

# Notes on Ruth

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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 that it may derive from the Hebrew *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 Ruth in the liturgy of the feast of Weeks (Pentecost).<sup>8</sup> This implies a common authorship or compilation of 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, Boaz lived during the seventh generation after Perez, the son of Judah, and Boaz was King David's great-grandfather. Life spans 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 (1 Chron. 2:15), 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 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 contemporary with 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. However, that was not due to a famine but to the yearly invasions of the Midianites.

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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; and Wood, p. 254.

Moreover it seems likely that there would have been several famines in Israel during the approximately 300-year period of the judges. Merrill believed she lived about 1200 B.C.<sup>12</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>13</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>14</sup> Whereas the book illustrates the theological concept of redemption beautifully, its primary purpose appears to have been to reveal how God often providentially works behind the scenes to bring His will to pass.<sup>15</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 once.

"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 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>16</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>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Merrill, "Ruth," p. 199.

<sup>13</sup>Idem, *Kingdom of . . .*, p. 225; Wood, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup>E.g., Gray, p. 374.

<sup>15</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>16</sup>The NET Bible note on 4:22.

<sup>17</sup>Reed, p. 416.

Another important purpose was to validate David as the true king of Israel.<sup>18</sup> References to David's genealogy open and close the book.

### 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

### 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>19</sup> Alexander Schroder, a literary critic, wrote, "No poet in the world has written a more beautiful short story."<sup>20</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.

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<sup>18</sup>Merrill, "Ruth," p. 198; and Keil and Delitzsch, p. 466.

<sup>19</sup>Morris, p. 229.

<sup>20</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, p. 466.

I believe that among many things the Book of Ruth reveals, three 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 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, Jacob's posterity.

When Jacob uttered his inspired blessing on each of his descendants 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 have the leadership among the tribes, and a king who would rule not only Israel—but the world—would come from him.

As history unfolded, David proved to be the king that God 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.

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. 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.

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).

One of the major revelations of Ruth is the crucial characteristic in particular individuals whom God uses to bring His will to pass. It is not their natural condition but their faith in Him. 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 second 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 source of rest for Ruth. As Ruth trusted in and committed herself to Yahweh, God provided rest for her through Boaz.

Ruth was the 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 world, by providing Obed, from whom came David.

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 God's reward for those who follow Him faithfully, as Hebrews 3 and 4 make clear.

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

God had also purposed to provide redemption for His people. He effected this for the nation of Israel as a whole in the Exodus from Egypt. There 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, 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. He provided Boaz to redeem Ruth and Naomi. Through Ruth He provided David to set Israel free. And 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 trust 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>21</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 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.

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<sup>21</sup>Reed, p. 418.

*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>22</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 and should be told repeatedly."<sup>23</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 blessings are presently 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>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:1:144.

<sup>23</sup>Reed, p. 417.

<sup>24</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>25</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>25</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>26</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. Therefore the book seems concerned with showing how God provided for His people, especially for their leadership need.

"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>27</sup>

"The Book of Ruth is a pearl in the swine pen of the judges."<sup>28</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>26</sup>Reg Grant, "Literary Structure in the Book of Ruth," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:592 (October-December 1991):440.

<sup>27</sup>Block, p. 614.

<sup>28</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>29</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>30</sup>

God had promised the Israelites that if they departed from Him He would discipline them by sending famine on the Promised Land (Deut. 28:17, 23, 38-40, 42).<sup>31</sup> The famine on Israel at this time indicates 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 Moab to obtain food for his family. Compare also Lot's migration in Gen. 13:1-13. There are many motifs that occur in the patriarchal narratives in Genesis and reappear in Ruth.<sup>32</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.

"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>33</sup>

Jacob 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>34</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>35</sup> The chapter opens with famine but closes with harvest (v. 22). Likewise the whole book opens with a bad situation but ends with a good one. God was at work 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>36</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Hongisto, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup>*The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 441.

<sup>31</sup>See George M. Harton, "Fulfillment of Deuteronomy 28—30 in History and in Eschatology" (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1981).

<sup>32</sup>See Hubbard, pp. 39-41.

<sup>33</sup>McGee, p. 48.

<sup>34</sup>Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, p. 67.

<sup>35</sup>Hubbard, p. 85.

<sup>36</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.

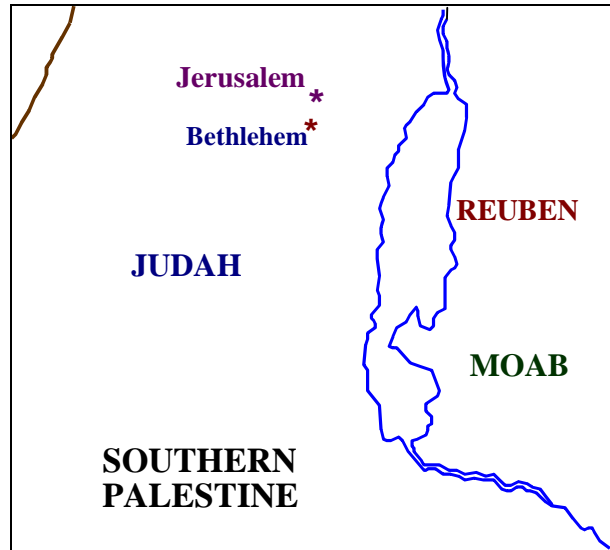
The fact that Elimelech (lit. "My God is King," or "God is King"—a theme of the book) was from Bethlehem (lit. house of bread, i.e., granary) is significant. "Elimelech" is a theophoric name, a name that combines a term for deity with another ascription. Elimelech's parents probably gave him this name 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 the grandson of Moses 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 because David was from Bethlehem in Judah. 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 value highly naturally. Bethlehem in Ruth's day did not have a good reputation. It was not the environment in which David grew up that made him great but his relationship with God. That relationship, we learn from Ruth, was a heritage passed down to him from his ancestors, godly Boaz and Ruth.<sup>37</sup>

The unusual association of Ephrathah and 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.

"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>38</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>39</sup> He



<sup>37</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.

<sup>38</sup>Merrill, "The Book . . .", p. 133.

<sup>39</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.

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>40</sup>

Ephrathah was probably also the name of an older settlement that 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>41</sup> or the name may reflect that Ephraimites had settled there.<sup>42</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 (cf. 1 Sam. 17:12).<sup>43</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. It was not contrary to the Mosaic law for Israelite men to marry Moabite women (Deut. 7:3), 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 circumstances of their births. Mahlon may have looked sickly when he was born, and Chilion probably looked as though he was failing.

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

God eventually withdrew the famine from Judah (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 sounds one of the major themes of the story: Yahweh's gracious intervention.<sup>44</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>45</sup>

Naomi's words to her daughters-in-law are very important. Of the book's 85 verses, 56 report dialogue, indicating that dialogue is one of its dominant literary techniques.<sup>46</sup> She 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,

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<sup>40</sup>Hubbard, p. 91.

<sup>41</sup>E.g., Charles F. Pfeiffer, "Ruth," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 272.

<sup>42</sup>E.g., F. B. Huey Jr., "Ruth," in *Deuteronomy-2 Samuel*, vol. 3 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 519.

<sup>43</sup>Bush, p. 67.

<sup>44</sup>K. Sacon, "The Book of Ruth—Its Literary Structure and Themes," *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* 4 (1978):5.

<sup>45</sup>David Atkinson, *The Message of Ruth*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>46</sup>Hubbard, pp. 100-101.

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>47</sup>

"I may be wrong, but I get the impression that Naomi didn't want to take Orpah 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>48</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>49</sup>

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>50</sup>

Third, Naomi wished "rest" (Heb. *menuhah*) for her daughters-in-law in the household of their next husbands (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 give 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 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. Here one reason for her counsel comes out. She was too old to remarry, bear sons, have those sons marry their brothers' (Mahlon's and Chilion's) widows, and raise up seed.

<sup>47</sup>Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary/History*, p. 181.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid. Italics omitted.

<sup>49</sup>Hubbard, pp. 102-3. Cf. E. F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth*, pp. 64-65; and Huey, p. 521.

<sup>50</sup>Hubbard, p. 104. "Kindly" or "kindness" (Heb. *hesed*) is also a key word in Ruth (cf. 2:20; 3:10).

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 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>51</sup> The word "levir" comes from the Latin translation of the Hebrew term for brother-in-law. Naomi was 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 could provide for them if they sought refuge in Him. She was not presenting the God of Israel in a positive light or demonstrating much faith in Him.

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 (v. 13; cf. Gen. 30:1-2; 42:36). Naomi was bitter rather than broken. Really 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.

"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>52</sup>

Ruth clung to Naomi. The Hebrew word for "clung to" is *dabaq*, which elsewhere refers to the ideal closeness that can be experienced in a marriage relationship (cf. Gen. 2:24).<sup>53</sup> 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>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>See *The New Bible Dictionary*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Marriage," by J. S. Wright and J. A. Thompson; 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.

<sup>52</sup>McGee, p. 61.

<sup>53</sup>Huey, p. 522.

<sup>54</sup>Bush, p. 97.

### **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. Ruth the Moabitess exercised faith, but Naomi the Israelitess lived by sight. Ruth trusted God and obeyed the Mosaic Covenant, but Naomi did not.<sup>55</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. 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>56</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>57</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 was (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

<sup>55</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.

<sup>56</sup>See Harold Fisch, "Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History," *Vetus Testamentum* 32:4 (1982):427.

<sup>57</sup>Huey, p. 523.



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>58</sup>

"There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel."<sup>59</sup>

God had always welcomed non-Israelites into the covenant community of Abraham's believing seed. Even in Abraham's day his 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 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>60</sup>

Verses 15-18 are a key to the book because they give the reason 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 chose to emphasize her hardships. 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>61</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 regarded herself no longer as pleasant but bitter as a result of what

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<sup>58</sup>Hubbard, pp. 120-21.

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

<sup>60</sup>See Thomas L. Constable, "A Theology of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 110.

<sup>61</sup>Hubbard, p. 124, and n. 19.

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 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 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>62</sup>

The biblical writer highlighted Naomi 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). Ruth, who had pledged herself to care for Naomi as long as she lived, had returned with her (v. 22). This was a tremendous blessing from the Lord. At this 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 Israel.<sup>63</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 her being this source of blessing emerges in the first chapter. It was her faith in Yahweh and her commitment to His people. 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>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Bush, pp. 95-96.

<sup>63</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, p. 476.

<sup>64</sup>Wiersbe, p. 182.

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

Chapter 1 prepares 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.

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>65</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, 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 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>66</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>67</sup> The Nelson Study Bible says that it means "Swift Strength."<sup>68</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."

<sup>65</sup>See W. S. Prinsloo, "The Theology of the Book of Ruth," *Vetus Testamentum* 30:3 (July 1980):334.

<sup>66</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, p. 447.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.; McGee, p. 70; Wiersbe, p. 185.

<sup>68</sup>*The Nelson . . .*, p. 444.

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, so he could provide food and physical protection for Naomi and Ruth, their immediate need (v. 1). The same Hebrew words (*'ish gibbor hayil*), translated "man of 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 she would become. God commanded farmers in Israel not to harvest the corners of their fields so 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>69</sup> Ruth qualified for gleaning as an alien and as a widow. She submitted her plans for Naomi's approval and received her blessing.

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 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>70</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 (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>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, 1:76.

<sup>70</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>71</sup>Hubbard, pp. 144-45.

Ruth's character too was of high quality, as the reaper foreman reported (v. 7) and as Boaz later testified he had learned earlier (v. 11). We should probably understand the last part of verse 7 to mean that Ruth had rested only a short time.<sup>72</sup> In other words, Ruth was a hard worker.

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

Boaz called Ruth his 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. Normally the poor migrated from field to field to glean. However, Boaz graciously made Ruth one of his maidservants (vv. 8-9, 13), so she would not 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>73</sup>

The foreigner 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 (v. 9). Water was a great blessing in the parched Near East.

Why was Boaz blessing her (lit. with "grace," "favor," or "acceptance"; Heb. *hen*)? Ruth wanted to know (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 (v. 11) and her trust in Yahweh (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>74</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, 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>75</sup>

Ruth had found the favor she had sought (vv. 2, 13). She was now not just a gleaner but a maidservant. Her lord, Boaz, would take care of her physical needs. However, she was an unusual maidservant because she was a poor alien widow.

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<sup>72</sup>Morris, p. 273.

<sup>73</sup>Block, p. 660.

<sup>74</sup>Hubbard, pp. 164-65. Cf. Atkinson, pp. 67-68.

<sup>75</sup>Arthur H. Lewis, *Judges and Ruth*, p. 115.

### **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, but 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 a mark 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 of barley, "the equivalent of at least half a month's wages in one day" (v. 17).<sup>76</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). 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>77</sup> She also identified Boaz's kindness as loyal love (Heb. *hesed*, v. 20). Previously she had asked God to deal "kindly" (*hesed*) with Ruth and Orpah for dealing 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>78</sup>

The beauty of Ruth's character shines forth in verse 21. She did not view her relationship with Boaz as a way out of her own responsibility to provide for herself and her aged mother-in-law. Instead she rejoiced that she could continue to discharge her duty in safety.

<sup>76</sup>Hubbard, p. 179. Cf. Huey, p. 532.

<sup>77</sup>Hals, pp. 4, 7.

<sup>78</sup>B. Rebera, "Yahweh or Boaz? Ruth 2:20 Reconsidered," *The Bible Translator* 36 (1985):324.

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 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>79</sup>

Chapter 2 marks God's initial blessing on Ruth for her faith in Yahweh. She received blessing and 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. Still more abundant and more significant blessing was 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>80</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 primarily for Ruth's welfare in marriage because Ruth had proved to be such a blessing to her.

Bush argued repeatedly that there is no indication in the text that part of the hope of Naomi and Ruth was that Ruth would bear a child who would perpetuate the line of her first husband.<sup>81</sup> But it seems likely that children played a part 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

<sup>79</sup>See Block, p. 677.

<sup>80</sup>See my note on 1:9.

<sup>81</sup>Bush, p. 147, et al.

arrange marriages for their children (cf. Judg. 14:1-10).<sup>82</sup> One writer suggested that Naomi was telling Ruth to act like a bride preparing for her wedding (cf. Ezek. 16:9-12).<sup>83</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>84</sup>

The plan Naomi proposed was in harmony with Israel's laws and social conventions. She was not suggesting anything improper much less immoral.<sup>85</sup> While it is true that in the phrase "uncover his feet" (v. 4) the "feet" may be a euphemism for the sexual organs,<sup>86</sup> Naomi was not suggesting that Ruth should remove Boaz's trousers.<sup>87</sup>

"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>88</sup>

Naomi was probably telling Ruth to remove the blanket or cloak (v. 15) that would be covering Boaz's legs and feet as he slept at the threshing floor. She would then ask him to cover her with it (v. 10). This was a symbolic way of requesting Boaz's protection as her husband (cf. Deut. 22:30; 27:20; Ezek. 16:8; Mal. 2:16).<sup>89</sup> It was an encouragement to pursue the possibility of marriage.

"Touching and holding his feet was an act of submission."<sup>90</sup>

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

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<sup>82</sup>Reed, p. 424.

<sup>83</sup>Wiersbe, p. 191.

<sup>84</sup>Hubbard, p. 199.

<sup>85</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>86</sup>Gray, p. 394.

<sup>87</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*.

<sup>88</sup>Gray, p. 394.

<sup>89</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; and Block, p. 691.

<sup>90</sup>*The Nelson . . .*, p. 446.



"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>91</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 that Ruth was inappropriately aggressive. However, Boaz had previously indicated his strong affection for her (2:11-17). 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>92</sup>

## **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 encouraged Boaz to pursue the possibility of marriage (vv. 6-9). 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>93</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 words translated "spread your covering [wing] over your

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<sup>91</sup>Morris, p. 287.

<sup>92</sup>Block, p. 692.

<sup>93</sup>McGee, pp. 92, 94.

maid" (v. 9) are 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 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.

"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>94</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>95</sup>

Why did Boaz not 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).

The blessing motif surfaces again as Boaz wished God's blessing on Ruth for her kindness to him (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 as they had dealt with her (1:8). Then she had prayed that Boaz would experience Yahweh's

<sup>94</sup>Hubbard, pp. 51-52.

<sup>95</sup>Block, p. 696.

blessing for his loyal love to Naomi, Ruth, and their husbands (2:20). Now Boaz acknowledged that Ruth had been God's channel of blessing to him out of loyal love to him.

Boaz's description of Ruth as a woman of "excellence" (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 promised to marry Ruth if the nearer kinsman chose not to exercise his right to do so (v. 13).<sup>96</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>97</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 to do so. His submission to God's Law reflects his submission to God. We see here another reason he was an excellent man (2:1).

### **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 (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>98</sup>

Boaz had previously given Ruth an ephah of barley to carry back to Naomi in addition to her gleanings (2:7). Now he gave her six measures of barley (v. 18). The Hebrew text reads "six of barley" the word "measures" having been supplied by the translators. What measure the writer meant is therefore unclear. 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 unlikely. Perhaps the measure was a seah (one-third of an ephah) in which case Ruth carried about one and one-fifth bushels, 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>99</sup> Perhaps the measure was six scoops made with both hands with a

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<sup>96</sup>McGee, 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>97</sup>Huey, p. 538.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., p. 539.

<sup>99</sup>Bush, pp. 178-79.

utensil used at the threshing floor.<sup>100</sup> It seems 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>101</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, 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 wait now until our Redeemer brings our redemption to completion when we shall rest finally and fully in His presence. Many writers have noted the parallels between Ruth and the church, the bride of Christ, and Boaz and Christ.<sup>102</sup>

Chapter 3 is all about how Ruth might find rest. The solution to her need was marriage to Boaz that we see planned in this chapter but 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>103</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>104</sup>

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

The gate of cities like Bethlehem 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>105</sup>

<sup>100</sup>Block, p. 698.

<sup>101</sup>B. Porten, "The Scroll of Ruth: A Rhetorical Study," *Gratz College Annual* 7 (1978):40.

<sup>102</sup>See, for example, McGee; and George E. Gardiner, *The Romance of Ruth*.

<sup>103</sup>Hubbard, p. 230.

<sup>104</sup>Wiersbe, p. 197.

<sup>105</sup>Hubbard, p. 216.

The writer did not preserve the name of the nearer kinsman (v. 1; cf. 1 Sam. 21:2; 2 Kings 6:8). He wrote that Boaz called him "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>106</sup> The reason the writer withheld his name was not that it is simply unimportant, because he could have made no reference at all to it.

"... he who was so anxious for the preservation of his own inheritance, is now not even known by name."<sup>107</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 stand.<sup>108</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>109</sup>

The text does not reveal the precise relations 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 in the name of her dead husband. Another was that the nearer kinsman had first rights of acceptance or refusal, and Boaz had 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 levirate marriage. The actions did not always go together.<sup>110</sup> In this case, Boaz wanted to do both things.<sup>111</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 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 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>112</sup> Perhaps someone took

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<sup>106</sup>Bush, p. 197.

<sup>107</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>108</sup>Bush, p. 199.

<sup>109</sup>Huey, p. 544.

<sup>110</sup>Jack Sasson, "The Issue of *Ge'ullah* in *Ruth*," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 5 (1978):60-63.

<sup>111</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>112</sup>Hubbard, p. 54.

control of the property when Naomi's family moved to Moab.<sup>113</sup> She may have had to mortgage her late husband's property to survive.<sup>114</sup> She may have been acting as guardian of her husband and sons' property rights and was now ready to dispose of their land. Or the issue may have been acquiring the right of holding and using her property without wasting its profits until the next Jubilee Year.<sup>115</sup>

We should not interpret Boaz's reference to Elimelech as the "brother" of the nearer kinsman and himself (v. 3) to mean they were necessarily blood brothers. The expression in Hebrew, as well as in English, is a broad one meaning "friend." Elimelech may have been their blood brother, but the expression does not require that. Since these three men were relatives, the possibility is strong that the field Naomi wanted to part with bordered on the lands of the other two men.<sup>116</sup>

The nearer kinsman desired Naomi's land and was willing to buy it from her (v. 4). Why the nearer kinsman had to marry 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 possible. Perhaps the following explanation provides the solution to this problem.

When the nearer kinsman chose to purchase Naomi's land he identified himself as the nearest kinsman. 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>117</sup> 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>118</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, he could not do so. The law did not require him to become a polygamist.<sup>119</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>120</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

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<sup>113</sup>Howard, p. 138.

<sup>114</sup>Merrill, "Ruth," p. 200.

<sup>115</sup>Block, p. 710.

<sup>116</sup>Morris, p. 300.

<sup>117</sup>Block, p. 715.

<sup>118</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>119</sup>See J. R. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, p. 251. Bush, pp. 221-23, provided an excursus on levirate marriage in the Old Testament.

<sup>120</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, p. 482. See further their helpful discussion of the transfer of property on pp. 488-90.

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>121</sup>

The desire to raise up a name for the deceased was one of the major motivations in Boaz's action. Boaz wanted to honor Mahlon by perpetuating his name in Israel.<sup>122</sup> The writer did not overtly condemn the nearer kinsman for doing what he did, though by withholding his name he put him in a bad light. Rather 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 would have been eligible to inherit from both Mahlon and Boaz. The Israelites regarded him as the son of both men. Naturally he was Boaz's son, but legally he was Boaz 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>123</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 (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, rather than a member of 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>124</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>125</sup> He regarded the unnamed kinsman redeemer's change of mind "the book's thorniest legal problem."<sup>126</sup>

<sup>121</sup>McGee, p. 109. See also Block, pp. 716-17; and Reed, p. 426.

<sup>122</sup>See Oswald Loretz, "The Theme of the Ruth Story," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 22 (1960):391-99.

<sup>123</sup>Hubbard, pp. 62-63.

<sup>124</sup>Gray, p. 399.

<sup>125</sup>Hubbard, p. 58.

<sup>126</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 56.

". . . 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; 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>127</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>128</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>129</sup>

Many scholars believe that it was the kinsman who removed his sandal to symbolize the completion of the transaction (v. 8).

<sup>127</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>128</sup>Ernest R. Lacheman, "Note on Ruth 4:7-8," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 56 (1937):53-56.

<sup>129</sup>*The Nelson . . .*, p. 441.



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

"The ancients believed that when a person's name is never mentioned after his death, he ceases to exist (Isa 14:20)."<sup>130</sup>

The witnesses to Boaz's transaction wished God's blessing of numerous descendants on him. They cited Rachel and Leah, both of whom, like Ruth, had joined the Israelites and had entered their land from alien nations that had demonstrated hostility to God's people. Rachel's tomb was near Bethlehem. She and her sister had 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 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>131</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 settlement of the land following Joshua's death (Num. 10:14; Judg. 1:1-2).

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

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<sup>130</sup>Block, p. 723.

<sup>131</sup>Hubbard, p. 261.

### **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>132</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 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 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 unlikely 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. God had always welcomed believers from outside Israel into the covenant community (Gen. 17; 38; Josh. 2; et al.). His purpose for Israel was that she bring 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 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. 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 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>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup>See Constable, p. 111.

<sup>133</sup>Hubbard, p. 277.

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 saying that Ruth was better to Naomi than seven sons was to say that she provided all that an ideal family could for Naomi.

Naomi became a nurse of Obed (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 his nanny.<sup>134</sup> Naomi adopted this grandson as her own child.<sup>135</sup>

Verse 17 contains one of only two instances in Scripture when a child received its name from someone other than the immediate family (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>136</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 Naomi said it was impossible for her to have a son (1:11-13). Yet at the end of the book she has a son (4:17). This motif of a need for the line of Judah, therefore, is one that the writer wanted his readers to appreciate. God provided the seed 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 opens with three funerals and closes with a wedding.<sup>137</sup>

#### **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? 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 (1 Chron. 2:5) who, like Jacob, seized the initiative to stand in the line of messianic promise from his twin brother (Gen. 38:27-30).<sup>138</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 entered Israel because they believed and valued God's promises to Israel, as Ruth did. David himself was the youngest rather than the eldest son of Jesse.

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<sup>134</sup>Bush, p. 259; Block, p. 730.

<sup>135</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, p. 492.

<sup>136</sup>Hubbard, p. 278. See also Block, pp. 734-36.

<sup>137</sup>Wiersbe, p. 197.

<sup>138</sup>Merrill, "The Book . . .," p. 134.

"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>139</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 since by marrying Ruth, Boaz perpetuated the line of Mahlon, Ruth's former husband. Evidently the genealogy goes through Boaz because Boaz 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 belong to the period of the early settlement in Canaan to the closing years of the judges."<sup>140</sup>

The fourth chapter brings to a tidy conclusion all the themes and threads spun out in the earlier chapters.<sup>141</sup> Then the genealogical appendix adds information that helps us to appreciate the greatness of God's gift of the son, Obed. He became the ancestor 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 connection with God's promise to raise up a ruler 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>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup>Idem, *Kingdom of . . .*, p. 184.

<sup>140</sup>Huey, p. 548.

<sup>141</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.

<sup>142</sup>Block, p. 736.

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

## 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, would fulfill 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>143</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>144</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 for generations to come. As such she became a kind of paradigm of what God intended for the whole nation of Israel: blessed 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>145</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 was very similar to what Christ has done for the object of His love, the church.

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<sup>143</sup>For further development of this purpose see Merrill, "The Book . . .," pp. 135-37.

<sup>144</sup>Hubbard, p. 279.

<sup>145</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 facet that shines with its own particular beauty. Perhaps the most outstanding of these is how God works out His own purpose through human instrumentality.<sup>146</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 possesses a unity that carries the reader along smoothly and excitedly to the end.

"Choices we make at the prompting of God's Holy Spirit have ramifications for good beyond our wildest dreams."<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup>See Hals; Prinsloo, pp. 330-41; and Merrill, "The Book . . .," p. 137, n. 8.

<sup>147</sup>Idem, "Ruth," p. 201.

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