

Notes on  
**Ruth**  
2000 Edition  
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Introduction

**TITLE**

This book received its title in honor of the heroine of the story. The name, Ruth, appears to have been Moabite and not Hebrew originally, though its etymological derivation is uncertain.<sup>1</sup> After Ruth entered Israel, and especially after the Book of Ruth circulated, the name became popular among the Jews and, later, Christians.

The same title appears over the book in its Hebrew (Masoretic), Greek (Septuagint), Latin (Vulgate), and modern language versions.

**DATE AND WRITER**

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

The writer is unknown to us, but he may have been Samuel or one of Samuel's contemporaries. Minor additions and changes may have taken place under the superintending ministry of the Holy Spirit after its original composition. However the structure and unity of the book argue for its being the product of one writer rather than a composite put together by many hands over a long time. A few writers have suggested that the writer was a woman since the story concerns two rather assertive women.<sup>3</sup> However this suggestion is only speculation since there is no solid data to support it.

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<sup>1</sup>It may derive from the Hebrew *rwh* meaning "to soak, irrigate, refresh." Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup>*Baba Bathra*, 14b.

<sup>3</sup>Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible—A Socio-Literary Introduction*, p. 555.

## SCOPE

The writer said that the era in which the events recorded took place was during the period when the judges governed Israel (1:1). Many students of the book have concluded that the genealogy in 4:18-22 helps to identify when during this period Ruth lived. If the genealogy is complete, Boaz lived during the seventh generation after Perez, the son of Judah, and Boaz was King David's great-grandfather. Life spans during the patriarchal period were sometimes very long, so it may be safer to calculate back from David. Conservative dates for David's lifetime are about 1041-971 B.C.<sup>4</sup> David was the seventh son born to his father (1 Chron. 2:15) who may have been born 35 years or more earlier. Boaz might have been born about 1150 B.C. and his son, Obed, by Ruth about 1100 B.C. Since most of the events recorded in Ruth took place shortly before Obed's birth we might conclude that these events happened around 1100 B.C. This would place Ruth in Israel during the judgeship of Samson (c. 1105-1085 B.C.) and the ministry of Samuel (c. 1115-1021 B.C.).<sup>5</sup>

The problem with these calculations is that four biblical genealogies also list Boaz as the son of Salmon, the husband of Rahab the harlot (Ruth 4:21; 1 Chron. 2:11; Matt. 1:5; Luke 3:32). Rahab was an adult when the conquest of the Promised Land began (c. 1406 B.C.). Boaz then may have been born shortly after that.<sup>6</sup> This would mean that the three generations of Boaz, his son Obed, and his grandson Jesse covered about 360 years (c. 1400-1040 B.C.). This seems quite impossible.

Probably these genealogies are incomplete and record only the names of outstanding individuals in David's family tree.<sup>7</sup> Consequently exactly when within the period of the judges the events of Ruth occurred remains a mystery.

"The Book of Ruth is a pearl in the swine pen of the judges."<sup>8</sup>

## MESSAGE<sup>9</sup>

The Book of Ruth is one of the most fascinating and important short stories that anyone has ever written. As a piece of literature it is almost perfect. The German poet Goethe

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<sup>4</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 244; Leon Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges*, p. 254.

<sup>5</sup>Some scholars date Ruth contemporary with Gideon. Some do this (e.g., C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 466) because of Judges 6:3-4, which refers to a lack of food during Gideon's judgeship. However that was not due to a famine but to the yearly invasions of the Midianites. Moreover it seems likely that there would have been several famines in Israel during the approximately 300 year period of the judges. Wood (p. 254) calculated that Boaz probably lived during Gideon's judgeship or about 1140 B.C.

<sup>6</sup>Wood dated Joshua's death about 1390 B.C. (Wood, p. 11), and Merrill placed it near 1366 B.C. (Merrill, p. 225).

<sup>7</sup>It seems equally clear, however, that some genealogies in Scripture are complete in view of how the writer worded them (e.g., Gen. 5 and 11).

<sup>8</sup>J. Vernon McGee, *Ruth: The Romance of Redemption*, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup>Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:1:132-44.

called it "the loveliest complete work on a small scale" ever written.<sup>10</sup> Alexander Schroder, a literary critic, wrote, "No poet in the world has written a more beautiful short story."<sup>11</sup> Yet as a revelation from God it is equally impressive. I would like to point out some of the major revelations, some of the major values, and some of the major lessons of this book to introduce our study of it.

I believe that among many things the Book of Ruth reveals three that are of major significance.

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

God had purposed to provide a ruler over His people. The first indication of this in Scripture is what God said to Abraham about His plans for his descendents. God's plan was to use Abraham's descendents to bring blessing to all humankind (Gen. 12:1-3). In the process Abraham's descendents would enjoy God's blessing themselves.

Later God told Abraham that kings would come from him (Gen. 17:6). Of course, many kings came from the lines of Ishmael and Esau. However other kings would come through the line of Abraham's descendents that God chose to use especially, namely Jacob's posterity.

When Jacob uttered his inspired blessing on each of his descendents who would become the heads of Israel's twelve tribes, he promised something special for Judah. A great king would come from Judah's branch of the family (Gen. 49:10). Judah would have the leadership among the tribes, and a king who would rule not only Israel but the world would come from him.

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

Nevertheless David did not carry out the will of God completely. He was not entirely faithful to God. So later in history God raised up one of David's descendents. Matthew wrote his Gospel to show that Jesus Christ was the completely obedient Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Messiah. He was the ultimate Son of God sent to rule Israel and to reign over all people.

The Book of Ruth reveals God's providence in providing David. Providence refers to God directing the circumstances of life so that His will is accomplished.

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<sup>10</sup>Leon Morris, "Ruth," in *Judges and Ruth*, p. 229

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

One of the major revelations of Ruth is the crucial characteristic in particular individuals that God uses to bring His will to pass. It is not their natural condition but their faith in Him. Even though Ruth was a Moabitess, a childless widow, and poor, God used her to accomplish His purpose. His purpose was to provide a ruler over His people. He used her because she trusted in and committed herself to Yahweh (1:16-17). Her faith, in spite of her natural condition, made her usable by God.

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

God had purposed to provide rest for His people. At Mt. Sinai, God promised to lead His people out of the wilderness and into rest (Exod. 33:14).

Moses reminded the generation of Israelites who crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land that when they had defeated the Canaanites God would give them rest (Deut. 3:19-20; 12:8-11; 25:19).

Joshua also reminded that generation that God had promised to give them rest (Josh. 1:13-15).

At the end of the conquest the Israelites were finally able to enjoy some rest (Josh. 21:44; 22:4; 23:1).

Unfortunately in the period of the judges, because of the Israelites' departure from God, they were not always at rest. Only when God raised up a judge and delivered their enemies into their hands did the Israelites enjoy rest. Often they lacked food, they were in danger, and their family lives underwent disruption.

That is the situation we discover in the Book of Ruth. Naomi and Ruth lacked food, they were vulnerable and in danger, and their families had broken up. It should be no surprise then when we read that Naomi desired rest for her daughters-in-law (1:9). She and Ruth devised a plan to obtain food and safety and so secure a degree of rest (2:2). Later having gained food and safety through Boaz's generosity they set about to secure full rest through the rebuilding of their family (3:1). Finally Ruth married Boaz and bore a son who would perpetuate the family of Judah as well as that of Boaz, Ruth, and Naomi.

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

Ruth was the source of rest for Naomi and for all Israel ultimately. She became God's instrument of blessing for her mother-in-law by providing food, security, and descendants. Moreover she became God's instrument of blessing for all Israel and even the world by providing Obed from whom came David. Ruth became a model of what God intended Israel to be in the world: a blessing to others and blessed herself. God was faithful to bring this to pass because Ruth exercised faith in Him. Rest is God's reward for those who follow Him faithfully as Hebrews 3 and 4 make clear.

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

God had also purposed to provide redemption for His people. He affected this for the nation of Israel as a whole in the Exodus from Egypt. There God purchased the nation for Himself.

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

As history progressed, God's plan for the personal redemption of His own led to Jesus Christ, the ultimate redeemer, paying the ultimate price. He did this so we might be free from the ultimate slavery, our slavery to sin.

The Book of Ruth reveals God's grace in providing a redeemer. He provided Boaz to redeem Ruth and Naomi. Through Ruth He provided David to set Israel free. Through David He provided Jesus Christ to set the world free.

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

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

Let me also point out three values of the Book of Ruth.

Historically the book ties the patriarchal period to the monarchical period of Israel's history. It does not just go back to the period of the judges or to the Mosaic era but all the way back to Perez the patriarch (4:18-22). This shows that the Davidic dynasty was a fulfillment of the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. It did not rest on the conditional Mosaic Covenant. Because of this, David could function as a priest even though he was not a Levite. His authority superseded the Mosaic Law.

Morally the book demonstrates that faith and purity are possible even in a terrible moral environment. Ruth and Boaz's faith in God resulted in their excellent moral characters (2:1; 3:11). The power of their faith overcame their backgrounds and environments.

Doctrinally the book illustrates redemption. It also illuminates the character of God, particularly His providential working, His loyal love, and His boundless grace, as we have already pointed out.

Finally what are the major lessons we should learn from the Book of Ruth? Let me suggest three.

First, God uses people who trust Him and commit themselves to Him to be a blessing to others. Boaz and Ruth probably did not live to see David's greatness, much less Jesus Christ's. However, God found in them people whom He could use to produce a David. We are very results conscious in our society. We demand instant success and we grow impatient when we do not see God using us to bless others. We need to remember that we will not see all the fruit of our faith this side of heaven. G. Campbell Morgan wrote, "You may be God's foothold for things of which you cannot dream."<sup>12</sup>

Second, God blesses people who trust Him and commit themselves to Him. Ruth and Boaz were not only a blessing to others, but God personally blessed them. They received rest from God. God's blessing of Ruth came in the form of food, security, and a family. A loving and loyal wife of sterling character and a son to carry on the name of his family blessed Boaz's life. (I don't know whether he considered Naomi a blessing or not, though I believe she was.) He also obtained an added portion of the Promised Land. While God has not promised Christians the same kinds of blessings He promised the Israelites, He has promised to bless us. Our blessings are presently mainly spiritual (forgiveness, peace, joy, etc.), but we will receive both spiritual and physical blessings at the judgment seat of Christ. God will reward your faith as He rewarded the faith of Boaz and Ruth.

Third, circumstances do not make or break a believer. Faith does. Boaz was a wealthy man living in a spiritually apostate, morally corrupt environment. Nevertheless he overcame his temptations by faith in God. Ruth was a poor Moabite woman and extremely vulnerable. Yet she overcame her temptations by faith, too. From this we learn that circumstances are not determinative. They do not determine our spirituality. Our attitude and relationship to God do. No matter what circumstances you are up against you can be an overcomer like Boaz and Ruth by trusting in and committing yourself to God.

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<sup>12</sup>Morgan, 1:1:144.

**OUTLINE**

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

## Exposition

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

As is often true in literature, the structure of the piece sometimes reveals the purpose of the writer. This is certainly the case in the Book of Ruth. The writer constructed the whole book with a chiasitic (crossing) structure.<sup>13</sup>

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

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

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

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<sup>13</sup>Lief Hongisto, "Literary Structure and Theology in the Book of Ruth," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23:1 (Spring 1985):23. See also A. Boyd Luter and Richard O. Rigsby, "An Adjusted Symmetrical Structuring of Ruth," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39:1 (March 1996):15-28.

more accurately reflect on the dynamic movement (or development) of the narrative from one level to the next and then to its climax and denouement. This kind of literary analysis offers several practical benefits to the interpreter: (1) It reinforces and adds dimension to correct exegesis. (2) It highlights the artistry of the writer, and thereby the audience's appreciation for the aesthetic beauty of God's inspired text. (3) It prevents the interpreter's placing an improper emphasis on what may be only incidental to the development of the author's message. (4) It exalts the Lord by showing that He is the Master of history. (5) Once the structure is discovered and is shown to be theologically consonant with the rest of Scripture, that structure becomes a source of truth in and of itself. That is to say, the reader can discover truth not only through structure, but also in structure."<sup>14</sup>

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

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

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

The whole chapter centers on the fact that Naomi was too old to conceive.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Reg Grant, "Literary Structure in the Book of Ruth," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:592 (October-December 1991):440.

<sup>15</sup>Hongisto, p. 22.

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

God had promised the Israelites that if they departed from Him He would discipline them by sending famine on the Promised Land (Deut. 28:17, 23, 38-40, 42).<sup>16</sup> The famine on Israel at this time indicates God's judgment for unfaithfulness. As Abram had migrated to Egypt as a result of a famine in his day (Gen. 12:10), so Elimelech migrated to Moab to obtain food for his family.<sup>17</sup>

"The story is never delightful when a member of the chosen seed leaves the Land of Promise and goes into the far country. It makes no difference whether he is Abraham going into Egypt to escape the famine or the prodigal son going to the far country and into the face of a famine there; the results are negative and the ending tragic. Elimelech should not have gone into the land of Moab, regardless of the conditions in the Land of Promise."<sup>18</sup>

Famines, according to the biblical record, usually advanced God's plans for His people despite their tragic appearances (cf. Gen. 12:10; 26:1; 41—50; Exod. 1—20).<sup>19</sup> The chapter opens with famine but closes with harvest (v. 22). Likewise the book opens with a bad situation but ends with a good one. God was at working blessing His people in the times and events that this book recounts. The restoration of seed (food, husband, redeemer, and heir) is one of the main motifs in Ruth.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>See George M. Harton, "Fulfillment of Deuteronomy 28—30 in History and in Eschatology" (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1981).

<sup>17</sup>Compare also Lot's migration in Gen. 13:1-13. For a discussion of the many motifs that occur in the patriarchal narratives in Genesis and reappear in Ruth see Hubbard, pp. 39-41. This repetition seems to indicate that one of the writer's purposes was to present Ruth as another of Israel's notable matriarchs who despite many natural barriers provided important leaders for the nation by God's grace.

<sup>18</sup>McGee, p. 48.

<sup>19</sup>Hubbard, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup>See Barbara Green, "The Plot of the Biblical Story of Ruth," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (July 1982):55-68.

The fact that Elimelech (lit. my God is king, a theme of the book) was from Bethlehem is also significant. Two stories make up the appendix to the Book of Judges. The first of these is the story of the grandson of Moses who left Bethlehem to lead the Danites into idolatry (Judg. 17—18). The second is the story of the concubine from Bethlehem who became the focus of discord in Israel that resulted in civil war and almost the obliteration of the tribe of Benjamin (Judg. 19—21). The Book of Ruth also features Bethlehem. God may have given us all three of these stories because David was from Bethlehem. In the two stories in Judges just referred to we can see that the Israelites would have looked down on Bethlehem after those incidents. However, Ruth reveals how God brought great blessing to Israel out of Bethlehem in the person of David. This is in harmony with God's choice to bring blessing out of those things that people do not value highly naturally. Bethlehem in Ruth's day did not have a good reputation. It was not the environment in which David grew up that made him great but his relationship with God. That relationship, we learn from Ruth, was a heritage passed down to him from his ancestors, godly Boaz and Ruth.<sup>21</sup>



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

"Does this incident in which Benjamin is the occasion of the death of the patronymic's favorite wife at Bethlehem anticipate in some way the Saul-David controversy in which the Benjaminite again proves antagonistic to one who has Bethlehem associations?"<sup>22</sup>

". . . it is best to understand *Ephrathite* as the name of a clan. If this clan descended from Caleb [which seems probable since Caleb settled near there], the author may have identified this family as Ephrathite to picture it as an aristocratic one—one of the 'first families of Bethlehem.'<sup>23</sup> He thereby underscored the humiliating tragedy involved: the Vanderbilts have suddenly become poor sharecroppers. Worse yet, he cleverly disallowed any hope of a temporary visit."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup>For further study of the "Bethlehem trilogy" see Merrill, *Kingdom of . . .*, pp. 178-88; or his "The Book of Ruth: Narration and Shared Themes," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142:566 (April-June 1985):131-33.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>23</sup>W. Fuerst, *The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Lamentations*, p. 10; Leon Morris, "Ruth," in *Judges and Ruth*, p. 249; A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, p. 103.

<sup>24</sup>Hubbard, p. 91.

Ephrathah was probably the name of an older settlement that became Bethlehem (cf. Gen. 48:10). Some scholars believe it was the name of the district in which Bethlehem stood, or the name may reflect that Ephraimites had settled there.<sup>25</sup> This seems less likely to me.

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

God eventually withdrew the famine from Judah (v. 6) probably in response to His people's calling out to Him for deliverance (cf. Judg. 3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6; 10:10; 16:28). This verse sounds one of the major themes of the story: Yahweh's gracious intervention.<sup>26</sup>

Naomi's words to her daughters-in-law are very important.<sup>27</sup> She appealed to them to maintain their strongest earthly ties by returning to their mothers' families (v. 8).

". . . the phrase 'mother's house' occurs in contexts having to do with love and marriage. It seems likely, then, that Naomi here referred to some custom according to which the 'mother's house'—probably her bedroom, not a separate building—was the place where marriages were arranged."<sup>28</sup>

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

"Here emerges a key theological assumption of the book: the intimate link between human action and divine action. In this case, human kindness has earned the possibility (even likelihood) of a God-given reward."<sup>29</sup>

God had also promised blessing to those who would worship Him exclusively (Deut. 5:7-10). Third, she wished "rest" (Heb. *menuhah*) for them in the household of their next husbands (v. 9). Rest was one of the great blessings God had promised the Israelites as they anticipated entrance into the Promised Land (Exod. 33:14; Deut. 3:20; 12:9-10; 25:19; Josh. 1:13, 15; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1; cf. Gen. 49:15; Exod. 16:23; 31:15; 35:2; Lev. 16:31; 23:3, 32; 25:4-5; Ps. 95:11; Heb. 3:11, 18). It refers to security, which in this case marriage would give Naomi's daughters-in-law, rather than freedom from work.<sup>30</sup>

After the two daughters-in-law refused to leave their mother-in-law (v. 10), which in Orpah's case was only a polite refusal but in Ruth's a genuine one, Naomi urged them again. Here the reason for her counsel comes out. She was too old to remarry, bear sons, have those sons marry their brothers' (Mahlon's and Chilion's) widows, and raise up seed.

<sup>25</sup>E.g., F. B. Huey, Jr., "Ruth," in *Deuteronomy-2 Samuel*, vol. 3 of *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 519.

<sup>26</sup>K. Sacon, "The Book of Ruth—Its Literary Structure and Themes," *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* 4 (1978):5.

<sup>27</sup>Of the book's 85 verses, 56 report dialogue, indicating that dialogue is one of its dominant literary features (Hubbard, pp. 100-101).

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 102-3; cf. E. F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth*, pp. 64-65; Huey, p. 521.

<sup>29</sup>Hubbard, p. 104.

<sup>30</sup>Huey, p. 521.

That seed would perpetuate the families begun by Mahlon and Chilion with Ruth and Orpah. Levirate marriage was the practice of a single brother marrying his deceased brother's widow to father children who would carry on the dead brother's name and perpetuate his descendents. It was common throughout the ancient Near East and in Israel (cf. Gen. 38:8-10; Deut. 25:5-10).<sup>31</sup> Naomi was too old to remarry and bear sons who could provide loyal love and rest for Ruth and Orpah. Consequently she urged her daughters-in-law to return home and start married life over with new Moabite husbands.

It was harder for Naomi than for Ruth and Orpah (v. 13) because while Ruth and Orpah had hope of marrying again and bearing children, Naomi did not in view of her advanced age. She regarded her situation as a judgment from God (v. 13; cf. Gen. 42:36). She did not realize that God would yet bless her with a descendent through Boaz. He would father a son who would carry on the name and lines of Ruth's dead husband and Naomi's dead husband.

"Ruth and Orpah demonstrate the two kinds of members in the church—the professors and the possessors. Orpah made only a profession of faith and failed at the climactic moment; Ruth possessed genuine faith, which produced fruit and works."<sup>32</sup>

Ruth clung to Naomi. The Hebrew word for "clung to" is *dabaq*, which elsewhere refers to the ideal closeness that can be experienced in a marriage relationship.<sup>33</sup> Ruth determined to stick to her mother-in-law as closely as a husband would cleave to his wife.

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

Ruth concluded that her prospects for loyal love and rest (vv. 8-9) were better if she identified with Israel than if she continued to identify with Moab. She had come to admire Israel's God. Elimelech and his family had fulfilled God's purpose for His people while living in Moab. They had so represented Yahweh that Ruth felt drawn to Him and now, faced with a decision of loyalty, she chose to trust and obey Him rather than the gods of Moab. Ruth was a descendent of Lot who chose to leave the Promised Land because he thought he could do better for himself elsewhere (Gen. 13:11-12).<sup>34</sup> Ruth now reversed the decision of her ancestor and chose to identify with the promises of Yahweh that centered in the Promised Land.<sup>35</sup> The ancients believed that a deity had power only

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<sup>31</sup>*New Bible Dictionary*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Marriage," by J. S. Wright and J. A. Thompson; and Dale W. Manor, "A Brief History of Levirate Marriage As It Relates to the Bible," *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* NS20 (Fall 1982):33-52.

<sup>32</sup>McGee, p. 61.

<sup>33</sup>Huey, p. 522.

<sup>34</sup>The "cities of the valley" (Gen. 13:12), including Sodom and Gomorrah, lay outside (to the east of) the territory that God originally promised Abram (Gen. 12:7). Later God revealed that He would give Abram's descendents even more land including the Jordan Valley (Gen. 13:14-15; 15:18; et al.).

<sup>35</sup>See Harold Fisch, "Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History," *Vetus Testamentum* 32:4 (1982):427.

in the locale occupied by its worshippers. Therefore to leave one's land (v. 15) meant to separate from one's god.<sup>36</sup>

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

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

". . . Ruth's leap of faith even outdid Abraham's. She acted with no promise in hand, with no divine blessing pronounced, without spouse, possessions, or supporting retinue. She gave up marriage to a man to devote herself to an old woman—and in a world dominated by men at that! Thematically, this allusion to Abraham sets this story in continuity with that one. Thus, a sense of similar destiny hangs over Ruth's story. The audience wonders, May some larger plan emerge from it, too?"<sup>37</sup>

"There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel."<sup>38</sup>

God had always welcomed non-Israelites into the covenant community of Abraham's believing seed. Even in Abraham's day his servants who believed underwent circumcision as a sign of their participation in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17). At Sinai, God explained again that the Israelites, as priests, were to bring other people to God (Exod. 19:5-6). Ruth now confessed her commitment to *Yahweh*, Israel, and Naomi, a commitment based on her faith in *Yahweh*.<sup>39</sup>

These verses are a key to the book because they give the reason God blessed Ruth as He did.

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<sup>36</sup>Huey, p. 523.

<sup>37</sup>Hubbard, pp. 120-21.

<sup>38</sup>P. Trible, "Two Women in a Man's World: A Reading of the Book of Ruth," *Soundings* 59 (1976):258.

<sup>39</sup>See Thomas L. Constable, "A Theology of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 110.

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

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

"In Israel, names were not just labels of individuality but descriptions of inner character which in turn were presumed to influence the person's conduct. . . . Recall Jacob ('schemer'; Gen. 27:36); Nabal ('fool'; 1 Sam. 25:25); Jesus ('savior'; Matt. 1:21). Similarly, to receive a new name signified a change in character and destiny (i.e., Abram to Abraham, Gen. 17:5-8; Jacob to Israel, Gen. 32:29 [Eng. 28]; Simon to Peter, Matt. 16:17-18; Saul to Paul, Acts 19:9)."<sup>40</sup>

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

This summary sentence not only concludes chapter 1 but also prepares the reader for the remaining scenes of the story. Naomi had left Bethlehem pleasant (Heb. *na'em*) but returned bitter (v. 20). She had left with Elimelech, one source of blessing in her life, but returned with Ruth who would become another source of blessing for her. She had left during a famine, but she returned to Bethlehem (lit. house of bread, the place of blessing) at the beginning of harvest.

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

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

Chapter 1 in a sense prepares for chapters 2—4 that constitute the heart of the book. Chapter 1 presents a problem, but chapters 2—4 provide the solution. The key to the solution on the human level was the planning of Naomi and Ruth.

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

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<sup>40</sup>Hubbard, p. 124 and n. 19.

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

Chapter 2 has its own chiasmic structure.<sup>41</sup>

- A Ruth and Naomi (2:2-3)
- B Boaz and the reapers (2:4-7)
- C Boaz and Ruth (2:8-15a)
- B' Boaz and the reapers (2:15b-16)
- A' Naomi and Ruth (2:19-22)

Boaz's conversation with Ruth is the focus of this section.

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

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

The writer introduced Boaz as a kinsman (lit. acquaintance or friend, Heb. *myd'*) of Elimelech. Keil and Delitzsch believed Boaz's name means "alacrity," but J. Vernon McGee wrote that it meant "in whom is strength."<sup>42</sup> Boaz was by virtue of his family relationship someone who was eligible to perpetuate Elimelech's line, the larger of Naomi and Ruth's needs. He was also wealthy so he could provide food and physical protection for Naomi and Ruth, their immediate need (v. 1). The same Hebrew words (*'ish gibbor*), translated "man of wealth," described Gideon (Judg. 6:12).

Ruth's plan to secure favor (v. 2) was a plan to obtain food. She did not realize how favored she would become. God commanded farmers in Israel not to harvest the corners of their fields so the poor and needy, such as aliens, widows, and orphans, could glean food enough to live (Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22). The reapers were free Israelites who hired themselves out to do this work for a stipulated payment.<sup>43</sup> Ruth qualified for gleaning as an alien and as a widow. She submitted her plans for Naomi's approval and received her blessing.

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

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

<sup>41</sup>W. S. Prinsloo, "The Theology of the Book of Ruth," *Vetus Testamentum* 30:3 (July 1980):334.

<sup>42</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, p. 477; McGee, p. 70.

<sup>43</sup>Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, 1:76.

"Significantly, the two greetings form a chiasm with the name Yahweh at its beginning and end. Hence, the exchange dropped a subtle hint which followed up the 'luck' of v. 3: in a simple, undramatic way, it affirmed the presence of Yahweh in this scene. . . . Thus, by this simple device the narrator reminded his audience that, though offstage, Yahweh was nevertheless within earshot"<sup>44</sup>

Ruth's character too was of high quality as the reaper foreman reported (v. 7) and as Boaz later testified he had learned earlier (v. 11). We should probably understand the last part of verse 7 to mean that Ruth had rested only a short time.<sup>45</sup> In other words, Ruth was a hard worker.

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

Boaz called Ruth his daughter (v. 8) because she was considerably younger than he (3:10) and because of his affection for her. He explained why he felt as he did for her in the following verses. Normally the poor migrated from field to field to glean. However, Boaz graciously made Ruth one of his maidservants (vv. 8-9, 13) so she would not leave his field and so he could provide for her needs more fully. The foreigner was integrating nicely into Israel as her spiritual ancestors Sarah and Rebekah had done (cf. Gen. 20:6; 26:29). One of the benefits she enjoyed as a maidservant was drinking drawn water (v. 9). Water was a great blessing in the parched Near East.

Why was Boaz blessing her? Ruth wanted to know (v. 10). The Israelites did not normally treat foreigners this way during the period of the judges. Boaz explained that it was not her nationality but her unselfish love for Naomi (v. 11) and her trust in Yahweh (v. 12) that had moved him to bless her.

". . . Boaz's kindness toward Ruth simply reciprocated hers toward Naomi. He was, indeed, a true son of Israel: he treated foreigners kindly because Israel itself knew the foreigner's life in Egypt."<sup>46</sup>

Verse 12 makes clear that Ruth was trusting in Yahweh and that her trust had become public knowledge in Bethlehem. The Hebrew word translated "wings" here, *kenapayim*, reads "skirt" in 3:9 (cf. Deut. 32:11; Ps. 36:7; 57:1; 91:4).

"Union of the individual believer with God is therefore expressed in the same way as union between man and wife."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Hubbard, pp. 144-45.

<sup>45</sup>Morris, p. 273.

<sup>46</sup>Hubbard, pp. 164-65.

<sup>47</sup>Arthur H. Lewis, *Judges and Ruth*, p. 115.

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

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

Boaz treated Ruth generously and courteously. Yet she continued to glean. Her maidservant status did not provide her with sufficient income so she could abandon her gleaning. The fact that Boaz permitted Ruth to eat with his household servants was another blessing from the Lord.

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

At the end of the day Ruth beat out and winnowed the grain she had gleaned. She had collected about three-fifths of a bushel of barley, "the equivalent of at least half a month's wages in one day" (v. 17).<sup>48</sup> Ruth also took the food she had left over from lunch back to Naomi in Bethlehem (v. 18; cf. v. 14).

Naomi twice blessed Ruth's benefactor (vv. 19-20). She prayed that Yahweh would bless Boaz who had been a source of blessing to her and Ruth.<sup>49</sup> She also identified Boaz's kindness as loyal love (Heb. *hesed*, v. 20). Previously she had asked God to deal "kindly" (*hesed*) with Ruth and Orpah for dealing kindly with her husband, her sons, and herself (1:8). Boaz had proved to be God's agent in extending kindness to Naomi and Ruth, and indirectly to their husbands (2:20).

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

The wheat harvest followed the barley harvest by a month (v. 23). The Feast of Unleavened Bread in late March or early April inaugurated the barley harvest. The Feast of Firstfruits seven weeks later in late May or early June terminated the wheat harvest.

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

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<sup>48</sup>Hubbard, p. 179. Cf. Huey, p. 532.

<sup>49</sup>Every prayer in the book is a prayer of blessing, and God answered every one of them (Hals, pp. 4, 7).

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

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

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

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

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

Naomi had expressed a desire back in Moab that each of her daughters-in-law might find "rest" (1:9). The Hebrew word reads "security" in the NASB and "a home" in the NIV, but its meaning in other parts of the Old Testament is a place or condition of rest.<sup>50</sup> Naomi's concern for Ruth extended beyond her physical needs of food and safety to Ruth's deeper need for a husband and hopefully a son. God had promised to bless His people with many descendents (Gen. 12:1-3), and the hope of every Jewish woman was that God would so bless her. If Ruth was able to marry Boaz and have a son, Naomi likewise would enjoy blessing since Ruth's son would perpetuate Elimelech's branch of the family. Yet Naomi's concern appears to have been primarily for Ruth's welfare because Ruth had proved to be such a blessing to her.

"A significant theological point emerges here. Earlier Naomi had wished for these same things (1:8-9). Here human means (i.e., Naomi's plan) carry out something previously understood to be in Yahweh's province. In response to providentially given opportunity, Naomi began to answer her own prayer! Thus she models one way in which divine and human actions work together: believers are not to wait passively for events to happen; rather, they must seize the initiative when an opportunity presents itself. They assume that God presents the opportunity."<sup>51</sup>

The plan Naomi proposed was in harmony with Israel's laws and social conventions. She was not proposing anything improper much less immoral.<sup>52</sup> While it is true that in the phrase "uncover his feet" (v. 4) the "feet" may be a euphemism for the sexual organs,

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<sup>50</sup>See my note on 1:9.

<sup>51</sup>Hubbard, p. 199.

<sup>52</sup>See Allen P. Ross, "The Daughters of Lot and the Daughter-In-Law of Judah: Hubris or Faith in the Struggle for Women's Rights," *Exegesis and Exposition* 2:1 (Summer 1987):79.

Naomi was not suggesting that Ruth should remove Boaz's trousers.<sup>53</sup> She was probably telling Ruth to remove the blanket or cloak (v. 15) that would be covering Boaz as he slept at the threshing floor. She would then ask him to cover her with it (v. 10). This was a symbolic way of requesting Boaz's protection as her husband (cf. Ezek. 16:8).<sup>54</sup> It was an encouragement to pursue the possibility of marriage.

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

"But why it should be done in this way we do not know. Nor do we know whether this was a widely practiced custom or not. It is not attested other than here."<sup>55</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

"Instead of bringing him before the public eye and forcing him to perform the part of a *goel* [kinsman redeemer], she was giving him the opportunity of rejecting or accepting the office of *goel* quietly."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>For a feminist interpretation of the Book of Ruth that sees quite a bit of self-interest and sexual preoccupation in the main characters see Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*.

<sup>54</sup>John Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, p. 395.

<sup>55</sup>Morris, p. 287.

<sup>56</sup>McGee, pp. 92, 94.

Evidently Ruth assumed or at least hoped that Boaz was the closest living single male relative of her husband Mahlon (cf. 4:10). As such he would have been able to marry her if he desired to do so.

The Old Testament nowhere lists marriage as a duty of a kinsman redeemer. Therefore Ruth's request seems to go beyond Boaz's obligations in that role. However there are indications that the duties of the *go'el* went beyond what the law stipulated, namely the redemption of property and enslaved relatives.

"The word's metaphorical usage suggests that he also may have assisted a clan member in a lawsuit (Job 19:25; Ps. 119:154; Prov. 23:11; Jer. 50:34; Lam. 3:58). Further, if one assumes that the picture of Yahweh as *go'el* reflects Israelite legal customs, the *go'el* also was an advocate who stood up for vulnerable family members and who took responsibility for unfortunate relatives.<sup>57</sup> In sum, it seems likely that the duty of *go'el* was a broad one—indeed, far broader than the redemption acts taught in Lev. 25 and those typical of the levirate. Evidently it aimed to aid clan members, both the living who were perceived to be weak and vulnerable and the dead. Indeed, it may be particularly significant for the book of Ruth that two of the duties concern actions on behalf of the dead (Num. 5:8; 35:12, 19-27; etc.)."<sup>58</sup>

The Hebrew words translated "spread your covering over your maid" (v. 9) are an idiom referring to marrying (cf. v. 10; Deut. 22:30; 27:20; Ezek. 16:8; Mal. 2:16).

Why did Boaz not initiate a proposal of marriage? Evidently for two reasons: he assumed Ruth wanted to marry a younger man, someone closer to her own age (v. 10), and he was not the closest eligible male relative (v. 12).

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

"Kindness" is loyal love (Heb. *hesed*, v. 10). This motif also appears again here. Previously Naomi had prayed that God would deal kindly with her daughters-in-law as they had dealt with her (1:8). Then she had prayed that Boaz would experience Yahweh's blessing for his loyal love to Naomi, Ruth, and their husbands (2:20). Now Boaz acknowledged that Ruth had been God's channel of blessing to him for her loyal love to him.

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<sup>57</sup>Gen. 48:16; Exod. 15:13; Job 19:25; Ps. 119:54; Prov. 23:10-11; Isa. 43:1; 44:22, 23; 48:20; 52:9; 63:9; Jer. 50:34; Lam. 3:58; cf. Ps. 72:12-14. Note also that a *go'el* could be a baby, hence referring to future help, and a 'restorer of life' and 'sustainer of old age' (Ruth 4:14-15)."

<sup>58</sup>Hubbard, pp. 51-52.

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

Boaz promised to marry Ruth if the nearer kinsman chose not to exercise his right to do so (v. 13).<sup>59</sup>

"Not to carry through his commitment after invoking the Lord's name would have been a violation of the third commandment (Exod 20:7)."<sup>60</sup>

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

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

Ruth had risked danger by sleeping on the threshing floor (v. 14). Other people might have seen her and assumed that something bad was taking place. Evidently some of Boaz's reapers were aware of her presence, but Boaz told them to keep Ruth's presence there a secret (v. 14).

"He knew that if it became known, town gossips would put the worst construction on the incident, just as some modern commentators do, thereby destroying Ruth's reputation and perhaps his own."<sup>61</sup>

Boaz had previously given Ruth an ephah of barley to carry back to Naomi in addition to her gleanings (2:7). Now he gave her six measures of barley (v. 18). The Hebrew text reads "six of barley" the word "measures" having been supplied by the translators. What measure the writer meant is therefore unclear. If it was the ephah, Ruth would have had to carry three and three-fifths bushels (over 200 pounds) in the cloak (shawl, NIV). This seems unlikely. Probably the measure was a seah (one-third of an ephah) in which case Ruth carried about one and one-fifth bushels, 60 to 95 pounds of grain. It seems that Boaz was even more generous on this occasion than he had been previously. As before, Boaz's gift of barley was a token of God's blessing on Ruth and on Naomi through Ruth.

"The seed to fill the stomach was promise of the seed to fill the womb."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>McGee wrote an extended discussion of the qualifications of a redeemer (pp. 115-76).

<sup>60</sup>Huey, p. 538.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 539.

<sup>62</sup>B. Porten, "The Scroll of Ruth: A Rhetorical Study," *Gratz College Annual* 7 (1978):40.

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

Likewise Christians wait now until our Redeemer brings our redemption to completion at which time we will rest finally and fully in His presence. Many writers have noted the parallels between Ruth and the church, the bride of Christ, and Boaz and Christ.<sup>63</sup>

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

". . . taken as a whole, the chapter taught that God carries out his work through believers who seize unexpected opportunities as gifts from God."<sup>64</sup>

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

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

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

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

"In ancient cities the 'gate' was a short passageway through the thick city wall which provided the town an entrance and exit. A series of small alcoves lined the passage, and the whole gate area served as both bazaar and courthouse. There the ancients gathered to buy and sell, to settle legal matters, and to gossip. Hence, 'gate' here represented the city as a whole (*the whole town*), not a specific legal body like a 'town council.'"<sup>65</sup>

The writer did not preserve the name of the nearer kinsman (v. 1; cf. 1 Sam. 21:2; 2 Kings 6:8). He wrote that Boaz called him "such a one" (AV, better than "friend," NASB, NIV). Perhaps God did not record the man's name in the text as a kind of judgment on him for refusing to perpetuate the name of his deceased relative by redeeming Ruth.

". . . he who was so anxious for the preservation of his own inheritance, is now not even known by name."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>See, for example, McGee; and George E. Gardiner, *The Romance of Ruth*.

<sup>64</sup>Hubbard, p. 230.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>66</sup>Paulus Cassel, "The Book of Ruth," in *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, edited by J. P. Lange, 2:46.

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

"In a time when few written records were kept, attestation by a number of witnesses made transactions legally secure."<sup>67</sup>

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

Redeeming the property of a relative in financial distress and marrying a near relative's widow to perpetuate his name and family in Israel were separate procedures. Leviticus 25:25-28 legislated the redemption of property, and Deuteronomy 25:5-10 regulated levirate marriage. The actions did not always go together.<sup>68</sup> In this case, Boaz wanted to do both things.<sup>69</sup>

Boaz raised the issue of redeeming Naomi's land first (vv. 3-4). For the first time in the story we learn that Naomi owned some property. In spite of this, she and Ruth were poor or Ruth would not have had to glean. Naomi may have wanted to sell her property to raise cash for living expenses. Evidently she had been acting as guardian of her husband and sons' property rights and was now ready to dispose of their land.<sup>70</sup>

We should not interpret Boaz's reference to Elimelech as the "brother" of the nearer kinsman and himself (v. 3) to mean they were necessarily blood brothers. The expression in Hebrew as well as in English is a broad one meaning "friend." Elimelech may have been their blood brother, but the expression does not require that. Since these three men were relatives the possibility is strong that the field Naomi wanted to sell bordered on the lands of the other two men.<sup>71</sup>

The nearer kinsman desired Naomi's land and was willing to buy it from her (v. 4).

Why the nearer kinsman had to marry Ruth if he decided to buy Naomi's property is not clear in the text. The Mosaic Law did not command that levirate marriage should

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<sup>67</sup>Huey, p. 544.

<sup>68</sup>Jack Sasson, "The Issue of *Ge'ullah* in *Ruth*," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 5 (1978):60-63.

<sup>69</sup>Donald A. Leggett, *The Levirate and Goel Institutions in the Old Testament with Special Attention to the Book of Ruth*, pp. 209-53.

<sup>70</sup>We can only speculate about why Naomi was poor even though she owned property. Perhaps she had annexed ownership of this land while she was in Moab and therefore derived no income from it (Hubbard, p. 54).

<sup>71</sup>Morris, p. 300.

accompany the redemption of family property whenever possible. Perhaps the following explanation provides the solution to this problem.

When the nearer kinsman chose to purchase Naomi's land he identified himself as the nearest kinsman. Since he was the nearest kinsman he was certainly under a moral, and perhaps even a legal, obligation to marry the wife of his deceased relative if he could (Deut. 25:5-6). His refusal to do so would have brought disgrace on him (Deut. 25:7-10).<sup>72</sup> The Mosaic Law required levirate marriage only when the male was legally able to marry his brother's widow. If he already had a wife he could not do so. The law did not require him to become a polygamist.<sup>73</sup>

"Ruth was the only one who could raise up a son to inherit the estate of Elimelech. Therefore, she was not only an important link in the chain of genealogy, but she sustained certain rights over the property which Boaz was discussing with the other kinsman. To redeem the property therefore would involve the *goel* in the affairs of the foreigner from Moab. The one who redeemed the estate would have to redeem Ruth also, as she and her affairs were legally bound up in the field of Elimelech. This was the legal technicality upon which Boaz was depending for his victory."<sup>74</sup>

The desire to raise up a name for the deceased was one of the major motivations in Boaz's action. Boaz wanted to honor Mahlon by perpetuating his name in Israel.<sup>75</sup> The writer did not fault the nearer kinsman for doing what he did. Rather he pictured Boaz as acting with extraordinary loyal love.

The fact that the genealogy at the end of the book (4:21) connects Boaz and Ruth's son with Boaz rather than Mahlon does not mean he failed to perpetuate Mahlon's reputation. The son would have been eligible to inherit from both Mahlon and Boaz. The Israelites regarded him as the son of both men. Naturally he was Boaz's son, but legally he was Boaz and Mahlon's son as well as Elimelech's descendent.

"The same person could be reckoned genealogically either in different family lines or at different places in the same line. In this case, Obed was probably reckoned to Boaz (and, ultimately, to Judah) for political reasons; at the same time, for theological reasons (i.e., to show the providence behind David's rise), he was also considered to be Elimelech's son."<sup>76</sup>

Faced with the double financial burden of buying the field and marrying and providing for Ruth (and Naomi?) the nearer kinsman declined Boaz's offer (v. 6). Note that he said

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<sup>72</sup>Huey, p. 544, believed that none of the disgrace of this regulation was present in Boaz's dealings with the nearer kinsman.

<sup>73</sup>See J. R. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, p. 251.

<sup>74</sup>McGee, p. 109.

<sup>75</sup>See Oswald Loretz, "The Theme of the Ruth Story," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 22 (1960):391-99.

<sup>76</sup>Hubbard, pp. 62-63.

he *could* not rather than *would* not redeem it. The reason he gave was that he would jeopardize his own inheritance. His inheritance evidently refers to the inheritance he would pass on to his descendents, not an inheritance he might receive from an ancestor. He felt he would have little left to pass on to his own heirs if he bought Naomi's property and married Ruth. Apparently he was not a wealthy man like Boaz (2:1).

Robert Hubbard, Jr., has concluded that the obligation to marry Ruth as well as purchase the land must have been a legal one either known throughout Israel or unique to Bethlehem.<sup>77</sup> He regarded the unnamed kinsman redeemer's change of mind "the book's thorniest legal problem."<sup>78</sup>

". . . the surprise element must be something other than the obligation to marry a deceased's widow since the kinsman probably expected that. While certainty is impossible, a careful reading of 4:3-5 suggests that the new information was the sudden, unexpected substitution of Ruth for Naomi as Elimelech's widow. The progression of thought would be as follows. Cleverly, Boaz steered the conversation away from Ruth to focus on legal matters concerning Elimelech and Naomi in vv. 3-4. If the thought of a marriageable widow associated with the land crossed the kinsman's mind at all, he probably assumed her to be Naomi. Advanced in age beyond child-bearing, she posed no threat to his prospective profitable purchase. The alluring proposition offered him double returns for a small investment. He would not only increase the size of his own holdings but also enhance his civic reputation as one loyal to family. Future profits from the land would offset any expense incurred in caring for Naomi; indeed, given her awful suffering, one might not expect her to live much longer anyway. In any case, there was no risk of losing his investment to the claims of a future heir. A required marriage to Ruth (v. 5), however, was a very different matter. Much younger, she might bear several sons, the first eligible to claim Elimelech's property as his heir, others perhaps to share in the kinsman's own inheritance (v. 6). That possibility made the investment all too risky and perhaps even flustered him . . . The profit to be turned would be his only until the child acquired Elimelech's land, probably on attaining adulthood. Further, the care of a younger, obviously robust wife (cf. 2:17-18) meant considerably more expense than anticipated. Hence, he willingly waived his redemption rights in favor of Boaz (vv. 6-8)."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 61. Other writers who hold essentially the same view include E. W. Davies, "Ruth 4:5 and the Duties of the *go'el*," *Vetus Testamentum* 33 (1983):233-34; Campbell, p. 159; and E. Robertson, "The Plot of the Book of Ruth," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 32 (1950):221.

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

Probably the practice of standing on land one possessed led to the custom of using the sandal as a symbol of possession in land transactions (v. 7; cf. Gen. 13:17; Deut. 1:36; 11:24; Josh. 1:3; 14:9).<sup>80</sup> Most scholars believe that it was the kinsman who removed his sandal to symbolize the completion of the transaction (v. 8).

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

The witnesses to Boaz's transaction wished God's blessing of numerous descendents on him. They cited Rachel and Leah, both of whom, like Ruth, had joined the Israelites and had entered their land from alien nations that had demonstrated hostility to God's people. Rachel's tomb was near Bethlehem. She and her sister had given Jacob 12 sons directly and through their maids. They had indeed "built the house of Israel" (v. 11). The people also wished wealth (cf. 2:1; 3:11) and fame on Boaz, which he did obtain thanks to God's blessing on his family, especially through Ruth and David.

The reference to Perez (v. 12) is also significant. There are many parallels between the story of Boaz and Ruth and the story of Perez's parents, Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38). Ruth and Tamar were both foreigners who had married into Israel. The first husbands of both women died leaving them widows. Both women participated in levirate marriages. Tamar seduced Judah under cover of a disguise, but Ruth encouraged Boaz under the cover of night. When Judah and Tamar appeared before a public tribunal they were ashamed and condemned, but when Boaz and Ruth did so they received praise and blessing. In both cases the husbands were considerably older than the wives. Both women, however, bore sons in the Davidic messianic line. Tamar bore Perez, and Ruth bore Obed (v. 21).

"Like Ruth, Tamar was a foreigner who perpetuated a family line threatened with extinction, one which later became Judah's leading house, and thereby gained herself fame as its founding mother. If fertile, may not the equally creative (ch. 3) foreigner, Ruth, also preserve Elimelech's line, and, if that line became famous, thereby earn a similar grand destiny?"<sup>81</sup>

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

The witnesses also recognized that children are a gift from God (v. 11; cf. Ps. 127:3-5). God is the source of all blessing.

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<sup>80</sup>Ernest R. Lacheman, "Note on Ruth 4:7-8," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 56 (1937):53-56.

<sup>81</sup>Hubbard, p. 261.

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

Verse 13 is a key verse in the book because it records the fulfillment of Naomi and Ruth's plans to obtain rest (2:2; 3:1-5).<sup>82</sup> A son was indispensable to the continuation of the line of Boaz as well as that of Mahlon and Elimelech. With the birth of Obed, Ruth and Naomi could both rest. They had produced someone who would carry on the program of God for Israel.

Why did a godly Israelite such as Boaz marry a Moabite woman? Did the Mosaic Law not forbid the Israelites from admitting Moabites into their nation (Deut. 23:3)? Several solutions to this problem have been proposed.<sup>83</sup>

1. Perhaps Boaz simply disregarded the law at this point. This is unlikely because Boaz, as the writer presented him in Ruth, was a scrupulous observer of the law (cf. 2:4, 12; 3:9-13; 4:1-6, 9-10, 13).
2. Perhaps the prohibition in Deuteronomy applied only to male Moabites since Moses used the masculine gender when he referred to them. However the masculine gender would have been the normal gender to use when referring to both male and female Moabites. Moreover there is no other clue in Deuteronomy that only males were in view in this prohibition.
3. Probably the law in Deuteronomy had in view unbelievers who wanted to immigrate into Israel. God had always welcomed believers from outside Israel into the covenant community (Gen. 17; 38; Josh. 2; et al.). His purpose for Israel was that she bring people from other nations to God (Exod. 19:5-6). God's purpose in the Abrahamic Covenant to make Israel a blessing to the world by bringing all people into relationship with God antedated and superseded all provisions of the later Mosaic Covenant. God brought the Mosaic Covenant in alongside the Abrahamic Covenant to help the Israelites maximize the blessings He had promised to Abraham.<sup>84</sup>

The women blessed the Lord (v. 14) acknowledging His goodness in providing a redeemer for Naomi as well as Ruth in Obed (v. 15). God eventually granted their desire that Obed's name become famous in Israel.

Obed did indeed restore life to Naomi's apparently dead branch of the family of Judah (v. 15). Furthermore he sustained her in her old age by giving her hope (cf. 1:20-21).

". . . in all probability, Obed originally meant 'servant' of Naomi; as her *go'el*, he 'served' her by assuring her family's survival and providing her

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<sup>82</sup>See Constable, p. 111.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>84</sup>See D. R. Ap-Thomas, "The Book of Ruth," *Expository Times* 79 (October 1967-September 1968):373. Compare also Ross, p. 79.

food. . . . Obed's name perhaps added the nuance 'servant of Yahweh,' for in the end his service of Naomi served Yahweh's larger purpose as well."<sup>85</sup>

Ruth too received praise for her unusually selfless love and care for her mother-in-law.

Naomi became a nurse of Obed (v. 16) in the sense of becoming his guardian, the meaning of the Hebrew word *'aman* (lit. "cared for him"). She did not become his wet nurse.

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

"This verse [v. 17] is, of course, a clue to the book's purpose: to show that the reign of David resulted from neither his shrewd politics nor his clever tactics but from the divine preservation of his worthy family line. Therefore, Israel was to accept David's kingship as the gift of divine guidance."<sup>86</sup>

Why did the writer feature Naomi in this closing section of the book rather than Ruth? I believe he did so to finish off the main point of chapter 1. There Naomi said it was impossible for her to have a son (1:11-13). Yet at the end of the book she has a son (4:17). This motif of a need for the line of Judah therefore is one that the writer wanted us to appreciate. God provided the seed supernaturally (4:14) to a godly couple. Ruth's faith in Yahweh qualified her as a channel of blessing in spite of her Moabite origins.

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

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

Why does the genealogy start with Perez? Perez was the illegitimate son of Judah (1 Chron. 2:5) who, like Jacob, seized the initiative to stand in the line of messianic promise from his twin brother (Gen. 38:27-30).<sup>87</sup> This genealogy emphasizes how God circumvented custom and tradition in providing Israel's great redeemer, David. Like Perez, Boaz was the descendent of an Israelite father, Salmon, and a Canaanite harlot, Rahab (Matt. 1:5). Both Tamar and Rahab entered Israel because they believed and valued God's promises to Israel, as did Ruth. David himself was the youngest rather than the eldest son of Jesse.

"It is clear that a major purpose of the biblical narrator was to establish links between Judah and Tamar on the one hand and Boaz and Ruth on the other, links binding the royal promise given to Judah with the fulfillment

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<sup>85</sup>Hubbard, p. 277.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>87</sup>Merrill, "The Book . . .," p. 134.

of the Davidic dynasty. This was accomplished not only by demonstrating the affinities between the stories of Tamar and Ruth, but also by suggesting important contrasts."<sup>88</sup>

The wording of the genealogy (Heb. *toledot*), to so-and-so was born so-and-so, does not necessarily imply that this is a complete list (cf. 1 Chron. 2:5-15; Matt. 1:3-6; Luke 3:31-33).<sup>89</sup>

"The first five names cover the period from the time of the entry into Egypt (Perez, Gen 46:12) to the time of Moses (Nahshon, Exod 6:23; Num 1:7), while the remaining five belong to the period of the early settlement in Canaan to the closing years of the judges."<sup>90</sup>

The fourth chapter brings to a tidy conclusion all the themes and threads spun out in the earlier chapters.<sup>91</sup> Then the genealogical appendix adds information that helps us appreciate the greatness of God's gift of the son, Obed. He became the grandfather of King David. The appendix also ties the events of the Book of Ruth to the past as well as to the future. It does so by showing connection with God's promise to raise up a ruler over His people from the descendants of Judah.

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<sup>88</sup>Idem, *Kingdom of . . .*, p. 184.

<sup>89</sup>The word *toledot* is key to the structure of Genesis indicating its major divisions (2:4; 5:1; et al.). This is one more of the many allusions back to the early history of Israel that Ruth contains. This book shows that God was still working faithfully with the Israelites as He had earlier in their history even though they were generally unfaithful to Him during the judges period.

<sup>90</sup>Huey, p. 548.

<sup>91</sup>See again the diagram of the structure of the book in the notes introductory to chapter 1 to visualize how these ideas come together.

## Conclusion

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

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

Second, the book links the patriarchal and monarchical eras of Israel's history. The patriarch Perez was the ancestor of King David, not Saul. This connection shows the legitimacy of the Davidic dynasty in the monarchical period and the illegitimacy of Saul's dynasty. Likewise the writer did not tie David in with the Mosaic era or covenant but with the patriarchal era and the Abrahamic Covenant. This helps the reader appreciate the fact that the Davidic dynasty did not have its roots in the conditional Mosaic Covenant but in God's unconditional promises to the patriarchs.<sup>92</sup> The Book of Ruth is thus a revelation of the providence of God.

" . . . God uses the faithfulness of ordinary people to do great things."<sup>93</sup>

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

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

This little book is like a small diamond. Each of the many motifs resembles a facet that shines with its own particular beauty. Perhaps the most outstanding of these is how God works out His own purpose through human instrumentality.<sup>94</sup> Other important themes include famine, harvest, rest, blessing, redemption, and seed. Yet the book is much more

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<sup>92</sup>For further development of this purpose see Merrill, "The Book . . .," pp. 135-37.

<sup>93</sup>Hubbard, p. 279.

<sup>94</sup>See Ronald Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth*; Prinsloo, pp. 330-41; Merrill, "The Book . . .," p. 137, n. 8.

than a collection of various themes. It possesses a unity that carries the reader along smoothly and excitedly to the end.

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