinsman*, in this case the unnamed relative, who removed his sandal to symbolize the completion of the transaction (v. 8).

Boaz's emphasis on "rais[ing] up the name of the deceased" (v. 10), namely, "Mahlon," and his father, "Elimelech" (v. 9), shows Boaz's concern for the reputation and posterity of his family line. These were important concerns in Israel, because of God's promises regarding Abraham's seed, and especially regarding *Judah's* descendants (Gen. 49:10).

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<sup>140</sup>Ibid., p. 61. Other writers who held essentially the same view include E. W. Davies, "Ruth 4:5 and the Duties of the *go'el*," *Vetus Testamentum* 33 (1983):233-34; Campbell, p. 159; E. Robertson, "The Plot of the Book of Ruth," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 32 (1950):221; and Howard, p. 138.

<sup>141</sup>McGee, *Thru the . . .*, 2:116, 117.

<sup>142</sup>Ernest R. Lacheman, "Note on Ruth 4:7-8," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 56 (1937):53-56. See also E. A. Speiser, "Of Shoes and Shekels," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 77 (Feb. 1940):17.

<sup>143</sup>Henry, p. 280.

<sup>144</sup>*The Nelson . . .*, p. 441.

"The ancients believed that when a person's name is never mentioned after his death, he ceases to exist (Isa 14:20)."<sup>145</sup>

The "witnesses" to Boaz's transaction wished God's blessing of *numerous descendants* on him ("May the LORD make the woman . . . like Rachel and Leah"). They cited "Rachel" and "Leah," both of whom, like Ruth, had joined the Israelites from a foreign country, and had entered their land from alien nations that had demonstrated hostility to God's people.

Rachel's Tomb was near Bethlehem, making the reference to her significant for the local audience. Rachel and her sister Leah had together *given* Jacob 12 sons—directly and through their maids. They had indeed "built the house of Israel" (v. 11). The people also wished "wealth" (cf. 2:1; 3:11) and "fame" on Boaz, which he *did obtain*, thanks to God's blessing on his family—especially through Ruth and David. "Ephrathah" means "fruitful."

The reference to "Perez" (v. 12) is also significant. There are many parallels between the story of Boaz and Ruth, and the story of Perez's parents, Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38):

- Ruth and Tamar were both foreigners who had married into Israel.
- The first husbands of both women *died* leaving them widows.
- Both women participated in *levirate* marriages.
- Tamar *seduced* Judah under the *cover* of a *disguise*, but Ruth *encouraged* Boaz under the *cover* of *night*.
- When Judah and Tamar appeared before a public tribunal, they were *ashamed* and *condemned*, but when Boaz and Ruth did so, they received *praise* and *blessing*.
- In both cases, the husbands were *considerably older* than the wives.
- Both women, however, bore sons in the *Davidic messianic* line: Ruth *honorably* and Tamar *dishonorably*.
- Tamar bore Perez, and Ruth bore Obed (lit. "he who serves"; v. 21).
- Obed lived up to his personality trait name by "serving" as Boaz and Ruth's son, and as Naomi's grandson.

"Like Ruth, Tamar was a foreigner who perpetuated a family line threatened with extinction, one which later became Judah's leading house, and thereby gained herself fame as its founding mother. If fertile, may not the equally creative (ch. 3) foreigner, Ruth, also preserve Elimelech's line, and, if that line became famous, thereby earn a similar grand destiny?"<sup>146</sup>

Perez's descendants included many leaders who were a blessing to Israel. The tribe of Judah led the Israelites in the wilderness march, and in the conquering and settlement of the land following Joshua's death (Num. 10:14; Judg. 1:1-2).

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<sup>145</sup>Block, p. 723.

<sup>146</sup>Hubbard, p. 261.

The witnesses also recognized that *children* ("offspring") are a gift from God (vv. 11-12; cf. Ps. 127:3-5). They prayed that Boaz would achieve "wealth" (standing, valor, worth, ability; Heb. *hayil*) in Israel ("in Ephrathah," and "become famous in Bethlehem"; cf. 2:1; 3:11). God is the source of all blessing.

### **C. GOD'S PROVISION OF A SON 4:13-17**

Verse 13 is a key verse in the book, because it records the fulfillment of Naomi and Ruth's plans to obtain rest (2:2; 3:1-5).<sup>147</sup> A son was indispensable to the continuation of the line of Boaz, as well as that of Mahlon and Elimelech. With the birth of Obed, Ruth and Naomi could both finally *rest*. They had produced someone who would carry on the program of God for Israel. The "redeemer" in view, in this discussion, was *Obed*, not Boaz.

Why did a godly Israelite such as Boaz marry a Moabite woman? Did the Mosaic Law not forbid the Israelites from intermarrying, and from admitting Moabites into their nation (Deut. 23:3)? Several solutions to this problem have been proposed.

1. Perhaps Boaz simply disregarded the Law at this point. Was this not, after all, the time of the judges, in which everyone "did what was right in his own eyes," including ignoring the proscription about welcoming Moabites into Israel? This is an unlikely explanation, because Boaz, as the writer presented him in Ruth, was a scrupulous observer of the Law (cf. 2:4, 12; 3:9-13; 4:1-6, 9-10, 13).
2. Perhaps the prohibition in Deuteronomy applied only to *male* Moabites, since Moses used the masculine gender when he referred to them. However, the masculine gender would have been the normal gender to use, when referring to both *male* and *female* Moabites. Moreover, there is no other clue in Deuteronomy that only males were in view in this prohibition.
3. Probably the law in Deuteronomy had in view *unbelievers* who wanted to immigrate into Israel. After all, God had always welcomed *believers* from outside of Israel into the covenant community (Gen. 17; 38; Josh. 2; et al.). It was even His *purpose* for Israel that she bring (i.e., draw or attract) people from other nations to God (Exod. 19:5-6). God's purpose in the Abrahamic Covenant, to make Israel a blessing to the world by bringing all people into relationship with God, antedated and superseded all provisions of the later Mosaic Covenant. God brought the Mosaic Covenant *in alongside* the Abrahamic Covenant, in order to help the Israelites maximize the blessings He had promised Abraham.

The women "blessed the LORD" (v. 14), acknowledging His goodness in providing "a redeemer" for Naomi, as well as Ruth, *in Obed* (v. 15). God eventually granted their desire that Obed's name become "famous in Israel" (v. 14). Little did Ruth and Boaz realize that from their union would come Israel's greatest kings, including David and Jesus Christ. Obed did indeed "restore life" to Naomi's apparently *dead branch* of the

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<sup>147</sup>See Constable, p. 111.

family of Judah (v. 15). Furthermore, he "sustained" her in her "old age," by giving her hope (cf. 1:20-21).

". . . in all probability, Obed originally meant 'servant' of Naomi; as her *go'el*, he 'served' her by assuring her family's survival and providing her food. . . . Obed's name perhaps added the nuance 'servant of Yahweh,' for in the end his service of Naomi served Yahweh's larger purpose as well."<sup>148</sup>

Ruth too received *praise* for her unusually selfless love and care for her mother-in-law. The ancient Israelites believed that "seven sons" constituted the ideal family (cf. 1 Sam. 2:5; Job 1:2; 42:13; Acts 19:14-17). Thus in saying that Ruth was "better" to Naomi "than seven sons," the witnesses meant Ruth had provided all that an ideal family could possibly provide for Naomi.

Naomi became Obed's nurse (v. 16), in the sense of becoming his "guardian," the meaning of the Hebrew word *'aman* (lit. "cared for him" or "one who serves"). Compare "Obadiah," which means "servant of Yahweh." She did not become his "wet nurse" but rather his "nanny."<sup>149</sup> Naomi basically adopted this grandson as her own child.<sup>150</sup>

Verse 17 contains one of only two instances in Scripture when a child received its name from someone other than the immediate family ("A son has been born to Naomi"; cf. Exod. 2:10; Luke 1:59).

"This verse [v. 17] is, of course, a clue to the book's purpose: to show that the reign of David resulted from neither his shrewd politics nor his clever tactics but from the divine preservation of his worthy family line. Therefore, Israel was to accept David's kingship as the gift of divine guidance."<sup>151</sup>

Why did the writer feature *Naomi* in this closing section of the book, rather than Ruth? I believe he did so to finish off the main point of chapter 1. There, in so many words, Naomi said it would be *impossible* for her to have "a son" (1:11-13). Yet at the end of the book, she *has* "a son" (in the form of her adopted grandson; 4:17)!

This motif of a need for the line of Judah to succeed in producing a king, therefore, is one that the writer wanted his readers to appreciate. God provided the royal seed (offspring) *supernaturally* (4:14), to a godly couple. Ruth's faith in Yahweh qualified her as a channel of blessing, in spite of her Moabite origins. The Book of Ruth opened with three funerals, but it closes with a wedding!<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup>Hubbard, p. 277.

<sup>149</sup>Bush, p. 259; Block, p. 730.

<sup>150</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, p. 492.

<sup>151</sup>Hubbard, p. 278. See also Block, pp. 734-36.

<sup>152</sup>Wiersbe, p. 197.

#### **D. THE GENEALOGICAL APPENDIX 4:18-22**

Far from being an unimportant postscript, this genealogy helps us see one of the main purposes for which God gave us this book.

Why does the genealogy start with "Perez"? Because he was the founder of the *branch* of Judah's family that took his name, to which Elimelech and Boaz belonged (Num. 26:20). Perez was the *illegitimate* son of Judah (and Tamar; 1 Chron. 2:4) who, like Jacob, seized the initiative to stand in the line of messianic promise from his twin brother (Gen. 38:27-30).<sup>153</sup>

This genealogy emphasizes how God circumvented custom and tradition in providing Israel's great redeemer, David. Like Perez, Boaz was the descendant of an Israelite father, Salmon, and a Canaanite harlot, Rahab (Matt. 1:5). Both Tamar and Rahab became Israelites because they believed and valued God's promises to Israel, as Ruth did. David himself was the youngest (cf. Jacob and Perez), rather than the oldest, son of Jesse.

"It is clear that a major purpose of the biblical narrator was to establish links between Judah and Tamar on the one hand and Boaz and Ruth on the other, links binding the royal promise given to Judah with the fulfillment of the Davidic dynasty. This was accomplished not only by demonstrating the affinities between the stories of Tamar and Ruth, but also by suggesting important contrasts."<sup>154</sup>

The wording of the genealogy (Heb. *toledot*), "to *so-and-so* was born *so-and-so*," does not necessarily imply that this is a complete list (cf. 1 Chron. 2:5-15; Matt. 1:3-6; Luke 3:31-33). The word *toledot* is key to the structure of Genesis, indicating its major divisions (2:4; 5:1; et al.). This is one more of the many allusions back to the early history of Israel that Ruth contains. This book shows that God was still working faithfully with the Israelites, as He had earlier in their history, even though they were generally unfaithful to Him during the Judges Period. We might have expected "Mahlon," rather than Boaz, to be mentioned in this list—since, by marrying Ruth, Boaz perpetuated the *line of Mahlon*, Ruth's former husband. Evidently the genealogy goes through "Boaz," because he was the *physical father* of Obed.

"The first five names cover the period from the time of the entry into Egypt (Perez, Gen 46:12) to the time of Moses (Nahshon, Exod 6:23; Num 1:7), while the remaining five [Salmon through David] belong to the period of the early settlement in Canaan to the closing years of the judges."<sup>155</sup>

The fourth chapter brings to a tidy conclusion all the themes and threads spun out in the earlier chapters.<sup>156</sup> The closing genealogical appendix then adds information that helps us

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<sup>153</sup>Merrill, "The Book . . .," p. 134.

<sup>154</sup>Idem, *Kingdom of . . .*, p. 184.

<sup>155</sup>Huey, p. 548.

<sup>156</sup>See again the diagram of the structure of the book in the notes introductory to chapter 1 to visualize how these ideas come together.



to appreciate the *greatness of God's gift* of the son, "Obed," who became the ancestor (grandfather) of King David.

The appendix also ties the events of the Book of Ruth to the past, as well as to the future. It does so by showing the connection between the Book of Ruth and God's promise to raise up a ruler (king) over His people from the descendants of Judah.

"Throughout the book the narrator has deliberately cast the characters as stellar models of *hesed*, of deep and sincere devotion to God and to one another, expressed in self-sacrificial acts of kindness toward one another. Into the plot he has also carefully woven markings of the providential hand of God, rewarding who[ever] rewards authentic piety with his fullness and care. The birth of Obed symbolizes the convergence of these two themes: piety and providence. But the narrator is aware that in the providence of God the implications of a person's covenantal fidelity often extend far beyond the immediate story. In fact, the story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz does not end with the birth of Obed. It simply signals a significant turn in the history of this family and the history of Israel, down a course that leads directly to King David."<sup>157</sup>

Boaz, like Enoch in Genesis 5, represented the seventh of ten generations, and set the course of his family toward godliness.

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<sup>157</sup>Block, p. 736.

## Conclusion

The Book of Ruth is an important, though brief, segment of scriptural revelation for several reasons.

First, the book shows the faithfulness of God in providing a ruler over His people in David, as He had promised Judah (Gen. 49:10). As later history would reveal, neither David nor his sons, the kings of the Davidic dynasty, fulfilled all that God had in mind when He promised a ruler. The greatest son of David, Messiah, will do that.

Second, the book, set in the *amphictyony*, links the patriarchal and monarchical eras of Israel's history. The patriarch Perez was the ancestor of King David, not King Saul. This connection shows the legitimacy of the Davidic dynasty in the monarchical period, and the illegitimacy of Saul's dynasty. Likewise, the writer did not tie David in with the Mosaic era or covenant, but with the patriarchal era and the Abrahamic Covenant. This helps the reader appreciate the fact that the Davidic dynasty did not have its roots in the conditional Mosaic Covenant but in God's unconditional promises to the patriarchs.<sup>158</sup> The Book of Ruth is thus a revelation of the *providence* of God.

"... God uses the faithfulness of ordinary people to do great things."<sup>159</sup>

Third, the book reveals that God will use apparently unpromising material to bring blessing to others, if such a person will only *trust* and *obey* Him. Though Ruth was a Moabitess, a childless widow, and poor, she became a true Israelite, namely, a believer in Israel, a wife and mother, and both physically and spiritually rich. The key was her faith in, and commitment to, Yahweh (1:16). Not only did Ruth enjoy God's blessing personally, but she became a channel of blessing to all around her—and to generations of people to come. As such she became a kind of paradigm of what God intended for the whole nation of Israel: both *blessed* herself, and *a blessing* to the world. The story of Ruth, therefore, also reveals the great grace of God.

"I was therefore obliged to relate the history of Ruth, because I had a mind to demonstrate the power of God, who, without difficulty, can raise those that are of ordinary parentage to dignity and splendor, to which he advanced David, though he were born of such mean [unassuming] parents."<sup>160</sup>

By way of application, as we compare later revelation with the Book of Ruth, we can see that there are many parallels here. There are parallels with the spiritual redemption that God has provided for us through the Son of David, Jesus Christ. What Boaz did for Ruth, in offering himself and his wealth to be her *kinsman-redeemer*, was very similar to what Christ has done for the object of His love, the church.

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<sup>158</sup>For further development of this purpose see Merrill, "The Book . . .," pp. 135-37.

<sup>159</sup>Hubbard, p. 279.

<sup>160</sup>Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 5:9:4.

This little book is like a small diamond. Each of the many motifs resembles a different facet of that "diamond," and shines with its own particular beauty. Perhaps the most outstanding of these is how God works out His own purpose through human instrumentality.<sup>161</sup> Other important themes include: famine, harvest, rest, blessing, redemption, and seed. Yet the book is much more than a collection of various themes. It also possesses a unity, that carries the reader along smoothly and with anticipation to the very end.

"Choices we make at the prompting of God's Holy Spirit have ramifications for good beyond our wildest dreams."<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup>See Hals; Prinsloo, pp. 330-41; and Merrill, "The Book . . .," p. 137, n. 8.

<sup>162</sup>Idem, "Ruth," p. 201.

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