

# Ruth Resources

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"Ruth" in Old Testament Historical Books class notes by Dr. Gerald **Priest**

# The Book of Ruth: An Introduction

The book of Ruth, which Block (p. 616) calls "one of the most delightful pieces ever produced in the history of literature," is so named because of the primary character of the book.<sup>1</sup>

Ruth is found among the "historical" books (Joshua-Esther) of the English Old Testament. Though the Jews early on combined Ruth with Judges to form one book, they eventually placed Ruth among the "Writings," the third section of the Hebrew canon (the first two being the "Law" and the "Prophets"). More specifically, it was one of the five books known as the "Five Scrolls." These five were read by the Jews at special occasions.<sup>2</sup> The book of Ruth was read annually during the Feast of Weeks (or Pentecost), which fell during the time of barley and wheat harvest, mid-April to early June.<sup>3</sup>

## The Setting of the Book

Ruth 1:1 states that the events described in the book took place "in the days when the judges ruled." The time when the judges ruled would have been during the early centuries of the second millennium B.C. The precise time during the days of the judges when the events of Ruth occurred is difficult to determine. Some have suggested during the Midianite oppression, a time marked by famine (see Judges 6:3-6). Others have suggested during the 80 years of rest that followed the judgeship of Ehud (see Judges 3:30), who delivered Israel from the Moabites. If so, the period of rest was likely coming to an end, as famine was a sign of God's judgment (see Deuteronomy 11:16-17). According to MacArthur (p. 72), the events narrated in Ruth occurred during an 11- to 12-year period, ten of which were spent in Moab (1:4).

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<sup>1</sup>Though Ruth is the book's primary human character, God is ultimately the main character. His name is mentioned 23 times in the book. Morris (p. 229) states: "Most of all the book is a book about God." Hubbard (p. x) adds: "God is the hero in Ruth." "When God steps in, the ordinary events of life take on extraordinary significance" (Eerdmans', p. 228).

<sup>2</sup>The other four books were the Song of Solomon (read at Passover); Lamentations (read on the 9th of Ab, the commemoration of the fall of Jerusalem); Ecclesiastes (read at the Feast of Tabernacles); and Esther (read at the Feast of Purim).

<sup>3</sup>The likely reason being that the bulk of the book takes place at the time of barley and wheat harvests (see 1:22 and 2:23).

The setting of the book of Ruth in the days of the judges is significant. The days of the judges were perhaps the most decadent days in Israel's history. By contrast, the story of Ruth is marked by fidelity to God and His covenant. Whereas in Judges the people of God turned to the idols of the surrounding nations, in Ruth a woman from one of these nations (Moab) turns to the God of Israel (Benware, p. 92). While the days of the judges were characterized by every man doing what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25), there were exceptions to this rule (such as Ruth and Boaz). No wonder Geisler (p. 101) remarks: "Ruth is a lily in the mud pond of Judges."<sup>4</sup> Just as a light's brilliance is magnified the darker the surroundings, so the more brilliant the story of Ruth shines in light of the era in which it takes place.

### **The Author of the Book**

According to Jewish tradition, Ruth was written by Samuel. "Samuel wrote the book which bears his name and the Book of Judges and Ruth" (Babylonian Talmud). This is consistent with the previously-mentioned fact that the Jews at times viewed Judges and Ruth as one book. However, assuming the book was written after David had become well known (based on the genealogy that concludes the book), it is unlikely that Samuel was its author, as he died before David became king (though Samuel did anoint David king prior to the former's death). There are, however, no other satisfying alternatives. Hubbard (p. 24) makes the case that the author was a woman, based on the book's supposed feminine perspective. In the absence of any definitive evidence, however, it seems best to leave the authorship of Ruth in the realm of speculation.

### **The Date of the Book**

The earliest possible date one may assign to the writing of the book of Ruth is approximately 1000 B.C., the time David became king. The only real clue we have within the book itself is in 4:7, where the author finds it necessary to explain the significance of removing one's shoe. The implication is that the book was written long enough after the events described in it to necessitate an explanation of this now-forgotten gesture.<sup>5</sup> How long after is

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<sup>4</sup>Merrill (p. 185) calls the book of Ruth "an oasis of purity and wholesomeness in a desert of corruption and anarchy." In like manner, Block (p. 614) calls it "an oasis in an ethical wasteland." Reed (p. 415) adds: "The Book of Ruth gleams like a beautiful pearl against a jet-black background." In like manner, Davis (p. 170) writes: "Among the rugged, dry, barrenness of the Judges period, the Book of Ruth is indeed a precious gem to behold."

<sup>5</sup>"That the shoe ceremony requires explanation (4:7) implies a time when the custom had become obsolete and open to misunderstanding" (Hubbard, p. 25).

unknown.<sup>6</sup> In light of the fact that the genealogy at the end of the book ends with David, it may be that the book was written sometime during his reign. "Had it been written as late as the time of Solomon, it is quite likely that David's famous son also would have been listed in the notice of Ruth's descendants" (Archer, p. 286).

### **The Purpose for the Book**

Many suggestions have been given as to the purpose of writing for the book of Ruth (see pp. 511-512 of Huey, pp. 239-242 of Morris, and pp. 35-39 of Hubbard for a list of the alternatives). Some see no real purpose at all, other than that of entertainment. Other more satisfactory suggestions include God's interest in Gentiles (seen, for example, in the book's emphasis on Ruth's ethnicity in 1:22, 2:2, 6, 10, 21, 4:5, and 10; interestingly, as with Luke in the New Testament, so Ruth is the only Old Testament book named after a Gentile) and a model of piety in the midst of rebellion. Most agree, however, that the purpose of the book of Ruth is closely connected with the mention of David in the concluding genealogy. As Hubbard (p. 38) states: "Since the book ends with David, any suggested purpose should somehow relate to him."

Taking this fact into account, the purpose of the book seems to be the validation of the Davidic dynasty. Gerleman (cited in Hubbard, p. 42) calls the book "an apology for King David." Hubbard (p. 42) adds: "In sum, the book has a political purpose: to win popular acceptance of David's rule." Assuming that such was being challenged<sup>7</sup>, the author of Ruth was attempting to show that David and his successors had every right to rule. This he does through a genealogy showing the continuity between the patriarchs (represented by Judah) and David himself.<sup>8</sup> This he also does by showing that David's partial Moabite ancestry (though the Moabites were a

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<sup>6</sup>The Hebrew phrase translated "in former time" in 4:7 is used elsewhere in Scripture to indicate a period as little as a generation or less or as great as 700 years (Edward Campbell, "Ruth" in Volume 7 of the *Anchor Bible*, p. 147).

<sup>7</sup>"Apparently, the book addressed a context in which the claim of David or his descendants to kingship was a matter of discussion if not of outright controversy. At issue was whether the Davidic dynasty represented continuity or discontinuity with Israel's ancestral past" (Hubbard, p. 42).

<sup>8</sup>"The point seems to be that the same divine guidance which led Israel's famous ancestors has brought David on the scene" (Hubbard, p. 41). "... [T]he author's aim is to explain how, in the providence of God, the divinely chosen King David could emerge from the dark period of the judges" (Block, p. 595).

cursed people, Deuteronomy 23:3-6) did not diminish his right to rule.

### **The Theme of the Book**

The theme of the book of Ruth may be found in one of its key words, the Hebrew noun, *hesed* (found in 1:8, 2:20, and 3:10), which means loyal love; "compassionate loyalty" (Hubbard, p. 1); "loyal devotion, kindness" (Hubbard, p. 65); "covenant loyalty" (Huey, p. 513); "loyalty borne out of love and kindness toward those to whom a person is responsible" (Reed, p. 417); "that quality of kindness, graciousness, and loyalty that goes beyond the call of duty" (Bush, p. 42).

Even in an age of apostasy, God maintained his loyal love for His own. In the book of Ruth, God displays His *hesed* by providing for both the short-term (through Ruth and Boaz) and long-term (through Obed) needs of Naomi. Not only is such loyal love shown vertically, but also horizontally, as Ruth shows it towards Naomi (see especially 1:16-17), while Boaz shows it towards Naomi and Ruth. The book of Ruth is the story of how God in loyal love through the loyal love of others fills those who are empty (compare 1:20-21 with 4:14-15). More ultimately, it is the story of how God in His providence (putting the right people in the right place at the right point in time for the right purpose) preserved and perpetuated the Messianic line during the darkest days in Israel's history (see chart at end of this lesson, taken from p. 51 of the *Holman Book of Biblical Charts, Maps, and Reconstructions*).

### **Outline**

This outline of the book of Ruth is taken from Roland Murphy, "Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther" in Volume 13 of *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, p. 85:

- I. Setting the scene (1:1-5)
- II. Naomi returns home (1:6-18)
- III. Interlude: Arrival of Naomi and Ruth in Bethlehem (1:19-22)
- IV. Ruth, the Moabitess, finds favor in the field of Boaz (2:1-17)
- V. Interlude: Ruth reports to Naomi (2:18-23)
- VI. Naomi's plan (3:1-5)
- VII. Boaz pledges himself to Ruth at the threshing floor (3:6-15)
- VIII. Interlude: Ruth reports to Naomi (3:16-18)
- IX. The transaction at the Bethlehem gate (4:1-12)
- X. Conclusion: the birth of a son (4:13-17)
- XI. Genealogical appendix (4:18-22)

This outline is taken from MacArthur (p. 75):

- I. Elimelech and Naomi's Ruin in Moab (1:1-5)
- II. Naomi and Ruth's Return to Bethlehem (1:6-22)
- III. Boaz's Reception of Ruth in His Field (2:1-23)
- IV. Ruth's Romance with Boaz (3:1-18)
- V. Boaz's Redemption of Ruth (4:1-12)
- VI. God's Reward of Boaz and Ruth with a Son (4:13-17)
- VII. David's Right to the Throne of Judah (4:18-22)

This outline is taken from Nelson's (p. 86):

Part One: Ruth's Love is Demonstrated (1:1-2:23)

- I. Ruth's Decision to Remain with Naomi (1:1-18)
- II. Ruth's Devotion to Care for Naomi (1:19-2:23)

Part Two: Ruth's Love is Rewarded (3:1-4:22)

- I. Ruth's Request for Redemption by Boaz (3:1-18)
- II. Ruth's Reward of Redemption by Boaz (4:1-22)

# Ruth 1

In Ruth 1, the author tells the story of a woman by the name of Naomi, who sojourns with her family in the land of Moab due to a famine in her native land of Judah. While in Moab, Naomi's husband (Elimelech) and two sons (Mahlon and Chilion) die, leaving her and her two daughters-in-law (Ruth and Orpah) without a provider. Upon learning that the famine back home has ended, Naomi returns to her hometown of Bethlehem, accompanied by one of the daughters-in-law, Ruth. In this chapter, Naomi experiences a loss of food (v. 1), then a loss of family (vs. 3 and 5), which results in a perceived loss of fullness (v. 21).

## Verse 1

For more on the significance of the opening words of the book ("Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land"), see "The Setting of the Book" in the Introductory Lesson. In light of Deuteronomy 11:16-17 (cf. Leviticus 26:18-20 and Deuteronomy 28:23-24), the famine that came upon Judah was likely a sign of judgment, not surprising considering the era in which these events took place, "the days when the judges ruled."

There is some question as to whether or not Elimelech's decision to take his family to Moab, a place where the grass was greener, was proper.<sup>9</sup> Rather

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<sup>9</sup>Reed (p. 417) calls the decision "irresponsible," adding: "Unfolding events indicate that it was an unwise choice, and that Bethlehem, not Moab, was the place where God would bless him" (p. 419). Block (p. 613) writes: "... [T]he family's move to Moab to escape the famine looks like a lapse of spiritual commitment. Instead of dealing with root causes, they reacted to symptoms. Instead of recognizing the famine to be punishment for the nation's sin and repenting of their spiritual infidelity, they left their people and their land for the 'unclean' land of Moab and 'It seems ... that Elimelech designed his own solution instead of calling on God for mercy and repenting of the sins that plagued the nation during the dark days of the judges' (p. 627). Younger (p. 429) adds: "[God] expected his people to live according to his Word in the land he had given them and not to go and live in another land when difficult times arose. This will was clearly revealed in his Word. Elimelech, like many Israelites of his day, lacked the faith to trust God in the midst of this famine. The move to Moab was highly unusual and was outside of God's revealed will." Henry (p. 253) states: "I see not how [Elimelech's] removal into the country of Moab, upon this occasion, could be justified" and "It is an evidence of a discontented, distrustful, unstable spirit, to be weary of the place in which God hath set us, and to be for leaving it immediately whenever we meet with any uneasiness or inconvenience in it." Jewish tradition attributed the subsequent deaths of Elimelech and his sons to this move. Interestingly the name, Elimelech means "my God is king." Could it be that he was not living up to his name

than removal from the scene, perhaps their response should have been repentance of sin.

The Moabites were descendants of Lot by the incestuous relationship of Lot and his eldest daughter (see Genesis 19:36-37). They were a wicked people, worshipping the god, Chemosh (see Numbers 21:29 and 1 Kings 11:7), a worship that involved child sacrifice (see 2 Kings 3:26-27). In fact, the Moabites were a cursed people (see Deuteronomy 23:3-6). The Moabites were one of the nations that oppressed the Israelites during the days of the judges (see Judges 3:12-30).

## **Verse 2**

According to Roland Murphy ("Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther" in Volume 13 of *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, p. 88), Mahlon means "sick" and Chilion means "come to an end." Are their names some kind of omen? Huey (p. 519) cautions: "In the face of etymological uncertainties, however, it is best not to read too much hidden significance into the names of Elimelech's family."

Ephrathah was evidently an area within Bethlehem that was home to the Ephrathite clan, of which Elimelech and his family were members (as David would later be, 1 Samuel 17:12).

Though the family's original intent was to "sojourn" (i.e., dwell temporarily) in Moab (v. 1), they ended up continuing there (v. 2), nearly a decade altogether (v. 4).

## **Verse 4**

In light of such passages as Deuteronomy 7:3, 23:3, Ezra 9:1-2, and Nehemiah 13:23-27, there is some question as to the propriety of Mahlon (who married Ruth, 4:10) and Chilion (who married Orpah) marrying Moabite women. Henry, writing in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, says: "All agree that this was ill done." Younger (p. 429) writes: "... [T]he marriages of [Elimelech's] sons were outside of God's revealed will for his people." Such

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in failing to trust God to meet the material needs of his family in Judah in the midst of famine? In defense of Elimelech's decision one might point to the fact that both Abraham (see Genesis 12:10) and Isaac (see Genesis 26:1) did the same, Abraham sojourning in Egypt and Isaac in Philistia. However, as Davis (p. 159) points out: "It is also significant to observe that problems usually attended such migrations on the part of God's people."

mixed marrying was a characteristic of the days of the judges (see Judges 3:5-6).

### **Verse 5**

According to Davis (p. 159), "Jewish commentators have generally regarded that the death of the two sons was an evidence of divine judgment for such intermarriage." Cundall (p. 178) writes in this regard: "No direct judgment is given on their departure from their own land (which God had given them) or on the foreign marriages contracted by Mahlon and Chilion, but this may be implicit in the triple disaster which struck the family."

In the male-dependent culture in which Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah lived, the deaths of Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion were doubly devastating, threatening the three women with deprivation.

The fact that Mahlon and Chilion died childless may be yet another indication of God's judgment, based upon such passages as Deuteronomy 28:15 and 18.

### **Verse 6**

After all the doom and gloom of the previous verses, here is a glimmer of hope. To "visit" means to show favor to, "to intervene on behalf of, to come to the aid of" (Block, p. 631). See also Exodus 4:31 and Psalm 8:4.

Interestingly, Bethlehem means "house of bread." The house of bread is once again living up to its name (cf. v. 1).

Note that it is God who gives grain (see especially Matthew 6:11). "Modern urbanites living far from farmers' fields would do well to remember that ultimately God, not the grocer, stocks their shelves" (Hubbard, p. 101).

### **Verse 8**

Normally the expression would read "father's house." This may be an indication that the book was purposefully written from a feminine perspective. Block (p. 632) suggests: "In each instance the phrase 'house of a mother' is found in a context involving love and marriage. Accordingly, by sending each of her daughters-in-law home to her 'mother's house' Naomi is releasing them to remarry." It may also be that Naomi is trying to make a corresponding contrast, between their mothers and their mother-in-law. In other words, wouldn't you rather be with your mother than with

your mother-in-law?

Here is the first occurrence of the book's key word, *hesed* (translated "kindly" in the KJV). See "The Theme of the Book" in the Introductory Lesson for an explanation of this term's meaning and significance in Ruth.

### **Verse 10**

To give an idea of what was at stake, Huey (p. 522) comments: "By following [Naomi], [Ruth and Orpah] were abandoning their families, friends, homeland, deities, and prospects for remarriage."

### **Verse 11**

This is the first allusion in the book to the practice of Levirate (from the Latin word, *levir*, meaning "brother-in-law") marriage. A Levirate marriage was one in which a man [an unmarried man<sup>10</sup>] was obligated by law to marry the widow of a deceased brother in order to provide a descendant for his brother (see Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

### **Verse 13**

From a purely human, worldly, temporal, earthbound, "life under the sun" (Ecclesiastes) perspective, it appears as though Naomi's assessment is accurate. As we shall see, however, God in His providence can use seeming tragedy to accomplish much greater good. While Naomi affirms God's greatness (in particular His sovereignty; cf. Job in Job 1:21 and 2:10), she loses sight of His goodness. As Block (p. 647) comments: "She does indeed ascribe sovereignty to God, but this is a sovereignty without grace, an omnipotent power without compassion, a judicial will without mercy." Naomi needed to come to the realization that God was not against her, but for her (see Psalm 118:6 and Romans 8:31).

### **Verse 14**

While Orpah kisses Naomi goodbye, Ruth clings to her. The Hebrew verb translated "clave" is the same one used in Genesis 2:24.

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<sup>10</sup>“We should assume that the implementation of Deuteronomy 25:5,6 could involve only the nearest relative who was eligible for marriage as qualified by other demands of the law” (MacArthur, p. 74). See also Block, p. 636.

### **Verses 16-17**

Rather than following the lead of her sister-in-law (v. 15), Ruth decides instead to follow the Lord by, in the first words she speaks by herself in the book, declaring her faith in Him (see also 2:12), burning all bridges. Davis (p. 161) rightly calls this "one of the highest expressions of faith to be found in the Bible." It is the Old Testament counterpart to 1 Thessalonians 1:9. Unlike her ancestor, Lot, who left the land of promise to seek God's blessing elsewhere (Genesis 13), Ruth leaves her homeland to enter the land of promise (Roy Zuck, *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 110). This expression is the essence of the *hesed* Ruth would go on to show to Naomi.

### **Verse 19**

The question asked by the Bethlehemites, "Is this Naomi?" may be consistent with the full-to-empty claim made by Naomi in verse 21. As Block (p. 645) explains: "... [T]he years of grief and deprivation have surely taken their toll on Naomi's form and visage. This one who had left Bethlehem as *Naomi*, 'the pleasant one,' a robust woman in her prime, had returned as a haggard and destitute old woman."

### **Verses 20-21**

The name, Naomi means "pleasant, beautiful, good, lovely," while the name "Mara" means "bitter." Naomi's words are reminiscent of Job in Job 27:2. In light of Naomi's comments, see my comments on verse 13 above.

One cannot help but notice Naomi's self-absorbed attitude at this point. Besides the predominance of first person personal pronouns (the "I"s and "me"s), she claims that God has brought her home empty, even though Ruth, the one whom God will use to make her full again, is with her.

### **Verse 22**

The timing of their return to the "house of bread" (Bethlehem) is highly significant (God's timing is always perfect). Being the time of harvest, they were able to take advantage of the law of gleaning, as we shall see in chapter 2.<sup>11</sup> The time of barley harvest was in late April/early May. So, as the first chapter ends, we have yet another (cf. v. 6) glimmer of hope.

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<sup>11</sup>"Ruth and Naomi were obviously very poor, and it was well for them that they arrived in their new home at the beginning of harvest. It enabled them to get some food immediately" (Morris, p. 268). Hubbard (p. 131) adds: "One almost senses a delighted, slightly smiling narrator thinking, 'What a coincidence! They arrived just in time for barley harvest!'"

# Ruth 2

In Ruth 2, Ruth goes to glean and is providentially led to the field of a man named Boaz, who just happens to be a relative of Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelech. Ruth finds favor in Boaz's sight and returns home to tell her mother-in-law all that has taken place that day.

## Verse 1

This is the first allusion in the book to the law of redemption (cf. comments on verse 20). According to this law, the nearest relative (a kinsman) of someone who had suffered a loss of some kind (such as a loss of land, Leviticus 25:25) was responsible to restore the loss by an act of redemption, buying back what was forfeited. Boaz was such a kinsman of Elimelech (cf. verse 3), likely a part of the Ephrathite clan (see comments on 1:2).

Boaz is called "a mighty man of wealth." The actual Hebrew phrase not only connotes material wealth but also moral wealth. Bush (p. 98) translates "a man of substance and standing," Younger (p. 440) "a real, substantial man of character." The feminine counterpart is found in Proverbs 31:10's "who can find a virtuous woman?"

## Verse 2

Ruth is seeking to take advantage of the law of gleaning, a welfare by work system (cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:10).<sup>12</sup> According to this law, landowners were to leave the corners of their fields unreaped so as to allow the poor to reap them. Also, these landowners were to leave the scraps dropped by the reapers for the poor to gather (see Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22, and Deuteronomy 24:19-21).

While Naomi appears to be paralyzed by her pain, Ruth does something about their plight, taking advantage of the means available to them, and diligently so (see verses 7 and 17). Perhaps this is a case in point of the popular proverb, "God helps those who help themselves."

"'Corn' is the British equivalent of 'grain'" (Huey, p. 527).

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<sup>12</sup> The Law also allowed for welfare without work (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

### **Verse 3**

I love this verse! Though the author states that it was by chance<sup>13</sup> (a tongue-in-cheek expression, no doubt) that Ruth gleaned in the field of Boaz, the clear implication is that God led Ruth to the exact place He wanted her to be.<sup>14</sup>

### **Verse 4**

The opening words of this verse continue to point us in the direction of God's providence, His placing the right people in the right place at the right point in time for the right purpose, as Boaz comes from Bethlehem at a point in time when he is able to meet Ruth.<sup>15</sup>

Our first impression of Boaz is certainly an impressive one (cf. what is said of him in the comments on verse 1), as the first words he utters in the book are a divine blessing upon his workers. His workers respond in kind. Talk about good labor-management relations! Huey (p. 528) comments: "This kind of salutation would rarely be heard in the fields today." Davis (p. 162) adds: "If the laborer-management situation were conditioned by such theology, perhaps many of the problems would be solved in a shorter period of time."

### **Verses 8-9**

In verse 8 Boaz addresses Ruth as "my daughter," likely an indication of the vast difference in age between the two (see also 3:10).

Boaz's generosity in these verses is magnified in light of the recent famine, the natural temptation being to hoard one's crop (Benware, p. 93). His

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<sup>13</sup>The literal rendering is "her chance chanced upon."

<sup>14</sup>"The sentence smacks of hyperbole—striking understatement intended to create the exact opposite impression . . . the reader is probably to react smilingly, 'Accident? Of course not!'" (Hubbard, p. 141). "By excessively attributing Ruth's good fortune to chance, the phrase points ironically to the opposite, namely, to the sovereignty of God" (Younger, p. 441). "The statement is ironical; its purpose is to undermine purely rational explanations for human experiences and to refine the reader's understanding of providence. In reality he is screaming, 'See the hand of God at work here!'" (Block, p. 653). It would do us all well to always be looking for the hand of God in life.

<sup>15</sup>Notice how the verse begins with the attention-grabbing words, "And, behold" (or, "and look"). Bush (p. 107) brings out the flavor by translating, "And wouldn't you know it, Boaz came from Bethlehem!"

generosity in regards to the drinking water is pointed out by Block (p. 660): "In a cultural context in which normally foreigners would draw for Israelites, and women would draw for men (Gen 24:10-20), Boaz's authorization of Ruth to drink from water his men had drawn is indeed extraordinary."

### **Verse 10**

Though Ruth was certainly a "stranger" to Boaz in the sense that this was the first time they had personally met (although, according to verse 11, Boaz knew about Ruth), the word means "foreigner" (see also 1 Kings 11:1).

### **Verse 11**

Boaz rightly points out the price Ruth has paid to follow the Lord (cf. comments on 1:10). Ruth's action is reminiscent of Abraham in Genesis 12:1f. Sometimes we need to be willing to forsake family in order to follow the Lord.

### **Verse 12**

Boaz's words at the start of this verse are testament to God's remunerative justice, His rewarding of right (cf. 1 Samuel 26:23, Psalm 18:20-24, Proverbs 13:21b, 25:22, Galatians 6:8b, Ephesians 6:8, and Hebrews 6:10; we may also speak of God's retributive justice, His punishment of wrong). Morris (p. 276) interestingly notes: "In due course, the prayer was answered through him who uttered it."

The end of this verse is another (cf. 1:16) indication of Ruth's conversion. The expression Boaz uses is one that Block (p. 663) rightly calls "one of the most beautiful pictures of divine care in all of Scripture." "Wings" is a "zoomorphism" for God's protection (see also Psalm 36:7, 57:1, and 91:4).

### **Verse 17**

To "beat out" is to thresh, the means of separating the ears of grain from the stalk. This was usually done with a stick.

An ephah of barley amounts to anywhere from 29-50 pounds, enough to feed the two women for several weeks (Huey, p. 532). If Ruth continued to produce at such a prodigious pace, by the end of the harvest (v. 23), she would have a year's supply of food for both Naomi and herself.

## **Verse 20**

Here is the second occurrence in the book of the key word, *hesed* (translated "kindness" in the KJV). It is difficult to discern if the subject of the kindness is God or Boaz. The difference is not as pronounced as one might think, for if the subject is God, His *hesed* is by means of Boaz, while if the subject is Boaz, his *hesed* is undoubtedly divinely driven.

Naomi's reference to "the dead" is likely indicative of her expectation that Boaz will perform the role of "kinsman redeemer" (Hebrew *goel*).<sup>16</sup> A *goel* was a kinsman who redeemed or set loose that which in any way had been bound. He "was the nearest adult male blood relative who served as an advocate for any vulnerable and/or unfortunate clan member in order to correct any disruption to clan wholeness, well-being, or [peace] (especially through the redemption or restoration of property, persons, or lineage)" (Younger, p. 399). For a delineation of the responsibilities of a *goel*, see page 533 of Huey, pages 188-189 of Hubbard, page 674 of Block, pages 136-137 of Bush, and pages 400-401 of Younger.

## **Verse 23**

These harvests ended in early June.

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<sup>16</sup>"Given the *goel* duty and Boaz's evident favor toward Ruth, Naomi's remark probably hinted that Boaz was a potential husband for Ruth. It may also have alluded to a future heir for Elimelech from that marriage" (Hubbard, p. 187).

# Ruth 3

In Ruth 3, Ruth, at Naomi's request, goes to Boaz at the threshing floor to ask him to marry her, seeing that he is a kinsman redeemer. Boaz eagerly agrees. However, he informs Ruth that there is a kinsman nearer than him. Ruth returns home to Naomi to tell her all that transpired that evening.

## Verse 1

Naomi wants to help Ruth find a husband, "rest" being a word with marital overtones (so NIV: "should I not try to find a home for you ...?; cf. 1:9). In that time and place particularly, marriage was the means of long-term "rest" or security for a woman.

As with Boaz, who became the means God used to answer his own prayer (see 2:12 and comments on), so Naomi becomes the means God uses to answer her prayer in 1:9.

Naomi seems to have turned a corner at this point in two respects: 1) No longer seemingly paralyzed by her pain, she, as did Ruth at the start of chapter 2 (see comments on 2:2), shows initiative, seeking to solve a problem by making use of an available provision and 2) Turning from her self-absorption (see comments on 1:20-21) to seeking the welfare of Ruth.

## Verse 2

The "and" at the start of this verse connects it with the previous one, clearly implying that Boaz is the potential husband that Naomi has in mind for Ruth. That Boaz is such a potential husband for Ruth is seen by the reminder that he is "of our kindred," thus one who can fulfill the role of a kinsman redeemer (cf. 2:1, 3, 20, 3:9 and comments on 2:1 and 20).

Winnowing was the process of separating the seed (in this case, barley) from the chaff following the threshing process (on threshing, see comments on 2:17). The mixture would be tossed vertically into the air with a winnowing fork, allowing the wind to blow away the lighter chaff and the heavier seed to fall to the ground. Winnowing would take place at a threshing floor in an elevated place conducive to wind currents.

### **Verse 3**

Naomi's instruction to Ruth to bathe, put on perfume ("anoint thee"), and change her outfit is most likely designed to indicate that, like David in 2 Samuel 12:20, she should "end her period of mourning and so signal her return to the normal activities and desires of life, which, of course, would include marriage" (Bush, p. 152) by "remov[ing] the symbols and the garments of her widowhood" (Bush, p. 155).

Naomi's instruction to Ruth to wait until Boaz had eaten before approaching him with such an important issue is wise advice. There is much truth in the proverb, "timing is everything."

### **Verse 7**

This verse has led some to suggest that Boaz was drunk.<sup>17</sup> While the expression, "his heart was merry" can describe drunkenness (see 1 Samuel 25:36, 2 Samuel 13:28, and Esther 1:10), it can also describe the satisfaction that follows the eating of a good meal (see Judges 19:6-9 and 1 Kings 21:7). It is "a typical Semitic way to express the emotions of well-being and contentment associated with feasting" (Hubbard, pp. 206-207).

Boaz spending the night beside his grain pile was most likely to prevent any grain from being stolen or eaten by wild animals. His choice of the end of the pile as his place of rest was a highly providential one, allowing for the privacy needed for the ensuing encounter with Ruth.

Why did Ruth uncover Boaz's feet? Probably to cause him to eventually wake-up (Morris, p. 286). There are some who suggest that Boaz and Ruth had sexual relations at this time (due to the terminology employed in the verse<sup>18</sup> and the reputation of the threshing floor<sup>19</sup>). However, such is highly unlikely, considering the character of the two individuals involved and Boaz's contention in verse 11 that Ruth is a "virtuous woman" (cf. the same in regards to

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<sup>17</sup> Block (p. 684) opines: "... Boaz's 'drinking' probably included an alcoholic beverage ...." and "... [Boaz] probably also was feeling the effects of the wine" (p. 689).

<sup>18</sup>See pages. 203-204 of Hubbard and page 685 of Block for possible sexual connotations in the verse.

<sup>19</sup>"The popular mind associated threshing floors with licentiousness" (Hubbard, p. 201). See Hosea 9:1.

Boaz in 2:1 and comments on).<sup>20</sup> "Those who interpret a sexual relation in the events reflect their twentieth-century cultural conditioning of sexual permissiveness" (Huey, p. 538).

### **Verse 9**

Ruth's request that Boaz spread his skirt over her (an ancient custom for seeking rest or protection) was tantamount to her asking him to marry her (see Ezekiel 16:8). Thus, Ruth is "popping the question." "In that time and place such an act carried no overtones of impropriety whatsoever, for it was quite legal and customary for a woman to make known her matrimonial aspirations in such a fashion, especially under those circumstances regarding property redemption" (Merrill, p. 187). "Wings" in 2:12 and "skirt" in this verse translate the same Hebrew noun. Bush (p. 181) makes the connection between the two: "She who came to find shelter under Yahweh's 'wing' will find her full reward from Yahweh when the man who himself voiced such a blessing [in 2:12] spreads his 'wing' over her in marriage!"

### **Verse 10**

"Kindness" is the third and final occurrence of the book's key word, *hesed*, meaning loyal love. The *hesed* that is being alluded to may be Ruth's loyal love to the family of Elimelech, seen by her willingness to marry Boaz and thereby, God enabling (4:13), continue the family line.

As suggested earlier (see comments on 2:8), there seems to have been a significant discrepancy in age between Boaz and Ruth.

### **Verse 11**

As did Boaz (see 2:1 and comments on), so Ruth had a righteous reputation, known by all as a virtuous woman (cf. Proverbs 31:10f). Such a righteous reputation is priceless (Proverbs 22:1). May the same be said of us.

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<sup>20</sup> "... [T]he overtly sexual interpretation ... runs roughshod over the narrator's characterization of both [Naomi] and Ruth in the story. How could Boaz, also a virtuous person, bless Ruth for her action (v. 10) and characterize her as a supremely noble woman (v. 11) if she was seeking sexual favors from him" (Block, p. 686).

### **Verse 13**

Boaz's insistence that Ruth stay the night was probably with her safety in mind. "The dead of night was no time for a young woman to be out alone! Thus, by this command, Boaz protected Ruth from physical harm" (Hubbard, p. 218).

That Boaz did not seek to usurp the right of priority possessed by the nearer kinsman is testament to his integrity.

### **Verse 14**

To rise up "before one could know another" was probably just before dawn. Boaz was careful to avoid the appearance of evil.

### **Verse 15**

The measure is not specified. If the measure was the ephah (as in 2:17), then the total weight would have been anywhere from 174-285 pounds. A more realistic option is the seah, one-third of an ephah (thus, two ephahs in all). This would make the total weight anywhere from 58-95 pounds. Another option is the omer, one-tenth of an ephah. This would make the total weight anywhere from 18-30 pounds. For comparison's sake, recall that the one ephah Ruth gleaned in 2:17 provided food for Ruth and Naomi for several weeks.

Block (p. 700) suggests that this grain may have been a down payment of the bride price, the bride price being given at the time of betrothal by the future groom to the parents of the future bride (in this case, Naomi is functioning in the place of the bride's parents). Bush (p. 183) suggests that this grain served as a "cover" for Ruth, giving justification for her visit to the threshing floor that night.

### **Verse 16**

The question translated "Who art thou?" in the KJV could better be translated as "How did it go?" (so NIV and NASB), as seen by Naomi's use of "my daughter" and by the way Ruth answered the question.

### **Verse 17**

The word "empty" is significant. Remember Naomi's complaint in 1:21 that the Lord had brought her back home to Bethlehem "empty." Naomi is no longer empty, and will become even less so before the story is through. The significance of the author of Ruth having Ruth,

not Boaz, be the one to communicate these words of Boaz is captured by Bush (p. 187): "... [T]hese words of Boaz, explaining the gift, which is his pledge that Naomi's emptiness is over, are placed in the mouth of Ruth, who not only 'heard it from the depths of Naomi's despair,' but whose very presence there with Naomi, ignored and unacknowledged in the blindness of her bitterness, was clear evidence that her emptiness even then was to some extent illusory and most certainly temporary."

# Ruth 4

In Ruth 4, Boaz discusses the matter of redemption with the nearer kinsman. Eventually, the nearer kinsman relinquishes his right of redemption, giving Boaz the opportunity to do so. The transaction is finalized in the presence of the city officials, Boaz marries Ruth, and God gives them a son, Obed, who would prove to be the grandfather of David.

## Verse 1

The gate was the place in an ancient near eastern city where official business was conducted (see, for example, Deuteronomy 21:19).<sup>21</sup>

The immediate appearance of the nearer kinsman (seen by the words “and behold,”<sup>22</sup> which Younger, p. 473 and Bush, p. 196 translate “and just then” and which Younger, p. 473 suggests are “meant to convey surprise”) is believed by many commentators to be another (cf. other such instances as the return of Naomi and Ruth at the time of harvest at the end of chapter 1; Ruth just happening to glean in the field of Boaz at the start of chapter 2; and Boaz returning from Bethlehem at a time that enabled him to meet Ruth in 2:4f) instance in the book of Ruth of God’s providence, His placing of just the right people in just the right place at just the right point in time for the accomplishment of His purposes. Younger (p. 473) concludes: “... [T]his is not simply coincidence but the hidden hand of Yahweh at work.” Block (p. 705) concurs: “With a superficial reading of the book the timing of the kinsman-redeemer’s arrival may seem coincidental, but a deeper reading will recognize again the hidden hand of God,” as does Henry (p. 271): “Providence favoured Boaz in ordering it so that this kinsman should come by thus opportunely, just when the matter was ready to be proposed to him.”

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<sup>21</sup>See also Genesis 19:1’s “Lot sat in the gate of Sodom,” indicating that Lot had become so attached to Sodom that he was a member of its city council.

<sup>22</sup>These same words are found in 2:4 (see comments on) and have a similar significance here (in 4:1) as they do there (in 2:4). E. F. Campbell, Jr. (cited in Younger, p. 473) states: “Here, as there [2:4], the scene is set (Boaz taking his place at the gate), where upon at just the right moment along comes just the right person. ... [T]he impact of the Hebrew construction ... conveys a hint of God’s working behind the scenes.”

## **Verse 2**

These ten men were most likely members of the city council of Bethlehem. It may be that ten members were necessary in order to have a quorum. These men, along with the other people present that day, would serve as witnesses to the proceedings to follow (cf. verses 9-11), providing the necessary notarization.

## **Verses 3-4**

The selling of land was extremely rare in Israel, done only in cases of extreme hardship. Such selling, however, was not the outright, transfer-of-ownership type of which we think today. What was sold was merely the right to the use of the land, as the land was perpetually held in possession by the one to whom it penultimately belonged (it ultimately belonged to God, Leviticus 25:23), as seen by the fact that every 50 years, during the Year of Jubilee, the use of the land reverted back to its original owner (Leviticus 25:28). Thus, in this scenario, Naomi was selling the right to the use of the land until the next Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:14-16). Accordingly, both Bush (p. 189) and Younger (p. 475) translate the verb "surrender the right to," rather than "sell." In keeping with the law of redemption (see comments on 2:1), a relative of Elimelech would be expected to purchase the right to the use of the land being sold, thereby preventing such a right from being transferred to someone outside the clan.

Another possible scenario, suggested by some, is that the right to the use of the land had already been sold by Elimelech (perhaps before the family moved to Moab) to someone outside the (Ephrathite) clan and that, now that Naomi has returned to Judah, she has the opportunity (being back in the area) to buy back/redeem the right to the use of it. However, she is not in a financial position to do so. Thus, she is relinquishing to a fellow clan member her right to buy back/redeem (from the non-clan member who currently owns the right to the use of the land) the right to the use of the land. Thus, in this scenario, Naomi is not selling her right to the use of the land. Rather, she is surrendering her right to buy back/redeem the right to the use of the land which has already been sold.

Since we know "the rest of the story," the dramatic tension generated by the initial affirmative response of the nearer kinsman is not nearly as great for us as it was for those present that day at the gate. Block (p. 712) writes at this point: "If Ruth was watching, her heart must have sunk."

### **Verse 5**

Though Levirate marriage (see comments on 1:11) and the law of redemption (see comments on 2:1) were separate things, both were apparently considered part of the broad responsibilities of a kinsman redeemer (for kinsman redeemer, see comments on 2:20).<sup>23</sup> As Hubbard (p. 49) states: "Ruth combines two practices which are normally thought to be separate, namely, the redemption of familial property and the procreation of an heir for a deceased relative (4:3-5)." Thus, people and property, lady and land [and also line], or, as Hubbard (p. 230) puts it, "both girl and ground."

That Ruth, not Naomi, is the one whom the nearer kinsman was to marry and through whom he was to perpetuate the line of Elimelech suggests that Naomi was beyond the age of child bearing.

### **Verse 6**

Why exactly couldn't/wouldn't the nearer kinsman marry Ruth? Most likely, because of the cost/sacrifice involved. Morris (p. 305) suggests: "He could not [would not?] assume the double financial burden of buying the field and supporting the widow." S. Herbert Bess (cited in Davis, pp. 168-169) opines: "[The nearer kinsman] must have reasoned that in order to buy Naomi's land he would have to invest a part of the value of his own estate, or inheritance. Then should he father a child of Ruth's that son would in Mahlon's name, not his own, become the heir of land which he bought with money from his own estate. He seemed willing to redeem Naomi's property if it should not hurt him financially, or if he might possibly gain by it, but he could not accept the responsibility if it should eventuate in a diminution of his own resources and a consequent injustice to his own heirs."

### **Verses 7-8**

For the significance of the phrase in verse 7, "in former time," see "The Date of the Book" in the Introductory Lesson.

"The passing of the sandal symbolized Boaz's right to walk on the land as his property" (Reed, p. 427).

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<sup>23</sup>For a summation of these responsibilities, in addition to the resources mentioned in comments on 2:20, one may consult page 168 of Davis, page 51 of Hubbard, and page 57 of Priest.

### **Verses 12-13**

Though Ruth was still a Moabite racially, she was no longer so religiously, thus making Boaz's marriage to her legitimate (see comments on 1:4).

Verse 12's "the seed which the LORD shall give thee" and verse 13's "the LORD gave her conception" is testament to the truth that children are a gift from the Lord (Genesis 33:5, 48:9, and Psalm 127:3). Ruth's fertility is magnified all the more in light of her infertility while married to Mahlon.

### **Verses 14-15**

The words of these women are a heralding of God's *hesed* and an exclamation that the (perceived) emptiness of Naomi (1:21) has ended.

Seven sons was considered by the Jews to be the ideal number of sons (1 Samuel 2:5).

### **Verse 16**

The verb translated "became nurse unto" in the KJV simply means "to care for" (Huey, p. 546; so NIV). The same verb is used of Mordecai in relation to Esther in Esther 2:7. Block (p. 730) suggests that Naomi became Obed's nanny. If so, this would be a case of a "granny nanny" ☺.

### **Verse 17**

Naomi's neighbors named Obed "in the sense of providing the explanation for his name with their glad cry" (Younger, p. 483; so also Bush, p. 261).

The name, "Obed" means "server." Obed would live up to his name by serving the needs of his grandmother (see verse 15).

### **Verses 18-22**

The genealogy found here is also found in 1 Chronicles 2:9-12.

It is noteworthy that Boaz's place in the genealogy is the honored (in Jewish thinking) seventh position.

Pharez was the son of Judah (see 4:12), and Judah was the line through which the promised Messiah would come (see Genesis 49:10). This points us in the direction of the bigger picture at play in the book of Ruth. As Younger (p. 485) points out: “[T]he original point of the narrative is extended beyond showing God’s providence and care in the life of one family. It now concerns the life of the entire nation, for in the son born to Naomi the history of God’s rule through David has begun. Furthermore, God’s rule through his ultimate ideal king, a son of David and God’s own Son, will come through Naomi’s son. This has ramifications throughout both history and the future” and “[T]he *hesed* of Boaz, Ruth, and Naomi lays the foundation for a salvation that extends to the ends of the earth for a lost world.”

**Archer (p. 287) points out the similarities between Boaz & Christ:**

"The kinsman-redeemer serves as a Messianic type, the *goel* who fulfills the following qualifications and functions of his kinsmen: (a) he must be a blood relative (even as Christ became a blood relative of man by the virgin birth); (b) he must have the money to purchase the forfeited inheritance (4:10—even as Christ alone had the merit to pay the price for sinners); (c) he must be willing to buy back that forfeited inheritance (4:9—even as Christ laid down His life on His own volition); (d) he must be willing to marry the wife of a deceased kinsman (4:10—typical of the bride and groom relationship between Christ and His church)." For similar suggestions, see page 273 of Henry, pages 59-60 of Priest, page 74 of MacArthur, and pages 87 and 89 of Nelson’s.