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• EAST AFRICA •

# RUTH

by

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The book of *Ruth* is by an unknown author, probably written around the time of Judah's exile to Babylon in 586 BC. The story itself takes place during the time of the Judges, 500 or more years before the exile. The three central characters are Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. The story is a great love story but also deals with several important issues. The book deals with family tragedy and the restoration of Naomi's family. The concept of *hesed* (relationship-based loving commitment) and the role of a kinsman-redeemer (*go'el*) are central concepts for such restoration. The family tragedy and restoration are set in the context of God's greater plan for the nation of Israel and his overall plan for the world. Thus, *Ruth* bears a certain resemblance to *Habakkuk*, which deals with geopolitical injustice, evil, and disaster, and *1 Peter*, which deals with persecution and suffering, in the context of God's overall plan. *Ruth* also raises the issues of race, tribe, and sex, and God's inclusion of "outsiders" as an integral part of his plan. The fact that the circumstances and actions appear purely "natural," without God's overt appearance or supernatural interventions, and the existence of multiple "coincidences" necessary to the story, show that God is the one driving the plot; in these ways, *Ruth* mirrors the book of *Esther*.

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## I. Introduction

### A. *Author, date, and placement in the OT*

The story of Ruth takes place in the time of the judges, i.e., after the conquest of Canaan and before Saul became Israel's first king in approximately 1050 BC. The author is not named. The *Babylonian Talmud* (written c. AD 200-400) attributes the book to the prophet Samuel. However, most scholars doubt this. The book could not have been written before David became Israel's king, since the book refers to David and includes his genealogy. Other than that, however, arguments have been made for a wide variety of dates, from the reign of David to the post-exilic period (see Block 1999: 590-98). Whoever the author was, he was a master storyteller. Indeed, Robert Alter, professor of Hebrew and comparative literature, describes the author as "one of the most brilliant masters of formal technique among biblical writers" (Alter 1981: 58).

*Ruth's* canonical status is not disputed. However, its placement in the canon differs between the Septuagint (LXX), i.e., the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, completed c. 135 BC, Christian OT, and the Hebrew Bible. Since **Ruth 1:1** says that the story takes place "*in the days when the judges ruled,*" in the Septuagint and the Christian ordering of the OT, the book of *Ruth* is placed immediately after the book of *Judges*. However, since **Prov 31:10-31** focuses on an *eset hayil* ("a woman of strength of character") and since Ruth is called an *eset hayil* in **Ruth 3:11**, the Hebrew Bible places the book of *Ruth* immediately after *Proverbs*. Later Judaism (i.e., since the twelfth century AD) included *Ruth* as one of the five books (called the Megilloth) to be read at various Jewish festivals.

### B. *Themes*

The story of *Ruth* not only is a great love story but also deals with several important issues. The book deals with family tragedy and the restoration of Naomi's family. The concept of *hesed* (relationship-based loving commitment) and the role of a kinsman-redeemer (*go'el*) are central concepts for such restoration. The family tragedy and restoration are set in the context of God's greater plan for the nation of Israel and his overall plan for the world. Thus, *Ruth* bears a certain resemblance to *Habakkuk*, which deals with geopolitical injustice, evil, and disaster, and *1 Peter*, which deals with persecution and suffering in the context of God's overall plan. *Ruth* also raises the issues of race, tribe, and sex and God's inclusion of "outsiders" as an integral part of his plan. Finally, the fact that the circumstances and actions appear purely "natural," without God's overt appearance or supernatural interventions, and the existence of multiple "coincidences" necessary to the story, show that God is the one driving the plot; in these ways, *Ruth* mirrors the book of *Esther*.

### C. *Structure and outline*

The story is developed in a series of seven acts. The prologue sets the scene and describes the predicament: the death of Naomi's husband and sons, leaving her without anyone to care for her. The following acts unfold how this predicament finds resolution. The epilogue narrates the resolution of the predicament and how Naomi is restored to life and fullness through the marriage of the other two main characters, Ruth and Boaz, and the birth of their son Obed. A coda to the story traces ten generations from Perez, through Obed, to king David.

As the following outline demonstrates, the author is a master storyteller and expert literary stylist. This is indicated by his use of chiasm throughout the book. Chiasm is when at least two concepts are repeated in inverted order, i.e., in the pattern: A-B-B'-A'. Chiasm, as is typically the case in *Ruth*, may include an unpaired central element around which the other elements are arranged, i.e., A-B-C-B'-A'; that central element may be the point of emphasis. Chiasm serves a number of functions: (A) it creates balance and beauty; (B) it helps us to focus on the topic; (C) it helps us to clarify the meaning; (D) it emphasizes the point and helps us to follow the theme with greater ease; (E) it helps us to see new connections or contrasts between things.

There is not only chiasm within each of the major sections of the book, but there is symmetrical correspondence between the beginning and ending sections of the book as a whole. Thus, the correspondence between the prologue and the epilogue is clear: the prologue details the famine, death, and tragedy besetting Naomi and her family; the epilogue details the fulfillment, new life, and abundance of the family. The second (II) and next-to-last (VI) sections also correspond: in both sections two relatives of Naomi are confronted with the choice of helping her (Orpah and Ruth; Boaz and the nearer kinsman). In each case, all the relatives are initially willing to help, but in each case, one of the relatives relents when the issue of marriage is mentioned. Also, in both episodes, Ruth is given a blessing: by Naomi in section II and by the women of Bethlehem in section VI. There are also certain correspondences between the third (III) and third-to-last (V) sections: section III recounts Naomi and Ruth's arrival into Bethlehem. That takes place at the beginning of the barley harvest

(1:22), whereas section V takes place during the “winnowing barley” (3:2). The women’s question, “*Is this Naomi?*” (1:19) is mirrored by Boaz’s question, “*Who are you?*” (3:9). In episode III Naomi and Ruth come into Bethlehem (1:22), and in episode V Ruth comes into Bethlehem (3:15); the same Hebrew word is used in each case. In episode III Naomi despairs, “*I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty*” (1:21); in episode V Ruth had left to glean empty-handed, but returned to Naomi full, Boaz having told her, “*You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law*” (3:17). The central unit (section IV), when Ruth and Boaz meet, is the obvious turning point of the entire story.<sup>1</sup>

The masterful nature of this book *as a story* is also seen in that its layout is “obviously intended to create and retain tension and suspense. The entire book is structured so that even at the end of the third unit the audience still remains in suspense as to how the widows’ dire situation can be rectified. Moreover, the individual episodes (e.g., Ruth’s gleaning, her proposal to Boaz, the legal procedure at the city gate) are designed to create and maintain suspense for as long as possible.” (Dorsey 1999: 128) Yet this is a masterful story with a point: not only are success and restoration the result of Ruth’s determination, diligence, and loyalty to Naomi and Boaz’s kindness and generosity, but “the admirable qualities exhibited by Ruth and Boaz can be used by God to reverse the fortunes of a whole family; or even the fortunes of a whole nation, as shown by the final outcome of this story—the Davidic dynasty” (Dorsey 1999: 128).

The book may be outlined as follows:<sup>2</sup>

### **I. Prologue: the time, circumstances, setting, characters, and the tragedy: Naomi loses her family (1:1-5)**

- A. The time: “*In the days when the judges ruled*” (v. 1a)
- B. The circumstances: “*a famine in the land*” (v. 1a)
- C. The setting: A man from Bethlehem in Judah along with his wife and two sons went to Moab and remained there (vv. 1b)
- D. The characters: Their names were Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, and Chilion (v. 2a)
- C’. The setting: Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah went to Moab and remained there (v. 2b)
- E. The tragedy: Elimelech died and Naomi was left with her two sons (v. 3)
- F. Respite: The sons marry Moabite wives (Orpah and Ruth) and lived there about 10 years (v. 4)
- E’. Worse tragedy: The sons die and Naomi is left without her sons and her husband (v.5)

### **II. Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi (1:6-19a)**

- A. Introduction: Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth set out to return to Bethlehem (vv. 6-7)
- B. Naomi urges Orpah and Ruth to “return home” (vv. 8-9a)
- C. Both daughters-in-law refuse to return home: Naomi kisses them, they weep, they refuse to leave (vv. 9b-10)
- D. Naomi passionately urges them to return to their homes: there is no hope of marriage, and Naomi is bitter because the Lord has turned against her (vv. 11-13)
- C’. Orpah agrees to leave, but Ruth refuses to leave Naomi: they weep, Orpah kisses Naomi, Ruth refuses to leave (v. 14)
- B’. Naomi again urges Ruth to “return home,” but Ruth refuses to be separated from Naomi and adopts Naomi’s people and God as her own (v. 15-18)
- A’. Conclusion: Naomi and Ruth travel and come to Bethlehem (v. 19a)

### **III. Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem (1:19b-22)**

- A. Naomi and Ruth “*came to Bethlehem*” and the whole town was stirred (v. 19b)
- B. “*Do not call me Naomi; call me bitter*” (v. 20a)
- B(1). “*For the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me*” (v. 20b)
- B(2). “*I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty*” (v. 21a)
- B’. “*Why call me Naomi?*” (v. 21b)
- B(2)’. “*The Lord has testified against me*” (v. 21c)
- B(1)’. “*The Almighty has brought calamity upon me*” (v. 21d)
- A’. Naomi and Ruth “*came to Bethlehem*” at the beginning of the barley harvest (v. 22)

<sup>1</sup> These and other elements are discussed in Dorsey 1999: 121-28.

<sup>2</sup> Gow 1992: 29, 31, 46, 64, 81, 82 has similar outlines for 1:1-7b, 1:7c-19a, 1:22b-2:23, 3:1-18, 4:1-11b, and 4:11c-17.

#### **IV. Ruth and Boaz meet (2:1-23)**

##### **A. Introduction: Ruth tells Naomi of her plans to glean (vv. 1-2)**

**A(1).** Naomi had “*a relative of her husband, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech*” (v. 1a)

**A(2).** His “*name was Boaz*” (v. 1b)

**A(3).** Ruth wishes to glean in the field of him “*in whose sight I find favor*” (v. 2)

##### **B. Ruth goes out and gleans, happening on Boaz’s field (v. 3)**

**B(1).** Begins in the morning (see v. 7)

**B(2).** Apparently without any guarantee of safety

**C. Boaz arrives and hears about Ruth:** She is the Moabitess who came with Naomi; she requested to glean and has worked since early morning except for a short rest (vv. 4-7)

**D. Ruth and Boaz meet:** Boaz instructs her to remain in his field; if she is thirsty, she may freely drink; Boaz has learned of all Ruth has done for Naomi and how she left her own people; “may the Lord give you a full reward!” (vv. 8-13)

**C’. Boaz invites Ruth to join him and the reapers for a meal:** He gave her more than enough, so that she had some left over (vv. 14)

**B’. Ruth arises and gleans again in Boaz’s field (vv. 15-17)**

**B(2)’. Has Boaz’s support and protection (vv. 9, 15-16)**

**B(1)’. Gleans until the evening (v. 17)**

##### **A’. Conclusion: Ruth returns to Naomi and tells her all that happened (vv. 18-22)**

**A(3)’. Ruth shows Naomi what she had gleaned, Naomi says, “*Blessed is the man who took notice of you,*” and Ruth tells Naomi with whom she had worked (v. vv. 18-19a)**

**A(2)’. “*The man’s name with whom I worked today is Boaz*” (v. 19b)**

**A(1)’. “*The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers*” (v. 20)**

#### **V. Ruth proposes to Boaz (3:1-18)**

##### **A. Naomi’s instructions to Ruth at their home (vv. 1-5)**

**B. Ruth leaves Naomi and goes to the threshing floor:** there she follows Naomi’s instructions (vv. 6-7)

**C. Boaz awakens with Ruth lying at his feet:** her proposal (vv. 8-9)

**D. Boaz accepts Ruth’s proposal (vv. 10-13)**

**C’. Boaz and Ruth awaken in the morning with Ruth still at his feet:** his gift (vv. 14-15c)

**B’. Ruth leaves the threshing floor and goes back to Naomi:** there she reports what happened (vv. 15d-17)

##### **A’. Naomi’s instructions to Ruth at their home (v. 18)**

#### **VI. Boaz redeems Naomi’s property and acquires Ruth (4:1-12)**

##### **A. The elders assemble at the city gate:** to hear Boaz’s case involving Ruth (vv. 1-2)

**B. Boaz introduces his case:** he gives the kinsman the opportunity to redeem Naomi’s land (vv. 3-4b)

**C. The kinsman’s first, positive response:** “*I will redeem it*” (v. 4c)

**D. Boaz’s declaration that redeeming Naomi’s land includes marrying Ruth the Moabitess (v. 5)**

**C’. The kinsman’s second, negative response:** “*I cannot redeem it*” (vv. 6-8)

**B’. Boaz concludes his case:** he redeems Naomi’s land and acquires Ruth to marry her (vv. 9-10)

**A’. The elders at the city gate:** bless the marriage agreement involving Boaz and Ruth (vv. 11-12)

#### **VII. Epilogue: Boaz and Ruth marry, have a son, and Naomi’s family is restored (4:13-17)**

##### **A. Boaz marries Ruth and they have a son (v. 13)**

**B. The women bless the child:** “*May his name be renowned in Israel*” (v. 14)

**C. The women tell Naomi that the child “*will be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age*” (v. 15a)**

- D. Praise of Ruth “*who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons*” (v. 15b)  
C’. Naomi takes the child and becomes his nurse (v. 16)  
B’. The women name the child: “*They named him Obed*” (v. 17a)  
A’. The son became the father of Jesse, the father of David (v. 17b)

VIII. Coda: the genealogy of David: Ten generations, from Perez to David (4:18-22)

II. Commentary on Ruth<sup>3</sup>

A. *Prologue: the time, circumstances, setting, characters, and the tragedy: Naomi loses her family (1:1-5)*

<sup>1</sup> *In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.* <sup>2</sup> *The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.* <sup>3</sup> *But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.* <sup>4</sup> *These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years,* <sup>5</sup> *and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.*

vv. 1-2: the time, circumstances, setting, and characters

The Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the OT which was completed over 100 years before Jesus came into the world, placed the book of *Ruth* immediately after the book of *Judges*, not only because the story of Ruth takes place “*in the days when the judges ruled,*” but also because Ruth contrasts with the final story in **Judges 19-21** where everything is done wrong. The period of the judges was an era of relative violence; **Judg 21:25** concludes that book by saying, “*In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes*” (see also **Judg 17:6**). On the other hand, K. Lawson Younger points out, “The opening clause [in *Ruth*] forms an inclusio with the historical reference to David in 4:17b so that the leadership vacuum evident during the period of the judges is answered in the ideal king, David” (Younger 2002: 413).

The phrase “*there was a famine in the land*” occurs elsewhere as a phrase only in **Gen 12:10** and **Gen 26:1**. Those cases involved Abraham traveling to Egypt and Isaac traveling to Gerar of the Philistines. In each case, Abraham and Isaac lied about their wives, claiming that they were their sisters (see **Gen 12:11-13; 26:7**). Nevertheless, despite their lies, it was God’s sovereign plan to bless his people, and God will do here despite the tragedy to Naomi’s family. The canonical linkage with **Deut 28:1-12, 15-24, 48** (famine was one of the curses for disobedience to God) and the fact that the time of the judges was characterized by disobedience (see **Judg 2:16-21**) suggest that the famine in **Ruth 1:1** was a punishment for disobedience.

The names of some of the characters had certain meanings. Elimelech means “God is my king”; Naomi is derived from the root meaning “beautiful,” “pleasant,” “good” (see Harrison 1989: 182). Mahlon and Chilion are of uncertain etymology and are not attested among Ancient Near East names; they may be coined names meaning “sickly one, sickness” and “finished or spent one, destroyed, death,” thereby “implicitly pointing to the intensification of the crisis about to strike Naomi” (Younger 2002: 415). Likewise, the meanings of Orpah, Ruth, and Boaz are uncertain.<sup>4</sup>

Traveling from Bethlehem to Moab because of the famine reveals a certain irony. Bethlehem itself means “house of bread.” Further, Bethlehem typically receives far more rainfall than does Moab (which is located immediately to the east of the Dead Sea). Elimelech’s moving his family from Bethlehem to Moab (a traditional enemy of Israel), where they will be strangers in a strange land, is not an act of faithfulness in keeping with his name “God is my king.” The irony of the situation is emphasized by the wording the author uses. Younger points out, “The narrator gives the reader the impression that out of all the Bethlehemites caught up in this famine, only this man and his family seek refuge in the “country” (*sadeh*) of Moab. The term *sadeh* is an ‘arable, cultivatable land or field.’ Later [in **Ruth 4:3**] the reader discovers that ironically this man ‘alienated’ a *sadeh* in Bethlehem in order to go sojourn in a *sadeh* in Moab.” (Younger 2002: 415)

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the English Standard Version will be used in this commentary.

<sup>4</sup> Boaz is only found in *Ruth* as the name of a person. However, one of the pillars before the temple built by Solomon was named Boaz (**1 Kgs 7:21**).

**vv. 3-5: the tragedy: Naomi loses her family**

Many people like to posit a 1:1 relationship between sin and bad circumstances in one's life (i.e., the bad circumstances must be punishment for one's sin). Such an idea is not realistic, and it is certainly not biblical. While bad effects *may* be the result of sin, the book of *Job*, **John 9**, and multiple other texts demonstrate that bad circumstances in one's life are not necessarily the result of one's sin and are not necessarily "pay-back" for one's sin. Various Jewish sources attribute the deaths of Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chillion to their having left Judah and the boys having married Moabite wives. However, the Bible does not specifically describe those actions as sins and does not otherwise relate the cause of the deaths.<sup>5</sup> Although marriage to the Canaanites was forbidden (**Deut 7:1-3**), marriage to Moabites was not prohibited.<sup>6</sup> However, Moabites could not enter the assembly of the Lord, nor could the offspring of a union between an Israelite and a Moabite, to the tenth generation (**Deut 23:3; Neh 13:1-3**).

The deaths of Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chillion left Naomi in a desperate situation *through no fault of her own*. Most women in the ancient world did not have the education or training in a craft to support themselves. The odds of Naomi's being able to remarry or have children were remote (see **Ruth 1:11-12**). Further, she is a foreigner. R. K. Harrison points out that, in that time and place, "without a male provider a widow was vulnerable to exploitation of various kinds, and if she could not find a family in which to live and work, she was reduced to begging, prostitution, and often death by starvation" (Harrison 1989: 182). Thus, Naomi's situation is bleak indeed. If people are not of the view that there is a 1:1 relationship between suffering and sin, then they often tend to attribute suffering to large impersonal forces, like nature and chance. That also is not biblical. The Bible attributes our circumstances ultimately to the sovereignty of God. In Naomi's case, unlike the situation in *Job*, God does not make a personal appearance, and the Bible does not tell us the reasons for the deaths of Elimelech, Mahon, and Chillion. Nevertheless, God is still sovereign and in control. The events that occurred to Naomi and her family were not primarily about Naomi—just as our problems are not primarily about us. Rather, the events that occurred to Naomi and her family and that occur to us are part of God's overall plan that ultimately is designed to bring glory to himself.

Naomi's distress is a pointed example for the church today. The early church recognized the significance of caring for widows (and orphans), i.e., the neediest and most vulnerable people in society. **Jas 1:27** states, "*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*" The word translated as "religion" in this verse is *thrēskeia* which refers to "ceremonial service or worship" (Zodhiates 1993: "thrēskeia," 742). In other words, it is talking about the religious ceremonies that have value in *God's* sight. People do many different religious rituals or ceremonies: some genuflect (bend the knee or touch one knee to the floor to show reverence); some make the sign of the cross; some raise their hands when they pray; others bow their heads, close their eyes, and fold their hands. James is saying that the real rituals or ceremonies that God values are not bending the knee, bowing the head, etc., but are "*to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained from the world*" (v. 27). In **1 Tim 5:3-16** Paul gives a more detailed description of the general principle stated in **Jas 1:27**, and gives specific suggestions of how the church can care for (i.e., "honor") needy widows.<sup>7</sup> The first form of social work in the early church was caring for needy widows (**Acts 6:1-6**). The care and concern we are to show others are not limited to "orphans and widows." In fact, "'orphans and widows' became in the Old Testament a stock description of the helpless in the world" (Moo 1989: 1155). Throughout the Bible caring for the poor and needy is emphasized. The church should care for poor and needy believers (**Rom 12:13; 15:25-27; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9; Jas 2:14-18; 1 John 3:17-18**). The church should also care for the poor and needy in general (**Exod 23:10-11; Lev 19: 9-10; Deut 15:11; 24: 19-21; Pss 41:1; 112:5-6; Prov 14:21; 19:17; 22: 9, 22; 31:20; Isa 58:6-7; Ezek 16:49; Matt 25:31-46; Mark 10:21; Luke 3:10-11; Rom 12:20; Gal 2:10; Eph 4:28; Jas 1:27**). Caring for the poor and needy is the external expression of our devotion to God. It is the outward, visible sign of the inward, spiritual grace in one's life. It is what Jesus called the "second" commandment, "*you shall love your neighbor as yourself*" (**Matt 22:39**; see also **Luke 10:27**). We need to ask ourselves: What are we doing to practically care for those who are most vulnerable and in need in our society?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Why do you think that many people like to posit a 1:1 relationship between sin and bad circumstances in

<sup>5</sup> **Ruth 4:10** states that Ruth had been the wife of Mahlon; hence, Orpah had been the wife of Chillion.

<sup>6</sup> Moabites were the progeny of Lot's incestuous relationship with his older daughter (**Gen 19:33**).

<sup>7</sup> This is discussed in detail in Menn 2016: 91-94.

one's life (i.e., the bad circumstances must be punishment for one's sin)?

- How does the book of *Ruth* help to dispel such a notion? Are there other biblical texts that dispel such a notion?

2. How can the fact that God is sovereign—even over the bad circumstances of our lives—and that everything that happens is part of his overall plan, be used to help us get through hard times?

3. What are we as the church doing to assist those who are most vulnerable and in need in our society?

### B. *Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi (1:6-19a)*

<sup>6</sup> Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. <sup>7</sup> So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. <sup>8</sup> But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup> The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. <sup>10</sup> And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” <sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? <sup>12</sup> Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, <sup>13</sup> would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” <sup>14</sup> Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

<sup>15</sup> And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” <sup>16</sup> But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” <sup>18</sup> And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. <sup>19</sup> So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem.

#### vv. 6-19a: Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth set out for Bethlehem; Orpah and Ruth refuse to leave Naomi; Orpah ultimately returns to Moab, but Ruth commits to remain with Naomi

Although probably the majority of commentators (including this one) see vv. 1-5 as comprising the prologue and first section of the book, some see vv. 1-6 as comprising the prologue and first section. Thus, Younger states that “verse 6 is antithetically parallel to verse 1, providing a chiasmic contrast in content” and “rounds off and brings to a conclusion the prologue of verses 1-2 by balancing ‘went to Moab’ . . . ‘returned to Moab,’ and ‘famine . . . ‘food’” (Younger 2002: 418-19). In any event, v. 6 acts as a transition and preview of what is to follow.

Naomi is so bitter and depressed because of what has happened to her family that she not only fails to perceive the hand of God in the events of her life, but she becomes bitter and angry against God himself. Verse 6 tells us that “the Lord had visited his people and given them food.” This reveals that God was sovereign over the famine and now, in his grace and mercy, is showing compassion to his people.<sup>8</sup> Even though she is an Israelite, Naomi does not realize that God's compassion applies to her. Instead, she says, “The hand of the Lord has gone out against me” (v. 13). She maintains this antipathy towards God even after arriving in Bethlehem, where she says, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” (vv. 20-21)

Despite her bitterness against God, Naomi nevertheless shows her compassion to her daughters-in-law. She realizes that she does not have the ability to provide new husbands for Orpah and Ruth, and that if the daughters-in-law continue with her to Bethlehem their prospects of finding husbands on their own would be

<sup>8</sup> The name of God is mentioned twenty-three times in the book by various characters in the story: “Yahweh” seventeen times; “Elohim” four times (once referring to Chemosh, the god of the Moabites); and “Shaddai” twice (see Hals 1969: 3). However, only twice are God's actual actions mentioned or is God referred to by the narrator (1:6 and 4:13). Nevertheless, as we will see, God is present and active “behind the scenes” continually throughout the book.



remote, since they would be despised foreigners in Israel. Hence, she strongly urges them to return to their own homes (**vv. 8-13**). Further, she wants to spare them her fate: since she believes “*the hand of the Lord has gone out against me,*” if Orpah and Ruth remain with her, then they could expect the hand of the Lord to be against them as well. In this, Naomi was clearly putting her daughters-in-law over her own wellbeing, since her advice to Orpah and Ruth would mean that Naomi herself would have to return to Bethlehem alone.

Even though Naomi was bitter against God, she blessed her daughters-in-law in the name of the Lord: “*The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!*” (**v. 9**) She also called on the Lord to himself bless them, just as they had shown kindness to their deceased husbands and to her: “*May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me*” (**v. 8**). The word translated “*deal kindly*” is the Hebrew word *hesed*. *Hesed* is a relationship-based act of loving commitment, typically a voluntary act of extraordinary mercy or compassion (“beyond the call of duty”), usually by someone in a more powerful position who, therefore, could choose to do otherwise; over two-thirds of the use of *hesed* in the OT are acts of God’s *hesed* to people (see Younger 2002: 393-96). In the story, God’s *hesed* is explicitly referred to in **1:8** and **2:20**, although **2:20** is grammatically ambiguous and may refer both to God’s and Boaz’s *hesed*. Boaz’s *hesed* is implicit in his treatment of Ruth throughout the book. The only two people who are explicitly said to manifest *hesed* are Orpah, once (**1:8**) and Ruth, twice (**1:8; 3:10**). Ruth clearly is demonstrating *hesed* in her commitment to Naomi (**1:16-18**). Ironically, therefore, Moabites are the only ones, other than God, who are explicitly said to manifest *hesed*.

*Hesed* was a Hebrew concept, based largely on their covenantal, clan, and family relationships with God and each other. Robert Hubbard points out that what is striking about the *hesed*-framework in *Ruth* is that “it seems to rest theologically, not on a covenant basis, but on a cosmic one. That is, its roots lie more in Yahweh’s role as king of the universe than as Israel’s covenant God.” (Hubbard 1991: 16) Thus, Naomi petitions in **1:8** that God repay Orpah and Ruth for their *hesed*, although neither Orpah nor Ruth were members of Israel’s covenant community. “Her plea assumes that Yahweh rewards *all* peoples, not just Israelites, for *hesed*. . . . Further, it assumes (as does the entire Old Testament) that Yahweh himself is a God of *hesed*.” (Hubbard 1991: 16) Consequently, *hesed* should particularly characterize Christians and the church. The church is a family (see **Matt 12:49-50; Rom 8:14, 16; 9:8, 26; 2 Cor 6:18; 11:2; Gal 3:26; 4:6-7; Eph 2:19; 5:22-32; 1 Tim 3:15; 5:1-2; Heb 2:11; 12:7; 1 John 3:1-2; Rev 21:2, 9**) and has been adopted into God’s family (**Rom 8:15, 23; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5**). Naomi called for God to manifest *hesed* to Orpah and Ruth because they had manifested *hesed* to their husbands and to Naomi. That should apply even more to Christians: because of all that Christ has done for us, “*we love because he first loved us*” (**1 John 4:19**).

In **v. 14**, Orpah kissed Naomi goodbye, followed Naomi’s advice, and returned to her home, people, and gods, “*but Ruth clung to her.*” Orpah is not condemned for this; she had, as Naomi herself pointed out, good reasons for returning to her home. However, her leaving makes Ruth appear all the more positive. Indeed, the same Hebrew word is used in **Gen 2:24** (“*a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast [cling] to his wife, and they shall become one flesh*”). This shows the depth of Ruth’s loyalty, affection, and attachment to Naomi. Naomi had painted a grim picture of life if the daughters-in-law stayed, including a future of widowhood and childlessness. Consequently, whereas Orpah returned “*to her people and to her gods*” (**v. 15**), Ruth’s decision to remain with Naomi was a complete turnaround physically, emotionally, geographically, and spiritually. As John Piper puts it, “Naomi painted the future very dark, and Ruth took her hand and walked into it with her” (Piper 2010: 34). Ruth articulates this in **vv. 16-18**: “*Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.<sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.*” Piper observes that, not only is Ruth abandoning her own family and land, but is committing never to marry a non-relative, since if she married a non-relative, Ruth’s commitment to Naomi’s family would be lost” (Piper 2010: 34). Her statement “*Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried*” meant that she would *never* return home, not even if Naomi died. Her commitment was total. In **v. 17** she even invoked the Lord’s covenant name (Yahweh) in calling down a curse upon herself if anything but death parted her from Naomi. Ruth confirms her true conversion to Yahweh by her actions, similar to Rahab in **Judges 2** and James’s discussion of true versus dead faith in **James 2**.

This, again, should challenge the church. Piper observes that, in Ruth, “we have a picture of God’s ideal woman—and we will see more of her quality later. Faith in God that sees beyond present bitter setbacks. Freedom from the securities and comforts of the world. Courage to venture into the unknown and the strange. Radical commitment in relationships appointed by God. This is the woman of Proverbs 31:25 who looks into the future with confidence in God and laughs at the coming troubles.” (Piper 2010: 35-36) Many, if not most, Christians never have had to make the choice that Ruth made—to live in a foreign land as an outsider from a

different background among people who generally hate you. The challenge is how can we, who do not face the situation and choice she faced but who live in our own familiar culture and circumstances, live as radically committed to Christ and others as Ruth did?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why, like Naomi, when we are afflicted with hard and difficult circumstances, do we tend to become bitter, depressed, and rail against God, rather than drawing closer to him?

- What might help us to draw closer to God in such circumstances?

2. What is the concept of *hesed*, and how can the church—individually and collectively—manifest *hesed* to others as a regular and ongoing essential aspect of our nature?

3. How can we, who do not face the situation and choice Ruth faced but who live in our own familiar culture and circumstances, live as radically committed to Christ and others as Ruth did?

### **C. Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem (1:19b-22)**

*<sup>19b</sup>And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?” <sup>20</sup>She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. <sup>21</sup>I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” <sup>22</sup>So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.*

#### vv. 19b-22: Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem

Naomi’s bitterness and depression are on full display when she enters Bethlehem. Her statement in v. 20 is a play on names; she is saying, “Do not call me Pleasant; call me Bitter.” Her statement in v. 21, “I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty,” reveals how our bitter circumstances tend to warp our perspective. They turn us inward so that we only focus on our pain and loss: five times in vv. 20-21 Naomi focuses on herself by using the words “I” and “me.” The ironic thing is that her statement “I went away full” is essentially untrue; although she had left with her husband and sons, they had left because of a famine, which was a disaster for the entire family. Her statement that “the Lord has brought me back empty” also is untrue. Naomi doesn’t even acknowledge the fact that Ruth is with her, despite Ruth’s amazing loyalty, affection, and attachment to Naomi, all of which were expressed and demonstrated at the cost of Ruth’s own wellbeing! The amazing commitment of Ruth to Naomi is indirectly hinted at in v. 22 where she is called “Ruth the Moabite,” which is what she will characteristically be called throughout the rest of the book. She continues to be called “Ruth the Moabite” even though she was clearly converted to belief in Yahweh and was now manifestly a follower of Yahweh.

The other ironic aspect of Naomi’s statements is the fact that bitterness tends to blind us to God’s greater plan and the small ways in which he is working that plan out. This is ironic in that Naomi has neither forgotten nor rejected God. She invoked his *hesed* when she urged Orpah and Ruth to return to their own homes (1:8-9). Now, she is not blaming natural circumstances but is specifically citing God as the cause of her misfortune. Thus, she has a high view of God’s sovereignty. However, she does not have a *broad* enough view of his sovereignty. She is blind to what God has done in the life of Ruth and that, in Ruth, God has given Naomi a life-long companion “who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons” (4:15). She is blind to the fact that God ended the famine and “had visited his people and given them food” (1:6). Not only did God protect two vulnerable and unaccompanied women on their journey from Moab to Bethlehem, but they even arrived “at the beginning off the barley harvest” (1:22). The barley harvest was in April and the wheat harvest followed in May (Harrison 1989: 183; Huey 1992: 525). This means that they arrived at the time where they would have two full months of being able to glean and thereby obtain food. Those are just some of the things God already had done. Naomi, of course, could not know what God soon would be doing in and through her situation to bring about the redemption of Naomi’s property through Boaz, the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, the birth of Obed who would become the grandfather of king David and ultimately lead to the Messiah himself! Grief and bitterness tend to take away our trust of God and make us forget that “for those who love God all things work together for good,

for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do grief, bitterness, and depression tend to turn our focus inward and blind us to the broader reality of God’s plan and the ways he may be working for our ultimate good even while we are suffering?
2. How can we help fellow believers to get a more balanced perspective when they are undergoing great hardship and suffering?
3. Can you think of how God has acted in your life or in the lives of people you know, when you or they were going through particularly hard times?

#### **D. Ruth and Boaz meet (2:1-23)**

<sup>1</sup> Now Naomi had a relative of her husband’s, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. <sup>2</sup> And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor.” And she said to her, “Go, my daughter.” <sup>3</sup> So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers, and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech. <sup>4</sup> And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem. And he said to the reapers, “The LORD be with you!” And they answered, “The LORD bless you.” <sup>5</sup> Then Boaz said to his young man who was in charge of the reapers, “Whose young woman is this?” <sup>6</sup> And the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, “She is the young Moabite woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab.” <sup>7</sup> She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers.’ So she came, and she has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest.”

<sup>8</sup> Then Boaz said to Ruth, “Now, listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. <sup>9</sup> Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping, and go after them. Have I not charged the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn.” <sup>10</sup> Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, “Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” <sup>11</sup> But Boaz answered her, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. <sup>12</sup> The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!” <sup>13</sup> Then she said, “I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants.”

<sup>14</sup> And at mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine.” So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed to her roasted grain. And she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. <sup>15</sup> When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, saying, “Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her. <sup>16</sup> And also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.”

<sup>17</sup> So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. <sup>18</sup> And she took it up and went into the city. Her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also brought out and gave her what food she had left over after being satisfied. <sup>19</sup> And her mother-in-law said to her, “Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.” So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, “The man’s name with whom I worked today is Boaz.” <sup>20</sup> And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” Naomi also said to her, “The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers.” <sup>21</sup> And Ruth the Moabite said, “Besides, he said to me, ‘You shall keep close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest.’” <sup>22</sup> And Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, “It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, lest in another field you be assaulted.” <sup>23</sup> So she kept close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

#### vv. 1-7: The circumstances of Ruth’s and Boaz’s meeting

We have previously mentioned that the author of the book of *Ruth* is a master storyteller and literary

stylist. This is seen in his use of chiasm throughout the book. The depth and subtlety of his literary style is seen in that, while all of chapter 2 is chiasmatic (see outline, above), the author even employs chiasm within chiasm. Thus, **vv. 1-3** are themselves chiasmatic:

- A. of the clan of Elimelech (v. 1a)
- B. whose name was Boaz (v. 1b)
- C. go to the field and glean (v. 2a<sup>1</sup>)
- D. after him in whose sight I shall find favor (v. 2a<sup>2</sup>)
- C'. so she set out and gleaned in the field (v. 3a)
- B'. the field belonging to Boaz (v. 3b<sup>1</sup>)
- A'. who was of the clan of Elimelech (v. 3b<sup>2</sup>)<sup>9</sup>

**Verses 1-7** set the stage for the actual meeting of Ruth and Boaz. These verses introduce us to Boaz and tell us a number of important things about him. First, he was a relative of Elimelech and from the same clan as Elimelech. This is the crucial fact for the rest of the story. Second, **v. 1** describes him as “*a worthy man.*” The Hebrew phrase is *gibbor hayil*. “It designates one who possesses social standing and a good reputation. In this context it connotes not only wealth and status but also ability, honor, and capability. Thus it is clearly used as a description of character.” (Younger 2002: 439-40) Third, Boaz was a godly man. This is demonstrated by the way he greeted his reapers and how they greeted him in **v. 4**: “*Boaz came from Bethlehem. And he said to the reapers, ‘The LORD be with you!’ And they answered, ‘The LORD bless you.’*”

These verses also give us further insight concerning the character of Ruth. We have already seen Ruth’s devotion to Naomi and her manifestation of *hesed*. Now we see that she takes the initiative to glean in the fields in order to take care of her mother-in-law and herself (**v. 2**). Gleaning had been ordered by God as a means of taking care of widows, orphans, and foreigners (**Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:19-22**). Second, she is humble. She did not just begin gleaning, even though that was her right under the law, but she asked, “*Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers*” (**v. 7a**).

Third, she is industrious and diligent. Boaz’s reapers reported to him that “*she has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest*” (**v. 7b**). In doing this, Ruth was exhibiting the character traits that should characterize all Christians. God created us to work—work is good and honorable and should be done to honor God (**Gen 2:15; Prov 6:6-11; Eph 4:28; 6:5-8; Col 3:22-25; 1 Thess 4:11; 1 Tim 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10**). The Bible calls on people to not be lazy or slothful, but to be diligent workers—that is the way to material prosperity (**Prov 6:6-11; 10:4-5, 26; 12:11, 24, 27; 13:4, 11; 14:23; 15:19; 16:26; 19:15; 20:4, 13; 21:5; 24:30-34; 27:23-27; 28:19; Eccl 10:18; Eph 4:28; 2 Thess 3:6-13**). Through working and engaging in business, God gives people the ability to make money and better themselves (**Deut 8:16-18; Prov 13:11; 22:29; 28:19-20; Eph 4:28; Jas 4:13-15**). Paul exhorts believers regarding work in **2 Thess 3:6-12**, “*Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.*”<sup>7</sup> *For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you,*<sup>8</sup> *nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.*<sup>9</sup> *It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.*<sup>10</sup> *For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.*<sup>11</sup> *For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.*<sup>12</sup> *Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.*” In other words, work is a *moral* imperative, not just a financial necessity. Work is contrasted with the moral sin of sloth (idleness) and also with the sin of being a meddling person who loves to pry into the lives of others rather than minding his or her own business (i.e., a busybody).

These verses also tell that God is sovereignly carrying out his plan “behind the scenes,” even though he makes no overt personal appearance and everything appears to be unfolding “naturally.” Note that God was aware of and was using all of the aspects of Boaz and Ruth in carrying out his overall plan. Naomi would have known of these aspects of Boaz and Ruth, yet in her bitterness and depression, she could not see them. This should remind us that, especially when we are suffering or undergoing extremely unpleasant circumstances, there is far more to our situation than we may be able to, or may choose to, see. Additionally, **v. 3** tells us that when she went out to glean, Ruth “*happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz.*” The Hebrew literally says, “*her chance chanced*” (Huey 1992: 527; Younger 2002: 441). The author is using hyperbole (an obvious and intentional exaggeration) to ironically highlight the fact that it is God, not chance, who is controlling the situation so that Ruth ends up gleaning in Boaz’s field, even though she had no specific intention

<sup>9</sup> Younger points out that **vv. 4-17** also incorporate an A, B, B’, A’ chiasm (Younger 2002: 442).

to do so. Ronald Hals puts it like this, “The labeling 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. . . . By calling his meeting an accident, the writer enables himself subtly to point out that even the ‘accidental’ is directed by God.” (Hals 1969: 12) **Verse 4** expresses a similar thought when it begins “*And behold.*” This “emphasizes once again the providence of God that, ‘wouldn’t you know it,’ Boaz shows up!” (Younger 2002: 442). These occurrences again should remind us that our lives do not take place “by chance.” Even in the worst of our circumstances, God is still sovereign and is carrying out his plan.

#### **vv. 8-16: Ruth’s and Boaz’s meeting and interaction**

Boaz refers to Ruth as “*my daughter*” (v. 8), which indicates that there was a substantial age difference between the two. The reaper’s calling her “*the young Moabite woman*” (v. 6), and Boaz’s saying to Ruth that “*you have not gone after young men*” (3:10) also indicate that. **Verses 11-12** reveal that Boaz had been made aware of all that Ruth had done for her mother-in-law and how she had left her native land to come to Bethlehem. Boaz’s nature as a godly man is confirmed in v. 12 where he says, “*The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!*”

After he received the report concerning who Ruth was, in **vv. 8-13** Boaz confers extraordinary support and privileges to Ruth: she should remain in his field, not someone else’s; she should stay close to his own women reapers; he specifically tells the young men not to touch or molest her; and if she is thirsty, she may drink from the water drawn by the young men which was normally reserved for them and his other employees. In v. 15 he adds that she is permitted to “*glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her.*” He goes beyond that in v. 16 by telling his male reapers, “*And also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.*”<sup>10</sup> These instructions go beyond the normal rights of gleaning. **Lev 19:9** only permitted the needy and foreigners to glean along the “edges” of a field. Boaz is permitting Ruth to glean with the regular reapers, where the harvest is much better than along the edges and then instructs his men to actually pull out some of the harvested barley for her to take. In doing this, Boaz was demonstrating that he had taken God’s concern for the poor to heart: “<sup>7</sup> *If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, <sup>8</sup> but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. . . . <sup>10</sup> You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. <sup>11</sup> For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’” (**Deut 15:7-11**)*

Sexual harassment was not a category of behavior recognized by the Israelite legal system (see Phiri 2006: 322; Younger 2002: 444n.18). Nevertheless, Boaz instructs his men not only not to touch but also not to speak improperly to her. Additionally, normally foreigners drew water for Israelites, and women drew water for men. Here it is the men who have drawn the water and Ruth, a foreigner, is given the privilege to drink it, when gleaners typically were not entitled to (Huey 1992: 530).

Boaz went even further in v. 14 by having Ruth share the midday meal, even providing enough that she had some of the roasted grain left over. Roasted grain was a staple of OT society (see **1 Sam 17:17; 25:18**). Gleaners, particularly foreigners, would not typically be invited to join in the meal of the employee reapers. The instructions he gave to his reapers and inviting Ruth to partake in the meal are examples of Boaz’s showing *hesed* to Ruth. It is important to note that Boaz’s demonstrating *hesed* to Ruth and Ruth’s demonstrating *hesed* to Naomi do not take place in some “religious” setting, but in the daily workplace (where *hesed* is often lacking). They should serve as role-models for us.

Ruth’s reaction in v. 10 shows that she is completely surprised and overwhelmed by the grace Boaz showed her. Boaz’s answer in **vv. 11-12** is significant. First, his statement to Ruth in v. 11, “*All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before*” echoes what God told Abram, “*Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you*” (**Gen 12:1**). This is at least a veiled hint that Ruth is playing a significant part in salvation history (even though neither Boaz nor Ruth could have known that themselves). Robert Alter notes that “Ruth is conceived by the author as a kind of matriarch by adoption” (Alter 1981: 59). There are other parallels: both Abram and Ruth

<sup>10</sup> Some infer that these instructions were given because Ruth had been the subject of some sexual harassment and was about to leave (see Younger 2002: 443-44).

began their lives as pagans, and both traveled west from their homes which were located east of Israel. The same is true of the matriarchs Rebekah (Isaac’s wife) and Rachel and Leah (Jacob’s wives). They were all from Mesopotamia, east of the Euphrates River (**Gen 24:3-4, 38; 29:4-5; 31:20-21**), so they, like Abram, were natives of a foreign country east of Israel. Alter adds, “In the case of Rebekah and Rachel, considerable importance is attached to ascertaining the genealogy of the maiden at the well. Here, in the exchange with Ruth, Boaz essentially establishes that Ruth’s courage and her loyalty to her mother-in-law will amply serve in place of genealogy.” (Alter 1981: 59) This is anticipating the gospel in which genealogy is completely irrelevant. As Paul says, “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.*” (**Gal 3:28-29**; see also **Col 3:11**)

Second, Boaz’s statement in **v. 12**, “*The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!*” confirms Boaz as a thoroughgoing man of God. He is, in effect, saying that the Lord is the one rewarding Ruth for the love and devotion she has shown to Naomi—Boaz is only God’s instrument of blessing. Further, the implication is that God is rewarding, and will reward, Ruth because she has sought shelter under his wings. Sheltering under God’s wings is a rich metaphor in both the OT and the NT of God’s faithful protection (**Exod 19:4; Deut 32:11; Ps 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 91:4; Matt 23:37; Luke 13:34**), healing (**Mal 4:2**), strength (**Isa 40:31**), and joy (**Ps 63:7**). The phrase importantly recurs in **3:9** as an important part of the plot of the story. Boaz could not have known that when he said the words in **2:12**. But they again demonstrate that God is the one orchestrating the story, and Boaz is, indeed, God’s instrument of grace in bringing to fruition God’s redemptive plan. In **v. 13**, Ruth’s statement, “*I have found favor in your eyes, my lord,*” shows that her request in **v. 2**—“*Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor*”—has been answered.

#### **vv. 17-23: Ruth’s and Naomi’s interaction following the meeting**

The excellence of the author as a literary stylist again appears in this scene. Younger (2002: 447) shows how the author again employs chiasm:

Narrative prologue (**2:17b-18**)

A. Naomi’s inquiry and blessing (**2:19a**)

B. Ruth’s response—she worked with a man named Boaz (**2:19b**)

C. Naomi’s blessing of Boaz and a revelation—he is a relative and one of their redeemers (**2:20**)

B’. Ruth’s response (**2:21**)

A’. Naomi’s endorsement (**2:22**)

Narrative epilogue (**2:23**)

This scene also reveals the result of Boaz’s kindness and generosity to Ruth (and, through her, to Naomi). An ephah of barley (**v. 17**) has been estimated at about one half to two-thirds of a bushel (or approximately 10-20 liters) (Huey 1992: 532; Younger 2002: 447-48). An ordinary gleaner could never have acquired anywhere near that amount. Ruth continued to glean in Boaz’s field “*until the end of the barley and wheat harvests*” (**v. 23**), which typically lasted about seven weeks in April-May (Huey 1992: 533; Younger 2002: 448). If she continued to reap similar amounts throughout the barley and wheat harvests, she would have obtained enough grain to feed herself and Naomi for between eight months to a year (Younger 2002: 448).<sup>11</sup>

The key fact of this scene, which is revealed for the first time, is that Boaz is “*a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers*” (**v. 20**). Naomi is referring to the Israelite institution of the “kinsman-redeemer” (Hebrew = *go’el*) who 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 *shalom* (especially through the redemption or restoration of property, persons, or lineage)” (Younger 2002: 399; see **Lev 25:24-34, 47-55**; see also Hubbard 1991: 4-5). One aspect of this was that if a clan member died without having children, the *go’el* could marry the widow and the firstborn son would assume the name of the deceased husband, so as to restore family and clan wholeness (see **Gen 38:6-11; Deut 25:5-10**). This is often called “levirate marriage,” from the Latin *levir*, meaning “husband’s brother.” The “brother” may be a biological sibling of the deceased or a person who is socially classified as such (Britannica 2022: “levirate”). Property inheritance is at the root of levirate marriage. “Where the land has already been alienated, redemption of it ‘triggers the levirate duty’” (Younger 2002: 403). This will prove to be crucial in Boaz’s interaction with the “nearer kinsman” in **Ruth 4**.

<sup>11</sup> This could have been possible, since Boaz granted Ruth the same special privilege of keeping “*close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest*” (**v. 21**).

Younger adds that the *go'el* was not obligated to perform the function of redemption, but had the choice to do so; hence, he had to be willing to perform the acts of redemption/restoration (Younger 2002: 403).

**Verse 23** takes us to the end of the barley and wheat harvests, about two months after she began in v. 3. This underscores that Ruth has been diligently laboring for approximately two months, perhaps being able to glean about an ephah per day. However, there is no indication from the text that the Boaz-Ruth relationship has gone anywhere. In short, from a storytelling point of view, we are left in suspense.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What should be the Christian attitude toward work?

- How is work a *moral* imperative?
- How can and should our churches disciple people regarding work and help those in need find good and suitable work?

2. How do both Boaz and Ruth manifest character traits that should be characteristic of Christians?

3. How is Ruth like one of the matriarchs (Rebekah, Rachel, Leah), and how does she point forward to the gospel?

4. How can we act as *go'els* in our own situations today?

#### **E. Ruth proposes to Boaz (3:1-18)**

<sup>1</sup> Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? <sup>2</sup> Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. <sup>3</sup> Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. <sup>4</sup> But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.” <sup>5</sup> And she replied, “All that you say I will do.”

<sup>6</sup> So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. <sup>7</sup> And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down. <sup>8</sup> At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! <sup>9</sup> He said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.” <sup>10</sup> And he said, “May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. <sup>11</sup> And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. <sup>12</sup> And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. <sup>13</sup> Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the LORD lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning.” <sup>14</sup> So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another. And he said, “Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.” <sup>15</sup> And he said, “Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out.” So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her. Then she went into the city.

<sup>16</sup> And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, “How did you fare, my daughter?” Then she told her all that the man had done for her, <sup>17</sup> saying, “These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, ‘You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.’” <sup>18</sup> She replied, “Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today.”

#### vv. 1-5: Naomi's plan

The last scene in chapter 2 gave Naomi hope. Now Naomi, who since she left Moab for Bethlehem has been passive, takes the initiative. Hope helps us to get outside of ourselves, to dream, to think of others, and to think how to do good. Until now, Ruth has taken the initiative to help Naomi. Now that she has seen all that Boaz—her late husband's relative—has done for Ruth (and for her), Naomi can come up with a plan to help Ruth. These verses reveal that she has such a plan, what John Piper calls “strategic righteousness,” i.e., a

thoughtful, purposeful plan to take the initiative and do what is good and right (Piper 2010: 80-81). Just as Boaz was God’s instrument of blessing to Ruth and Naomi, so Naomi’s plan is the outward and visible manifestation of God’s plan and purpose. God typically operates through the actions of people. Success of this plan will be part of the *“full reward be given you by the LORD”* that Boaz had prayed for Ruth in **2:12**.

Naomi primarily appears to be concerned about Ruth’s security and welfare (**v. 1**). R. K. Harrison observes that, with the harvesting of the barley and wheat completed, “there would be no further work for Ruth until the olives and grapes were harvested.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, she is interested in a much more permanent situation for her daughter-in-law.” (Harrison 1992: 185) Her plan is not based on the fact that Boaz is a potential kinsman-redeemer but simply on the fact that he is a relative who knew of Ruth and had shown favor to Ruth (**v. 2a**). Consequently, he might respond favorably to a marriage proposal. The rest of Naomi’s plan is very practical. He will be *“winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor”* (**v. 2b**), i.e., he will be alone and in circumstances where he could respond favorably to a marriage proposal. Ruth should *“wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak”* (**v. 3a**), i.e., make herself as presentable as she can; this might also signal the seriousness of her intentions. She should *“not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking”* (**v. 3b**), i.e., wait to approach him until he is probably in the most receptive mood. Finally, *“when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do”* (**v. 4**).

This final aspect of the plan has caused a fair amount of controversy. In some places in the Bible, the word “feet” is a euphemism for a man’s sexual organ (see **Judg 3:24; 1 Sam 24:3**, where the Hebrew literally says “cover his feet”). To “lie down” with someone sometimes refers to sexual intercourse (see **Gen 39:7; 2 Sam 13:11**). Consequently, some commentators have suggested that what Ruth is being ask to do is to expose Boaz’s genitals and have sex with him. Although there certainly is a sexual overtone to a woman uncovering a man in the dark and lying next to him, the idea that she was to uncover his genitals and have sex with him is not necessary to the text and is utterly improbable. First, the godly character of both Ruth and Boaz already has been firmly established. For Naomi to suggest an act of blatant immorality and for Ruth to agree to do it would be completely outside of both of their characters; it would also be completely contrary to Boaz’s character. Second, what is being proposed apparently is a nonverbal custom of requesting marriage (see **Deut 22:30; 27:20; Ezek 16:8; Mal 2:16**). That is corroborated in **v. 4** where Naomi says, *“He will tell you what to do.”* Third, the fact that neither Ruth nor Boaz took Naomi’s proposal in a sexual way is confirmed in the actual account of what Ruth and Boaz did that night: no sexual encounter is described. Ruth is clearly seeking marriage *“for you are a redeemer”*; Boaz promises, *“I will do for you all that you ask”*; and he calls her *“a worthy woman”* (**3:9-11**). In fact, if Boaz and Ruth had had sexual relations on the threshing floor, the scene between Boaz and the nearer kinsman at the city gate in chapter 4 “would be a sham with Boaz tricking the other redeemer into relinquishing his rights to a woman who has already physically bound herself to Boaz” (Bernstein 1991: 17).

Although the plan apparently is in accord with a proper custom, there was still risk. Boaz was under no obligation to marry Ruth. As we will see in **3:12**, he was not the nearest kinsman-redeemer. Further, as a rich and powerful Israelite landowner, he could have mocked Ruth’s actions as a presumptuous attempt at social-climbing by poor, widowed Moabitess. Finally, he could even have used the opportunity to fulfill his sexual pleasure and then charge her with entrapment or even accuse her of being a prostitute! Despite these risks, Ruth replies to Naomi, *“All that you say I will do”* (**v. 5**).

#### **vv. 6-15: Ruth and Boaz play out Naomi’s plan**

As we have seen on more than one occasion, the author shows himself to be a master stylist. Thus, while chapter 3 as a whole is chiasmically arranged (see outline above), this pivotal middle section itself is chiasmically arranged:

- A.** Ruth’s symbolic actions of petition (narrative) (**vv. 6-7**)
  - B.** Ruth’s words of petition (dialogue) (**vv. 8-9**)
  - B’.** Boaz’s words of consent (dialogue) (**vv. 10-13**)
- A’.** Boaz’s symbolic actions of commitment (narrative) (**vv. 14-15**)

As we have also seen earlier, particularly in chapter 2, God typically operates through the actions of people and uses natural means and “coincidences” to effectuate his plan (see **2:3-4** and discussion above). We see the same thing at work here: after Boaz ate and drank and *“his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain”* (**v. 7**). In other words, Boaz naturally got himself into a good mood (having no idea of what was soon to transpire), and then he just “happened” to lie down in a place on the threshing floor where the

<sup>12</sup> Grapes typically were harvested in the summer and olives in the fall (Morrison 2022: n.p.).



actions that are about to occur can take place without being seen or interrupted or misinterpreted by others.

Ruth did as Naomi had instructed. When Boaz was startled to find a woman lying at his feet<sup>13</sup> and asked “*Who are you?*” Ruth replied, “*I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer*” (v. 9). The word for “wing” (Hebrew = *kānāp*) is also the word for a man’s “skirt” or “robe” (Huey 1992: 530). Consequently, several translations have Ruth saying something like, “*Spread, therefore, they skirt over thine handmaid*” (KJV), or “*Spread your covering over your maid*” (NASB), or “*Spread the corner of your garment over me*” (NIV). To “spread a garment” over someone is an idiom that means “to marry” (Brotzman 1994: 153; Younger 2002: 462n.20). Walter Kaiser, et al. point out that “the idiom reflected the custom, still practiced by some Arabs, of a man’s throwing a garment over a woman he has decided to take as his wife” (Kaiser, et al. 1996: 200). However, the wording (and the ESV’s translation) “*spread your wings*” is important here and is rich with meaning. That is the literal translation of what Ruth said. The reason why that wording is important is that it picks up on what Boaz had said to Ruth in **2:12**, “*The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!*” The only other place where the phrase “spreading the wings” is used in connection with lovers is **Ezek 16:8**, where God describes Israel as a young maiden when “*I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine.*” John Piper observes, “If this is any indication of what Ruth wanted from Boaz, the request went far beyond sexual relations. She was saying in effect, ‘I would like to be the one to whom you pledge your faithfulness and with whom you make a marriage covenant.’” (Piper 2010: 86) Ruth’s using the same idiom as Boaz used further suggests that Ruth understood that what Boaz really meant when he used that idiom in **2:12** was, “Because you take refuge under the wings of God, you are the kind of woman I want to cover with my wings” (Piper 2010: 87). As Hubbard says, “By repeating the key word from his own lips, Ruth essentially asks Boaz to answer his own prayer!” (Hubbard 1991: 17). This again shows how God acts “behind the scenes,” using human beings to implement his will and plan: “By covering Ruth with his *kānāp*—that is, to marry her—Boaz implements Yahweh’s *kānāp*—that is, his protection of Ruth. Or, to weave in a thread dropped earlier [Naomi’s petition in **1:8** that God show *hesed* to Ruth], the *hesed* of Boaz toward Ruth is the form in which Yahweh conveys his *hesed* to her.” (Hubbard 1991: 17)

Boaz’s response to Ruth was to not use the moment with Ruth to gratify his sexual desires. His statement in **3:10-11**, “*May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman,*” confirms that Ruth had rightly judged Boaz’s intention when he had spoken with her back in the field. When Boaz refers in **3:10** to “*this last kindness,*” the word translated “kindness” is *hesed*. Ruth’s first *hesed* was her committing herself to Naomi, leaving her own country, and coming to Bethlehem with her. Then, she continually demonstrated *hesed* by diligently gleaning in the field throughout the barley and wheat harvests. Now she is committing herself both to Boaz and to restoring clan wholeness by her symbolic act of proposing marriage to Boaz. By covering Ruth with his “wings,” Boaz in turn continues his *hesed* to Ruth. Boaz’s *hesed* toward Ruth is how God conveys his *hesed* toward her and is the fulfillment of the “*full reward*” referred to by Boaz in **2:12**.

Piper points out another important aspect of God’s working through Boaz and Ruth (which, again, was unknown by both Boaz and Ruth): “Ruth is about to be folded purely and righteously by Boaz into a line that will give birth to Jesus Christ. The purity of the moment and the purposes of eternity come together at this holy moment.” (Piper 2010: 91-92) Jesus said, “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*” (**Matt 5:8**). That applies, of course, to eternity, but it begins now. Boaz and Ruth remained sexually pure on the threshing floor, despite being in a sexually-charged situation. That is a lesson for us. Piper adds, “Don’t miss this. It is relevant for you and your sexual life. . . . Let Boaz’s massive willpower in the service of strategic righteousness stir up in you a great, noble vision of sexual life: ‘We will wait. We will wait until all is made righteous according to the word of God.’” (Piper 2010: 92-93) God will honor that in your life. God’s honoring our righteous actions extends far beyond staying pure sexually. This entire book is largely about people’s character and doing good primarily to those of the household of faith. We are to act as *go’els* for those in need. We can all show *hesed* to others. Jesus said, “*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one*

<sup>13</sup> Younger points out that the Hebrew word translated “feet” (*margēlot*) is only used in the Bible in **Ruth 3:4, 7, 8, 14** and **Dan 10:6**. It is derived from the word *regel* which means foot, lower leg, and leg. In **Dan 10:6** it refers to the legs as a whole. Consequently, he concludes that Ruth is to uncover his feet or legs and “lie down close beside him (probably not simply ‘at his feet’ as is often understood)” (Younger 2002: 459, 459n.10).

*another*” (**John 13:35**). If the church—both individually and collectively—took this seriously, our influence in the world would be immeasurably greater.

The fact that Boaz was an honorable man who committed himself to Ruth is confirmed in **v. 12-15**. First, he acknowledges that there is a kinsman nearer in relation to Elimelech than he is; because of that, the legal duty to act as *go’el* fell on that nearer kinsman. Boaz did not want to act against the hierarchy of the clan structure. From a storytelling point of view, this adds an element of great unresolved tension into the story. But Boaz makes it clear in **v. 13** that if the nearer kinsman will not redeem, he will. In fact, in **v. 13** he swore an oath in the name of the Lord: “*As the Lord lives, I will redeem you.*” F. B. Huey points out that that was “the solemn and binding oath a Hebrew could take on himself,” and “not to carry through his commitment after invoking the Lord’s name would have been a violation of the third commandment (Exod 20:7)” (Huey 1992: 538). Jared Wilson adds that “Boaz is saying that he is going to redeem Ruth *because God lives*” (Wilson 2017: n.p.). That is a lesson for us: If we truly and deeply believed that the God of the Bible was alive and present, what would our lives look like? How should that fact affect everything we think, say, and do? Second, in **v. 14** Boaz makes sure that no one is to know that Ruth has been present at the threshing floor. That will ensure that both of their reputations (especially hers) will remain unstained. Third, in **v. 15** he symbolically affirms his commitment to Ruth by giving her six measures of barley. Finally, although many manuscripts say, “*Then she went into town*” (**v. 15b**), the Masoretic text says, “*Then he went into town.*” If that is the correct reading, it indicates that Boaz was not delaying in his commitment to resolve the matter of the nearer kinsman. That certainly would be in keeping with his character as disclosed throughout the rest of the book.

#### **vv. 16-18: Ruth reports back to Naomi**

In this brief scene, Ruth reports all that had happened at the threshing floor. However, Ruth adds the important statement that, when Boaz had given Ruth the six measures of barley, he said, “*You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law*” (**v. 17**). By repeating the word “empty,” we are taken back to Naomi’s statement when she entered Bethlehem, “*I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty*” (**1:21**). Again, Boaz is God’s instrument to effect God’s will in the life of Naomi as a result of the loss of her husband and sons. Naomi’s response to Ruth shows that she understands Boaz’s feelings and his commitment to resolve the matter as soon as possible. We also see the author’s literary style in this chapter: “The chapter opened with Naomi and the search for ‘rest’ for ‘my daughter’ (v. 1). It closes with Naomi and the same themes (‘rest,’ and ‘my daughter’; v. 18)—but now with the resolution in sight.” (Nielson 2022: Week 4: Back Again to Naomi)

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Some Christians seem to think that planning and strategizing somehow is not acting according to “faith.” Do you think that is true? Why or why not?
  - Discuss that in light of Naomi’s plan she laid out in **vv. 1-5**.
2. What are the different ways that Ruth and Boaz demonstrated *hesed*?
  - How can and should we—both individually and collectively as the church—demonstrate *hesed* and act as *go’els* (redeemers) to others?
3. Remaining sexually pure can be very difficult in certain situations. Yet God honors that, as he honored Boaz’s and Ruth’s remaining sexually pure despite being in a highly charged sexual atmosphere on the threshing floor.
  - What are things we can do to remain sexually pure in the different situations of our lives?
  - What hope is there for those who have fallen into different kinds of sexual sin?
4. If we truly and deeply believed that the God of the Bible was alive and present, what would our lives look like?
  - How should that fact affect everything we think, say, and do?

## F. Boaz redeems Naomi's property and acquires Ruth (4:1-12)

<sup>1</sup> Now Boaz had gone up to the gate and sat down there. And behold, the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, "Turn aside, friend; sit down here." And he turned aside and sat down. <sup>2</sup> And he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, "Sit down here." So they sat down. <sup>3</sup> Then he said to the redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech. <sup>4</sup> So I thought I would tell you of it and say, 'Buy it in the presence of those sitting here and in the presence of the elders of my people.' If you will redeem it, redeem it. But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you." And he said, "I will redeem it." <sup>5</sup> Then Boaz said, "The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance." <sup>6</sup> Then the redeemer said, "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it." <sup>7</sup> Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel. <sup>8</sup> So when the redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it for yourself," he drew off his sandal.

<sup>9</sup> Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon. <sup>10</sup> Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day." <sup>11</sup> Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem, <sup>12</sup> and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman."

### vv. 1-8: The interaction between Boaz and the nearer kinsman at the city gate

In this scene, Boaz is true to his word. Boaz went to the city gate, which is where business was transacted and judicial matters were resolved by the city elders (see **Deut 22:15; 2 Sam 15:2**). Since at some point virtually everyone had to pass by the city gate, Boaz stationed himself there and waited. He didn't have to wait long. **Verse 1b** again shows us the hand of the Lord at work when it says, "And behold, the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by." This is akin to **2:4** ("And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem"). In other words, "And what do you know! The nearer kinsman just happened to show up." God was orchestrating events.

In **v. 1c**, the translation ("Turn aside, friend; sit down here") misses the wordplay of the author. In Hebrew, the nearer kinsman is actually called, *p<sup>e</sup>loni almoni*. This is an example of two unrelated, even meaningless, rhyming words (e.g., hodge-podge, helter-skelter, hocus-pocus) that are combined to form a new idiom. They are best translated, "Mr. So-and-so" (Huey 1992: 541; Younger 2002: 474). The reason for this is that, although Boaz obviously knew the man's name, it was shameful not to fulfill one's responsibilities as a *go'el* (kinsman-redeemer); therefore, the author wanted to keep the man nameless. A somewhat similar NT analogy is found in **1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 2:6**, where a man who had been sleeping with his father's wife is not named by name, but is called "such a one." **Verse 2** then tells us that Boaz "took ten men of the elders of the city and said, 'Sit down here.'" In later Judaism, ten men was the least number necessary for a synagogue; it was also "the quorum necessary for the marriage benediction" (Smith and Cleland 1952: 847). This indicates that Boaz did not just wait for the elders to appear, but that he actively went out and rounded up a legal quorum who could legitimize the proceedings that he was about to institute.

In **vv. 3-4**, Boaz begins to set forth his case. There is more to his statement in **v. 3**—"Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech"—than meets the eye. First, this could not represent an outright sale of land by Naomi, because land of a family or clan could not be permanently sold; only the right of use for a limited period of time (until the next Year of Jubilee) could be transferred (see **Lev 25:14-16, 23-25**). Second, Elimelech probably had sold the right of use of the land before emigrating to Moab. Naomi did not have the means to reacquire it, so she is transferring the right to the land to a kinsman-redeemer pursuant to **Lev 25:25** in order to restore the land to the family.<sup>14</sup>

When the nearer kinsman said in **v. 4** that he would redeem the land, he clearly was only interested in

<sup>14</sup> J. G. Baldwin states, "So far as we know a widow had no right of inheritance, but she would be acting on behalf of her sons" (Baldwin 1970: 282).

the land. He may have known that “by redeeming the property he would have to marry the widow, but it is probable that he had assumed that the widow in question was Naomi. The kinsman’s assumption would not have been without foundation since, strictly speaking, it was indeed Naomi and not Ruth who should have married the redeemer of the property.” (Davies 1983: 233) This might have been acceptable to him, since Naomi likely was past childbearing age (see **1:11-12**). Then, without a descendant in the line of Elimelech, the land would have become his own (Davies 1983: 234; Younger 2002: 476).<sup>15</sup>

Then, for the first time, Boaz raised the crucial point: “*Then Boaz said, ‘The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance.’ Then the redeemer said, I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.*” (**vv. 5-6**) It was the redemption of the land that triggered the necessity to marry Ruth, since the primary issue is to raise up an heir for the dead man who will then have legal title to the land and thereby restore clan wholeness. J. G. Baldwin states, “Elimelech had a right to an heir; Ruth his daughter-in-law was still living, and the man who bought the field had the duty of raising an heir for the dead [**Deut 25:5-6**]. If a son was born, the field would revert to him, and so the *go’el* would have impaired his own inheritance because his sons would not inherit what he had bought. Moreover, he would have another family to keep.” (Baldwin 1970: 282) Additionally, although Ruth had been married for ten years without having any children, she is younger and of childbearing age and therefore is far more likely than Naomi to have children. Any son she produced “would eventually inherit not only the property which he had redeemed but also, in all probability, a share of his own personal estate.” (Davies 1983: 234) This accounts for the nearer kinsman’s immediately response, “*I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it*” (**v. 6**).<sup>16</sup>

It should be noted that the practice “*in former times*” of attesting to the purchase of land by taking off one’s sandal and giving it to the other party to the transaction (**vv. 7-8**) indicates that the practice was no longer being performed when the book was written; hence, the need for the explanatory information. That is evidence that the book probably was written considerably after the time of the judges (when the story itself takes place). For example, **Jer 32:9-12**, which was written around the time of the exile to Babylon, states that when Jeremiah was written, documents attesting to the sale of land were used. It should also be noted that the practice of removing the sandal and giving it to the other party to the land transaction is not the same as the humiliating sandal removal and spitting procedure described in **Deut 25:7-10** when a kinsman refused to marry his deceased brother’s wife in order to raise up offspring for his brother. In the case of Boaz and the nearer kinsman, that procedure was not followed. Although the nearer kinsman may have had a moral responsibility to redeem the land and marry Ruth which he did not do, and the fact that he is not named (which places him in a bad light), the text does not explicitly condemn him.

Jeffrey Cohen raises another possibility which is in keeping with the repeated emphasis throughout the book that Ruth is a non-Jewish Moabite (see **1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 10, 21; 4:5, 10**). That is, the nearer kinsman’s refusal to redeem the land and marry Ruth may not have been entirely “marital or domestic - namely, that an additional wife and children sharing in his estate would mean less for his present children - but, purely and simply, xenophobic, the fear that his existing children would be tainted in the eyes of the community through their father’s marriage to a Moabite” (Cohen 2021: 184). Cohen adds that, for any family which welcomed and married a Moabite woman, “there was no guarantee that its action would have been accepted with equanimity by the local Israelite community. It is more probable that the usual prejudiced attitudes to ‘sleeping with the enemy’ would have obtained, and that more than a tincture of ignominy would have attached to the memory of Elimelech’s offspring for that reason.” (Cohen 2021: 185)

This issue goes to the very heart of the gospel. John Piper observes that the story of Ruth “is built precisely to include a Moabite woman in the lineage of David and the Messiah” (Piper 2010: 133). That is highlighted in **Matt 1:3-6** where Ruth is one of only four women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Indeed, each of those four women “were understood to be Gentiles, and were included in order to show that the Messiah, whose male ancestors in his direct descent from Abraham could not, by definition, be Gentiles, nevertheless had Gentile ancestors, thereby suggesting his suitability to be the Messiah for Gentiles as well as for Jews” (Bauckham 1995: 313).

Each of those women has an interesting background. Tamar played the role of a prostitute in order to

<sup>15</sup> In fact, since women had no right to inheritance or ownership except in certain instances (see **Num 27:1-11; 36:1-13**), it may have been possible for the nearer kinsman to inherit the field by doing nothing at all if Naomi and Ruth died. It was Boaz who forced the issue into the open and required that it be decided.

<sup>16</sup> Ronald Hals points out that, once again, we see the hand of God working behind the scenes: “Even the dubious inclinations of the heart are used by God, as in Boaz’s handling of the nearer relative” (Hals 1969: 18).

have sex with Judah when Judah refused to give his third son, Shelah, to Tamar in levirate marriage after her husband Er (Judah's firstborn son) died and after Onan, his second born son, had died (**Gen 38:1-30**). She bore Perez as a result of her adultery with her father-in-law. Judah himself had been married to a Canaanite woman (**Gen 38:2**). Although Tamar's lineage is not specified, many believe that she also was a Canaanite (see Bauckham 1995: 314-20; Kadari 1999: "Tamar's Marriages"; Warner 2022: n.p.). Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute from Jericho (**Josh 2:1-2**). **Matt 1:4-5** says that she was the mother of Boaz through Salmon (who is in the genealogical line mentioned in **Ruth 4:20**); consequently, Boaz himself had Canaanite blood in him.<sup>17</sup> Although Rahab was a Canaanite, she was from Jericho, which was in the land that God had promised to Israel. Ruth not only was a non-Jewish Moabitess, but she was from *outside* of the promised land (**Deut 2:9**). Bathsheba was married to a Hittite (**2 Sam 11:3**). Her own genealogy is not given. Many think it is likely that she was an Israelite (see discussion at "Was Bathsheba" 2021: n.p.) However, since she was married to a Hittite, she herself may have been a Hittite. The Bible reports that Bathsheba was the son of Eliam, whose father was "*Ahithophel the Gilonite*" (**2 Sam 11:3; 23:34**). Edwin Hitti states, "The Gilonites were named for their city of Giloh in the Highlands of Judah near Hebron (Joshua 15), and were one of several Canaanite tribes that were not expelled from Judah's portion of the land. Some of the survivors lived together with the tribe of Judah and even married into the tribe." (Hitti 2019: n.p.) In any event, Bathsheba committed adultery with king David (**2 Sam 11:1-5**); although, given the fact that he was the king, she would have had little choice in the matter, and his having had sex with her essentially may have amounted to rape).

All of this was an intentional part of God's plan. "What God was doing in his far-seeing providence was planting the dynamite that would explode the fortresses of ethnocentrism and racism. . . . The story of Ruth tells us that Moabite [and, as we just saw, Canaanite] blood flowed in the veins of the Son of God. This blood was then shed for the salvation of Moabites—and every other people group." (Piper 2010: 134) As Caiaphas the high priest had prophesied, Jesus "*would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad*" (**John 11:51-52**). That has been fulfilled. **Rev 5:9** says that "*by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.*" As Paul says in **Rom 9:25-26**, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.' And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" (quoting **Hos 2:23**; see also **1 Pet 2:10**) Consequently, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (**Gal 3:28**). **Col 3:11** similarly says, "*Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.*" Tribalism, racism, and ethnic discrimination are absolutely contrary to the gospel.

This has important practical implications for Christians individually and for the church collectively. In **Acts 10** Peter had been shown that God does not show partiality between Jews and Gentiles. He even testified about this in **Acts 11** to Jews who had opposed his eating with uncircumcised Gentiles. However, **Gal 2:12-13** tells us that "*before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.*" Peter's external, objective actions did not correspond to his internal, subjective beliefs. He was denying the very gospel he had preached by the way he was living. Consequently, Paul "*opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned*" (**Gal 2:11**), rightly called him a "hypocrite" (**Gal 2:13**), and pointed out that "*their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel*" (**Gal 2:14**). Since this was not just a private matter between Peter and certain individual Gentiles, but the entire church was being affected and the nature of the gospel itself was at issue, Paul did not go to Peter privately (per **Matt 18:15-16**) but rightly confronted him *publicly* (see also **Eph 5:11; 1 Tim 5:20**).

Paul's attack went to the heart of the matter, namely, that Peter was not being "*in step with the truth of the gospel*" (**Gal 2:14**). Peter denied the gospel by excluding Gentiles from full participation and equality in the

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<sup>17</sup> As we will see in **vv. 18-22**, often in the Bible, genealogies are "telescoped" (i.e., certain names are omitted) for "didactic or instructional purposes" (Younger 2002: 403). Consequently, with respect to the genealogies recorded in **Ruth 4:18-22** and **Matt 1:3-6**, D. A. Carson points out, "Approximately four hundred years (Gen 15:13; Exod 12:40) are covered by the four generations from Perez to Amminadab. Doubtless several names have been omitted: the Greek verb translated 'was the father of' (*gennaō*) does not require immediate relationship but often means something like 'was the ancestor of' or 'became the progenitor of.'

Similarly, the line between Amminadab and David is short: more names may have been omitted. Whether such names properly fit before Boaz, so that Rahab was not the immediate mother of Boaz (just as Eve was not immediately 'the mother of all the living,' Gen 3:20), or after Boaz, or both, one cannot be sure." (Carson 1984: 65; see also Jones 2012: n.p.) For more on the exegetical basis on which it was concluded that Rahab married Salmon, see Bauckham 1995: 320-25.

life of the church. He was also denying Gentiles complete acceptance *in his private life* (i.e., in who he ate with) because of the fact that they were Gentiles. In effect, although he knew better, Peter was making the gospel for “Jews only.” This is a complete reversal of the entire movement of salvation history and amounts to overturning the New Covenant, overturning what Jesus accomplished on the cross, and reinstating the Old Covenant. Rich Lusk states, “Because the Old Covenant ceremonial laws were laws of exile and exclusion rather than access and intimacy, laws of promise rather than fulfillment, for Gentile converts to come under these laws would be to take a major step backwards, just as for Jews to remain under them would be to stay in the old age. . . . The essential difference [between Paul and the Judaizers] was Paul’s realized eschatology in Christ vs. the Judaizers’ commitment to ongoing practice of Torah. Paul could say, and his Jewish opponents could not say, that the promised, final, eschatological age has arrived in history, opening the gates of covenant blessing, not merely to all the genetic sons of Abraham, but ultimately to all the genetic sons of Adam. The basic problem in Galatia was a Jewish nationalism, or exclusivism, rooted in a defective understanding of God’s redemptive-historical timetable. Israel turned Torah, which should have been a means to the end of Christ’s coming (cf. Rom. 10:4), into an end in itself, and therefore into a form of idolatry (Gal. 4:8-9; cf. Rom. 2:22).” (Lusk 2003: n.p.)

The issue occurs any time a church or individual Christian denies people membership, positions of leadership, fellowship, or full equality because of tribal, ethnic, socio-economic, or other similar reasons. This was a big problem not only in Galatia but also in the early church in Jerusalem (see **Acts 6:1; Jas 2:1-13**). It continues to be a big problem for the church around the world today. This is also reflected in the lack of fellowship that some denominations have with other denominations. Of course, we all think our own theology is correct and those who disagree with us are wrong. Even if we are correct in our theology, however, we may be correct in the same way that Peter was correct: his internal beliefs about the oneness of Jews and Gentiles in Christ were correct, but since he did not translate those internal beliefs into concrete, positive action to ensure that Gentiles were treated as equals, Peter was a hypocrite who was “*not in step with the truth of the gospel.*” He had, in effect, turned his Jewish heritage and traditions into *idols*. This is serious. The gospel is *truth*, and truth necessarily affects how we live as well as what we believe. If churches (and individuals) do not resolutely examine themselves and change their practices to bring them in line with the implications of the gospel, God’s verdict on the day of judgment may be that we were not faithful believers or churches at all but really were nothing but hypocrites and idolaters. The inclusion of “Ruth the Moabite” in the line leading to David and to Jesus was engineered by God as part of his plan as a sign of what is to find fulfillment in and through the gospel.

#### **vv. 9-12: Boaz acquires the right to redeem the land and marry Ruth**

Boaz clearly knew Israelite legal procedure, the moral requirements surrounding levirate marriage, the responsibilities of a *go’el*, and the intersection between the redemption of land, restoring clan wholeness, and marrying a widow, and he skillfully implemented them (see also, e.g., **Matt 10:16; Luke 16:8-9; Acts 22:25**). His acquiring the right to redeem the land could have cost him a considerable amount of money (depending on how many years were left until the Year of Jubilee), and his marrying Ruth could have resulted in others in the community looking down on him and rejecting the new couple because of her Moabite birth. Nevertheless, Boaz had no qualms about redeeming the land and marrying a Moabite. He obviously loved Ruth. He therefore quite forcefully says to all of the assembled elders, “*You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon. Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day.*” (**4:9-10**) His twice-repeated statement, “*You are witnesses this day,*” and his pointed use of the phrase “*Ruth the Moabite,*” are the words of a man “sending a clear and bold message to both the leaders and the ordinary members of his community that not only would he not tolerate any future tittle tattle regarding the status of his marriage to Ruth, or, indeed, regarding her previously unauthorized right to be considered a beneficiary of the property of the deceased Elimelech’s family, but that, to the contrary, he expected them all to recognise a Moabite convert as possessing the full rights of a home-bom Jewess.” (Cohen 2021: 185-86)

His forcefulness and influence had the desired effect. All the people at the gate said, “*We are witnesses*” (**v. 11**). However, they went far beyond that and blessed both Ruth and Boaz, essentially giving Ruth matriarchal status by comparing Ruth to Rachel and Leah and requesting that Boaz and Ruth produce many offspring (**vv. 11-12**). Thus, what was hinted at in **2:11** is now made explicit. In fact, Ruth is no longer called “Ruth the Moabite.” Instead, the people speak of “*the offspring that the Lord will give you by this young woman*” (**v. 12**). The people’s blessing in **vv. 11-12** may have been a standard wedding blessing customarily recited for other betrothals in Bethlehem (see Bernstein 1991: 23-24). However, it reveals a deeper level of meaning in this specific context. The reference to “*the offspring that the Lord will give you*” hints at the fact

that, given Ruth's ten years of barrenness, divine intervention may be required if Boaz and Ruth are to produce a child. The people's reference to Tamar also makes sense because "firstly, it referred to levirate marriage, but, whereas Tamar had been tacitly refused, Boaz had honoured the obligation. Secondly, there was a special local interest. Perez, who was born to Tamar as a result of her stratagem, was an ancestor of Boaz (v. 18), and doubtless of many others in the Bethlehem district, for the genealogies mention only three sons of Judah, from whom the whole tribe descended." (Baldwin 1970: 282; see also Bernstein 1991: 23 ["Tamar, as mother of Perez, is the ancestress of the tribe and matriarch of the local clan"])

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Notice the intersection between legal procedure and moral obligation: the nearer kinsman did not have an absolute legal obligation to redeem the land and marry Ruth, although he had a moral obligation; Boaz knew and followed the legal procedure before the required number of elders in resolving the matter (and the use of the sandal confirms that proper legal procedure was followed). What implications may we draw from these facts for our dealings with others in different situations we may face?

2. The nearer kinsman said in v. 4 that he would redeem the land. Sometimes when Christians face obstacles, they conclude that it is "not God's will" that they proceed with what they wanted to do. That is not what Boaz concluded. How did he respond when his hopes and plans appeared to be thwarted?

- What implications can we draw from this when our own hopes and plans appear to be thwarted?

3. Although the nearer kinsman was within his legal rights in not redeeming the land and marrying Ruth, he is portrayed rather unfavorably. What implications from this may we draw for our dealings with others in different situations we may face?

4. What is the significance of including "Ruth the Moabite" in the genealogy of David and, ultimately, of Jesus?

- How does tribalism, racism, and ethnic discrimination relate to the gospel?
- What problems does the church today have with tribalism, racism, and ethnic discrimination (give specific examples)?
- How can we act to eliminate those problems (give specific examples)?

### **G. Epilogue: Boaz and Ruth marry, have a son, and Naomi's family is restored (4:13-17)**

*<sup>13</sup> So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. <sup>14</sup> Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! <sup>15</sup> He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." <sup>16</sup> Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. <sup>17</sup> And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.*

#### vv. 13-17: Boaz and Ruth marry, have a son, and Naomi's family is restored

This final main section of the book culminates the resolution of the central problem raised in **1:3-5**, the deaths of Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion and the consequent emptiness of Naomi. It also parallels and contrasts with Naomi and Ruth's entrance into Bethlehem and their interaction with the women in **1:19b-22**. The author again demonstrates mastery of literary form, this time employing not chiasm, but parallelism. The scene is bracketed by statements concerning the birth of a son: "*and she bore a son*" (**v. 13b**) and "*a son has been born*" (**v. 17a**). The scene may be diagrammed in two parallel parts, as follows:

Part 1 (4:13-15)

A. Narrative statement (4:13)

B. Speech of the women (4:14-15)

Part 2 (4:16-17)

A. Narrative statement (4:16)

B. Action of the women (4:17)

In v. 13, the Lord makes only his second appearance in the book, “*and the Lord gave her conception*” (his first appearance was in 1:6, “*the Lord had visited his people and given them food*”). One might say that these two direct references to God’s actions—one at the beginning of the book and the other at the end—frame the story. However, as we have seen at various points along the way, God has continually been present and active through the actions of people. Indeed, even both of the “appearances” of the Lord in 1:6 and 4:13 were not overt but were through “natural,” not supernatural, means. The book contrasts Ruth’s ten years of childless marriage to Mahlon in Moab with the apparently rapid conception she experienced after marrying Boaz. Robert Hubbard points out that there is more to the story than God’s giving conception to Ruth: “Granted, Yahweh’s help enabled Ruth to conceive. But there would be no birth at all without human actions—sexual consummation by the newlyweds (4:13), Boaz’s day in court (4:1-12), the meetings of Ruth and Boaz (chaps. 2 and 3), and her migration to Judah (chap. 1).” (Hubbard 1991: 18) As we have seen, these events were ultimately orchestrated by God, even though there is no overt miracle, the voice of God is never heard, and no divinely authorized authority figure like a prophet, priest, or judge appears. In short, the book of *Ruth* is telling us that “Yahweh does not guide human affairs through intermittent miracles followed by long periods of apparent retreat. Rather, his activity is hidden behind the actions of human agents, yet he is presumed to be the implicit, immanent cause of events. Hence, he is the cause of even the smallest ‘accidental’ details of life. In sum, one theological foundation on which the book of Ruth firmly rests is belief in God’s hidden but continuous all-causality.” (Hubbard 1988a: 70; see also Hals 1969: 15-19 [In *Ruth*, God “remains on the scene every moment, but hidden . . . here he acts in the needs and hopes of ordinary people”])

The birth of Obed as described in vv. 13-17 is the fulfillment of Boaz’s prayer and petition in 2:12, the blessing of the people and the elders in 4:11-12, the reversal of Naomi’s bitterness and emptiness (1:20-21), and an instrumental step leading to the birth of king David and, ultimately, the Messiah (4:17-22). The birth of Obed is the culmination of the story that has shown God to be sovereign over and involved in even the apparently mundane occurrences of family life and over family tragedies. The story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz shows us that the daily events of our individual and family lives may have significance, including long-term, and deep theological significance, far beyond anything we can perceive or could possibly imagine.

It is important that Christians do not draw a false conclusion from the birth of Obed. To conclude, “If we live lives of *hesed* and faithfulness, then God will be faithful to answer our prayers and give us children, or help us financially (or whatever else we are praying for)” is completely unwarranted. What is being described in v. 13 is description, not prescription. Of course, it is true that we are to live lives of *hesed* and faithfulness, and God will honor that. However, God has not promised to every loving and faithful Christian couple or individual children, wealth, health, or any other particular blessing. God is, indeed, sovereign over the world, all that is in it, and everything that happens. Everything is part of his plan. He raises some people up and puts others down—including making some rich and some poor (1 Sam 2:7; 1 Chron 29:12-16; Job 42:10; Ps 75:6-7; Eccl 5:19; Dan 2:20-21; 1 Tim 6:17). He kills and makes alive; he both opens and closes wombs (Gen 20:17-18; Ruth 4:13; 1 Sam 2:6; Ezek 24:16-18; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). Although there is a general connection between how one lives and how prosperous one can be, we cannot presume upon the Lord’s earthly blessings. Both the OT and the NT indicate that God’s protecting the poor and vindicating the afflicted do *not* occur “immediately” or *even necessarily in this lifetime* (see Ps 9:17-20; Rev 6:9-11). Millions of Christians (including countless numbers today) have lived in poverty, have suffered, been persecuted, and died for their faith through the ages. That is in accord with what Christ and the apostles promised we would face (see, e.g., Matt 5:10-12; Luke 14:27; John 16:33; Rom 5:3; Phil 3:10; 2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pet 2:19-21; 4:12-13). These believers never experienced great health or material plenty. Their poverty, suffering, and persecution are not because they sinned or lacked faith but *because* they were righteous and lived lives of faith. Gordon Fee reminds us, “Even though God has promised to vindicate his own [and our vindication and joy will last for all eternity; see, e.g., Rev 21:4], he has seldom promised immediate vindication. For example, in Hebrews 11:32-39 some by faith saw great victories; but others *by faith were destitute*. But they are *all* commended for their faith. And these words were spoken to encourage believers who themselves had ‘joyfully accepted the confiscation of their property’ (10:34, N.I.V.), but who were now about to lose heart. Immediate vindication, however, is not promised to them (10:35, 36).” (Fee 1984: 41)



This concluding section brings the story full circle back to the beginning. The focus is on Naomi and the child: “The story began with Naomi’s losses. It ends with Naomi’s gain. It began with death and ends with birth.” (Piper 2010: 105) As such, in **vv. 14-15** the women do not see the significance of the child in the fact that he is the heir of Elimelech and will inherit his property but in the fact that “he restores Naomi to life and will support her in her old age. Nor do they celebrate his identity by crying, ‘A son has been born to Elimelech,’<sup>18</sup> but rather, ‘A son has been born to Naomi.’ At every level, then, the point and purpose of this scene is to describe the transition of Naomi’s life from death and emptiness to life and fullness.” (Bush 1996: 7)

A number of unusual and ironic matters are shown in these verses. The name Obed means “serving” (Harrison 1989: 187). Although the “redeemer” (*go’el*) referred to in **v. 14** may be taken as Boaz, the “He” at the beginning of **v. 15** indicates that the women are referring to Obed. Although he is a newborn, Obed is a redeemer in at least two ways: first, through his birth he has restored life and wholeness to Naomi and the family and second, he will be “*a nourisher of your old age*” (**v. 15**). Ironically, despite the meaning of Obed’s name and the fact that he will nourish Naomi, in **v. 16** we see Naomi taking Obed and nourishing him as his nurse.<sup>19</sup> **Verse 17** uses the language of a joyous birth announcement, but ironically applies it to Naomi, whereas customarily such an announcement was given to a waiting father who would not have been present at the birth (Hubbard 1988b: 296). The women are also said to have named Obed, although in that culture the men usually gave the children their names (Phiri 2006: 324).<sup>20</sup> In short, in the last bit of dialogue in the book, the women climactically and triumphantly highlight the fact that “the childless Naomi indeed has a son! It, thus, forms a thematic *inclusio* around Naomi’s bitter period of childlessness in Bethlehem. As the women’s sad question inaugurated it (i 19b), so their joyous statement concluded it. The woman who despaired of ever having a son now has one. The key theme of Naomi’s lack of an heir has come to an end. Once shunted aside as mockery in favor of Mara (‘Bitter’), the name Naomi (‘Pleasant’) now has regained its appropriateness as a description of her fate (cf. i 20-1). In sum, here the author placed a typical birth announcement formula as a climactic editorial comment on the story’s closing scene.” (Hubbard 1988b: 299)

We have seen that God has continually been at work throughout this book in a comprehensive, yet hidden, way. This is confirmed in that every prayer in the book has been answered: **1:8-9** (Naomi’s prayer that the Lord bless her daughters-in-law and that they find rest in the house of her husband); **2:12** (Boaz’s prayer that the Lord fully reward Ruth); **2:19-20** (Naomi’s prayer that Boaz be blessed); **3:10** (Boaz’s prayer that Ruth be blessed); **4:11-12** (the people’s prayer that Boaz and Ruth be blessed with offspring); and **4:14-15** (the women’s prayer that the Lord be blessed and that Naomi be restored to life and sustained). Since only God answers prayer, these answers indicate his continual presence and activity throughout the story. Yet the means by which he answered these prayers was through the decisions and actions of people.

The praise given to Ruth at the end of **v. 15** (“*who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons*”) also is significant and ironic. In a male-dominated society, seven sons were an ideal number (see **1 Sam 2:5**; **Job 1:2**; **42:13**); yet Ruth, a female and a Moabite, is worth more than that. Further, as Daniel Block states, “More than anyone in the history of Israel, Ruth embodies the fundamental principle of the nation’s ethic: ‘You shall love your God with all your heart’ (Deut 6:5) ‘and your neighbor as yourself’ (Lev 19:18). In Lev 19:34 Moses instructs Israelites to love the stranger as they love themselves. Ironically, it is this stranger from Moab who shows the Israelites what this means.” (Block 1999: 729)

The last sentence of **v. 17**, that Obed “*was the father of Jesse, the father of David,*” both hearkens back to the beginning of the book and links to the concluding genealogy in **vv. 18-22**. **Ruth 1:2** had subtly hinted at this conclusion by stating that Elimelech and his family were “*Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah.*” That also is how David is described in the account of David and Goliath in **1 Sam 17:12**: “*Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah.*” In short, the story of Ruth is crucial to the subsequent history of Israel. Younger summarizes, “Without Ruth the line of Elimelech would be extinguished, as too the line of Boaz, and hence no David” (Younger 2002: 484). The amazing thing to remember is that the story of Ruth took place “*in the days when the judges ruled*” (**Ruth 1:1**) when “*there was no king in Israel*” (**Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25**). This, again, demonstrates the magnificence of God’s plan and sovereignty over history.

<sup>18</sup> Although Obed was born to Boaz and Ruth, “the child was not referred to as the child of Elimelech, as was supposed to be the case in a levirate marriage” (Phiri 2006: 324).

<sup>19</sup> The word for nurse means a guardian, as opposed to a wet nurse (Huey 1992: 546).

<sup>20</sup> Frederic Bush states that this is an example of “poetic license” in that the neighbor women did not formally name the child but “named” him by providing the explanation for his name with their glad cry, ‘A son has been born to Naomi’” (Bush 1996: 12).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Sometimes we tend to think that God is only interested in the “big events” of the world, not in our day-to-day lives. How does the story of Ruth change that perspective?

- How can the perspective gained from the story of Ruth of God’s involvement in our day-to-day lives help us as we face our daily challenges and decisions?

2. One thing that the story of Ruth shows us is that seemingly small acts and seemingly meaningless family tragedies may have tremendous long-term theological significance that we cannot perceive or even imagine. Reflect on this.

- How can this fact help us as we go through our lives?

3. The story of Ruth shows us that God typically acts in seemingly “natural” ways: he is present and involved in the events of life (both bad and good) but cannot be seen, heard, or otherwise sensed. Why do you think he operates this way?

- Why is it important to understand and reflect on this?

4. Some Christians think, “If we live lives of *hesed* and faithfulness, then God will be faithful to answer our prayers and give us children, or help us financially (or whatever else we are praying for).” However, that is not true. God has not promised to every loving and faithful couple or Christian children, wealth, health, or any other particular blessing.

- Why do you think God has not promised to every loving and faithful couple or Christian children, wealth, health, or any other particular blessing?
- What problems can arise if we think that “If we live lives of *hesed* and faithfulness, then God will be faithful to answer our prayers and give us children, or help us financially (or whatever else we are praying for)”?
- How can we deal with situations in which we have been living lives of *hesed* and faithfulness but, nevertheless, are experiencing great tragedy and God seems to be absent?
- How can we—both individually and as a church—help others who have been living lives of *hesed* and faithfulness but, nevertheless, are experiencing great tragedy and God seems to be absent?

### **H. Coda: the genealogy of David (4:18-22)**

<sup>18</sup> Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, <sup>19</sup> Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, <sup>20</sup> Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, <sup>21</sup> Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, <sup>22</sup> Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.

#### vv. 18-22: The genealogy of David

As we mentioned in note 17, above, often in the Bible, genealogies are “telescoped” (i.e., certain names are omitted) for “didactic or instructional purposes” (Younger 2002: 403). Younger points out that “there was a tendency [in Ancient Near East genealogies] to limit the maximum length of a written genealogy to five to ten generations” (Younger 2002: 404; see **Gen 4:17-24; 5:1-32; 11:10-26; 25:12-15; 1 Sam 9:1**). He concludes, “Since genealogies functioned to legitimate claims to position, authority, or power in various political and societal contexts, a persuasive case can be made that 4:18-22, rather than being an insipid anticlimax, brings closure to the whole by underlining the significance of the story’s resolution: Naomi’s return to life and fullness through the birth of Obed. That resolution led two generations later to David.” (Younger 2002: 404)

Although the genealogy and the book end with the mention of David, David is not an end in and of himself. That is because **2 Sam 7:1-17** contains the “Davidic Covenant” in which God promised to raise up David’s seed after him and “*establish the throne of his kingdom forever*” (**2 Sam 7:12-13, 16**; see also **Ps**

**89:29, 36-37**). Several related prophecies point to this (**Jer 33:15-17; Ezek 37:24; Zech 12:7-10**). Thus, David naturally points beyond himself to the greater “Son of David,” i.e., the Messiah, who is none other than Jesus Christ. John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah, recognized this when he prophesied concerning the coming birth of Jesus, “*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David*” (**Luke 1:68-69**). James Edwards comments that this salvation “stands in continuity with God’s historic work in Israel, as revealed in the establishment of the Davidic monarchy (v. 69)” (Edwards 2015: 62). Further, Zechariah’s prophecy says that the coming of the Messiah and the salvation he brings is based on God’s “mercy” which in Greek is *eleos* and in Hebrew is *hesed* (see *Septuagint* n.d.: Ruth 1:8; 2:20; 3:10; Edwards 2015: 62). The Jews recognized that the phrase “son of David” meant the Messiah. Matthew begins his gospel by describing Jesus as “*the son of David, the son of Abraham*” (**Matt 1:1**). Jesus asked the Pharisees what they thought about the Christ: “*Whose son is he?*” They responded that he is “*the son of David.*” (**Matt 22:42**; see also **Mark 12:35; Luke 20:41**). Others who recognized Jesus’ power and uniqueness applied the term “*Son of David*” to him (**Matt 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9; Mark 10:47-48; Luke 18:38-39**). Jesus applied the term to himself (**Mark 12:35-37**). “By healing the blind man from Jericho who addressed him as the Son of David, Jesus publicly acknowledged this role [as Messiah]” (Goppelt 1982: 87).

Jesus’ resurrection shows that he is the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. Paul’s major speech in **Acts 13:16-41** concerns how Christ is the promised savior, a descendant of David (**Acts 13:22-23**; see also **Rom 1:3-5**). His central point is that God fulfilled his promise to David and to Israel by raising Jesus from the dead (**Acts 13:30-37**). Throughout his address, Paul’s words parallel the wording of the Davidic Covenant in **2 Samuel 7**, particularly as phrased in the Septuagint (see Goldsmith 1968: 321-22). In **Acts 13:34**, Paul points out that Christ has been raised from the dead and therefore will “*no more to return to corruption.*” Because of that, he then quotes or paraphrases **Isa 55:3**, “*I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David,*” which “refers to the covenant promise to David” and is connected with the “holy one” of **Ps 16:10** [15:10, LXX] (Goldsmith 1968: 323-24). In other words, “Isa 55:3 is cited to show how God has fulfilled the promises of II Sam 7. . . . II Sam 7:15a and 16a are fulfilled in the fact that Jesus is now incorruptible. . . . The complex of OT citations in Acts 13:33-37 is not a random selection, but one carefully conceived on linguistic and theological grounds to show the Jews *how* God fulfilled his promise to David in II Sam 7—namely, by raising Jesus from the dead.” (Goldsmith 1968: 324)

Before He was born, the angel Gabriel promised Mary that the Lord God would give Jesus “*the throne of his father David; and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end*” (**Luke 1:32-33**). After His resurrection, Jesus told His disciples that “*all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth*” (**Matt 28:18**). On the Day of Pentecost Peter explicitly explained how Jesus fulfilled the Davidic Covenant through His resurrection and ascension (**Acts 2:22-36**). Peter relates by quotation and allusion **2 Samuel 7** and **Psalms 16:8-11; 110:1**, and **132:11** to the effect that “*being seated on David’s throne is linked to being seated at God’s right hand.* In other words, Jesus’ resurrection-ascension to God’s right hand is put forward by Peter as a fulfillment of the Davidic covenant” (Bock 1992: 49, *emph. in orig.*). At his ascension the final aspect of the Davidic Covenant was fulfilled—the true “seed” of David, the Son of God sat down on the “throne of David” where He is reigning now with all power (see **Mark 16:19; Luke 22:69; Eph 1:20-23; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 1 Pet 3:21-22; Rev 1:5; 3:21**).

The story of Ruth, therefore, not only resolves a desperate family tragedy and is an integral link in the history of the nation of Israel, but it points forward to the pivotal person of all history, Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of the world. While Obed is called a “redeemer” in **Ruth 4:14**, Jesus is the ultimate redeemer (**Luke 1:68; Gal 3:13; Titus 2:14**). In his discussion of biblical law, David Daube states, “The idea of God or Jesus redeeming mankind from sin and damnation, apparently a purely religious idea, derives from those ancient rules on insolvent debtors and victims of murder, on the preservation of the existing clans and the patrimony of clans [i.e., the institution of the *go’el*]” (Daube 1969: 59). Robert Hubbard adds that the institution of the *go’el* “threw Israel a provocative challenge to give up greed, hubris [excessive pride and self-confidence], and apathy. . . . It presented her a more excellent way and called for a kinder and gentler Israel. Thus, from a New Testament perspective, it anticipated the advent of the Great Redeemer, the one who paid for redemption with his own life.” (Hubbard 1991: 19) Younger concludes, “Consequently, it is not difficult to see how the New Testament could interpret Christ’s death in terms of the *go’el*. Jesus’ function as the ultimate *go’el* is highlighted by the fact that he is not ashamed to call us ‘brothers’ (Heb. 2:11).” (Younger 2002: 401) In sum, the “Great *Go’el*” is Yahweh himself. Human beings like Boaz, Ruth, and Christians today who practice *hesed* and “*go’el* activity” are the agents of Yahweh’s divine activity and the ministry of the ultimate incarnate *go’el*, Jesus Christ (see Younger 2002: 401, 489). Without even realizing it, Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz were participants in a drama of

eternal significance. The same can be said about us.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. How does the genealogy, particularly the mention of David, point forward to Jesus Christ?

- How, if at all, does that affect your view of the book?

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