

# INTRODUCTION AND RUTH

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## Introduction

### *I. Authorship*

A. The book gives no hint as to the identity of its author. The Rabbinic literature known as the Babylonian Talmud, which was completed around A.D. 500-550, attributes the authorship of Ruth (and Judges) to Samuel.

B. A major problem with that claim is that Samuel lived in the late Judges period and there are clear indications that the book, at least in its final form, was written a significant time after the Judges period. It is possible that Samuel wrote an earlier form of the book that was later put in its final form, but that is pure speculation.

## *II. Date*

A. Ruth 1:1 makes clear that the author is writing about events that took place in a former time, a time identified as "the days when the Judges ruled." The period when Judges ruled in Israel commenced not long after the death of Joshua (Judg. 1:1), which one can reasonably estimate occurred around 1366 B.C., and ended with the anointing of Saul as king (1 Samuel 10) around 1051 B.C.<sup>1</sup>

B. The fact David's genealogy is given at the end of the book means it was written after David had become king, after he had become someone whose genealogy was of special interest and significance. So it could not have been written before around 1011 B.C.

C. Ruth 4:7 shows that the book was written so long after Boaz redeemed Elimelech's property that the custom for confirming such transactions had been forgotten and thus required an explanation. It seems it would take at least several generations for that to occur, which takes one to the time of David at the earliest (and probably beyond).

D. Based on certain linguistic evidence, most scholars today are convinced the book was written prior to the Babylonian exile in 587/586 B.C., but the proposed dates vary widely from the tenth to the sixth centuries B.C.

## *III. Themes and Purpose*

A. It is easy to read the Book of Ruth simply as an engaging story that promotes the virtues of loyalty, kindness, and generosity by showing that God rewards such behavior, but as Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman state in *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 133, doing so "distorts the book and misses its profound theological teaching."

B. There is a link to David at the beginning of the book (1:1-2) through the identification of Elimelech as "a man of Bethlehem in Judah" and the more specific identification of his family as "*Ephrathites* from Bethlehem in Judah" (see 1 Sam. 17:12). There is also a link to David in the genealogy with which the book concludes. This

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<sup>1</sup> See Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 146-151 and Walter C. Kaiser, *A History of Israel From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 178-179.

suggests that the book was written *primarily* to reinforce the truth that the Davidic dynasty was instituted by God, that David's family ruled by divine right.

1. It reinforces that truth by implying God's providential hand in David's ancestry, paralleling his guidance of Israel's patriarchs, by highlighting that lowly Bethlehem was an oasis of honor in the dark days of the Judges, and by answering presumed criticism of David's Moabite heritage by asserting the nobility of his Moabite great grandmother and her Jewish husband.<sup>2</sup>

2. This purpose suggests that the book was written during a time when the Davidic monarchy was being resisted. There was resistance to the Davidic monarchy during the reigns of both David and Solomon, and a number of scholars date the book during one of those reigns.

3. Daniel Block in *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary (Broadman & Holman, 1999), 590-598 makes an interesting case for the book being written to silence detractors during the renaissance of the Davidic dynasty under Josiah (640-609 B.C.) This not only accounts for the presence in the book of both standard biblical Hebrew and late biblical Hebrew better than a date during the reigns of David or Solomon but also better accounts for the distance from the time of the Judges suggested by 4:7.

C. Though the author's primary goal seems to have been to exalt David by telling the story of his roots, he develops additional themes in the process.

1. God's kindness and mercy are shown through his working in and through the everyday lives of ordinary people to preserve Elimelech's lineage and to reverse Naomi's (and to a lesser extent Ruth's) dire circumstance of childless widowhood, even exalting them within Israel by bringing through them the great King David, in whose lineage the far greater Lord Jesus would be born. William Lasor, David Hubbard, and Frederic Bush state in *Old Testament Survey*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 524-525:

In much of the Bible, God intervenes directly and supernaturally in human affairs to effect the purposes of redemption. But in Ruth no guidance comes through dreams, visions, angelic messengers, or voices from heaven. No prophet arises to announce "thus says the Lord." Instead, God "is everywhere – but totally hidden in purely human coincidences and schemes. . . ." God's firm, loving providence lurks behind Ruth's "lucky" meeting with Boaz (2:3-4) and Naomi's risky plan (3:1-5). In short, the

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Hubbard, Jr. thinks it unlikely there was any intent to defend David's Moabite ancestry. He states in *The Book of Ruth*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 38, "since David's ancestry was probably well known at the time, the chances of successfully reshaping public opinion would seem unlikely. How probable is it, then, that a writer would make such an attempt?" But certainly familiarity with the details of David's ancestry could vary at different times and places, and those details would need to be reasserted whenever or wherever the Moabite criticism began to gain traction.

book stresses that God works behind the scenes *in* the deeds of faithful persons like Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz.

2. The story points out that God welcomes into the covenant non-Israelites who are willing to give him their allegiance and loyalty. Ruth was a Moabite by birth, but she chose to come to God and was blessed to become the great grandmother of King David.

3. The story also displays the goodness of practicing *hesed* and the blessings that accompany doing so. God not only blesses the one practicing *hesed* but uses that person as a vehicle to bring blessing to others. Regarding the word *hesed*, which often is translated "kindness," Block states (p. 605):

*Hesed* is one of those Hebrew words whose meaning cannot be captured in one English word. This is a strong relational term that wraps up in itself an entire cluster of concepts, all the positive attributes of God – love, mercy, grace, kindness, goodness, benevolence, loyalty, covenant faithfulness; in short, that quality that moves a person to act for the benefit of another without respect to the advantage it might bring to the one who expresses it.

## Text

### *1. Tragedy Brings a Crisis (1:1-5)*

A. Ruth 1:1 specifies that the events reported in the book took place in "the days when the Judges ruled," which is the period from soon after Joshua's death in roughly 1366 B.C. to Saul's anointing as king around 1051 B.C.

1. This was a dark period in Israel's history, a time when there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judg. 17:6, 21:25). The people repeatedly abandoned the Lord, were oppressed by a foreign power as divine punishment, cried out for deliverance, and then were delivered by a Judge whom God raised up, only to repeat the cycle time after time. Robert Hubbard, Jr. remarks in *The Book of Ruth*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 84, "The book of Judges teems with violent invasions, apostate religion, unchecked lawlessness, and tribal civil war. These threatened fledgling Israel's very survival."

2. Despite Israel's faithlessness at this time, we will see in Ruth that God was guiding history to bless the nation through the future birth of King David.

B. In those days, a famine came on the land of Israel, which prompted Elimelech, an Ephrathite from Bethlehem in Judah, to move to Moab with his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion.

1. The author points out in 1:6 that the Lord provided food for Israel, the implication being that the famine was the result of his withholding food.

a. Given the widespread disobedience in the days of the Judges, perhaps one is to understand this famine as fulfillment of God's promise in Lev. 26:19-20 and Deut. 28:23-24 to punish his people with droughts should they persist in rebellious and pagan behavior. But the fact the author gives no hint of such a connection suggests that it is not significant for his point.

b. Mentioning the famine may serve merely as background for how this Jewish family found itself in Moab, or it may be intended to remind readers of the patriarchs, such as Abraham (Gen. 12:10), Isaac (Gen. 26:1), and Jacob and his sons (Genesis 41-50), who were driven by famine to sojourn in foreign lands. The purpose in the latter case would be to signal that God was at work and thus heighten interest in how the story would unfold.

c. The severity of the famine is perhaps implied by the fact Bethlehem in Hebrew means "house of bread." The town presumably was so named because wheat, barley, and other crops were plentiful in the area. If a famine forces one to leave the "house of bread," one can imagine the situation elsewhere in Israel.

2. Some commentators are convinced that Elimelech's leaving Israel for Moab was an act of faithlessness for which he and his family were punished.

a. They reason that the famine was punishment for Israel's sin, and since God promised he would lift his punitive curse if his people would repent (Deut. 30:1-3, 8-10), faith would require one to stay and work to bring about repentance rather than flee to a foreign land (e.g., Block, 626-627).

b. The fact Elimelech went to Moab, a longstanding enemy of Israel, is seen as a corroborating indication of an impure heart, and Naomi's declarations that her suffering was God's punishment (1:13, 20-21) are assumed to relate to the family's move to Moab and to be a correct assessment of her circumstance.

c. Moab refers to the region east of the Dead Sea. Some claim that it is too close to be free of a famine in Israel, but God is the one who withholds the food and thus determines the scope of the famine.

3. The evidence cited in support of the view that Elimelech's move to Moab was sinful is weaker than it may initially appear.

a. As previously indicated, the fact the author gives no hint that the famine was punishment for Israel's sin suggests that, even if it was, its being so was not significant for his point. It therefore does not seem valid to make it a key to the story by inferring from it that Elimelech's leaving was an act of faithlessness (because he should have remained to work for the lifting of the curse through repentance).

b. Moab and Israel did indeed have a long history of enmity, but that need not mean that choosing to reside there temporarily during a famine would be an affront to God. 1 Samuel 22:3-4 reports that David, a man of undeniable faith, entrusted his parents to the king of Moab when he was running from Saul. David himself lived among the Philistines in 1 Samuel 27, and though he was fleeing from a king who wanted him dead, famine can be every bit as dangerous and threatening as a human enemy.

c. The fact Naomi attributed her suffering to God need not mean he had punished her for moving to Moab (or for allowing her sons to marry Moabites). She had certainly suffered, but as in the case of Job, God may have allowed it for some nonpunitive purpose to which we are not privy or as part of his orchestration of David's ancestry.

4. Weighing against the notion that Elimelech's sojourning in Moab was an act of faithlessness is the fact the author gives no hint of condemnation regarding the move or their lives in Moab. As Frederic Bush states in *Ruth/Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1996), 67:

While noting the implications of this highlighted detail [of the origin of Elimelech's family], it is also important to stress the *lack* of implications in the broad general statements with which our author sketches the rest. There is not the faintest suggestion, for example, that there is any opprobrium to be attached to the move to Moab or that the famine is Israel's punishment for her sin. Especially there is not the slightest hint that the tragic deaths of Elimelech and his sons in any way resulted from their having forsaken their people in a time of trouble or their having moved to Moab where the sons married Moabite women. Later rabbinic exegesis used such themes of retribution and punishment to the full (for details, see Campbell), but they are read into the story, not out of it. . . . [N]one of this is relevant to [the story's] meaning simply because the author leaves all such questions totally in the background – by design, in my opinion. To raise such questions, indeed to give any more details, would have been a distraction, for the complete journey to and from Moab and its cause are but the background and setting for the main problem the story addresses, which is depicted in the second section, vv 3-5.

5. Also weighing against the notion that Elimelech's sojourning in Moab was an act of faithlessness is the fact God graciously spares Elimelech's line from extinction and reverses Naomi's emptiness without any indication of a change in Naomi's heart. Naomi did return to Bethlehem, but she did so only after she learned that God had ended the famine there. Since the famine was why she was in Moab in the first place, the fact she returned to Israel only when the famine was over is consistent with her attitude all along. In other words, one cannot take her returning to Israel when the famine was over as an indication that she believed it was wrong to have left during the famine or not to have returned before the famine was over.

C. The names of the family members – Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, and Chilion – occur only here in the O.T., but all the names except Mahlon have counterparts in other literature from the ancient Near East (Amarna, Ugarit, and Mari). Naomi means "good, pleasant, lovely," and since her name is the only one whose meaning is played on in the story (1:20), the meanings of the other names, even if they could be known with confidence, do not seem relevant.

D. The author is careful to note the origin of Elimelech's family.

1. He first states in v. 1 that Elimelech was from "Bethlehem in Judah" and then further specifies in v. 2 that he and his family were "*Ephrathites* from Bethlehem in Judah." As Hubbard notes (p. 90), "this expression was probably an ethnic way of specifying the clan within the tribe of Judah to which the family belonged" (see also Bush, 64-65).

2. Given that David "was the son of an Ephrathite from Bethlehem in Judah" (1 Sam. 17:12), this repeated detail would almost certainly raise in the minds of the audience a connection with David. So at the very beginning the expectation is created that this family somehow will play a role in the coming of David.

E. After Elimelech died, Naomi's two sons each took a Moabite wife; one was named Orpah and the other Ruth. The statement "They lived there about ten years" could refer either to Mahlon and Chilion's entire time in Moab (e.g., Bush, 65) or to the time they lived there as married men (e.g., Hubbard, 91 fn. 2, 95). I think the latter is more likely, given that Naomi in 1:11 is beyond the age of childbearing. After the statement that they lived there for ten years, one expects some comment about their lives during that time (e.g., the children born to them) but hears only news of the sons' tragic deaths.

1. A number of scholars believe the author expected the readers to understand that the sons' marrying Moabite women was something improper that Naomi should have prevented. In this view, her failure to do so was an indication of her faithlessness, which then provides the explanation for her suffering. I am not convinced that is correct.

2. As I already said, God reverses Naomi's emptiness without any acknowledgement of wrong or change of attitude on her part. If the author intended to suggest that Naomi was faithless for allowing her sons to marry Moabites, then certainly one would expect some indication of repentance to precede her being blessed by God. Otherwise, the implication would be that God blesses the impenitent. Since there is no indication of repentance on her part (the return to Bethlehem does not qualify for the reasons stated above), it seems better not to read disapproval of the marriages into the author's silence.

3. Though the issue is complicated, I side with those who conclude that the Law did *not* forbid Mahlon and Chilion from taking Moabite wives (e.g., Hubbard, 93).

a. The Jews were expressly forbidden in Ex. 34:11-16 and Deut. 7:1-4 (see also Josh. 23:12-13) from marrying people from the nations they were dispossessing, but that does not include Moab. Indeed, Deut. 21:10-14 provides for marrying foreign women who were taken in wars against distant enemies, so at least at that time there was no absolute ban on having foreign wives.

b. Deuteronomy 23:3-6 forbids any Moabite from "entering the assembly of the Lord," but that is not a prohibition against marrying them.

(1) Like eunuchs (Deut. 23:1) and those born of forbidden marriages (Deut. 23:2), Moabites could be members of Israel but not full members of the worshipping community. Regarding Deut. 23:1-8, Christopher Wright states in *Deuteronomy*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: 1996), 247:

The assembly of the Lord means the assembly of those who belong fully to the covenant community and gather for worship, for the reading of the law, and for festivals. This body is not quite coextensive with the whole nation, which includes various people who are not full members of the worshipping community. Three groups are here excluded from membership of the assembly.

(2) Given that Ruth presumably was a convert to Judaism (see Ruth 1:16, 2:12b), the ban on Moabites entering the assembly of the Lord would not apply to the offspring she bore to the Israelite Boaz. Craig Keener states in "Marriage" in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 685, "A child conceived in the womb of a proselyte was himself a full Israelite."<sup>3</sup>

c. I do not believe that 1 Kings 11:1-8 establishes that marrying a Moabite comes within the prohibition of Deut. 7:1-4 (contrary to Charles Baylis, "Naomi in the Book of Ruth in Light of the Mosaic Covenant," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 [Oct. 2004], 421 [fn. 28]).

(1) The meaning of 1 Kings 11:1-2 seems to be that Solomon loved many foreign women from the nations identified in Deut. 7:1 *along with* foreign women from other nations. In other words, the listing of foreign women from the nations in v. 1 is parenthetical: "Now King Solomon loved many foreign women – along with the daughter of Pharaoh, Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite

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<sup>3</sup> To similar effect, Bruce Waltke states in *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 853 (fn. 7), "The Mosaic law forbade a Moabite male and his sons *even* to the tenth generation (i.e., forever) to 'enter the assembly of the Lord' (Deut. 23:3-4). Ruth's offspring are not descended from a Moabite male."



women – from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, 'You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.' Solomon clung to these in love."

(2) The "Hittites" of 11:1 are not the same group as the "Hittites" of Ex. 34:11 and Deut. 7:1, so the distinction between the nations in 1 Kings 11:1 and Deut. 7:1 is complete. Philip Satterthwaite and David Baker state in "Nations of Canaan" in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 602:

Apart from these Hittites in Palestine, further references to Hittites in the north of Israel should be identified with the Neo-Hittites, city-states that had belonged to the Anatolian Hittite Empire before its fall and continued to be identified by that name (Judg. 1:26; 1 Kings 10:29; 11:1; 2 Kings 7:6; possibly Josh 1:4). . . .

Were the two groups ethnically distinct? The Hittite Empire never extended as far south as Hebron (Damascus [Apa] probably being the furthest south they came; ANET, 319), suggesting that the two groups were not identical.

See also, Gregory McMahon, "Hittites in the OT" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 233 ("We must then distinguish between the 'sons of Heth' of Palestine and the 'men of Hatti' of Anatolia and northern Syria").

(3) First Kings 11:1-8 demonstrates the danger that all unconverted foreign wives pose, whether included in the ban of Deut. 7:1-4 or not, but that is different from a flat prohibition against marrying them. Moreover, the pull toward idolatry that foreign wives exert would not exist in the case of foreign wives who genuinely embraced their husband's faith, which may have been true of Orpah and Ruth.

(a) Naomi's statement on the road to Judah that Orpah had gone back to her people and to her gods (1:15) does not specify when Orpah had left them. She may have left her people and her gods in an identifying and devotional sense when she married Chilion and only returned to them when she turned back on the road to Judah.

(b) Ruth's declaration in 1:16 that Naomi's people shall be her people and Naomi's God shall be her God need not reflect a new commitment. Rather, it may express her refusal to go back on a commitment she made when marrying Mahlon. As Naomi urges her to turn back, Ruth not only reasserts her prior commitment but reveals its great depth.

d. When Israel returned to Palestine after the exile, the principle of not marrying *indigenous* foreigners applied to those of other nations who *now* were in the land.

(1) Ezra 9:1 decries the people of Israel not having separated themselves "from the people of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites," which the following verse makes clear involves their having married them. The description in Ezra 9:10-12 of the commandment they violated refers to the people in the land they were entering, i.e., the Promise Land. As they returned from the exile, they apparently disobeyed this command by marrying resident non-Israelites, women from foreign communities within Israel.

(2) The marrying of resident non-Israelites presumably is also behind Nehemiah's rebuke of mixed marriages in Neh. 13:23-27. As Hubbard remarks (p. 93, fn. 10), "Esther shows that [Ezra's and Nehemiah's] prohibition was apparently not considered valid in a foreign land." Indeed, her marriage to the Persian king Ahasuerus, whose Greek name was Xerxes, was God's means of delivering his people from disaster.

(3) Though Boaz married Ruth in the land of Israel, Moabites presumably were not an established community within Israel at that time (Ex. 34:11; Deut. 7:1), and in any event, theirs was a levirate or a kinsman-redeemer marriage, which is different from other marriages because it is in fulfillment of a duty.

F. Mahlon and Chilion both die without having had any children, leaving Elimelech's line on the verge of extinction and leaving Naomi without provision or protection.

1. As a childless, aging widow, she is in the worst possible position for an Israelite woman. Bush (p. 68) quotes Phyllis Tribble's assessment of Naomi's dire state:

From wife to widow, from mother to no-mother, this female is stripped of all identity. The security of husband and children, which a male-dominated culture afforded its women, is hers no longer. The definition of worth, by which it values the female, applies to her no more. The blessings of old age, which it gives through progeny, are there no longer. Stranger in a foreign land, this woman is a victim of death – and of life.

2. You can feel Naomi's anguish in her description of her situation as "too bitter" in 1:13, in her statement in 1:20 that the Almighty had dealt "very bitterly" with her, and in her statement in 1:21 that she was "empty" and that the Almighty had brought "calamity" on her. I do not take these as sinful accusations against God but as the cry of an afflicted soul that, like Job, sees God behind her suffering and is convinced that she has done nothing worthy of such severe discipline.

3. I think there is more than a little truth in the statement by Bill Arnold and Bryan Beyer in *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 188: "Though the book is named for Ruth, the story is really about Naomi and the reversal of

her life's sad circumstances." Similarly, Block states (p. 588), "Based on the plot, the book is more appropriately titled 'The Book of Naomi.'"

## *II. The Return to Bethlehem (1:6-22)*

### **A. Naomi and her daughters-in-law set out (1:6-7)**

Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, with Orpah and Ruth following, because she had heard that the Lord had brought an end to the famine that had driven her family to Moab in the first place. God had acted to bless his people, the report of which serves as a kind of turning point in the family's story. The three of them actually begin the journey in v. 7.

### **B. Conversations en route (1:8-18)**

#### **1. First exchange (1:8-10)**

a. At some point on the road, Naomi urges Orpah and Ruth to each return to her mother's house.

(1) This conversation presumably happened at some kind of "point of no return," where it was time to turn back if one was going to do so. Perhaps it was customary to accompany someone out of town for a certain distance (see Gen. 18:16) and this took place at that boundary. Hubbard (p. 102) speculates that Naomi may have waited to say farewell to Orpah and Ruth on the journey because doing so at their Moabite home would have added to the force of their appeals to stay and subjected her to additional stress.

(2) In urging them to return to their "mother's house" rather than to their "father's house," Naomi may have been referring to a custom that associated the arrangement of marriages with the mother's house. The phrase "mother's house" occurs in contexts having to do with love and marriage, and v. 9 expresses Naomi's desire for Orpah and Ruth to have fulfilling second marriages (see Hubbard, 102-103). It could be, as Block says (p. 632), that "by sending each of her daughters-in-law to her 'mother's house' Naomi is releasing them to remarry." Then again, the expression may be designed simply to contrast their mothers with her position as a mother-in-law (Bush, 75).

(3) In urging them to turn back Naomi is doing what she thinks is best for them given her sense of her disfavor with God. Perceiving that God's hand is against her, she at this point has no hope regarding the future of any who cast their lot with her. Better to return to Moab than to follow this aging widow who, without

God on her side, offers no hope of a new husband for her daughters-in-law and thus no hope for the blessing of family.

b. She prays for the Lord to demonstrate *hesed* toward them – a devotion to their welfare – as they had demonstrated *hesed* toward her and toward her sons when they were alive, one expression of which would be his granting to them a fulfilling second marriage. She recognizes that Yahweh is Lord of all, including Moab, and is willing to ask for his blessing *of others* despite her sense of his hostility toward *her*.

c. Bush remarks (p. 86):

To have Orpah and Ruth return to Moab means that she must journey home utterly alone and desolate, having lost all. But to have them return to Judah with her means asking them to renounce all hope of the life she now implores Yahweh to give them. Faced with this dilemma, she has no real choice. To the calamity of losing home, husband, and sons, she must now add another, inflicted this time by herself (Campbell, 82). She must return home alone.

d. Naomi then kisses Orpah and Ruth goodbye, and they all begin sobbing aloud over the prospect of not seeing one another again. The pain is too much, and Orpah and Ruth protest through the tears saying to Naomi, "No, we will return with you to your people."

## **2. Second exchange (1:11-14)**

a. Naomi again insists that they turn back and asks a rhetorical question ("Why will you go with me?") the point of which is that it is foolish for them to come with her because they would be better off in their own country.

b. She makes clear through a rhetorical question that she is too old to have children and thus too old to provide any future husbands for them. (Recall how the widow Tamar in Genesis 38 was waiting for her deceased husband's brother Shelah to grow up so that he could become her husband.) She then adds by way of another rhetorical question (or two) that even if she somehow had a husband and conceived a child that very night they would not wait for that child to grow up.

c. In v. 13b she emphatically states, "No," meaning (as NET puts it) "No, my daughters, you must not return with me." The reason they must not return with her is given in the last two clauses, the first of which can be translated in a number of different ways. Following Bush (p. 80-81), I favor the translation "For things are too bitter for me for you [to share]," which is then followed by the further explanation, "for the hand of the Lord has gone out against me."

(1) Hubbard comments (p. 113):

Thus, Naomi made her most crucial point. If even God was after her, to follow her home was to court personal disaster. Her earlier tragedies – famine, exile, bereavement, childlessness – might be only the beginning. One ought to shun such a person to escape the maelstrom of her misfortune. What better argument to make return to Moab attractive!

(2) I think it is important to appreciate how deeply Naomi's outlook for the future was darkened by her perception that God was afflicting her.

(a) I think that accounts for her initial lack of hope that her emptiness might be reversed. Her belief in God's willingness to bless her life, to demonstrate *hesed* toward her, had been gutted by her pain. She still knows he is God, but she feels he has turned against her.

(b) But again, I do not see her charge that God was afflicting her as an expression of rebellion but as the utterance of a wounded soul that has suffered grievously with no understanding of why. Yes, she should have trusted God's commitment to her welfare despite her suffering, but that is not easy to do when one is being hammered.

(c) In the midst of his terrible suffering, righteous Job said that God multiplies his wounds without cause and fills him with bitterness (Job 9:17-18). He was so low that he lamented the fact he was ever born (Job 3:11-12, 10:18-19). He asks God (Job 13:24), "Why do you hide your face and count me as your enemy?" I see Naomi as being somewhere in this same emotional ballpark.

d. In response to this appeal, they again wept together loudly, and then Orpah kissed Naomi goodbye and turned back for home. This signals the end of Naomi and Orpah's relationship, and Orpah is not mentioned again. Orpah's decision is neither condemned nor praised by the author. It simply is reported and serves to highlight Ruth's contrary response, which is introduced in v. 14 with the simple statement "but Ruth clung to her."

### **3. Third exchange (1:15-18)**

a. Naomi feels so hopeless about her future, since she believes she has in essence been cursed by God, that she urges Ruth to follow Orpah's lead in turning back to Moab even though she recognizes it will involve a return to her pagan roots. She feels so targeted by God that she apparently believes her daughters-in-law would be better off as pagans in Moab than as members of her family in Judah.

b. That is not true, as the story will reveal, but it seemed that way to Naomi because her perception of Yahweh had been distorted by her suffering. And yet,

in the midst of her sense of divine enmity, God is already working to reverse her emptiness through Ruth's demonstration of *hesed*, through the life of an average person who is willing to reflect God's character. Like us, Naomi is oblivious to God's work in its early stages.

c. Ruth's immortal response in vv. 16-17 to Naomi's final urging is an amazing expression of loyalty and commitment to Naomi's welfare. She tells Naomi to stop telling her to turn back. Naomi's effort notwithstanding, Ruth is going to stick with Naomi, identify with the Jews, and serve Yahweh as her God. She says that she will die and be buried where Naomi dies, and then takes an oath to be punished by Yahweh if anything but death separates her from Naomi! You talk about committing yourself to someone!

d. Given Ruth's obvious determination, Naomi relented. Presumably she now felt free from any responsibility for Ruth's unknown fate in Judah. Hubbard says of Ruth (p. 116), "Whatever her motives – deep affection, a sense of loyalty, misguided idealism – she sacrificed her destiny to 'cling to' an aged, hopeless mother-in-law. One may understand Orpah; one must emulate Ruth."

### C. The arrival in Bethlehem (1:19-21)

1. Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, which created quite a buzz. The women ask, "Is this Naomi?" Perhaps this was merely an expression of surprise that she should return after being gone for so long, but it may also indicate how her suffering had worn on her physically. Block remarks (p. 645), "[T]he years of grief and deprivation have surely taken their toll on Naomi's form and visage. The one who had left Bethlehem as *Naomi*, 'the pleasant one,' a robust woman in her prime, had returned as a haggard and destitute old woman."

2. Naomi's state of mind is made clear in her response to those asking the question. She tells them not to call her Naomi, because that name, which means "pleasant" or "lovely," no longer fits her circumstances. Instead, they should call her Mara, which means "bitter," because God Almighty had afflicted her. She left with a husband and two sons and is returning with no husband, no sons, and no grandchildren. Why call her "Pleasant" when the Lord has singled her out for calamity?

### D. Narrator's summary (1:22)

The author summarizes the situation in v. 22. Naomi had returned to Bethlehem from Moab with her daughter-in-law, Ruth the Moabite. And he adds that they came there at the beginning of the barley harvest, which was in late April or early May. (The wheat harvest followed in about two weeks.) This chronological note sets the stage for the events of chapter 2.

### III. Ruth Finds Favor with Boaz (2:1-23)

#### A. Introduction of Boaz (2:1)

1. The author mentions that Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man named Boaz. The mention of a relative of Elimelech would cause the ears of those familiar with Israelite family law and custom to perk up.

2. We are told that Boaz was a mighty man of power, wealth, and/or standing in the community. In other words, regardless of the phrase's ambiguity, it is clear that Boaz was no "average Joe" but a man of means and status.

3. Boaz is said to be from the clan of Elimelech, a fact so significant it is repeated in 2:3.

a. Clans were subdivisions of the tribes consisting of groups of extended families that had descended from a common ancestor. So Boaz and Elimelech both were Ephrathites, a subset of the tribe of Judah (see comments on 1:2), the same as King David (1 Sam. 17:12).

b. The land the Israelites conquered was allotted to the twelve tribes *according to their clans* (Joshua 13-19), meaning the "[c]lans enjoyed inalienable ownership of specific lands" (Hubbard, 134). Ownership of land had to remain with the clan to which it had been given (see Leviticus 25), a state the kinsman-redeemer was obliged to protect. Hubbard remarks (p. 134, fn. 14), "The inclusion of an individual's [clan] in his name served as a geographical address (cf. Judg. 10:1 . . .). No one outside the clan, not even other Israelites, could own land within that territory."

#### B. Meeting with Boaz (2:2-17)

1. Ruth politely asks Naomi for permission to go out and gather from the fields being harvested ears of grain that were dropped or left standing by the reapers. Naomi tells her to go ahead.

a. This practice, known as "gleaning," was a right guaranteed by the law (Lev. 19:9-10, 23:22; Deut. 24:19-22). Landowners were required to leave an edge around their fields unharvested and were prohibited from going back over the field to pick up stalks they had missed or dropped in the initial harvesting. These scraps were to be left for the poor and resident aliens.

b. Though it was a right under the law, Ruth intended to ask permission to glean from either the reapers or the landowner. That is the import of her statement that she will "glean among the ears of grain *after him in whose sight I shall find favor*." Her gleaning would depend on her being shown favor or mercy by someone. This

is confirmed in 2:7. That suggests that landowners or reapers occasionally, if not frequently, disallowed gleaning, whether by ridicule, tricks, or outright expulsion.

c. The repeating of Ruth's identification as a Moabite in v. 2 after just having identified her that way in 1:22 may be intended to highlight that her gleaning carried added danger. As an unmarried foreign woman, from Moab no less, she would run a greater risk of being abused in the fields, either verbally or physically.

2. Verse 2:3 opens with a summary statement of her outing – she went and came and gleaned in the fields – the details of which are unfolded in v. 2:3b and following.

a. In other words, v. 3 is not a chronological sequence in which she first gleaned in the field after the reapers and then "stumbled" onto Boaz's section. Rather, v. 3b is a concomitant circumstance indicating that it was in the events in Boaz's field that she gleaned behind the reapers (see Bush, 104; Hubbard, 140).

b. It is helpful to note that the fields were outside of the town. They were large tracts of land that had sections apportioned to various owners. Hubbard remarks (p. 138): "One individual might own several such pieces, which need not be adjacent. To take advantage of all available land, no visible fences or boundaries were used. Rather, each field was identified by the name of its owner."

3. The opening of 2:3b is commonly translated as "she *happened* to come" or "As it *turned out*, she found herself." The point is that Ruth ended up in Boaz's portion of the fields without any intent on her part to do so; indeed, she had no idea who Boaz was. But having just mentioned that Boaz was from the clan of Elimelech, the reader is to understand that what was happenstance from Ruth's perspective was in fact the hand of God. Block calls this "one of the key statements in the book" and states (p. 653-654):

The statement is ironical; its purpose is to undermine purely rational explanations for human experiences and to refine the reader's understanding of providence. In reality, he is screaming: "See the hand of God at work here!" The same hand that had sent the famine (1:1) and later provided food (1:6) is the hand that had brought Naomi and Ruth to Bethlehem precisely at the beginning of the harvest (1:22) and has now guided Ruth to that portion of the field belonging specifically to Boaz.

4. In the same vein, v. 4 says "And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem." Now how about that? Right when Ruth just happened to have "stumbled" onto Boaz's portion of the field, Boaz arrives at his field from the town, presumably to inspect the progress of the harvest. We see something of the kind of man he is from the kindness of his greeting to his reapers ("The Lord be with you!") and from their warm response back to him ("The Lord bless you").



5. Ruth "happens" to be where Boaz sees her, and he inquires about her identity by asking about the family to which she belongs, either as a member or as a servant.

a. The servant in charge of the reapers informs Boaz that she is the young Moabite who came back with Naomi from Moab. He adds that she had requested permission to glean and had been hard at it from the early morning.

b. It is very unlikely that Ruth had requested and been given permission "to glean and gather *among the sheaves* behind the reapers," as the verse is commonly translated.

(1) That indicates she is requesting permission to glean among the piles of cut grain the reapers left as they worked their way through the field, piles that later would be bundled. As 2:15 implies, gleaners normally were barred from the area near the piles of already-cut grain, presumably to prevent them from helping themselves to the harvest. This would make Ruth's request quite audacious, which does not fit with her humble and self-effacing character, and it does not fit well with the fact Boaz's instruction to his workers in 2:15 to permit Ruth to glean among the sheaves is presented as a new act of generosity on his part.

(2) With Bush (p. 113-114) and Block (p. 656), the word translated "sheaves" ( *ōmārīm*) here should be understood in the general sense of "bundles" and the preposition ( *bē*, different from 2:15) should be interpreted as "in" or "into." Ruth's request is not to gather *among* the piles of already-cut grain but to glean stalks of grain and to gather those gleanings into bundles behind the reapers.

c. The last clause of v. 7 is notoriously difficult to translate, but it seems to mean that she took only a short rest in some kind of shelter. (ESV, among others, drops *habbayit* [the house] from the text.)

6. Boaz addresses Ruth in vv. 8-9, calling her "my daughter." This reflects the difference in their ages and the fact he intends to extend his protection and care over her.

a. He tells Ruth not to go and glean in any other field but to remain in his field.

b. He tells her to stick with his regular servant girls, keeping an eye on the field they are harvesting and following them (or both them and the male reapers). One needed such inside knowledge to know which section(s) of the large tract belonged to Boaz.

c. He tells her she need not worry about her situation in the field because he has – meaning as of now, in the very act of making the statement – instructed

the young men who work for him not to "touch her," here meaning not to trouble, molest, or interfere with her (Bush, 122).

d. And finally, he tells her that she may drink freely of the water that had been brought to the field in containers to provide for his regular field workers.

7. Ruth is blown away by Boaz's kindness and generosity. In a physical gesture of submission and gratitude, Ruth bows before him with her face to the ground, presumably having first dropped to her knees. And she expresses her amazement that Boaz would express such kindness to her even though she was a foreigner. He was treating her essentially as an equal with his hired, Israelite field workers.

8. Boaz in vv. 11-12 uses Ruth's question as an occasion to dignify her, explaining that he had heard all about the kindness and extraordinary commitment she had shown to Naomi.

a. He thereby suggests that his action was simply a response to her noble conduct, leaving unmentioned the fact Naomi was his relative.

b. Once he was told by his foreman that she was the Moabite who had returned with Naomi, he realized who she was. Ruth apparently was the talk of Bethlehem, and the talk was all good. People were very impressed by what she had done.

c. Boaz invokes Yahweh to intervene on Ruth's behalf. He prays for God to grant her a full reward for her loving kindness to Naomi. This is in line with the principle of texts like Prov. 19:17: Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed.

d. He then notes that Ruth had come to take refuge under Yahweh's wings. The image is that of "a mother bird who offers her wings for protection of her defenseless young" (Block, 663). In offering his protection, Boaz was functioning as the wings of God and honoring God in the process (e.g., Prov. 14:31 - Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him).

9. Ruth responds in v. 13.

a. The meaning of the opening clause of Ruth's response is disputed. With Block (p. 664) and NET, I think it is an expression of gratitude in which the literal statement "I am finding favor with you" carries the sense "You are kind to me." (NASU and ESV translate it as a reference to past action – "I *have found* favor in your sight/eyes" – but Block labels that a "cavalier" rendering of the imperfect verb.)

b. She then notes that Boaz's favor or kindness has been shown to her in that he has eased her mind about her situation and spoken kindly to her, his servant, adding "though I will never be equal to your servants."

(1) The word she uses here for servant (šiphâ) probably refers to a female servant of the lowest rank, distinct from a servant who had the potential to advance to the status of a wife (Hubbard, 169-170; Bush, 124; Block, 665). If that is correct, it is an expression of humility.

(2) Ruth then places herself even lower by adding "though I will never be equal to your servants." I here follow Bush (p. 124-125) and Block (p. 665 fn. 70) in understanding the phrase as a future rather than a present.

(3) As Block remarks (p. 665-666), "Ruth is totally amazed that differences in race or class could not stifle Boaz's compassion toward her."

10. In v. 14, which occurs some time later, Boaz invites Ruth to share in the midday meal he has provided for his workers. What is translated "wine" or "vinegar" or "wine vinegar" is probably some kind of sour sauce used as a condiment for the bread. Boaz personally serves her the roasted grain and provided her more than she could eat. He shows this foreigner compassion, generosity, and acceptance.

11. In vv. 15-16 Ruth rises to return to her gleaning, and Boaz instructs his workers not to rebuke her even if she gleans where she should not, i.e., among the sheaves, near the piles of already-cut grain. He further instructs them to pull out some stalks of grain from the handfuls they are cutting and leave them lying on the ground for Ruth.

12. Ruth gleaned in the field until evening and then beat out the grain from the heads of barley, presumably at Boaz's threshing floor. When she measured the grain she had threshed, it was about an ephah, which is probably about 5.8 gallons<sup>4</sup> (though others claim it is 9.6 gallons – Bush, 133). That would weigh around 30 pounds (or 50 pounds if the higher estimate is correct – Bush, 133; Hubbard, 179). That is an amazing amount of grain for one day of gleaning, so clearly Boaz's workers took his instructions to heart.

### C. Ruth reports to Naomi (2:18-23)

1. Ruth lugs her bounty back to town, and when she arrived Naomi saw the large quantity she had gleaned. Ruth also pulled out and gave to Naomi the roasted grain she had leftover from lunch as noted in 2:14.

2. Naomi excitedly asks Ruth where she gleaned, the tone of which was no doubt along the lines of "Where in the world did you glean today?" The redundant double question ("Where did you work?") reflects her amazement at Ruth's success. And knowing that such bounty represented someone's kindness toward her, Naomi adds, "Blessed be the man who took notice of you."

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<sup>4</sup> See Michael Homan, "Weights and Measures" in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans's Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1374.

3. Ruth identifies her benefactor as Boaz, whose name she presumably heard in conversations in the fields. At the mention of Boaz, Naomi erupts with a request for Yahweh to bless him and then praises Yahweh as the one "who has not abandoned his *hesed* toward the living and the dead" (Block, 673).

a. With Block (p. 672-673) and most commentators (and against Hubbard and Bush), I take the introductory particle *'ăšer* as a relative pronoun (rather than because) and understand Yahweh to be its antecedent.

b. Naomi realizes that God was at work in Ruth's "stumbling" into contact with Boaz and in his generosity to her, which causes her to recognize that God has maintained his commitment to the well being of her family, both to her and Ruth, the living, and to Elimelech and Mahlon, the dead. With a heart renewed by the hope of God's favor, she seems to realize the potential Boaz poses for Ruth and for the survival of Elimelech's and Mahlon's line. Block states (p. 673-674):

The speech represents a total turnaround from her despairing and accusatory words in 1:20-21. . . .

Specifically, in Naomi's eyes Ruth's coming upon the field of Boaz was a demonstration of God's grace and favor. In 1:8-9 she had prayed that Yahweh would match Ruth's *hesed* to her family by granting her rest in the house of her own husband. There she had in mind a Moabite husband, but now, in remarkable fulfillment of that prayer, she is struck by the potential of Ruth's encounter with Boaz.

c. That Naomi is beginning to hope along these lines is suggested by the fact she exclaims that Boaz is a close relative, one of their "kinsman-redeemers."

(1) "Kinsman-redeemer" (*gō'ēl*) is a term from Israelite family law that "describes not a precise kinship relationship but the near relatives to whom both law and custom gave certain duties toward the clan" (Hubbard, 188). Among other things, the kinsman-redeemer "was responsible for . . . the repurchase of property once owned by clan members but sold from economic necessity (Lev. 25:25-30; cf. Jer. 32:1-15). By restoring the land to its original owner, the [kinsman-redeemer] maintained the clan's inheritance in tact" (Hubbard, 188).

(2) The duties of a kinsman-redeemer seem quite broad, and it is easy to imagine their application in certain atypical situations being unclear.

(a) I suspect this is true of some the kinsman-redeemer duties raised in the Book of Ruth. Specifically, I suspect it was debatable whether a kinsman-redeemer who was not the brother of the deceased male not only had a duty to redeem property of the deceased male that had been sold but also had a duty to perpetuate the existence of the deceased male on that redeemed property by continuing his lineage through a levirate-like marriage to the deceased male's widowed Moabite

daughter-in-law where the deceased male's widow was alive but beyond child-bearing age.<sup>5</sup>

(b) I think the uncertainty of this duty can explain the discretion with which Naomi, through Ruth, later broaches the subject with Boaz. There was a risk that Boaz would reject the suggestion that he as a kinsman-redeemer was obligated to marry Ruth in connection with redemption of Elimelech's property. In that case, either Naomi and Ruth would be shamed by having their overture not only rejected but perhaps resented as well or Boaz would be shamed by having his resistance determined to be contrary to the law and custom and thus a mark of an ungracious spirit. By raising the matter discreetly, that risk could be contained.

4. Ruth adds that Boaz also told her that she could work in his field, sticking close to his workers, until they finished the entire harvest, meaning the harvest of both barley and wheat. Naomi approves of Boaz's offer. She tells Ruth it is good for her to go out with Boaz's female servants, changing the masculine form for "servants," which referred to all harvesters irrespective of sex, to the feminine form, which referred only to the female servants. She points out that in another field she would run the risk of mistreatment.

5. Verse 23 summarizes what followed. "Ruth 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." This means Ruth would have been in Boaz's fields from late April to early June, some six or seven weeks. No further contacts with Boaz are mentioned, and one is left wondering what will come of Ruth's providential encounter with Boaz.

#### *IV. Ruth Proposes Marriage to Boaz (3:1-18)*

##### **A. The proposal (3:1-15)**

1. Naomi indicates by a rhetorical question that she should take steps to find a husband for Ruth, someone who could provide Ruth some security and protection. She then identifies Boaz as their relative (perhaps meaning close relative), which suggests that in Naomi's mind he was the one who should become Ruth's husband.

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<sup>5</sup> Hubbard (p. 50-51) comments on the unusualness of the situation in Ruth:

[O]ne must reckon with how complex – indeed, extreme – is the situation told in Ruth compared, for example, to that in Gen. 38 or Deut. 25:5-10. These texts presuppose the relative youth of all parties involved, whereas in Ruth the widow, Naomi, is old. No mention is made of Elimelech's brothers as candidates for levirate marriage; presumably they, like he, are also deceased. Thus, a true levirate marriage is impossible. Even were there a surviving brother, such a marriage would be futile since the text implies that Naomi is physically beyond childbearing age (see 1:11-13). Hence, this situation requires stand-ins for *both* Elimelech and Naomi if they are to have an heir.

a. Notice that Naomi here says nothing about continuing Elimelech and Mahlon's line of descent. Though that will be significant for Boaz, Naomi's focus is on securing a husband for Ruth. Her sense of duty in that regard probably has grown in light of Ruth's great loyalty to her.

b. Block comments (p. 681), "It seems that in this patricentric environment, concerns involving inheritance and the place and reputation of the family within the family history were primarily male concerns. Women in general and widows in particular were more anxious about life for the living in the present."

2. Naomi has a plan for encouraging Boaz to assume what she perceives to be his responsibility, presumably not realizing that he was not the nearest kinsman-redeemer. She calls Ruth's attention to the fact Boaz will be spending the night on the threshing floor winnowing barley and then instructs her on what to do.

a. She tells Ruth to bathe, to apply perfume, and to put on her cloak (presumably to keep warm) and go down to the threshing floor. It is possible, by analogy to 2 Sam. 12:20, that Naomi is telling Ruth to end her period of mourning and resume normal life. Block states (p. 684), "We know too little about how long widows would customarily wear their mourning clothes, but it may be that Naomi is now telling Ruth the time has come to doff her 'garments of widowhood' (Gen. 38:14,19) and let Boaz know that she is ready to return to normal life, including marriage, if that should become possible."

b. Naomi tells Ruth not to reveal her presence until after Boaz had finished eating and drinking and lain down for the night. She adds that Ruth is to observe where he lies down and then, presumably when he has fallen asleep, uncover his feet (or legs) and lie down herself. Naomi said Boaz would tell her what to do after that.

(1) This obviously was some kind of symbolic gesture that Boaz was expected to understand. Given Ruth's marriage proposal in v. 9, it may be that lying at Boaz's feet symbolized that proposal by presenting herself as one humbly seeking his protection.

(2) Waiting until Boaz had finished his meal, finished eating and drinking, probably was designed to increase the likelihood that he would be in a good mood, that he would be feeling content from the meal. Likewise, uncovering his feet may have been designed to allow Ruth to speak to Boaz in private, after everyone else had left the threshing floor or was asleep, without having to risk any negative feelings by having awakened him herself (because the cold would gradually awaken him).

(3) Perhaps Naomi wanted to keep the exchange discreet to minimize embarrassment in the event the proposal was misinterpreted or rejected.

c. Notice how Naomi is willing to act in light of her sense of God's providential maneuvering. Hubbard states (p. 199):

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 Yahweh's providence. 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. In Naomi's case, any success presumably would be part of Yahweh's "full payment" of Ruth (cf. 2:12). If so, then, theologically Yahweh acts *in* Naomi's acts. That is, what Naomi does constitutes at the same time God's acts. Her acts execute God's plans.

3. As the dutiful daughter-in-law she was, Ruth says simply (v. 5) that she will do all that Naomi has asked her to do. The following verse (v. 6) summarizes that she did indeed do just that.

4. Verse 7 reports Ruth sneaking up on Boaz after he had eaten his meal and fallen asleep and uncovering his feet (or legs). With Hubbard (p. 210), Block (p. 689-690), and others, I think the meaning of v. 8 is not that Boaz was shaking from fear at midnight, as though he was startled by some unexplained phenomenon, but that he was *shivering* from the cold. (Remember Naomi had instructed Ruth to take her cloak.) He then turned over and was surprised to find a woman lying at his feet, a woman he could not recognize in the darkness.

5. Rather than seeking to take sexual advantage of the situation, Boaz asked Ruth who she was, and Ruth answered, "I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer."

a. The word Ruth uses here for "servant" (*'āmā*), which is different from the word in her self-deprecating statement in 2:13 (*šiphâ*), indicates she is eligible for marriage.

b. The request for Boaz to spread his wings over her is a clear request that he marry her.

(1) Block states (p. 691), "[W]ithout equivocation, Ruth requests that Boaz marry her. The idiom she used may be puzzling to the modern reader, but there was no question about its meaning in the Israelite context in which it was given."

(2) In 2:12 Boaz prayed for Yahweh, under whose wings Ruth had come for refuge, to grant Ruth a full reward for her loving kindness to Naomi.

Ruth is here essentially asking Boaz to answer his own prayer. His marrying her would be Yahweh's provision of protection for her and his full reward for her kindness. Hubbard comments (p. 212), "Theologically, God worked here not by direct intervention but within righteous human acts." He adds (fn. 35), "In this case, the 'righteous human act' was Boaz's execution of his duty as *gō'ēl*. This suggests something further: God works through human obedience to his legal instructions."

c. Ruth bases her request on the fact Boaz is a kinsman-redeemer.

(1) This raises a difficult question. If Boaz was legally obligated to marry Ruth as part of his kinsman-redeemer duties, why risk the nighttime rendezvous on the threshing floor rather than simply bring his duty to his attention?<sup>6</sup>

(a) As I noted earlier, I suspect Naomi's view of the kinsman-redeemer's duty was debatable. Perhaps Naomi was emboldened to have Ruth assert it because she recognized that God had providentially brought Ruth into contact with Boaz and thus suspected that Boaz would accept the alleged responsibility. Indeed, Naomi's instruction to Ruth to do whatever Boaz would tell her to do seems to assume that he would respond favorably.

(b) Naomi probably had the matter raised in private to minimize embarrassment in the event she was wrong, in the event Boaz rejected the proposal. By raising it in private, the parties would have the option of keeping the matter between themselves.

(2) Naomi's view of Boaz's duty is why Ruth was willing to be so forward in asking Boaz to marry her. In the absence of such a duty, the request of a Moabite servant girl to marry an Israelite man of wealth and stature would have been unthinkable effrontery. Being a foreigner, Ruth probably was unaware that Naomi's view of the kinsman-redeemer's duties was debatable. Naomi sent Ruth on the mission because she thought God would bring her success and arranged it in such a way that the fallout could be limited if she were wrong in that assessment.

(3) Some are convinced that Ruth in 3:9 raised the kinsman-redeemer duty on her own and that Naomi had nothing to do with that aspect of the encounter, but that seems contrary to the summary statement in v. 6 that Ruth did everything Naomi had commanded her. That emphasizes her compliance with Naomi's

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<sup>6</sup> Bush states (p. 169):

It is also not possible that Ruth is here using the term *lag* in a technical sense referring to a legal responsibility of the *lag* to perform the duty of levirate marriage. Apart from the difficult question of whether the legal responsibility of *hlag*, 'redemption,' included the duty of levirate marriage, assuming such a legal responsibility on Boaz's part, to which Ruth now refers, again renders the story incredible and unintelligible. If such a responsibility existed, why would Naomi . . . have sent Ruth on her risky and provocative excursion to the threshing floor?



instructions not her striking out on her own. Moreover, Ruth would have been dependent on Naomi for knowledge of Israelite law and custom regarding kinsman-redeemers. Bush states (p. 169):

When Ruth does more than mutely obey the instructions Naomi gave her that she should lie down at Boaz's legs and that he would tell her what to do, she is neither changing those instructions nor violating them but simply putting into words what Naomi voiced in her opening statement in vv 1-2: "Must I not seek for you home and husband . . . ? So then, is not Boaz . . . a relative of ours?"

d. The tension at this point in the story, as I see it, is whether Boaz will embrace that view of the kinsman-redeemer's duty, seeing it as a proper expression of the family-guardian principle inherent in the kinsman-redeemer role, or whether he will refuse to help, and perhaps even take umbrage at the request, by insisting on a narrower interpretation of his responsibility. Based on what has already been revealed about Yahweh's providential involvement and Boaz's character, one is not completely surprised by his response.

6. Boaz reacts very positively to Ruth's proposal. Rather than chastising her for trying to impose on him a duty he did not owe, he in v. 10 invokes a blessing on her and praises her for taking her devotion to Naomi so far as to seek to marry him for the family's sake rather than to pursue young men, whether for love or security (whether poor or rich). (Note Boaz's humility in comparing himself unfavorably to others as a marriage prospect.) He says that this showing of *hesed*, this showing of family loyalty and devotion, was even greater than her original showing in committing herself to Naomi.

7. Boaz tells Ruth in v. 11 not to fear as he will do *all* she asked, perhaps hinting that her request involves more than merely marriage. In saying he will do so because (for) all the townspeople know she is a worthy woman, Boaz seems to be reassuring her that no one would challenge the propriety of him marrying her in his capacity as kinsman-redeemer, despite her being a Moabite, because her stellar reputation had removed whatever incentive her being a Moabite may have provided for such a challenge. She had proven her character to the people, and therefore no one would be looking for an excuse to use the fact she was a Moabite against her.

8. Verse 12 raises a potential stumbling block to Boaz's fulfilling his intention to marry Ruth.

a. He acknowledges that he is indeed a kinsman-redeemer, the implication being (if I am on the right track) that he accepts the validity of Ruth's claim and thus the validity of her view of his duty. He adds, however, that there is another kinsman-redeemer who is prior to him by virtue of being a closer relative to Elimelech.

b. Presumably Naomi was unaware that this other kinsman-redeemer had priority when she sent Ruth to Boaz. Perhaps the rules for determining

priority were complex and less well known as one moved further from the immediate circle of the deceased, or perhaps Boaz or the other kinsman-redeemer were related to Elimelech differently than Naomi knew or remembered.

9. Boaz tells her in v. 13 to spend the remainder of the night at the threshing floor because "the dead of the night was no time for a young woman to be out alone" (Hubbard, 218). He also tells her that he will bring the matter of her "redemption" to a resolution in the morning and assures her with an oath that he will redeem her if the prior kinsman-redeemer refuses to do so.

a. To "redeem" her presumably means not simply to marry her but to marry her in the capacity of a kinsman-redeemer so that the first child would have some kind of legal tie to the deceased and his property. As indicated in chapter 4, redemption by the kinsman-redeemer includes a transaction involving Elimelech's property.

b. Boaz's integrity is evident in his conduct. He wants to marry Ruth, but rather than violate protocol to do so, he will settle things in the proper manner and leave the outcome to God.

10. Ruth awakens before there was enough light to recognize someone, presumably because she was concerned about how it would appear if she was seen leaving the threshing floor. Indeed, Boaz was thinking that very thing. With Hubbard (p. 220, fn. 3), Bush (p. 177-178), and NET, it makes more sense to understand "And he said, 'Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor'" as meaning he said it *to himself*, he thought it. That explains why it says "the woman" rather than to "you."

11. Boaz loads Ruth up with six measures of barley grain, probably meaning six seahs, which would weigh somewhere between 58 and 95 pounds (Hubbard, 222). Then she returns to the town (or he does, depending on a textual issue).

## B. Ruth reports to Naomi (3:16-18)

1. When Ruth returns, Naomi asks how things went. She tells Naomi all about what Boaz did for her, including generously providing her with the large load of grain she was carrying, and she adds that Boaz said when giving her the grain that she could not go back *empty-handed* to Naomi. This is another signal for Naomi of God's provision, recalling her earlier complaint that she had returned *empty*. And God was not finished filling her cup.

2. Naomi tells Ruth to wait to see how things will play out, convinced that Boaz will pursue the matter to a conclusion that day. The reader is left in suspense as to how things will end up.

## *V. Widow Naomi Has a Baby (4:1-17)*

### A. Report of the legal process (4:1-12)

#### **1. Boaz convenes a legal assembly (4:1-2)**

a. Boaz goes to the city gate that morning because it was something like a small town square where people would congregate and was the area commonly used for conducting legal business. The other kinsman-redeemer Boaz had mentioned "just happened" ("And behold") to pass by at that time, and Boaz called him over.

b. The author does not reveal the other man's identity. He instead refers to him in v. 1b with a Hebrew wordplay that seems to mean something like "Mr. So-and-So."

(1) Though most modern English versions preserve the sense of anonymity in the phrase by translating it "friend," Block states (p. 706), "The rendering 'Mr. So-and-So,' found in the NJPS [New Jewish Publication Society Version], certainly captures the sense better than the NIV's 'my friend,' but our 'Hey you' also works in the present context."

(2) Perhaps the author kept this person anonymous because he acted selfishly in comparison to Boaz and thus was not thought worthy of mention. Certainly his identity was not necessary for the story.

c. Boaz then gathered together ten of the city's elders, men who were part of the local community's governing body. Presumably ten was a sufficient number to serve as witnesses for the kind of transaction he had in mind.

#### **2. Boaz negotiates with the nearer redeemer (4:3-8)**

a. In v. 3 Boaz tells the other redeemer that Naomi is "selling" the field of Elimelech, their mutual relative. This is the first mention of any family land, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to be confident about what is going on here. It seems clear that Naomi has some kind of interest in Elimelech's field that is of no practical value to her in terms of easing her difficult circumstances, but the nature of that interest is elusive.

b. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that prior to being driven to Moab Elimelech had been pressured by poverty to "sell" his field to someone outside the clan, economic circumstances being so difficult that no clan member was then able to preempt the sale so as to keep it in the family. By "sell" I mean sell the right to possess

and use the property and draw the profits it produces until the year of Jubilee when it would revert to him or his family. Israelites could not sell a permanent right to hold land to anyone outside the clan. Block states (p. 710):

It seems most reasonable that moving to Moab had been a last resort for Elimelech. Before he would embark on such a drastic . . . course of action, he would have attempted every other alternative, including selling the land to an outsider (cf. Lev 25:25-30). Obviously the poverty continued; and after the money from the sale was used up, he seems to have been faced with two choices: sell himself into slavery (cf. Lev 25:47-55) or move to a place where food was available. In moving to Moab he chose the lesser of two evils.

c. It seems that Naomi, as Elimelech's widow, inherited from him a right to possess and use the property until she married again or died, at which time that right would revert to her husband's clan in the normal order of inheritance (See Bush, 202-204, 214-215). She would not have inherited the property itself, only a temporary interest in it, otherwise the property would leave the clan should the widow marry outside the clan.

d. But since Naomi's inherited right of use presumably had already been transferred to someone else, it meant that she had only a right to redeem the property back from that purchaser, which she, of course, was in no position to do. So the right was essentially useless to her, which explains why she and Ruth were reduced to scavenging for food despite having the right.

e. When Boaz tells the other redeemer that Naomi is "selling" the field of Elimelech, he probably means (and would have been understood to mean) that she was transferring or disposing of her right to buy back the field from the current possessor. (Bush translates the relevant part of v. 3: "Naomi . . . is hereby surrendering her right to the field of our brother Elimelech.") She is passing her right of redemption to Elimelech's nearest kinsman-redeemer, which he presumably must exercise or pass to the next one in line.

f. Boaz in v. 4 tells the other kinsman-redeemer to acquire the right of redemption that Naomi is surrendering. Bush remarks (p. 213), "[I]t does not seem beyond the range of probability at all that, in the context of a widow's right of usufruct of her husband's estate, these verbs [sell and buy] have shed their component of compensation and mean 'to dispose of, surrender (the rights to)' and 'acquire, accept (the rights to),' with the context making clear what rights are meant" (see also Block, 712).

g. Acquiring the right apparently carries the duty of exercising it, at least when someone next in the redemption line wants to do so. Thus, Boaz tells him to say whether or not he will redeem the property because if he will not then Boaz will. Note that the actual redemption of the property from the third person is not reported; in Bush's words (p. 215), "it takes place offstage, so to speak."

h. The nearer redeemer says he will redeem the property, and then Boaz informs him in v. 5 that doing so carries with it the obligation of marrying Ruth in order to have children by her so as to perpetuate Elimelech's name on the family land, to perpetuate his lineage in association with that land.

(1) Boaz presents as a legal fact the broad view of the kinsman-redeemer's duty that he accepts, the view that a kinsman-redeemer who was not the brother of the deceased male not only had a duty to redeem property of the deceased male that had been sold but also had a duty to perpetuate the existence of the deceased male on that redeemed property by continuing his lineage through a levirate-like marriage to the deceased male's widowed Moabite daughter-in-law where the deceased male's widow was alive but beyond child-bearing age.

(2) This makes it difficult for the other kinsman-redeemer to argue against that broad view, even if he were inclined to do so, because he would thereby appear uncharitable or ungracious by comparison. (The broad view of the duty apparently had sufficient legal basis that, though it may have been debatable, the other redeemer's acquiescence removed it as an issue in the mind of the elders who were present.) With that avenue closed, the only question is whether he will embrace the duty as presented.

i. The other kinsman-redeemer declines to assume the responsibility of redemption as stated by Boaz.

(1) The public stipulation that redemption involved marrying Ruth changed the equation because Ruth was young enough to bear children. Without any descendants for Elimelech, the transaction was financially easy on the redeemer. The amount he expended to redeem the field and care for the widow would be offset by the value and produce of the field itself and, in the end, the property would become part of his family inheritance by virtue of his being the nearest relative (and hence the kinsman-redeemer).

(2) But any child sired through Ruth would be Elimelech's descendant and thus would inherit Elimelech's field, presumably when he or she became an adult. (As Beattie states, quoted in Bush [p. 231], "after property had been sold and redeemed by a member of the seller's family, the original seller and his heirs retained some rights to the property.") There was no guarantee that in the time available the redeemer could earn enough off the field to cover the new expenses and recoup the redemption price, and thus the prospect of not having the property become part of his estate created a risk that the transaction would diminish his own estate.

(3) Boaz's announced desire in v. 4 to assume (and carry out) the right of redemption makes it easier for the nearer redeemer to decline the right of redemption. His doing so under those circumstances would not work to the disadvantage of anyone and would allow Boaz to have what he wanted. The refusal perhaps could even

be spun as an act of kindness toward Boaz. The nearer redeemer could claim that Boaz's announcement about the obligation to marry Ruth revealed his desire to marry her, which prompted the redeemer to concoct a financial excuse for declining so as to open the door for Boaz without making him feel indebted. I do not believe that is the author's view of the nearer redeemer's motives (he left him anonymous for a reason); I am saying the availability of this possible defense of his action may have made it socially easier for him to decline.

j. The relinquishment by the nearer redeemer of the right and obligation to redeem Elimelech's field and marry Ruth was accomplished by him telling Boaz to "acquire (the right) for yourself" (Bush, 237) and removing his sandal and giving it to Boaz.

(1) Block comments (p. 720):

[T]he court proceedings were not about redeeming land but transferring the right to redeem it. [Footnote 47: As in v. 4, in vv. 9 and 10 the verb קָנָה does not mean "to buy" but "to acquire."] Through this action Boaz's status is changed from being a *gō'ēl* to being the *gō'ēl* (*haggō'ēl*). . . . [T]he actual redemption of the land still lay in the future and would involve negotiations between Boaz and the person who currently held Elimelech's estate.

(2) This custom existed back when the events occurred but was unfamiliar to those living at the time the story was written.

### **3. Legal assembly ratifies the agreement and blesses Boaz**

#### **(4:9-12)**

a. Boaz publicly calls on the elders and people gathered at the gate to witness the symbolic act of transfer. They confirm their role as witnesses of the transaction and then pronounce a blessing on Boaz.

b. They pray that Ruth may be as fertile as Rachel and Leah, that Boaz may prosper (RSV, NKJV, NET) in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem, and that Boaz's family line would have a prominence like that of Perez's line, which had given rise to a number of clans of Judah including Boaz's clan living in Bethlehem.

c. Notice the recognition "that the offspring of Boaz's union with Ruth not only will belong to Naomi (v. 17), and so continue the family line of Elimelech, but will in a genuine sense also belong to Boaz" (Bush, 247). The child is reckoned as being in the lineage of both Elimelech (4:5, 10, 14-17) and Boaz (4:12, 17-22), presumably in different senses or for different purposes, but the details of those senses or purposes are lost to us. This same phenomenon is evident in Genesis 38, "which

implicitly reckons Tamar's twins to her first husband, Er, while all OT genealogies and Matt. 1:3 list them as Judah's sons" (Hubbard, 62, fn. 55).

#### **4. A son is born to Ruth and Boaz (4:13-17)**

a. Boaz and Ruth marry, the Lord grants Ruth conception or pregnancy, and she gives birth to a son. Recall that she had not had a child during her (probably) ten years of marriage to Mahlon. God begins to fulfill the prayer of the witnesses in vv. 11-12. He blesses Ruth with a son, and this son will indeed be significant in Israel.

b. The women of Bethlehem praise God for his kindness toward Naomi. They exclaim that he has not left her without a "redeemer," meaning that in the birth of this child God has given Naomi someone who will provide security for her, one who, in the words of v. 15, will be a restorer of life and a nourisher of her old age. In other words, "redeemer" is used here in a nontechnical sense of one who provides rest and security rather than in the technical legal sense in which it was used earlier.

c. The women say in v. 15 that this son shall be a restorer of life and a nourisher of her old age *because* ("for") her daughter-in-law who loves her, who is more to her than seven sons, is the one who gave birth to this child.

(1) The child would not necessarily be the kind of caretaker they envision if he had been born to someone who was not as committed to Naomi's welfare as is Ruth. But because Ruth is the child's mother and Ruth's commitment to Naomi's welfare is such that she is a greater blessing to Naomi than would be seven sons, this child will be taught likewise to love Naomi and thus will be a blessing, comfort, and provider in her old age.

(2) Indeed, Ruth's intention in that regard is reflected in v. 16 which says that the once empty Naomi laid the child in her bosom, meaning held the child to her chest in fond embrace, and became his "nurse," meaning his caregiver or nanny. As Bush states (p. 259), "Hence, it is quite clear that the word is used to mean 'nurse' in the sense of the one who takes care of or looks after a child." Thus, NET translates it "caregiver" and NIV and TNIV say "cared for him." Ruth shared her son with Naomi in ways other daughters-in-law would not so as to build within that child the kind of commitment for Naomi that Ruth herself had. Now that's loving somebody!

d. Given the special caregiver relationship Naomi was to have with the child, the women exclaimed, "A son has been born to Naomi," meaning one has been born who will be a de facto son to Naomi and will care for her as such. Accordingly, they named him Obed.

(1) Block states (p. 732):

Obed, "one who serves," is a hypocoristic (abbreviated version) of Obadiah, "servant of Yahweh" . . . or Abdiel, "a servant of God." By dropping the appellation for God, however, this name is rendered ambiguous. Is the boy viewed as a servant of God or as a servant of Naomi? If the former applies, then he represents an agent of God born to Naomi to take away the bitterness she accuses God of having imposed on her in 1:20-21 and to redeem the estate of her husband. If the latter applies, then his service to Naomi must be more direct. This son is her redeemer, the one who has come to serve her by restoring her life and offering her security in her old age.

(2) The women neighbors probably named the child in the sense their exclamation "A son has been born to Naomi" was the basis for the name formally given to him by his parents. "They" (the women) named him indirectly. Bush states (p. 261):

What he means by his blatant statement "they [fem pl] named him," so utterly in conflict with the fact known to all that the parents (usually the mother) named the child, is that these women "named" him by providing the explanation for his name with their glad cry "A son is born to Naomi." An analogous situation is provided by the naming of Perez in Gen 38:27-29. There, as the infant is born, the midwife exclaims, "What a breach you have made!" (v. 27c), and the narrator then relates that the child was named Perez, "breach" (v. 27d). If it had been literally appropriate in this setting, the narrator could just as well have said, "The midwife gave him a name, saying "What a breach you have made," for it is this statement that provides the explanation for the name.

e. The last statement before the formal genealogy is that Obed was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Block remarks (p. 732):

The story of Ruth ends on a surprising but climactic interpretive note. In the mind of the narrator, the historical significance of the birth of Obed does not lie in the resolution he brings to the personal crises of the characters in this book. Nor does he derive his significance from valorous deeds either of mercy or power. Neither the present narrator nor any other Old Testament author writes any stories about him. On the contrary, the birth of Obed has historical significance because he lives on and achieves his significance through the lives of his son Jesse and particularly his grandson David. Through David the blessing of the male witnesses to the court proceedings (4:11) is fulfilled; Boaz's name is "called out" in Bethlehem. And through David the prayer of the female witnesses to the birth of Obed is fulfilled; Obed's name is "called out" in Israel. Indeed, to this day their names and the names of Naomi and Ruth are "called out" all over the world as their story is read. In the providence of God the genuine



piety of all the major characters is rewarded, and the divine plan for Israel and her kings is fulfilled.

## VI. *The Genealogy of Perez (4:18-22)*

I will close our study with another lengthy quote from Daniel Block (p. 736-737):

This book and this genealogy demonstrate that in the dark days of the judges the chosen line is preserved not by heroic exploits by deliverers or kings but by the good hand of God, who rewards good people with a fullness beyond all imagination. These characters could not know what long-range fruit their compassionate and loyal conduct toward each other would bear. But the narrator knows. With this genealogy he declares the faithfulness of God in preserving the family that would bear the royal seed in troubled times and in rewarding the genuine godliness of his people. If only the rest of the nation had demonstrated such covenant faithfulness at the same time! In this genealogy the name of Boaz and Obed are indeed proclaimed far beyond Bethlehem and Israel, to the ends of the earth.

But the narrator could not know what implications the piety of these characters would have on generations of his own people that would come after him. If only he could have known that in the glorious providence of God the *hesed* of Boaz, Ruth, and Naomi would have laid the groundwork for the history of salvation that extends far beyond his own time and place. For as the genealogy of Matthew 1 indicates, one greater than David comes from the loins of Boaz. In the dark days of the judges the foundation is laid for the line that would produce the Savior, the Messiah, the Redeemer of a lost and destitute humanity.