

BS – OT 8.1 - Early Prophecy - Ruth

1. INTRODUCTION:

- a. The Book of Ruth is actually short story in the historical narrative genre, with an historical setting being in a time period after the Judges era and before the Davidic Monarchy. As such it provides a wonderful window into the past, providing the only peek into the social norms and customs of that age. The author is not identified which is not atypical with early Scripture. The Jewish Talmudic Tradition holds that Samuel wrote the story after David ascended to the Monarchy. Others hold to a later date at the end of the Davidic kingship or during the reign of Solomon, and perhaps even slightly later. It was not untypical for a post-mortem history to be written about a great man or woman at any time in history, and certainly David's reign was a high point of the nation emerging from the dark era of the late Judges period when warlords ruled during a rather anarchic and chaotic period of time. It makes sense why the story should be told about God's providential preparation of Israel and the ancestry of King David.
- b. The Book of Ruth is one of only a few stories where the heroine is celebrated for her noble vigilance and competence (Proverbs 31:10; Ruth 3:11). Another celebration of womanhood is Proverbs 31 which is written with the personification of wisdom as a woman, and often regarded as a pseudonym for the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Other such stories of noble women include Deborah in Judges, Esther during the exilic period and of course Mary the mother of Jesus. The Spirit inspired an author to tell these stories to preserve their heritage and acknowledge that women have played key pivotal roles in advancing the Kingdom of God.
- c. The main action of the story takes place in Bethlehem... a fitting prophetic hint to the Messiah who would be born in that city as the last and greatest in the line of the Davidic Monarchy. In the Book of Judges there was evidence of an idolatrous priest and an ungodly callous priest recounted in the epilogue of Judges. Ruth and Boaz stand out as people of noble character in an age of religious confusion and ethical lapses. Ruth demonstrates the nobility latent in humanity from being made in the image of God [*Imago Dei*]. Boaz demonstrates that he is part of a faithful remnant that God has reserved throughout redemptive history to carry out His purposes in advancing the Kingdom of God.
- d. Themes include redemption [*Goel*]; bareness [Boaz, Ruth and Naomi had no children of their own]; famine; hope for a time of plenty [fullness]; God's "loyal Love" [*Hessed*] looking forward with an eye on what God has already done in the past; the prophetic merging of Gentile [Ruth] and Jew [Boaz] who are instrumental in the hopeful future of humanity; and a change of fortune [Grace] in Boaz' kindly action in caring for and redeeming a Jewish widow [Naomi] and her Gentile daughter-in-law [Ruth].
- e. It is a great story that has many twists and surprises that has delighted readers for 3,000 years. The author speaks prophetically for God:
 - i. The text states that the famine was ended by God's intervention – 1:6.
 - ii. The text concludes with the revelation that the son born of Boaz and Ruth is David's grandfather – 4:13.
 - iii. God's gift of grain [fruit of the land] is placed in conjunction with God's gift of a son [fruit of the womb] – both the result of God's beneficial providence.
 - iv. The audience is the universal covenant people of God – and integrated nation of Jews and Gentiles.

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- f. All writers of Scripture include theology and history through artistic and aesthetic literature. The Book as Scripture is canonical because it is theological – it says something important about God that the Spirit wanted His people to understand, it is prophetic – it says something about how God advances His Kingdom often in surprising and unexpected ways, and it occurred in real time and place in an historical context with real people who lived out the drama. This is not fiction with a purpose; rather it is a prosaic prophetic narrative with theological maxims to reveal about the nature of God.
- g. There is an interesting *inclusio* employed – the end of the famine is “grain seed” and the answer to humanities need is a “human seed” [an heir] through whom King David and Messiah Jesus would emerge from. This constitutes a proclamation of hope and expectation in the prophetic tradition.

2. BACKGROUND:

- a. The author is anonymous. It is implied from the context that the author knew of the ancient customs of Israel, and knew King David’s importance in history thus recounting his lineage. The implication is that the author is a prophet of God:
 - i. Who is able to interpret God’s more ambiguous providence – 1:6; 4:13.
 - ii. Who aims to demonstrate the values of God’s covenant community of faith.
 - iii. Who makes it clear that God’s covenant is inclusive. The Jews celebrated that they were God’s people, and basically looked down upon everyone else. This story takes a much different approach.
 - iv. Who celebrates God’s providence in the provision for King David and Messiah Jesus.
- b. The author is a masterful artistic writer – we often presume the ancients were more simple, but this author expresses sublimely within the fabric of his available language – ancient Hebrew had some 3,000 word usages whereas modern English has some 150,000+ word usages.
 - i. 58 of the 85 verses are dialogue... this is much higher in proportion to any other book. Dialogue moves the story along rather than the narrator.
 - ii. Every scene has the feeling of intimacy – the author allows his readers to connect to his characters and understand their joys and sorrows.
 - iii. The twists and turns employed are exquisitely portrayed.
- c. The theology presented is relevant to both ancient and modern Israel; as well as all Christians. The inclusive approach makes it more open to divergent groups.
- d. Historically, Obed would have been born 2 generations after Joshua, and 2 generations before David. The story sheds much light on the everyday life of the time.
- e. The story provides an interesting alternative perspective of the spirituality of Israel after Joshua.
 - i. Though the Book of Judges demonstrated increasing apostasy in Israel’s leadership, Ruth demonstrates that there were some who remained faithful, ethical, and true to God’s decrees.
 - ii. Boaz is a Jew and Ruth is a Pagan; but both demonstrate respect for the dignity of others with the integrity and humility in keeping with God’s covenantal standards.
 - iii. Boaz’s generosity precedes his expressed interest in Ruth, and when he does express interest it is her love and dedication for her mother-in-law Naomi that he commends her on... not merely her beauty. She must have been a remarkable woman.

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3. STRUCTURE:

- a. Chiastic structure of the Book:
 - A. Naomi – too old to conceive – and incapable of caring for herself – chap 1
 - B. Possible redeemer is introduced – 2:1
 - C. Ruth and Naomi make a plan – 2:2
 - D. Ruth and Boaz’s field – 2:3
 - E. Boaz comes from Bethlehem – 2:4
 - F. Boaz asks – “who is that young woman?” – 2:5-7
 - G. Ruth becomes part of the Boaz clan, Ruth brings seed & food to Naomi – 2:8-18
 - H. Naomi blesses Boaz – 2:19
 - I. Boaz the One in Position to redeem – 2:20
 - J. Ruth joins Boaz’s workers – 2:21-23
 - X. The plan laid by Naomi and Ruth – 3:1-8
 - J’ Ruth identifies herself as Boaz’s handmaid – 3:9
 - I’ Ruth challenges Boaz to act as redeemer – 3:9
 - H’ Boaz blesses Ruth – 3:10
 - G’ Boaz promises to marry Ruth – Ruth brings seed to Naomi – 3:16
 - F’ Naomi asks – “who are you?” – 3:16-18
 - E’ Boaz goes to Bethlehem – 4:1
 - D’ Ruth and field – 4:2-12
 - C’ Ruth and Naomi’s plan fulfilled with marriage – 4:13
 - B’ The redeemer was successful – 4:14-16
 - A’ A son is born to Naomi – and a family who is more than capable for caring for her – 4:17

Epilogue – a remarkable story of a devoted, persevering and courageous young woman; an honorable, ethical and generous older man... and a son is born! Who is the grandfather of the great King David, and ancestor of the Messiah Jesus.

- b. Narrative Structure and discussion:
 - i. 1:1-22 – Emigration – Act 1 of the story opens 1st with Elimelech migrating to Moab then is followed when his widow and daughter-in-law migrate back to Bethlehem. While there was not a great distance in mileage involved in these moves, there was substantial social and cultural distance involved.
 - A. 1:1-5 – Elimelech’s move to Moab had to have been a move of desperation.
 - a. In these days dominated by war-lords and small city-states God would allow His people to suffer for their lack of faith by allowing oppressors, pestilence, and famine to drive this stiff-necked people to their knees – Judges 2:14; 3:15; 6:1; Deut 28:23. When the people returned in faith and obedience God would always relent and bring peace and healing. But it says something about humanity that after the Fall as we pretty consistently tend to neglect obedience, faith and love in preference to each person doing

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- what they pleased (Judges 17:6; 21:25) often seeking their own ease and comfort even at the expense of their brothers.
- b. Elimelech means “my God is King” and Naomi means “pleasantness.” Interestingly, as if to accentuate the problems of their sons generation... Mahlon and Kilion mean “sterile” and “spent.” The name change between generations may speak to the fading glory of Israel during the dark war-lord years.
 - c. The story 1st presents that there is no grain seed, then that there are no offspring [human seed] – 1:3-5. Naomi’s predicament goes from bad to worse... her husband dies, and after her sons marry Moabite women they both die childless leaving Naomi without any tangible means of support in her old age... as there are no heirs there is none to claim the land Elimelech owned.
 - d. The three widows are in desperate need... and God’s *Hessed* love [loyal & faithful love] seems distant. Naomi going back to Bethlehem is another act of desperation, but God’s loyal love would be epitomized in the least likely of persons for a Jew – a Moabite woman named Ruth.
- B. 1:6-22 – Return home to Bethlehem – In this second part of the developing story the key word is “return” in three stages – leaving Moab (6-7), on the road to Bethlehem (8-18), and finally arriving in Bethlehem (19-22).
- a. Leaving began with a report that “the Lord had come to the aid of His people” and Naomi responds amid the desolation of her life in Moab with hope.
 - b. The road journey has three exchanges between Naomi and her daughters-in-law.
 - i. Naomi makes it clear that her hope and petition is the God of Israel YAHWEH, not the god of Moab Chemosh (2 Kings 23:13). Her hope is expressed to her daughters that they would find loyal love [Hessed] and a place of peace and security [rest]. The daughters resistance to return is likely testimony to Naomi’s “pleasantness” and her loyal love expressed to them.
 - ii. 11-13 – As Naomi works things out she realizes she is in dire straits... the land law of the Israelites traced from males, especially the oldest male son. There is the *Levirate* practice when a brother to the dead man would marry and sire sons to preserve the lineage and retain the land. Naomi was well beyond child bearing years, and the cold-hearted pragmatism of the current Jewish tradition would most likely not favor them desiring to help her. So she decides to encourage her daughters to return home... placing their best interests ahead of her own, and facing her uncertain future alone as any good parent would.

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- iii. 14-18 – Orpah decides to go back... her testing demonstrating though she is a kind person, her faith is weak and misplaced in the vile Chemosh. Ruth decides to go on – professing her love for Naomi and her complete dependence and identity with Naomi – “your people are my people, your God is my God.” Orpah functions as the literary foil to Ruth demonstrating the character of each. Not unlike Abraham, Ruth leaves her Pagan life, her country, and her family for a future grounded in YAHWEH. It has always been so in pursuing the Kingdom of God... you have to let go of what you had to accept something way better by faith.
- c. Arrival in Bethlehem – When Naomi and Ruth arrive the question “is this Naomi?” likely means that she has become care worn beyond her years. In renaming herself “Marah” [Bitterness], she is publicly admitting her distress for the hard times she has endured and her depression. None the less, Ruth goes on to prove she is every bit a daughter to Naomi as one naturally born.
- ii. 2:1-23 – Ruth gleanes in Boaz’s field – Act 2 of the story begins with the barley harvest which would have occurred in early April – 1:22. Barley harvest time is associated with the Passover, and wheat harvest time is associated with Pentecost. Act 2 has 2 scenes... Ruth meets Boaz in the field (2:1-17), and later reports to Naomi what occurred (18-23).
 - A. 2:1-17 – Ruth meets Boaz in the field:
 - a. The scene moves from the town to the field where Boaz is introduced. His name means “The Lord is Strength.” He is identified as “a man of standing,” a “capable and powerful man of wealth,” he is “highly respected” and a relative of Naomi and therefore also of Ruth.
 - b. The Law of Moses has many components that demonstrate God cares for the common people and that those with wealth have a responsibility to use it wisely and share with those in need. “Gleaning” was an early social justice means to care for the poor – Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut 24:19; Proverbs 3:27.
 - c. Ruth asks Naomi permission to go glean, and Naomi calls her “my daughter” – meaning she is now accepted as her daughter and as an Israelite (2:2, 22; 3:1, 16, 18). Ruth happens upon a field that is owned by Boaz... a rich relative who “just then” returns from the town and encounters Ruth (2:2-3). The author is allowing us to see God’s providence working behind the scene.
 - d. Boaz demonstrates his stature by treating Ruth with courtesy and respect. His calling her “my daughter” probably had much to do with their age difference, but also suggested their family ties through Naomi. Ruth is somewhat perplexed by Boaz’s welcoming and consideration for her... realizing she is a “foreigner” she no doubt is aware the reciprocal would not be expected in Moab. Boaz gives the Lord’s blessing and protection to Ruth, and unlike the men in the Book of Judges he does not treat her as an

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inferior or as property. Boaz treats her to a meal, access to water, protection as one of his maidservants, advises her to remain and glean her only under his protection.

- e. Ruth was expecting to be treated as an outsider and with disdain, instead she is treated as family... this is a grace she did not expect. Boaz is impressed by her winsome humility and enterprise, and asks God to repay her for her kindness expressed to Naomi... character matters... integrity is important... what you are inside is more important than what you appear on the outside, though it appears they were each beautiful both ways. When Boaz invites her to eat with him and instructs his servants to provide additional grain for her... the reader is given a glimpse into the developing relationship that the actors themselves are not yet fully aware of... this is masterful storytelling, a love story way ahead of its time.

B. 2:18-23 – Ruth & Naomi at home:

- a. Upon arriving home Ruth presents her adopted mother the special gift of what she set aside for Naomi from her savory meal with Boaz 2:18. In addition she presents 3/5 of a bushel of barley that she has threshed by hand. Overwhelmed by the gifts, Naomi must know where Ruth gleaned.
- b. Learning it was Boaz who was responsible for these gifts Naomi praises God for His loyal love [*Hessed*] to the needy women. Naomi realizes this is God's providence and not mere chance... God led Ruth to a close relative [*go'el*]. This term is translated as "*Kinsman Redeemer*" or as "*family protector*."
- c. This term is used for a close relative who has the means to defend or protect those under his charge... the Kinsman Redeemer would avenge murder, buy back land that was sold to pay debts, and even buy a family member back who had been sold into servant hood to pay a debt. The Kinsman Redeemer was part of the social justice of the Mosaic Covenant [Law] – Num 35:19-21; Lev 25:25, 47-49; Deut 25:5-19.

iii. 3:1-18 – Naomi's Plan for Ruth & Boaz:

- A. Naomi might be understood as an opportunist by some, but this is more her understanding that this seemingly coincidental convergence of events is orchestrated by God. Her immediate and multiple praise of God (2:19-20) recognizes God's intervention. Boaz being concerned for Ruth's protection so she would be harmed is indicative that he is already accepting the family protector role and has genuine concern for this vulnerable and noble young woman.
- B. Naomi reads between the lines of the events Ruth has described and proposes a daring plan... that would have Ruth steal into bed with Boaz at the threshing floor. The Chiasmic structure on page 3 demonstrates that Naomi's plan is the central act and turning point of the story. This act has three scenes – the preparation of the plan at home (3:1-5), the dark of night and Ruth's marriage proposal on the threshing floor (3:6-15), and the early morning at home (3:16-17).

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- C. Threshing floor scene 1 – preparation – 3:1-5
- a. Naomi accepts her role as Ruth’s mother which includes being her match maker – “Should I not find a home?” is not a rhetorical question, it is an observation and promise to Ruth that she is accepting her role as mother to her daughter.
 - b. Naomi observes that Boaz is the rightful kinsman redeemer – “Is not Boaz our kinsman?” This is a statement that Boaz ought to accept his responsibility to marry Ruth, thus providing an heir for Naomi and ensuring the continuity of the clan.
 - c. The underlying story here rests on the crucial observation of the character of the principal actors in this drama:
 - i. Ruth – that she is a noble, caring, selfless widow looking after her deceased husband’s mother as her own. In an era where widows and orphans were particularly vulnerable and at risk, she courageously dares to do the right thing by her mother.
 - ii. Boaz – that he is not only a man of means, but a man of ethical compassion who uses his means in a way that honors others... he is a worthy man, not the self-centered brutes depicted in the final stories in the Book of Judges.
 - d. Naomi advises Ruth to bath, perfume, and dress is to make her not only attractive but to prepare her for her wedding night. Naomi’s instruction to wait until late and then go to the threshing floor is counter-cultural as women were generally not allowed on the threshing floor revelry (3:14). Implicit in Naomi’s instruction is a marriage proposal to Boaz – to lie down with Boaz is a sexually suggestive word, and the statement to “uncover his feet” may also be referring to intimacy... and perhaps a consummation of the marriage proposal (3:4).
 - e. Ruth does as she was told but then decides to lay down at Boaz’s feet... a definitive statement of reverence and submissiveness. A wife or a lover would lie beside the man; this is definitely not what Ruth did. Boaz asks, “Who are you?” which in the original language creates an inclusio with 3:16... she replies “I am your servant Ruth” which confirms her position.
- D. Threshing floor scene 2 – the encounter 3:6-15
- a. Implicit in Naomi’s plan is the underlying character of both Boaz and Ruth... this is the key to the whole story. Ruth’s statement “I will do whatever you say” indicates she trusts her mother and Boaz completely. Ruth is a widow and obviously not a virgin, so the more tantalizing approach she is advised to pursue is balanced by her submissive and trusting naivety. That she was discrete in coming in at Boaz’s feet during the night and left early showed she cared for Boaz and didn’t want to harm his reputation... this interaction was just between the two of them.

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- b. Boaz confirms his acceptance of the marriage offer and we again see how their character is important in completing their proposal. Ruth's request that Boaz "spread a corner of his garment over me" is the marriage proposal for the kinsman redeemer, and Boaz tells her "I will do all that you ask" – 3:9-11. Boaz accepts her proposal based on their standing in the community whose elders/leaders know them both to be noble and competent, kindly and impressive... they are a good match for one another.
- E. Threshing floor scene 3 – returning home – 3:16-18
 - a. Naomi's question "who are you?" is paraphrased in the NIV as "how did it go?" The question is directed to Ruth's identity... has it changed? This completes the inclusio started in 3:4. The acceptance of marriage is the identity change Naomi is asking about that would move Ruth from a widowed servant girl to a married woman of stature in the community... this is a big deal for them both.
 - b. Ruth relates everything that Boaz said and promised. Naomi's trust in their character is proved out... Boaz will act immediately and compellingly... he will accomplish his promise. Naomi knows she got the right man to do the right thing.
- iv. Boaz Redeems Ruth – 4:1-12: The 4th act of this short story has three parts that occur at the city gates. In the Ancient Near East the elders of the city/township would generally meet and convene business and settle disputes publically. The elders would hear these proceedings and render decisions and/or accept negotiations. Boaz is about to complete a clever and aggressive negotiation in this setting.
 - A. Boaz convenes a legal assembly – 4:1-2
 - a. As promised and Naomi predicted, Boaz immediately goes up and sits in the town gate... the Ancient Near East equivalent to city hall. When the nearer kinsman approaches Boaz hails him so all can hear.
 - b. The author does not list his name, but preserves Boaz's kindly greeting. When the deal is complete the un-named redeemer walks away and is left out of the stage of salvation history much like Orpah... more concerned with their own interests rather than doing what is right and honorable. Boaz remains the dignified gentleman and treats his kinsman with respect.
 - B. Boaz engages his kinsman in two dialogues – 4:3-6:
 - a. The 1st dialogue involves Naomi wanting to sell her late husband's property. With no apparent heir, the land would revert to the nearest kinsman... instead of struggling she is looking to sell the land now. According to the Law, the nearest kinsman would be expected to buy back the land [redeem it] to preserve it for the clan. It cannot be sold outside the clan (Lev 25:23-28). Although the word redeem is used, the kinsman who bought it would enlarge his own inheritance... which the un-named kinsman is initially all too happy to do.

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- b. The 2nd dialogue has to do with the responsibility of the nearest kinsman to marry the widow and raise up heir for the dead husband... this practice is called “Levirate Marriage” (Deut 25:5-10). Zondervan’s New International Bible Dictionary states this comes from the root word *Levir* meaning “a husband’s brother”. To refuse to perform this obligation meant public shame even derision. Note that Boaz states prominently that Ruth is a Moabitess... most Jews would have nothing to do with the Moabites. Boaz cleverly links both responsibilities together... to buy the land you need to marry Ruth. The un-named kinsman is OK with part A because it enriches his inheritance, but refuses part B because it is not in his self-interest. Therefore he publically renounces his claim to either before the elders. Boaz gladly accepts both requirements... not merely because it is the right thing to do, but it also is likely that he is in love with Ruth.
- C. Boaz gets the girl and the land preserving Elimelech’s estate – 4:7-12:
 - a. Though regarded as an act of charity and generosity, it was the right thing to do. The story reinforces that doing what is right is good and a great blessing to each other and the community of faith.
 - b. Through there are obvious romantic overtones that create dramatic tension with doing what is right, the story stops short of encouraging the romance in the tale, and focuses on the sacrificial gift within an extended family.
 - c. There are other tales regarding sexual encounters in Scripture... the Bible does not ignore human nature or its weaknesses, but does approve when humanity acts in prudent trust and obedience:
 - i. Lot’s daughters are crude and animal like in securing their offspring. There is a tale of deliberate drunken debauchery and incest.
 - ii. Tamar though playing a harlot in securing offspring through incest is ultimately declared to have acted rightly by her accuser.
 - iii. Ruth is something quite different – she acts deliberately but also innocently. She considers the delicate nature of the situation and acts with propriety stealing in and leaving without anyone else observing her. The public approval of the marriage acknowledges their character and prudence.
 - d. The elders and those with them at the gate celebrate the marriage with prayerful approval for the couple and their offspring.
- v. The birth of Obed – 4:13-17
 - A. The writer who has employed dialogue so effectively in moving the action of the drama along takes the position of narrator to let the reader know the results of God’s providence as the women pray a benediction over Naomi:
 - a. First – they praise God that Naomi has not been left without a kinsman redeemer, who will maintain the family property and preserve their name.
 - b. Second – they petition God to make this child famous throughout Israel.

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- f. Israelites are flawed covenant partners – Naomi reflects Israel by trying to win what God desires to grant through their own scheming efforts. God desires our love and dependence, and the story of Ruth demonstrates God’s providence on behalf of His people.
- g. Gentiles are invited into the covenant – Ruth demonstrates qualities of nobility and grace matched only by Boaz. Because of Orpah’s failure to remain committed to Naomi it is evident that not all Gentiles are worthy covenant partners, but Ruth certainly demonstrates her worth.
- h. Kinsman redeemer – Boaz represents what is noble and true as an Israelite leader. He is what most of Israel’s leaders failed to be. He is however, a positive example that sets the stage for King David. More importantly, he is in a small way a reflection of the greater “antitype” Jesus who sacrifices his own well-being in obedience to God to purchase the future of others.
- i. Election into God’s Covenant – involves both the pre-action of God and the deliberate decision and action of individuals. It is evident that this is not a neat and easy process and individual character, trust and obedience to God are pre-requisites:
 - i. Moab and Ammon are rejected; Perez is chosen and becomes the father of Boaz.
 - ii. Though Moab is rejected, Ruth the Moabitess is chosen and becomes the wife of Boaz and grandmother of King David.
 - iii. The tribe of Judah emerges as the choice for Boaz, King David and Messiah Jesus... all of whom are the “anti-type” of their era... they exemplify and embody the nature their peers do not, and are also the “arch-type” of what humanity ascribes to be.