

Ruth

The book is named after Ruth, who is the focus of the story in providing a descendant for Naomi's husband Elimelech. While Ruth is the focus in the story, the main character is actually her mother-in-law, Naomi.¹ The story begins with the family of Elimelech and how he and his two sons die, bringing an end to his line. Naomi, his wife, is the only one left from the line. The main idea in the story is the need to continue the line of Elimelech. Everything that Ruth does is to take care of Naomi, even to the point of marrying Boaz in order to provide a descendant for Elimelech. This is made clear at the end of the story, when the women of the village praise Naomi for the birth of her grandchild and emphasize that Boaz had become the guardian of Naomi rather than Ruth. It is important that one understands this point, which will be developed in detail throughout this commentary, in order to understand the main idea and the importance of the genealogy at the end.

The first word of the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers has a prefix—the Hebrew letter *waw*. This is called a *waw*-consecutive, which creates a conjunction with the meaning of “and” or “and the.” This means that they were meant to be read as the sequel to Genesis—and sequentially from there. Conversely, the book of Deuteronomy does not begin with the conjunction *and*, while the books of Joshua through Kings do begin with the conjunction *and*. Thus, Genesis through Numbers are linked together and tell of Israel outside of the Promised Land. Deuteronomy is the bridge between Israel not being in the land and Israel being in the land. In the same way, Joshua through Kings are linked together and tell about Israel in the Promised Land. Deuteronomy is the beginning of what scholars call the Deuteronomic History, which includes the books of Deuteronomy through Kings.

The authorship and date of the book of Ruth are uncertain. The closing genealogy traces Boaz's genealogy back to David, showing that its final form postdates the birth of David. The positive perspective on the line of David in the genealogy points to a pro-Davidic line perspective that was more dominant before the exile. However, there are exceptions to this. The linguistic style of the book also points to a pre-exilic dating. Ultimately, there is no consensus among scholars on the date of the book.²

Setting

The book of Ruth begins by stating that the story takes place during the time period of the Judges. Before the time period of the Judges, the courageous and godly leader Joshua had led the most faithful generation of Israel into the Promised Land, which Yahweh had promised them. This generation faithfully conquered the land of Canaan and divided the land among the twelve tribes. Yahweh commanded that the next generation of tribal leaders conquer the remaining Canaanite cities within their tribal allotment. However, the judges failed to obey Yahweh and carry out His will, instead leading the nation of Israel away from Yahweh and into the abhorrent practices of the surrounding Canaanites. The book of Judges tells how the nation practiced idolatry, child sacrifice, sexual immorality, and many other sins. The repeating phrase is that “everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” The book ends with the nation being so corrupted that they are performing unspeakable acts of murder, abduction, and rape of the very

¹ See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 559-560.

² See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 577-580.

women they were supposed to protect and care for. Most likely, based on the genealogy at the end of the book, Ruth takes place at the end of the 300 years of the Judges.

After reading the book of Judges one should feel a deep dread for the widowed Naomi and Ruth, who are living on their own during this time period, wherein everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes. It is in this context that the book of Judges becomes a foil for the characters of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. The moral depravity of the culture surrounding these three characters not only makes their moral character stand out all the more but also makes the point that one's culture does not determine one's character and faithfulness to Yahweh.

However, the fact that the story also takes place during the barley and wheat harvest (Ruth 1:22, 2:23) brings the sense of renewed agricultural fertility and thus gives a positive and hopeful outlook to the future of Naomi and Ruth.³

Purpose

The purpose of the book of Ruth is to show that Yahweh cares for needy people like Naomi and Ruth. He is their ally in a world where death often leaves people helpless and vulnerable.⁴ This is seen in the repetition of the Hebrew word *hesed*. The Hebrew word *hesed* means an “unfailing love, undeserved love, loving kindness.” So far, this root word has not been found in any ancient Near Eastern text outside of the Bible, whereas *hesed* and its related words occur 275 times in Scripture. It is the idea of someone being given favor to which they do not have the right by someone who is not obligated to give that favor. It has special covenantal language.⁵ Often associated with the word *hesed* is the Hebrew word *aman*, which means “to be stable, reliable, secure.”

The word *hesed* occurs three times, at the beginning, middle, and end of the story (Ruth 1:8; 2:20; 3:10). The characters in the story continually proclaiming the demonstrated acts of *hesed* as being a great amazement and blessing in their lives shows that this is the focus of the book. In the book, it is not Yahweh who specifically demonstrated the acts of *hesed*; rather, it is Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. Yet by the way the narrator develops the story, it is clear that Yahweh is using these three in the lives of each other in order to demonstrate His *hesed*.

Yahweh's *hesed* manifested through the characters in the story makes the point that His people are to demonstrate *hesed* because He is a God of *hesed*, and one of the ways He demonstrates *hesed* is through the lives of His people. Thus, the second purpose of the book is to show that Yahweh expects His people to share his concern for the needy and demonstrate loyalty and sacrificial love in their relationships.

Because Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz lived this out in their lives, Yahweh rewarded them by using them as a blessing in the lives of the others. They were a blessing to others and were blessed by others. Thus, Yahweh blessed them with a true community of *hesed* because they were committed to demonstrating *hesed* to others. Thus, the third purpose of the book of Ruth is that Yahweh will reward those who are loyal and sacrificially love others by abundantly blessing them.

³ See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 558.

⁴ See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, pp. 567-568.

⁵ See John N. Oswalt. “Theology of the Pentateuch.” In *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, pp. 850-852.

Themes

There are at least two major theological themes that stand out in the book of Ruth and help develop its purpose of Yahweh's care for the needy.

Yahweh Is Concerned about Needy People

The book of Ruth takes Yahweh's theological desire to help needy people (Ps. 146:9) and develops it into a real-life, practical example. However, the story does not focus on the supernatural provision of Yahweh, as one might look for in their lives, but rather on the faithful love of others. Yahweh shows in this story that His greatest desire is to use those who obey the Mosaic Covenant—in other words, those who love Yahweh are used to love others. It is Ruth and Boaz whom Yahweh used to provide for the destitute and bitter Naomi. And rather than Ruth complaining about how bad she had it, she did what she could to love and provide for Naomi. Thus, Yahweh used Boaz to take care of Ruth because of her faithfulness to Him.

However, the book of Ruth unpacks what obedience to the Law means to a greater extent than any other biblical book. For Boaz was not just interested in obeying the Law out of his love for Yahweh and others; instead, he went over and beyond the requirements of the Law because he truly grasped that the Law was not about rules but about the loving-kindness of Yahweh for others. Boaz did not just allow the poor to glean in his fields as the law demanded, but he gave extra grain on top of that when he saw that the need was greater than the legalistic glean could provide. And rather than just redeeming the land of Naomi as the Law required, he went above and beyond by also redeeming the family line of Elimelech even though he was not required. He understood that the Law was a demonstration of the heart of Yahweh, and so he allowed his heart to reflect the heart of Yahweh.

Yahweh Rewards Those Who Are Faithful

Yahweh rewards those who are faithful to the relationships to which they have committed themselves (Ps. 18:25). Naomi showed her desire for Ruth to have a future by her willingness to send Ruth home to find a husband even though it would have benefited her to keep Ruth with her. She spends the rest of the story trying to find a husband for Ruth. So Yahweh used Ruth and Boaz to redeem her family line and give her a child.

Ruth sacrificed everything to take care of Naomi. So Yahweh used Boaz to bring about Ruth's reward by providing her with a safe place to glean, food for her and Naomi, and, eventually, a home. Boaz gave up a lot of his resources to take care of Naomi and Ruth and risked his reputation by taking care of a foreigner. So Yahweh blessed him by providing him with a wife and a family line of his own.

Because everyone was taking care of others and not themselves, Yahweh rewarded them by bringing people into their lives to take care of them and bless them.

Structure

The book of Ruth is divided into four acts corresponding with the chapter divisions of the book. Each act has three scenes. The change of geographical setting marks the change of a scene. The first act begins with the family of Elimelech, who are threatened by a famine in the land. As the act continues, the despair of the family increases with the death of Elimelech and then his two

sons, leaving Naomi alone in a foreign land with no family or line for Elimelech. However, there is one little glimmer of hope in Ruth, who refused to leave Naomi.

The second act begins with the introduction of another glimmer of hope with the return of Naomi to Israel and Ruth gleaning in the fields of Boaz, the kinsman redeemer. The hope and positive circumstances of Naomi and Ruth begin to rise as the second act progresses. The second act ends with the tension of the simultaneous negative and positive circumstances of Naomi and Ruth: the end of the family line of Elimelech yet the presence of Boaz the kinsman redeemer.

In the third and fourth acts, the hope of redemption continues to build until the climax of Naomi and Ruth's redemption at the end of act four. The hope for the future has returned with the birth of Ruth's child, who is the continuation of the family line of Elimelech, displacing the despair of past death.

Outline

- I. Death and Emptiness (1:1-22)
 - A. A Judean Family Dies in Moab (1:1-6)
 - B. Ruth Clings to Naomi (1:7-19a)
 - C. Naomi Arrives in Bethlehem with Ruth (1:19b-22)
- II. Ruth Meets the Redeemer (2:1-23)
 - A. Ruth Goes to Glean (2:1-3)
 - B. Ruth Meets Boaz on the Harvest Field (2:4-17a)
 - C. Naomi Names Boaz as the Kinsman Redeemer (4:17b-23)
- III. Ruth Seeks Out the Redeemer (3:1-18)
 - A. Naomi Send Ruth to Propose (3:1-5)
 - B. Ruth Asks Boaz to Redeem Naomi (3:6-15)
 - C. Naomi Praises Boaz (3:16-18)
- IV. Naomi and Ruth Are Redeemed (4:1-22)
 - A. Boaz Acquires the Right to Redeem Naomi and Ruth (4:1-12)
 - B. A Son Is Provided for Elimelech (4:13-17)
 - C. A Judean Family Is Restored (4:18-22)

I. Death and Emptiness (1:1-22)

The first act begins as a tragedy, where the reader is introduced to a family who was trying to escape a famine but ends up losing the husband and sons to death with no descendants to carry on the family name. The point is to build the hopelessness in order to prepare the reader for the amazing act of love and redemption that Yahweh would bring into their lives.

1:1-2 The story begins by informing the reader that it is the time period of the Judges. As mentioned already, this period was a dark time period in Israel's history, as the leadership was lacking and the people were morally depraved and involved in idolatry, child sacrifice, sorcery, and sexual immorality. As a result of this, Yahweh brought a famine on the land as a judgment for Israel's sin and rebellion (Deut. 28:17, 23, 38-40, 42). The setting is thus depressing in both its cultural and environmental state.

As a result of the famine in Israel, Elimelech took his wife Naomi and two sons and left Bethlehem for Moabite territory. Bethlehem was just west of the tip of the Dead Sea and Moab was on the eastern side of the southern part of the Dead Sea. The irony here is that there is a famine in the city of Bethlehem, whose name means "the house of bread."

Elimelech's leaving the Promised Land should probably be seen as a lack of faith in Yahweh to care for and provide covenantal blessing for his family's needs.⁶ Yahweh made it very clear in the Torah that there were no covenant blessings outside the land. When Abraham and Jacob left Canaan to escape the famine, it led to great difficulties in their lives. Yahweh only blessed them in order to teach them about who He was. Yet everything in their stories emphasized the need to get back into the land. Yahweh did allow Jacob to take his family to Egypt to escape the famine, yet Jacob's descendants ended up in idolatry and slavery. Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land because of his sin, and later, exile from the land would be a punishment for Israel's sins.

When Elimelech left the land, he experienced death outside the Promised Land of blessing. Even though Ruth, found outside the Promised Land, was a positive addition to Naomi's life, it is not until Naomi and Ruth return to the Promised Land that blessings of life come into their lives. However, in this story there should not be too much emphasis placed on this point, for the narrator moves very quickly from this point, unlike the other stories in the Bible, and on to the main story of Yahweh

Elimelech's name means "My God is king," and Naomi's name means "my pleasant one." The meanings of their names may communicate that the reader is to see them as godly and righteous people in the eyes of the Mosaic Law. Even though Elimelech left the Promised Land, he can still be seen as a godly man in the same way Abraham is seen as godly even though he too left the Promised Land. The name Mahlon comes from the Hebrew word *malah*, which means "to be weak, sick," and Kilion's name comes from the Hebrew word *khalah*, which means "to be frail." The infant mortality rate was so high in the ancient Near East that parents did not typically name their children until they survived infancy. Elimelech and Naomi may have named their children based on their physical condition of growing up in the famine. Or the narrator could have slightly changed the spelling of their names and given them a nickname to foreshadow what was soon to happen to them.

⁶ Daniel I. Block. *Judges, Ruth*, pp. 626-627.

1:3-4 As time went by, Elimelech died, leaving his wife and two sons alone. The tension in the story is that the two sons have no children, a gap that threatens the line of Elimelech. However, this was soon resolved when they each married while living in Moab. Their wives were not Israelite women but Moabite women. The Mosaic Law never forbade the marrying of foreign women as long as they were not Canaanite and had become part of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. The name Orpah means “to turn one’s back,” and the name Ruth means “friend” or “companion.” Both of these names foreshadow what they would be to Naomi.

1:5-6 However, tragedy struck the family again. After ten childless years both of Elimelech’s sons died with no children to continue the family line. Elimelech’s family line was dead with no one and no hope of continuing it. In Israel descendants were everything since this was how one continued their name and accomplishments.

This is the major conflict that drives the whole story: Elimelech has no descendants to continue his name, and Naomi and her two daughters-in-law were on their own in the time period of the Judges. There was no hope for the family’s future. The only chance of survival that Naomi had was in that the famine in Judea was over, so she decided to move back to Bethlehem where the rest of her extended family was living.

1:7-13 Naomi demonstrated loving-kindness (*hesed*) in her willingness to send her daughters-in-law away for their own survival. It would have been far better for Naomi, as an older woman, to have with her two younger women, who could work and help take care of her. However, it would be incredibly difficult for Ruth and Orpah to leave their blood families and to go to a foreign land and find husbands, especially given the fact that in the recent past the Moabites had oppressed Israel for eight years during the days of Ehud (Judg. 3:12-31). The love that Naomi demonstrated here was not based on emotions or the right circumstances but on her desire for Ruth and Naomi to have the best life possible, no matter the sacrifice or what it would likely cost her. Though both Ruth and Orpah said that they would stay, only one would truly remain.

1:14-18 Ruth demonstrated loving-kindness in her willingness to leave her own home and the chance to remarry by going back to Bethlehem in order to help take care of Naomi. Though Ruth demonstrated the same sacrificial love as Naomi had, what really stands out about her was her willingness to abandon her people and their gods in order to make Yahweh her God. This is emphasized in three ways. First, Naomi pointed out that Orpah turned her neck and went back to her gods, which is contrasted with Ruth clinging to Naomi and her God (Ruth 1:5-6). Second, Ruth’s confession of faith is in a poetic structure that breaks the flow of the narrative, which emphasizes that this is of great significance and is a turning point in her life. Third, Ruth says that she wants to die in Naomi’s land of Israel and be buried there. The ancients believed that the gods had power over only the land that their worshipers occupied and controlled. Thus, the gods would have the ability to bless their worshipers in this life and the next only if the people were buried in the land of their control. By being buried in Israel, Ruth was leaving the sovereignty and provision of her pagan gods and surrendering to Yahweh’s sovereignty and provision.

“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?"⁷

1:19-22 When Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem, all the people there were excited to see her, but Naomi did not feel the same joy that they did since her husband and sons were dead. Naomi made this clear by telling them to no longer call her pleasant (Naomi) but bitter (Mara). This does not necessarily mean that she herself was bitter but that her life had become bitter with the presence of death. The irony in this statement is that Ruth was standing next to her and had sacrificed everything for her. This does not mean that Naomi did not realize or appreciate the sacrifice that Ruth had made for her; it is just that she was overwhelmed with the grief of the reality that she was now without the people most important to her. Likewise, she may have felt that Yahweh was judging her for her sins by taking her husband and children away from her. This was not an uncommon cultural and pagan belief during this time.

This act ends on the negative note of death and hopelessness for two widowed women who have no means of taking care of themselves. Yet there is also the positive note of the loving-kindness that exists between the two women.

⁷ Robert L. Hubbard. *The Book of Ruth*, pp. 120-21.

II. Ruth Meets the Redeemer (2:1-23)

The second act introduces the hope of the kinsman redeemer and that things would not continue on in death as they had begun. The reader also begins to see the sacrificial love that all the characters have for each other and how Yahweh would use their obedience to the true spirit of His Mosaic Law in order to bring about their redemption.

2:1 The second act begins with the introduction of Boaz who was a relative of Elimelech. The name Boaz means “strength” or “pillar” and is reflective of what he would be for Naomi and Ruth. Boaz was not only a relative but also a wealthy, prominent, and respected man in the town. For the Israelite reader who knew the Mosaic Law, this would immediately create interest and hope because Boaz was a potential kinsman redeemer.

When an Israelite had become so indebted or poor that he had to sell his land in order to survive, the kinsman redeemer was a close relative who then made provision for the poor relative (Lev. 25:25-28). The Mosaic Law required that the impoverished person’s next of kin buy back the land that the relative had sold or lost and then give it to the relative so that his land would stay within the family to be an inheritance to the children. It also required that the kinsman redeemer buy the relative’s freedom if he had been sold into slavery. The criteria that qualified one as a kinsman redeemer was that he had to be related, able, and willing. Boaz met the first two criteria; the question was whether he would be willing.

2:2-3 Yahweh commanded farmers in Israel not to harvest the corners of their fields so that the poor and needy—such as foreigners, widows, and orphans—could glean enough food to live (Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22). They were also required to leave any grain behind that the harvesters had dropped while walking through the fields. Ruth set out to learn whether there was a landowner who was actually obeying this law in the time period of the Judges. The fact that Ruth “happened to end up” in Boaz’s field is remarkable, and the reader later finds out that this was really of Yahweh.

2:4-7 When Boaz arrived in the fields, he and his workers greeted each other using the personal covenantal name of Yahweh. This stands out significantly in context of the time period of the Judges. The dialogue between Boaz and his workers reveals that Boaz was a man of God and had created a godly work atmosphere in which his workers love him. The fact that Boaz allowed the poor to glean in his fields also shows his obedience to the Mosaic Law (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:37-39).

Boaz immediately noticed Ruth working in his fields. Never does it mention that Boaz noticed Ruth because of her beauty; in fact, the narrator never states what Ruth even looked like. Most likely Boaz noticed her because he knew all of his workers personally and did not recognize her (Ruth 2:4). When Boaz’s workers spoke of Ruth, they praised her for her sacrificial love for Naomi and for her hard-working character. This is significant, for already Ruth, as a foreigner, was standing out among the people as a friend to their fellow clansmen. The narrator continually refers to Ruth as “the Moabite” to emphasize the uniqueness of her faith and becoming a part of the covenant people of Yahweh and the Israelites’ acceptance of her as a foreigner. In contrast to how the book of Judges ended, here the people of Bethlehem are fulfilling the purpose of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:3), to be a blessing to the people of the world.

2:8-9 Boaz demonstrated his loving-kindness by telling Ruth not to go to other fields to work but to stay in his, where he would make sure that she was taken care of. Boaz would treat Ruth with

the same care as his other, paid female workers. It was not uncommon for the poor to move from field to field looking for enough food to glean. Boaz assured Ruth that there would be enough for both her and Naomi, so she had no reason to move to another field.

2:10-13 Ruth submitted herself before Boaz and expressed her shock that he would show her any kindness at all since she was a foreigner. Boaz explained to Ruth that the reason he was taking care of her was because he was impressed with her sacrificial love for Naomi and the fact that she was gleaning for Naomi as well as for herself. Thus, Boaz did not intend to take care of Ruth only but also Naomi. Boaz pronounced a blessing upon her that Yahweh would reward her and return to her all that she had done for Naomi. The phrase “under whose wings you have sought shelter” invokes the imagery of a mother bird spreading her wings over her young in order to care for them and protect them (Ps. 91:4). Boaz was declaring that Ruth had come under Yahweh’s protection when she chose to enter the covenant of Yahweh and the blessings of His Promised Land.

Perhaps Boaz had a special place in his heart for foreigners since he was the grandson of Rahab (Judg. 3; Matt. 1:5). Boaz was fulfilling the heart of Yahweh and His Law by taking care of the foreigner (Ex. 22:21; 23:12; Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:18-19; 16:11; 24:14, 17, 19; 24:20-21; 27:19).

2:14-17 Boaz continued to demonstrate his loving-kindness by going beyond the Mosaic Law when he gave Ruth a generous meal and at least half of a month’s wages of grain to take home to Naomi. He told his workers to drop extra grain for her, to look out for her, and to protect her. This shows that Boaz truly understood that the point of the Law was to love Yahweh and love others. He was not merely interested in doing what the Law said he had to do, but he was living out the spirit of the Law and its expectations of love. He understood that the Law was filled with examples of what righteousness and love looked like—not just things you had to do to be right with Yahweh. Boaz went over and beyond because he truly loved Yahweh and others.

2:18-23 Ruth continued to demonstrate her loving-kindness by gleaning not only for herself but also for Naomi and returning with the gleanings. Upon hearing of Ruth’s day, Naomi told Ruth that Boaz was their kinsman redeemer, which was new information to Ruth. Here the providence of Yahweh is clearly revealed. When Naomi declared that Boaz had “shown loving-kindness (*hesed*) to the living on behalf of the dead,” she meant that by lovingly taking care of Naomi and Ruth, Boaz was showing loving-kindness to Elimelech and Ruth’s husband, who were dead. Though these men were dead, they, as husbands who loved their wives, would have wanted their wives to be cared and provided for, especially in their absence. Boaz was demonstrating love to the deceased men by caring and providing for Naomi and Ruth.

Ruth worked in the fields of Boaz through the barley and wheat harvests. The barley harvest was in late March and early April, the time during which the Passover and Unleavened Bread festivals were celebrated (Lev. 23). The wheat harvest was a month later, during which the Feast of Weeks brought an end to the harvest in late May and early June. Though Boaz had been extremely generous to Ruth, what was gathered during this time would be all that she and Naomi would have to eat for the entire year.

Though this act ends on a much more positive note for Naomi and Ruth, Naomi still faced the reality of having no home of her own and no family line even though she was back in the Promised Land.

III. Ruth Seeks Out the Redeemer (3:1-18)

In the third act, Ruth and Boaz take their sacrificial love to the next level in order to redeem the line of Elimelech. They show what it really means to love Yahweh and love those who are in your life.

3:1-5 Naomi continued to demonstrate her loving-kindness by helping Ruth navigate the Israelite customs and traditions so that she could find a husband. She was taking care of Ruth by helping her find a loving and caring husband. Naomi had already expressed her desire for her daughters-in-law to find rest (Ruth 1:9). Now she was taking action to help Ruth achieve rest. Rest here has the idea of physical as well as spiritual and emotional security and provision.

The threshing floor was where the grain and the chaff of the wheat stalks would be separated and the grain would be prepared for its many uses. During the harvest, the people of the village would sleep in the fields and not return home until the harvest was complete. They all slept side by side on the threshing floor at night.

Normally, one would approach the kinsman redeemer publicly before the elders of the village. If he refused to redeem the family member, there would be public disgrace. Naomi had Ruth approach Boaz in the night to save him from public disgrace if he chose to refuse.

3:6-10 Ruth did all that Naomi commanded and sought Boaz after he had eaten and gone to sleep. Ruth uncovered Boaz's legs and lay down at his feet, then covered herself with his blanket. This act symbolically demonstrated her willingness to place herself under his authority. When, in the night, he awakened to find her at his feet, she asked him to cover her with his garment, which in the Hebrew is, literally, "spread your wing [or skirt] over your servant." This phrase is based on Ezek. 16:8 where Yahweh metaphorically spreads His garment over the nakedness of Jerusalem as an act of protection and as a precursor to marriage. Based on Naomi's words in Ruth 3:1-2, Ruth's actions here, and the context of Ezek. 16:8, one should interpret Ruth's comment as a marriage proposal. This is made clear by the fact that this was how Boaz interpreted her comment.

However, Ruth was not asking Boaz just to marry her but for him to be Naomi's and her kinsman redeemer and to join her in a levirate marriage.⁸ Deut. 25:5-10 stated that a levirate marriage was when an unmarried brother was required to marry his deceased brother's childless wife in order to provide descendants for his deceased brother. This child would then take the name and inheritance of the deceased husband/brother, thereby maintaining the family, line, and inheritance.

When Boaz stated that "This act of loving-kindness (*hesed*) is greater than what you did before" (Ruth 3:10), he was referring to Ruth's previous act of sacrificial love in her willingness to come to Bethlehem with Naomi to take care of her (Ruth 2:11). The fact that he connected Ruth's current request with her previous act of love towards Naomi shows that he interpreted Ruth's request as a request for a levirate marriage. He made this clear by stating that Ruth could have gone after any of the younger men she wanted but chose him who would be able to act as a kinsman redeemer on Naomi's behalf. As kinsman redeemer, Boaz was not required to be in a levirate marriage with Ruth because he was not the brother of Elimelech. In fact, no one was required to do this since Elimelech had no brothers and no living sons. Boaz's willingness to do

⁸ See Robert B. Chisholm. *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, p. 655.

the levirate marriage once again demonstrated his willingness to go over and beyond what the letter of the Mosaic Law required.

3:11-15 Boaz told Ruth that he would do the levirate marriage but that he had to make the offer available first to another who was a closer relative to Naomi than he was. Though he wanted to marry Ruth and provide for Naomi, he did not want to violate the Mosaic Law and so chose to go to the closer relative with the opportunity. Boaz showed that he was ruled not by his emotions but by the will of Yahweh. Boaz's comment here sets the scene for chapter four. Once again, Boaz did not send Ruth away empty handed but rather with more grain. Demonstrating his desire to take care of her despite his intention to go to the other kinsman, he sent Ruth home with 60 pounds of grain, double what he had previously had given her.

There are some who argue that Boaz and Ruth had sex when Ruth uncovered his "feet" (Ruth 3:7) because the Hebrew word *margēlah* (translated "feet") is sometimes used euphemistically for the genitals. This is not a correct interpretation for many contextual reasons.⁹ First, they had already established themselves as godly people with good reputations. Second, they were not alone in the fields. The threshing floor was a public place out in the fields, where men, women, and even entire families would be gathered around each other for warmth and protection while sleeping. It would have been challenging for two righteous people to get away with this act. Third, after Ruth had been lying at his feet for a while, Boaz woke in the middle of the night, startled because he did not know she was there or who she was. If they'd had sex, he would have known who she was and that she was lying next to him. Fourth, though righteous people do make mistakes and commit sins, they feel guilty afterwards. Boaz would not have commended Ruth for being righteous after having sex outside of marriage. Fifth, Boaz would not have connected an act of sex with Ruth's love for and desire to redeem Naomi (Ruth 3:10).

Why Ruth was to propose to Boaz in this way is not known, neither is how common this practice was. Ruth should not be seen as aggressively pursuing Boaz, for he had already shown interest in her. Likewise, this proposal had very little to do with lust and romance and everything to do with sacrificial love for others, especially Naomi.

3:16-18 The scene ends with Ruth reporting to Naomi that all went well. Naomi, having every right to demand that Boaz take care of her as a blood relative rather than Ruth the Moabite, chose instead to promote and celebrate what Boaz could do for Ruth. In the same way, Ruth did not see her relationship with Boaz as a way out of her responsibility to Naomi but rather as a chance to bless Naomi even further than she had already. When everyone is looking out for everyone else, no one has to be selfish and look out for themselves.

The act ends with a greater sense of hope than the previous acts. Boaz was willing to do a levirate marriage and redeem the entire family. However, there is the chance that the other kinsman, though willing to be their kinsman redeemer, is unlikely to be willing to do a levirate marriage, and Ruth's hopes for Naomi family line would be lost.

⁹ Fredric Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, pp. 164-165.

IV. Naomi and Ruth Are Redeemed (4:1-22)

In act four, the hope that has been developed comes to fulfillment, and the promises of the kinsman redeemer are realized. The reader sees how Yahweh is faithful to His promises and will indeed use those who trust and obey Him to bring redemption into the lives of others.

4:1-4 Boaz gathered ten elders together at the city gate to witness the ceremony of the kinsman redeemer. In the ancient cities, the gate was a passageway through a thick city wall with alcoves that lined the passageway. During wartime these alcoves would be filled with soldiers defending the gate. During peacetime they would be filled with the judges and elders of the city making decisions for the people of the surrounding territory.

The narrator did not mention the other kinsman by name but merely refers to him as “such a one” in the Hebrew. Perhaps the narrator chose not to record the name of Mr. So-and-So as judgment on him for his refusal to carry on the name of Elimelech.

For the first time, the narrator informs the reader that Naomi still held the land that belonged to Elimelech before they went to Moab. Though Naomi had land when she returned to Bethlehem, she did not have the money nor the means to buy grain, plant and harvest it, or hire people to help her. It seems that she wanted to sell the land off, knowing that she would never be able to tend it or had children to pass it to.

It is important to remember that the kinsman redeemer’s redeeming of land or life of a relative (Lev. 25:25-28) and a brother’s providing a levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-10) were two different and separate procedures, and no one in the story was required to do the latter. Boaz offered Mr. So-and-So the opportunity to redeem Naomi’s land by buying it from her and intentionally makes no mention of a levirate marriage to either Naomi or Ruth. Buying the land would have been a benefit to Mr. So-and-So because Naomi was an old woman with no descendants, and he would only have to provide for her for a short time until her death. Because she had no descendants, he would not have to give the land to her descendants, which the Mosaic Law required. Thus he would be able to keep it in his family line forever.

4:5-8 After Mr. So-and-So agreed to redeem the land, Boaz then said that he had to also perform the levirate marriage to Ruth and provide an heir for Naomi. This was a surprise to Mr. So-and-So because everybody would have known this was not required. Why then did Mr. So-and-So and the elders not object? Because taking care of others was so important in a community like this, there would have been a moral obligation to do a levirate marriage even though it was still voluntary. Fredric Bush calls this a “levirate-type responsibility.”¹⁰ It is also possible that Mr. So-and-So thought erroneously that Naomi, not Ruth, was the one for whom the “levirate-type responsibility” was needed since she was the blood relative. And knowing this was not possible because of her age, he knew he would not have to do the “levirate-type responsibility” and so agreed to be her kinsman redeemer.¹¹

Boaz knew that everyone loved Naomi and had come to admire Ruth for her extraordinary sacrificial love for Naomi. This had caused everyone to want to see Ruth and Naomi taken care of. It would be obvious by now that Boaz was willing to do both. If Mr. So-and-So accepted the first proposal but refused the second—knowing that Boaz was willing to do both—he would be a

¹⁰ Fredric Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, pp. 225, 229.

¹¹ Eryl W. Davis. “Ruth IV 5 and the Duties of the Gō’ēl,” p. 234.

social outcast in the community.¹² He himself was apparently unwilling to do both, likely because it would have jeopardized his own inheritance. Maybe being less wealthy than Boaz he could not afford to buy the land and farm it, take care of Ruth, and provide her with children (who would inherit the land) without harming his own family line. The only option was to back out and refuse both.

“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).”¹³

Mr. So-and-So then publicly declared before the elders that he would not redeem the land and Ruth and that Boaz could do it. To make the transaction official, he took off his sandal and gave it to Boaz.

“The taking off of the shoe was an ancient custom in Israel, adopted, according to Ruth iv. 7, in cases of redemption and exchange, for the purpose of confirming commercial transactions. The usage arose from the fact that when any one took possession of landed property he did so by treading upon the soil, and asserting his right of possession by standing upon it in his shoes [cf. e.g., Gen. 13:17]. In this way the taking off of the shoe and handing it to another became a symbol of the renunciation of a man’s position and property... But the custom was an ignominious one in such a case as this, when the shoe was publicly taken off the foot of the brother-in-law by the widow whom he refused to marry. He was thus deprived of the position which he ought to have occupied in relation to her and to her deceased brother, or to his paternal house; and the disgrace involved in this was still further heightened by the fact that his sister-in-law spat in his face.”¹⁴

4:9-12 Boaz then publicly declared that he would be willing to do both. Boaz first stated that he was acquiring all that belonged to Elimelech, including the land, Naomi, and Ruth. Second, he stated that he was marrying Ruth in order to provide a descendant for Elimelech. This makes it clear that Boaz was not marrying Ruth just to marry her but was actually establishing a levirate

¹² Fredric Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, p. 224.

¹³ Robert L. Hubbard. *The Book of Ruth*, p. 61.

¹⁴ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch. *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 3:423.

marriage. This means that everything he acquired would go to Elimelech's descendant, whom Boaz would provide.

The people of the village served as witnesses and then proclaimed two blessings on Boaz and Ruth: first, that Boaz and Ruth would be like Rachel and Leah, who had many children and who gave birth to the nation of Israel; second, that they would be like the family of Perez, who was the son of Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38). Tamar was a foreigner, like Ruth, who desired to have children, even though her husband had died, in order to be a part of the Abrahamic Covenant. Because Judah, her father-in-law, would not give her his son in a levirate marriage, she tricked Judah into having sex with her in order to provide her with a son. Though her means were not godly, her desire to continue the line of Judah, when Judah himself would not, gave her a certain righteousness. Judah's line would then lead to Elimelech, whose line would be saved by Boaz and Ruth. As seen in the next verses, this line would then lead to David and to then Jesus Christ—the ultimate kinsman redeemer.

Though the Law did not forbid Boaz from marrying a Moabite, Deut. 23:3 did state that a Moabite and his or her descendants were not allowed to enter the sanctuary of Yahweh until the tenth generation. However, this law may have had in view unbelievers who wanted to immigrate into Israel without becoming part of the Abrahamic Mosaic Covenants. Yahweh's character and actions have always shown that He desires for people from all the nations to become part of Israel through the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants and partake of all His blessings (Gen. 12:1-4; 17; 38; Ex. 19:5-6; Josh. 2).

4:13-17 When Obed was born, the women of the village praised Naomi rather than Ruth and made Naomi the child's caregiver. This also shows that the village saw the son of Boaz and Ruth as legally belonging to Elimelech and Naomi to continue their line and inheritance. Though the narrator spends more time on Ruth in this story, it is clear from everyone's actions that Naomi and the continuance of the line of Elimelech were the true focus of the story. Boaz and Ruth were also praised for their sacrificial love toward Naomi.

4:18-22 The genealogy begins with Perez, once again emphasizing how Yahweh can use foreigners and circumvent traditions in order to continue His chosen line. As with the genealogy of Matthew, it also communicates His desire not only to include the gentiles in His plan of redemption but to use them as well. It also shows that Yahweh rewarded Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth's sacrificial love by making them part of the Davidic and the Messianic lines.

Conclusion

These were every day, seemingly “insignificant” people who were just trying to survive day to day. Yet they showed extraordinary loving-kindness and self-sacrifice toward others despite their own needs. They were incredibly faithful and righteous people in the midst of the time period of the Judges, a time of great cultural wickedness during which “everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” Yahweh used them to be a blessing to others and so blessed them in return. The ultimate blessing to Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz was that Yahweh used them to continue the line of redemption that would eventually lead to Jesus Christ.

Boaz’s commitment to the Mosaic Covenant makes him a foreshadowing of Christ as the ultimate kinsman redeemer. Like Boaz, Christ would become our kin by coming in the flesh (Isa. 9:6-7; Phil. 2:5-11; Heb. 2:14). He then paid the ransom price (Mar. 10:45; 1 Tim. 2:6; 1 Pet. 1:18) by dying for us (Jn. 3:16) so that we may inherit the kingdom of Yahweh (Matt. 25:34; Eph. 1:11-14; 1 Pet. 1:1-5). Boaz, whose ancestry was a mixture of both Jew and gentile, redeemed with loving-kindness a Jew (Naomi) and gentile (Ruth) into the same covenant family of Yahweh. Likewise, Jesus, whose ancestry was a mixture of both Jew and Gentile, redeemed with loving-kindness the Jews and the Gentiles into His New Covenant established in His own sacrifice.

The faithfulness of Ruth and Boaz serves as a bridge from the patriarchs to the monarchy. At the end of the Judges, one realizes that Israel needs the Deuteronomic king (Deut. 17:14-20; Gen. 49:8-12) but wonders how this could ever happen, considering what Israel has become. The book of Ruth shows that there are still those who are faithful to Yahweh and that He will use them to bring about the Deuteronomic kingdom of 1 and 2 Samuel and, ultimately, the Messiah.

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