

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

Ruth: Salvation, Covenant, and Savior

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OBST 515

Old Testament Orientation I

By

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I. Introduction to Ruth

The book of Ruth, set in the period of the judges, is a beautiful story of the love, covenant loyalty, and daring initiative of two impoverished widows. Together with a generous openhearted man, they demonstrate the truth of a proverb that applies to individuals, families, communities, and nations: *'Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off'* (Prov. 23:18). Future and hope are the will of Yehweh, whose hidden hand is at work creating opportunities and opening doors for people to respond with covenant loyalty.¹

¹ E. John Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future: A Commentary on the Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996).

In E. John Hamlin's *Ruth: Surely There Is a Future*, the use of Proverbs 23:18 in this introductory setting is so eloquent, it may have inspired Guyette's title, "Solidarity, Kindness, and Peace"² (Old Testament's language), as this treatise's title was inspired: "Salvation, Covenant, Savior" (New Testament terms).³

While contemplating on this commentary, these terms were perceived: Ruth married a Judean husband. She was introduced to her husband's "living" God called *Yahweh*. His Laws produced peace, kindness, and love (*hesed*) among members of her new family, who treated her like a daughter. When Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, Ruth unerringly voiced her heart's desires (Covenant) to Naomi, vowing to remain with her until death parted them both (1:16-17). Ruth's love covenant became her spiritual (Salvation). Among Naomi's people, she finds favor in Boaz's eyes (2:11), and he becomes Naomi's "next-of-kin" (*go'el*) to "redeem" (*ga'al*) Naomi's estate.⁴ In contemporary language, Boaz becomes a "redeemer" (Savior) to Naomi and Ruth. Thus, the title of this treatise is "Ruth: Salvation, Covenant, Savior."

After the fact, these terms were found in Robert L. Hubbard Jr.'s text of *The Book of Ruth*:

Ultimately, this book is about the way God uses Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, and other minor characters (1) to provide salvation to all men and to draw them into the Kingdom of God; (2) to lay the way to the fulfillment of each person's life by embracing His Covenant promises; and last, but not least, (3) to reward one's faith in the Father and His son Jesus Christ, the Savior, with abundant blessings and fulfillment in an eternal home in the Kingdom of God.⁵

II. Historical Background of Book of Ruth

Book of Ruth is an Old Testament book that embeds the events of the book in "the chaotic era" reflected in the book of Judges, when there was "no central authority and everyone did as he saw fit" (Judg. 21:25).⁶

² Frederick W. Guyette, "The Book of Ruth: Solidarity, Kindness, Peace," *Solidarity* Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 3, 33-43, accessed on October 29, 2018. <http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/solidarity/vol3/iss1/3>.

³ In the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the word salvation ("And all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Luke 3:6) is found in 49 NT verses; the words, (new) covenant ("For this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." Matt. 26:28) are mentioned 14 times in NT and the words, (old) covenant are mentioned 2 times in the NT; the word Savior is mentioned 13 times in the OT and 24 times in the NT.

⁴ Hamblin, *Surely There is a Future*, 56.

⁵ Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) Accessed on November 9, 2018.

⁶ "Ruth: Narrative Literature," NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible: Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 448.

Most scholars today believe that the Narrator (author of Ruth) composed this story in the time of the Monarchy (1020-587 B.C.). Some support the reign of David (1000-961), or Solomon (961-923). Others believe that it was written during the reign of Josiah (640-609) to the postexilic community time of Ezra and Nehemiah (464-358). Authors like E. John Hamlin, Victor P. Hamilton, and John W. Reed, stand among most of the scholars who support the “time of the Monarchy (1020-587 B.C.)” as the period that the book of Ruth was written.

E. John Hamlin, (*Surely There Is a Future*), claims,

The Book of Ruth is a story with historical background. It is set in a particular historical period (Ruth 1:1) and talks about real people. However, it is not a factual historical account by an eyewitness. It is a literary work, composed long after the events described. The intended readers no longer understood customs of former times (4:7-8). David had already made a name in Bethlehem as Israel’s greatest king (4:11, 17).⁷

The “intended readers” as well as contemporary readers did not understand the custom of redeeming and exchanging in ancient Israel. Therefore, in Ruth 4:7-8, the narrator described the custom of “giving his sandal” to the next of kin, which meant that the closer relative is giving up his rights to buy the estate in question.

John W. Reed, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, identifies “Ruth as the great-grandmother of David (Ruth 4:17), who began his rule at Hebron in 1010 B.C.” Reed surmises that the “experiences in the Book of Ruth likely occurred in the last half of the 12th century. This means that Ruth may have been a contemporary of Gideon (‘The Judges of Israel’ in the *Introduction to Judges*).”⁸

Victor P. Hamilton, (*Handbook on the Historical Books, 2001*), also notes the setting for the book of Ruth as “in the days when the Judges ruled.” To him, this meant “anytime between Othniel of Judges 3 and Samson of Judges 13-16.” Hamilton also acknowledges that “Boaz is only three generations before David (Boaz>Obed> Jesse> David [4:21-22]).” Therefore, “Ruth may be set in the latter portions of this period, during a time, that Israel’s unfaithfulness and disloyalty to the ways of Yahweh had mushroomed.”⁹ Hamilton also noted, that “the pastoral calmness of Ruth contrasts vividly with the chaos and turbulence of Judges. Judges focuses on times of wars of

⁷ Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future*, 1-2.

⁸ John W. Reed, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament Edition*, edited by John Walvoord and Roy Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1984), 415-416.

⁹ Victor P. Hamilton, “Ruth,” *Handbook on the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, ebook edition created 2013), accessed on November 29, 2018, www.bakeracademic.com.

conquest and liberation. Ruth focuses on times of peace, the kind of family events that take place during years of rest in the land.”¹⁰

Hamilton, in *Handbook on the Historical Books (2001)*, makes a comparison between Judges and Ruth; he creates a parallel between Homer’s *Iliad* (with its focus on war) and *Odyssey* (written thirty years later by Homer, which includes details of Odysseus’s postwar experience during his ten-year journey home from the siege of Troy to his wife in Ithaca).¹¹

In the Septuagint and Christian canon, Ruth is placed between Judges and Samuel. In contrast, “the Jewish canon places Ruth in its third and final section of canonical books, known as the ‘Writings.’ It is the first of five books in a subcategory of ‘Writings’ known as the ‘Megilloth’ (‘festal scrolls’). The placement of Ruth between Judges and Samuel reinforces its role in legitimating the kingship of David. Its presence produces three canonical books in sequence that end with a statement about the monarchy. Ruth (4:22) is the only biblical book whose last word is a personal name--“...Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.”¹²

The book of Ruth precedes First Samuel in the Septuagint and Christian canon, and “it also parallels it by bookending the judges’ epoch at one end and the emergence of David at the other end.”¹³

III. The Book of Ruth as Literature

The book of Ruth is a Hebrew short story told with consummate skill. Among historical narratives in Scripture, it is unexcelled in its compactness, vividness, warmth, beauty, and dramatic effectiveness—an exquisitely wrought jewel of Hebrew narrative art.¹⁴

Leif Hongisto, *Literary Structure and Theology in the Book of Ruth*, said, “This book uses devices that are common to Hebrew poetry.”¹⁵

Claus Westermann,¹⁶ in his essay on “Structure and Intention of the Book of Ruth,”¹⁷ said,

¹⁰ Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books* (2001).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ “Introduction to Ruth,” *NIV Study Bible*, *biblica.com*, scholar notes, accessed on October 29, 2018, <https://www.biblica.com/resources/scholar-notes/niv-study-bible/intro-to-ruth/>.

¹⁵ Leif Hongisto, “Literary Structure and Theology in the Book of Ruth,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Spring 1985, Vol. 23, No. 1, 19-28. Accessed on October 29, 2018. <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/logi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1701&context=auss>

“The book of Ruth is a *narrative* (an independent literary form) with a *history that runs through the entire Old Testament*. (Therefore) Ruth is a narrative that must be interpreted accordingly. (Westermann continues) ...the answer is simple: “Ruth is a family narrative or an ancestral narrative, itself one genre among many in the Old Testament.”¹⁸

Westermann succinctly divides a formal and informal (oral) narrative as follows:

The formal narrative is distinguished from informal narrating by two characteristics: First, the former has a recognizable beginning and end. Second, between beginning and end, the narrative has a simple structure: the action develops in a narrative span rising from a particular situation to a climax and then back down to another (newly transformed) situation. “A narrative formulates an event from a moment of suspense to its resolution.”¹⁹

With Westermann’s description of a formal narrative as opposed to an oral narrative, we can now understand why the story of Ruth is a narrative that meets the formula of a formal narrative.

From a more contemporary viewpoint, Hamlin (*Surely There Is A Future*) says, “*Ruth* is a beautiful, well-crafted narrative like those about Joseph (Gen. 37, 39-50), Jonah, and Esther. It is to be enjoyed as a prime example of the storyteller’s art.” Thus, in this treatise (like Hamlin), “we will call the storyteller the Narrator, and agree (with Hamlin) that he or she was a literary genius.”²⁰

¹⁶ Claus Westermann1, “Structure and Intention of the Book of Ruth,” *WORD & World*, Vol. XIX, No. 3, Summer 1999, 285-303. Accessed on October 29, 2018. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/d8fc/30d6172441799ec00b3243f33f81cceb2bd.pdf>.

¹⁷ Note: “Claus Westermann, professor emeritus of Old Testament at Ruprecht-Karl-Universität Heidelberg, will be 90 years old on October 7, 1999. *Word & World* is pleased to publish this new essay honor of that milestone and as a sign of Professor Westermann’s untiring efforts to expound the Old Testament for the sake of Church and world.”

¹⁸ Westermann1.

¹⁹ Claus Westermann, *Erzählungen in den Schriften des Alten Testaments* quotes (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1998) 17-18, on page 286.

²⁰ Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future*.

IV. Main Characters in the Book of Ruth

A. Ruth

Question: What does the name, Ruth (*Rut*, רֹּוּת) mean?

Answer: The *Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon* translates the name of Ruth (*Rut*) as “friendship.”²¹

Question: Why was Ruth identified as a Moabite princess?

Rabbi Noson Weisz, of “The Book of Ruth: A Mystery Unraveled,” claims that “She (Ruth) was a Moabite princess who converted to Judaism in the 10th century BCE.” In Noson Weisz words...

Ruth was no ordinary convert. Her name gives us a clue to her essence. In Hebrew, Ruth's name is comprised of the letters *reish*, *vav*, *tav*, which add up to a numerical value of 606. As all human beings have an obligation to observe the seven Noachide commandments -- so called because they were given after the flood -- as did Ruth upon her birth as a Moabite. Add those seven commandments to the value of her name and you get 613, the number of commandments in the Torah.

The essence of Ruth, her driving life force was the discovery and acceptance of the 606 commandments she was missing. Thus, Ruth is a Torah seeker par excellence who is held up to the rest of us as the shining model of proper Torah acceptance. If we could learn to emulate Ruth in our own act of Torah acceptance, the act of Divine service that is the essence of Shavuot, we would succeed in absorbing the entire spiritual input offered by God on the Shavuot holiday.²²

According to Rabbi Tuly Weisz, editor of *The Israel Bible*, responds:

“To most Jews, *Megillat Rut* immediately conjures up memories of the holiday of Shavuot, when (the Book of Ruth) is read publicly in synagogue. On that day, reading Ruth commemorates the giving of the *Torah*. Shavuot is one of the three festivals, according to Jewish tradition, when the children of Israel experienced revelation, receiving the *Torah*.”²³

²¹ “Ruth (meaning of name),” *NAS Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon* (public domain), Strong’s No. 7327, Transliterated Word=Ruth; Ruth is used 12 times in KJV and NAS versions of Bible. <http://classic.studylight.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=07327>.

²² Rabbi Noson Weisz, “The Book of Ruth: A Mystery Unraveled,” *Aish.com*, accessed October 29, 2018, <http://www.aish.com/h/sh/t/48960411.html>.

²³ Rabbi Tuly Weisz, ed. “Ruth,” *The Israel Bible*, accessed on December 7, 2018, <https://theisraelbible.com/bible/ruth>.

Question: Why is the book of *Ruth* read publicly in synagogue?

The ancient rabbis explained that since Israel is the Jewish homeland, had the *Torah* been given in there, it would have belonged exclusively to the Jewish people. Instead, therefore, *Hashem* chose to transmit His moral code on a barren mountain in the ownerless wilderness, to emphasize that His Word is for everyone equally, because His instructions are the key to universal redemption. In *Megillat Rut* we read about a **Moabite princess Ruth** who forges her own path to Mount Sinai through her relationship with her mother-in-law Naomi. *Rut* is associated with the holiday of *Shavuot* because, with great self-sacrifice, she finds her way to the ultimate truth of the Torah. As she movingly declares to Naomi, “your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16).²⁴

Through this reader’s research on *Ruth*, the word Mahudist was used in the text of Joseph Jacobs and Emil G. Hirsch, in “Proselyte (προσέλυτος from προσέρχεσθαι),” in the *Jewish Encyclopedia.com*. It defined the word Mahudist that led to the word proselyte and then to the term Ger.²⁵

Weisz quotes Philo who said, “a proselyte is one who abandons polytheism and adopts the worship of the One God (“De Poenitentia,” § 2; “De Caritate,” 12).”²⁶

Josephus, whose words are included in Jacobs and Hirsch, *Jewish Encyclopedia.com*, describes the convert (proselyte) as “one who adopts the Jewish customs, follows the law of the Jews and worships God as they do--one who has become a Jew.”²⁷

Finally, Jacobs & Hirsch’s description of a proselyte is as follows.

Nokri (ξενος = stranger) is another equivalent for proselyte, which refers to a person, like Ruth, who seeks refuge under the wings of Yhwh (Ruth 1:16). In the Septuagint, the term ger, generally is a convert from one religion to another. These “converts are often residents of Palestine. They are called gerim but circumcised.”²⁸

²⁴ Weisz, *The Israel Bible*.

²⁵ Joseph Jacobs and Emil G. Hirsch, “Proselyte (προσέλυτος from προσέρχεσθαι).” *JewishEncyclopedia.com*, accessed on November 9, 2018, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12391-proselyte#>.

²⁶ Tuly Weisz quotes Philo (“De Poenitentia,” § 2; “De Caritate,” 12).

²⁷ Tuly Weisz quotes Josephus.

²⁸ Jacobs & Hirsch, *Jewish Encyclopedia.com*.

Therefore, the term “ger” gives the proselyte a justifiable position as a non-Jew.

The attitude of ancient Israel to proselytes and “proselytim” is found in the history of the term “ger.” It reflects the progressive changes to the development of Israel from a nation into a religious congregation under the priestly law. Ezra’s policy, founded on the belief that the new commonwealth should be of holy seed, excluded those of foreign origin. Nevertheless, the non-Israelite could gain admittance through circumcision (see Ex. 12).²⁹

A note in Rabbi Noson Weisz’s treatise, *The Book of Ruth: A Mystery Unraveled*, clarified the LORD’s use of the word, “Wings” in Ruth 2:12 as one of the “subtle echoes of the exodus,”

As Israel arrives at Sinai having just been led out of Egypt, God describes their rescue like this: “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how *I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself*” (Ex. 19:4) As if to symbolize this, the cherubim that guard the ark of the covenant are built with outstretched wings, and the Song of Moses pictures God leading Israel like an eagle leads its young, “*spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions*” (Deut. 32:11).³⁰

In this writer’s perception, Ruth’s name seems to open the doorway of “salvation” to all the “nations of the world” (Matt. 24:14; Luke 12:30). By her example of giving up Moab’s foreign gods to embrace Yahweh, the Living God, she was honored and recognized as a “daughter of God” and bore Obed as Boaz’s wife. Thus, a Gentile convert’s name is found in the lineage of the Messiah. Could it be possible that her decision to convert was influenced by the “love, kindness, and peace” (*hesed*) she received as a member of Elimelech’s Judean household (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 19:19; Ex. 20:12-16; Deut. 5:16-20)?

B. Boaz

Question: Who is Boaz?

Answer: Boaz is a kinsman of Naomi’s husband, Elimelech (2:1). He was a man of great wealth (2:1). This may indicate that Boaz is older than Ruth, for he has had time to build his fortune.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Rabbi Noson Weisz, *Aish.com*.

Boaz's character is displayed in his first words to the reapers in his field. He greets them, "May the Lord be with you." The reapers respond, "May the Lord bless you" (2:4). This exchange of greetings indicates that (1) Boaz was a God-conscious (godly) man.

Boaz's question to his supervising servant, "Whose young woman is this?" (2:5) indicated that (2) Boaz was an observant man. It may also indicate that he thought Ruth was "attractive, pleasing" in his sight. His servant identifies Ruth as Naomi's daughter-in-law (2:6). Boaz had heard (probably from his dealings in the marketplace) that Naomi had returned from Moab. So, like a father, his instinct was to protect Ruth who is now a part of his "kinsman" family.

Boaz addressed Ruth by calling her "my daughter" (2:8). The word "my" may indicate that Boaz may have felt a kinsman's responsibility for Naomi and Ruth, since they no longer had a man (head of household) protecting them. The word "daughter" may indicate that Boaz felt old enough to be Ruth's father. After these two words, (3) Boaz respectfully gave Ruth seven orders of conduct (2:7-9) to follow while gleaning in his field. His purpose was to protect her from masculine advances: "I have commanded my servants not to touch you" (2:9), as well as to protect Naomi's household (2:11-12). As a mature, well-known man in his community, his words were disseminated from his servants to their families and into the "community gossip line." The servants/community respected Boaz, and therefore, they heeded his words.

Thus, we perceive that Boaz is a godly (God-conscious) man. He gracefully greets/blesses his servants, ("May the Lord be with you" [2:4]), in his daily encounters with them. Secondly, Boaz is an observant and responsible man. He understood his place in the community, as well as his place as a kinsman of Naomi. He provided food, protection, and respect to Ruth in the eyes of his servants. Finally, Boaz willingly becomes a "redeemer" of Naomi's estate at the city gates (Ruth 4). In this writer's perception, Boaz's character traits placed him at the forefront of God's plans to provide "salvation" not only to the Jews, but also to the "nations of the world" (Matt. 28:16-20).

C. Naomi

Question: What does Naomi's name mean?

Answer: "Hebrew. **Naomi** (נְאוֹמִי) is a feminine Jewish **name** of Hebrew origin. **In Hebrew**, it **means** 'pleasantness.'³¹ Since Naomi is the wife of Elimelech (head of household), this writer sought to learn the meaning of his name and genealogy.

³¹ "Naomi: Bible | Jewish Women's Archive," accessed on January 9, 2019, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/naomi-bible>.

J. J. Reeve, Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin, and Thomas L. Constable define Elimelech's name and provide a glimpse into Elimelech's genealogy.

J.J. Reeve, in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* defines "Elimelech's name as follows:

"Elimelech" translated means (e-lim'-e-lek (*'elimelekh*) 'my God is King'). Elimelech was a member of the tribe of Judah, a native of Bethlehem Judah, a man of wealth (Ruth 1:2, 3; 2:1, 3). He lived during the period of the Judges, possessed land in Bethlehem, and is chiefly known as the husband of Naomi the mother-in-law of Ruth and ancestress of David the king."³²

Thomas L. Constable, *SonicLight.com*, in his "Notes on Ruth," states,

...The fact that "Elimelech" (lit. "My God is King," or "God is King"—a theme of the book) was from "Bethlehem" (lit. 'House of Bread,' i.e., granary) is significant. "Elimelech" is a theophoric name, a name that combines a term for deity with another ascription. Elimelech's parents probably gave him this name hoping that he would acknowledge God as his king, but he failed to do that when he moved from Israel to Moab.³³

Dr. Meir Levin, *torah.org*, sought to answer the question, "Who was Elimelech?" He said,

What does the name Elimelech mean? Ordinarily it would be translated as "My God is King". The Sages, however read it with a slight difference in pronunciation as "Elai melech" - "For he said: "Kingship is due to me (Ruth Rabba 2,5)". What could have led them to this interpretation? It seems that they are pointing out a certain "disconnect" between the name and the behavior. Would man who truly believes that His God is King abandon his people at the time of famine?

Naomi reaps the consequences of her husband's decision. To move and become acclimated to a new home requires fortitude. Moving to a new "nation" with your family must have increased the already heavy burden on Naomi. Biblical characters name their children according to their emotional state of mind. For example, Leah names her first son, Reuben, and said, "Surely the LORD has looked upon my affliction..." for she was the "unloved" wife, second to her sister Rachael" (Gen. 29:31-32). Keeping this in mind, could it be possible that Naomi's life was difficult? Taking the clues from the translations of her sons' names, "sickness" and

³² J. J. Reeve and James Orr (ed.) "Elimelech," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Bible-history.com - ISBE; 1915.

³³ Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Ruth," 2017 ed. *SonicLight.com*, accessed on October 29, 2018, <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/ruth.pdf>.

“consumption,”³⁴ her sons may have been sickly children. To move to another country and lose all familial support system must have added to the burden she already carried at home. (A saving grace may have been that while she lived in Judah, the “Promised” land, she had community support and the protection of her LORD GOD. In Moab, she probably lost all her physical, spiritual, and emotional support systems since she knew no one in Moab. Moabites worshipped idols. If Elimelech worked out of the home, this change probably cut her emotional support with her husband drastically.

Could it be understandable that in her frustration of losing her husband and sons, she returns to Bethlehem and told her friends who excitedly welcomed her home, “Call me Mara (meaning “bitter”)³⁵ for the Lord has dealt very bitterly with me” (1:20).

Yet, in His love and mercy towards his children, the Word says,

*“There hath no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man: but **God is faithful**, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13).*

Therefore, returning to Judea, Naomi’s hopes are fulfilled through her daughter-in-law, Ruth, who marries Boaz, a “redeemer” of Naomi’s family estate. Holding her grandson in her arms (4:16), she thankfully praised the LORD with her friends as they prophesied and blessed her grandson, Obed (4:14-15, 17).

In the concluding chapter of the Book of Ruth, the *Jewish Women’s Archive* writes,

Naomi never speaks again; her work is finished. Nevertheless, she figures prominently in the last scene (4:1–21), her name appearing six times. Boaz depicts Naomi as the owner of property (4:3, 5, 9). The women of Bethlehem invoke YHWH’s blessing upon Naomi through Ruth and the grandchild Ruth bears her (4:14–15). The narrator reports that Naomi embraces the child and becomes his nurse. And at the end, the women even declare that the child has been born to Naomi (4:17).³⁶

V. Key Verses: Ruth 1:16-17.

³⁴ “Chilion,” *Abarim Publications*. Accessed on December 29, 2018. <http://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Chilion.html#anc-3>.

³⁵ “Naomi: Bible | Jewish Women’s Archive.”

³⁶ “Naomi,” *Jewish Women’s Archive.com Encyclopedia*, accessed on January 9, 2019, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/naomi-bible>.

Ruth said, “Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you.”

VI. Theme and Theology

The importance of faithful love in human relationships among God’s kingdom people is powerfully underscored. The narrator focuses on Ruth’s unswerving and selfless devotion to desolate Naomi (1:16-17, 2:11-12; 3:10; 4:15) and on Boaz’s kindness to these widows (chs. 2-4). He presents striking examples of lives that embody in their daily affairs the self-giving love that fulfills God’s law (Lev. 19:18; cf. Ro 13:10). Such love also reflects God’s love, in a marvelous joining of human and divine actions (compare 2:12 with 3:9). In God’s benevolence such lives are blessed and are made a blessing.³⁷

VII. Interpretation and Exposition

This treatise is divided into seven parts according to the NIV Study Bible.

A. Introduction: Naomi Emptied (1:1-5)

At the beginning of the story of Ruth, Naomi is presented as “the survivor of a double disaster: a famine in Judah that made her family refugees among a people not their own, and the death in Moab of her husband and two sons. In patriarchal society, a widowed and childless woman was automatically marginalized by society.” The story begins with a Hebrew man and his wife (1:2). Ten years later, Naomi is neither a wife nor mother, but simply “the woman” (*ha-ishah*, 1:5) alone and vulnerable in an alien world.”³⁸ Naomi “was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away...left all alone” (Isa. 49:21).

A bold affirmation of the book of Ruth is that Naomi “the woman” (Ruth 1:5), with neither husband nor sons, is in fact “the remnant that will return.”³⁹

B. Naomi Returns from Moab (1:6-22)

The key word in Ruth 1:6-22 is Heb. *shub*, variously translated as “return” (1:6, 10, 15, 22). The decisions of Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth are all about “returning.”

³⁷ Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future*, 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁹ Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future*, 55.

Naomi, the only surviving Hebrew remnant of Elimelech's family (Ruth 1:13), decided to leave the "country of Moab" (1:6) and return to Bethlehem, her hometown. After ten years (1:4) of sojourning in Moab, the tide of times had changed. Death (1:3, 5) had come to her household and taken her husband and sons, but news of the return of "plenty" in Judah (Ruth 1:6) gave Naomi hope that perhaps her people would treat her kindly as a widow, thus, giving her a fair chance at survival.

Hamlin chose to identify Naomi's move back to Bethlehem as "God's Time."⁴⁰ He wrote, "The 'latter rain' (Deut. 11:14) had fallen in November, and the barley and wheat crops had been planted. 'The beginning of the barley harvest' (Ruth 1:22), which followed the Festival of Unleavened Bread in March or April, was at hand. It was time to gather Yahweh's gift of 'seed to the sower and bread to the eater' (Isa. 55:10). This was good news to Naomi, that the LORD of the harvest had visited Judah in Ruth 1:6."⁴¹

In Guyette's *Ruth: Solidarity, Kindness, and Peace*, he surmised that although Ruth and Orpah had begun to follow Naomi on the road back to Bethlehem. Naomi still believed that their prospects for marriage and a family were better in Moab. Orpah reluctantly agrees with Naomi's assessment, and she turns back and "fades into the view on the road back to Moab." She felt no reproach, and we do not hear of her again.⁴²

On the other hand, Ruth is not willing for her relationship with Naomi to come to an end. She expressed her "steadfast loyalty" to Naomi in a very poetic way (1:16-17).

To Guyette, when Ruth took the initiative, by expressing "her desire for solidarity and friendship with Naomi, something new and unexpected came into the story."⁴³

Mark Smith wrote, "Ruth's loyalty to Naomi shows how the practices of covenant (*berit*) and loving kindness (*hesed*) are not just for diplomats at the royal court, not just for special times of worship in the Temple, but also for the day-to-day challenges faced by widows, migrant workers, and refugee families who have no settled home."⁴⁴

The word (*hesed*) is a Hebrew word whose rich meaning makes it necessary to translate it. The term "steadfast love" is commonly used in the RSV and NRSV to refer to Yahweh's covenant with his people, like "Yahweh is 'abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Exo.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁴¹ Ibid., 13.

⁴² Guyette, *Solidarity, Kindness, and Peace*.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Mark Smith, "Your People Shall Be My People: Family and Covenant in Ruth 1:16-17" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2007): 245-46.

34:6; Ps. 136:1). When it is used between relationships of covenant community members, the words loyalty (Prov. 3:3; Hos. 4:1) and kindness (2 Sam. 9:1; Mic. 6:8) are often used.”⁴⁵

In *Ruth*, these terms are used in as “deal kindly” (1:8), and “kindness” (2:20), and “loyalty” (3:10). Naomi praises her two Moabite daughters-in-law, and they in turn, expressed their loyalty to the family who kindly practiced (*hesed*) towards each other.⁴⁶

C. Ruth and Boaz Meet in the Harvest Fields (2:1-23)

Harvest time in the fields of Bethlehem of Judah welcomed the two widows from Moab. The harvest joy in this chapter replaced the “bitterness” and “emptiness” in Naomi’s heart with “joy” and “bounty.” The narrator begins this chapter of *Ruth* by introducing the other main character, along with three facts about him that give the reader three clues for understanding the rest of the story. This character’s name is Boaz.

First, Boaz was Naomi’s relative or “kinsman” on her husband’s side. The Hebrew word is used as found in Ruth 3:2, “our kinsman Boaz.” In this term, it implies that Naomi and Boaz are blood relatives. The Hebrew term translated “family” designates a kinship group larger than the immediate family unit, and smaller than a clan or tribe. In this case, we can use the phrase “extended family.” Boaz was a member of Elimelech’s extended family, but not of the immediate family (*betab*) which was in danger of extinction due to the death of both of Naomi’s sons. Membership in the extended family made Boaz a possible “redeemer” who could come to the aid of Naomi and her daughter-in-law. Family solidarity, one of the key concerns in the story of Ruth is expressed in a cluster of words related to the concept of “the next-of-kin” (Heb. *go’el*) that was mentioned earlier. This word carries the meaning of “rescuing, delivering, or to “redeem” (Ruth 4:7).

The custom of redemption (Lev. 25:29; Jer. 32:7) by a redeemer was part of ancient Israel’s system of social security based on the extended family or tribe. If a member of the extended family had to sell land, the next of kin would buy the land back and restore it to the family (Lev. 25:25). If one sold oneself to an alien, the next-of-kin had the right to restore the damage done to the family or tribe by paying the purchase price and setting the slave free (Lev. 25:47-49). If a person who had been wronged died, the restitution for the crime committed should be paid to the next-of-kin who acts on behalf of the whole family (Num. 5:8).⁴⁷

Second, Boaz was a “prominent rich man” or “a man of substance” (NJPS), a landowner who employed a large group of laborers in the harvest, and he was well able to be “of help” to the two poor widows who had just arrived. The Hebrew word *hayil* translated “rich” both

⁴⁵ Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future*, 16.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future*, 26.

materially and morally. At the end of the story, the same word will be used in a wish that these two “worthy” partners should “prosper” in Bethlehem (literally, ‘produce *hayil*; 4:11 RSV).⁴⁸

Finally, Boaz is implied to be an “older man” than the “young men” he employed (3:10). The Narrator gives no hint about whether he was a widower (probable) or had been single all his *life (unlikely)*. Jewish legend speculated that the funeral of his late wife coincided with the arrival of Ruth and Naomi from Moab.⁴⁹

In this chapter, Ruth goes out into the fields with other women who were gleaning after the harvesters. Not by chance (2:2), Ruth chose to glean in a field belonging to Boaz.

Boaz arrives to check on the harvesters. After his greeting of “The LORD bless you!” (2:4), Boaz notices Ruth and asks his foreman, “Whose girl is this?” (2:5) Boaz apparently makes it his business to inquire about Naomi and learns the story behind Ruth’s arrival in Bethlehem. Upon learning of the loyalty and kindness Ruth had for Naomi, and that she left behind the gods of Moab to “find refuge: under the sheltering wings of The God of Israel,” Boaz addresses Ruth directly, calling her “my daughter.”⁵⁰ In two verses (2:8-9), Boaz gives her no less than seven commands. These imperatives are not harsh words, but they are gentle words of a protector and an advocate who cares about Ruth’s dignity. “Now, listen, my daughter. Do not go into another field to glean. Stay close to my young women. Keep your eyes on what they do and follow behind them. If you get thirsty, go to our vessels and drink from our water.”⁵¹

Ruth does not take his kindness for granted. Bowing low to the ground before him, she makes it plain that she hopes to keep on finding favor in his sight (2:10). “You have given me comfort and encouragement,” she says, “even though I am not one of your servants.” Towards the end of the day, Boaz invites her to eat with them (2:13). Though Ruth has experienced famine and loss of loved ones in the recent past, “nowhere is gracious plenty for all to share, and she enjoys a newfound sense of belonging,” thanks to the generosity of Boaz.⁵²

Ruth gleaned an *ephah* of barley (2:17), which she takes home to Naomi. She shares all that Boaz said to her and did for her. Naomi praises God for Boaz’s kindness and advises Ruth to stay close to his young women throughout the harvesting season. Ruth abides by Naomi’s words (2:23-24).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Guyette, *Solidarity, Kindness, and Peace*.

⁵¹ Guyette, *Solidarity, Kindness, and Peace*.

⁵² Ibid.

D. Naomi Sends Ruth to Boaz's Threshing Floor (3:1-18)

In Ruth chapter 3, “the heap of grain on Boaz’s threshing floor is the setting for a secret encounter between Boaz and Ruth, arranged by Naomi. This encounter would set events in motion that would open the future for Ruth and Naomi, the family of Ebimelech, and indeed, the whole nation of Israel.”⁵³

Naomi seized the opportunity provided by the harvest--Boaz would be “winnowing barley *tonight* at the threshing floor” (3:2). Her daring plan calling for immediate action reminds us of Paul’s words to the Corinthians, “See now is the acceptable time; see, *now* is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

When Ruth revealed that Boaz is the kind man, Naomi immediately sees a possible redemption, and further, she sees the hand of God in the fruitful turn of events: “May he be blessed by the Lord, who has not abandoned his *hesed* to the living and to the dead.”⁵⁴ Then, Naomi said to her, “The man is near of kin to us, he is one of our redeemers” (Ruth 2:20).

Naomi’s plan unfolded as she explained to Ruth what she should do. She directed Ruth to prepare herself by washing and dressing (presumably in the best clothes she had). Ruth will be in an unusual situation, one in which she would be proposing marriage to Boaz. Naomi is counting on “the noble character and discretion” of Boaz.⁵⁵

Ruth’s task is to let Boaz know that she would be honored to become his wife, and then, it would be up to him to act as he sees fit--to follow through or drop the matter. Ruth does not know what to expect, but “she is willing to trust Naomi’s judgment.”⁵⁶

Adhering to Naomi’s script as closely as she could, Ruth watched the scene from her hiding place.⁵⁷ Boaz was merry and had eaten and drunk with his laborers. Then, “he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain” (3:7). Ruth had marked carefully where he lay and waited. When all was quiet, she moved softly, uncovered his feet, and lay down. During the night, Boaz made a sudden move and turned in his sleep. Startled to find a woman lying at his feet, he asked, “Who are you?” She answered, “I am Ruth, your maid servant. Take your maid servant under your wing, for you are a close (kinsman)” (3:9).

Her answer has two clear implications: (1) I hope you will be pleased to take me as your wife, for (2) we (Naomi and me) need a secure future. Boaz is dumbfounded, hardly believing

⁵³ Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future*, 39.

⁵⁴ Kerry Muhlestein, “Ruth: Redemption, Covenant, and Christ” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), accessed on October 28, 2018, <https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/gospel-jesus-christ-old-testament/11-ruth-redemption-covenant-and-christ>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Guyette, *Solidarity, Kindness, and Peace*.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

that he could be so fortunate. Boaz “admired Ruth from their first meeting, but he believed he was too old to be of interest to her as a husband.”⁵⁸

Boaz responds: *“May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; you have made this last kindness greater than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. For now, my daughter, do not worry. I will do all that you request, for all the people of my town know that you are a virtuous woman. It is true that I am a close (kinsman), however, there is a relative that is closer than I. Stay the night, (since it is too dark to travel) and in the morning it shall be that if he will perform the duty of a close relative for you--good; let him do it. But if he does not want to perform the duty for you, then, I will perform the duty for you, as the Lord lives! Lie down until morning.” (3:10-13).*

By his words, Boaz indicated that he felt honored and respected by this young woman whom he calls “daughter.” But he knew that one significant obstacle remained between Ruth and him-- a kinsman who is closer to Naomi than he is. Boaz revealed his true desires when he “swore” (“...as the Lord lives!”) that should he be fortunate enough to receive the shoe of the closer relative, he would fulfill the duties of a “redeemer.” Boaz then suggested that “Ruth lay down” and wait for dawn’s light before returning home. **(No pun intended. How could a man whose lips constantly praised God defile a young woman in the presence of his Holy God? Would God have blessed them with a son that was conceived out of wedlock?)**

So, Ruth lies at Boaz’s feet, and “before one could see another” (3:14) in morning light, she arose. Boaz sent Ruth home with six ephahs of grain--all that she could carry. Then, he too, retreats from the threshing floor, determined to bring this case to the elders at the city gate that day.

E. Boaz Arranges to Fulfill His Pledge (4:1-12)

“The story of Ruth reaches its climax at the Bethlehem city gate in the bright morning light, where the promises made beside the heap of grain the night before must be kept, and where those once hopeless will have their hope fulfilled. In keeping with the patriarch nature of Israelite society, neither Ruth nor Naomi appears in this scene. Boaz, the ten elders, and Naomi’s next-of-kin made decisions for the women. The name Boaz, mentioned only twice in Ruth 3, appears seven times in 4:1-12. Now it is Boaz’s turn to “settle the matters today” (3:18), while Naomi and Ruth wait quietly at home for the unfolding of events that they themselves have initiated.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Guyette, *Solidarity, Kindness, and Peace*.

⁵⁹ Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future*, 55.

“This chapter tells of the marriage of Ruth and Boaz. Speeches by Boaz (4:9-10), the people at the gate (vv. 11-12), and the women of Bethlehem (vv. 14-15, 17a) give three different views of the marriage, to which the Narrator adds a fourth (vv. 18-22). In the views here expressed we may find clues to the intentions, hopes, and blessings inherent in events at the gate. We may also glimpse dimensions of the marriage that find echoes in the human community and reveal the redemptive purpose of God that lies behind the jointing of two lives together.”⁶⁰

F. Naomi Filled (4:13-17)

Hamlin’s view of the Narrator’s use of five brief expressions at the city gate (4:13-17) is full of Hamlin’s “inspiration.” For me to (Ad. Lib., or) rewrite would create “imperfection.” This reader chooses to quote Hamlin, “*Surely There Is a Future*” who speaks through the Narrator.

The Narrator uses five brief expressions to describe the events that followed the ceremony at the gate. First, Boaz “took” Ruth, suggesting a very simple ritual. We may imagine that he went to Naomi’s home to escort her to his own home. Ruth was probably dressed in her “best clothes” (3:3). She was too poor to own any jewels normally worn by brides (cf. Isa. 61:10).

The second expression is equally brief: “she became his wife” (Ruth 4:13). The word “became” suggests a mysterious process by which the lives of the “man” (*ish*) and the “woman” (*ishshah*, 3:8) were joined together in “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24), so that each one could say, “My beloved is mine, and I am his [or hers]” (Cant. 2:16). “This was not a casual union of convenience but a joining of lives in which each would be helper and partner to the other” (cf. Gen. 2:20).⁶¹

The third expression speaks of their sexual union: “they came together” (Ruth 4:13), suggesting a mutuality of sexual relations. Hamlin suggests that “the NRSV is more appropriate than the literal translation of the Hebrew, which reads ‘he went into her’ (RSV). The Hebrew phrase probably means to enter the woman’s tent or her chamber.”⁶²

The fourth expression is a faith statement by the Narrator: “the LORD made her conceive.” The natural process of human reproduction as a gift of God is implied in the words “male and female” and the divine command “be fruitful and multiply” which are part of the creation faith found in Genesis 1:27-28). Humans stand in awe at the process by which “breath comes to the bones in the mother’s womb” (Ecc. 11:5), when an

⁶⁰ Ibid., 55.

⁶¹ Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future*, 67.

⁶² Ibid., 68.

individual is “knit together” in the womb and “intricately woven in the depths of the earth” (Ps. 139:13, 15).

Ruth’s conception was special, like Sarah (Gen. 21:1-2), Rebekah (25:21), Rachel (30:22), and the mother of Samson (Judges 13:3). Like those women, Ruth had been barren. Like them Ruth was, without knowing it, a part of Yahweh’s providential plan that began with Abraham, to bring blessing to “all the families of the earth: (Gen. 12:3). The Narrator of the story of Ruth made this confident statement of faith of Yahweh’s intervention to make Ruth conceive, from a perspective after the death of David (Ruth 4:17).

Finally, the story of Ruth is at its climax: “she bore a son.” Because of Yahweh’s direct intervention, the child of Ruth and Boaz was in a special way a gift from Yehweh. The son would be the one to “maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance” (4:10), to provide security for Naomi (v. 14), and to give Ruth and Boaz a place in the history of God’s people (v. 17, cf. Matt. 1:5).⁶³

G. Epilogue: Genealogy of David (4:18-22)

The conclusion of the Book of Ruth includes a list of ten generations from Perez to David. Like other biblical genealogies, it presents the continuation of God’s purpose. “The Narrator of the story of Ruth may have had some theological purpose for adding this ten-generation genealogy, which comes to a climax with the first mention of David in the Old Testament.” During the chaotic period of the judges, when there was no king in Israel, all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 21:25), there was no need for someone to bring order out of chaos. “In the time of the Narrator, the name of David, like the names of Noah and Abraham, would have signified the fulfillment of hope for a new era of peace and stability.”⁶⁴

In the dark ages after the fall of Jerusalem and the end of the Monarchy, the hoped-for Messiah was seen as a descendant of Ruth’s great-grandson David (cf. Ezek. 34:23-24). The writer of the gospel of Matthew includes the same ten generations (in *Ruth*), but with a longer genealogy, noting the role of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth among the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah (Matt. 1:2-6). The words of Zechariah add further depth to the words of the women of Bethlehem in naming Boaz’s son:

Blessed be the LORD GOD of Israel,

For He has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty savior for us

In the house of his servant David. (Luke 1:68-69)⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibid., 67-68.

⁶⁴ Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future* 73.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 73-74.

The last words in the Book of Ruth inform the readers what none of the people in the story-- Ruth, Naomi, Boaz--could have known:

The going out from and return to Bethlehem, the bitterness of death and joy in the harvest, the bold initiative and patient waiting, the compassion and generosity, and above all, the covenant loyalty so beautifully described in the story were all part of Yehweh's preparation, over a period of several hundred years, for the birth of his chosen servant. Can the community of faith doubt that the same hidden purposes are at work among the nations and communities of our world today?⁶⁶

VIII. Application

A. Hamlin wrote, "Looking at the Book of Ruth as *a piece of literature art*, we notice the story line develops as it moves from Bethlehem to Moab and back to Bethlehem, from emptiness to fullness, and from bitterness to joy; the moments of dramatic encounter in Moab, the grain fields of Bethlehem, on the threshing floor, and at the Bethlehem gate; the speeches of Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, the people at the gate, and the women of Bethlehem; the recurrence of key words like: fields, glean, covenant loyalty, security, and Bethlehem, all of which are evidence of the literary skill and clues to the intended emphases of the Narrator."⁶⁷

B. Mark Smith's "Your People Shall Be My People" and John Hamlin, *Surely There is a Future*, view the reading of the Book of Ruth as *literature set in a particular historical time*. Readers "have gained insight into the structures of family and society, as well as the customs and laws relating to family solidarity and the protection of the poor in ancient Israel. This prompts us to look at similarities and differences with family and society of our time."⁶⁸

C. Charles Halton, *An Indecent Proposal*, notes, "Traditionally, biblical commentators either tone down the sexual tension within *Ruth* or celebrate it with sensationalistic exuberance. However, theologians have not attempted to integrate the provocative nature of the passage into a theological understanding of the book or the character of Ruth. Ruth follows Naomi's plan until the very last minute when she reveals herself and her intentions to Boaz. These

⁶⁶ Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future*, 74.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁶⁸ Mark Smith, "Your People Shall Be My People"; Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future*, 75.

actions--showing fidelity to both Naomi and Boaz--could have exposed Ruth to potential harm and could have been a picture of the negative side of what (*hesed*) entails."⁶⁹

D. Hamlin, in *Surely There Is a Future*, commented,

Reading *Ruth as part of the canon* has reminded us of the wider witness of the entire Bible. We have frequently compared Ruth with Abraham, who responded to God's call to leave home, kindred, and gods in search of a new society. In its setting following the violent ending of the book of Judges, this book (Ruth) is a testimony to the possibilities of an alternative society created by the loyalty of Naomi and Ruth, the faithfulness of Boaz, and the sustaining support of the community of men and women. Set as it is two generations before the birth of David, and many generations before the birth of David, this book is witness to the continuity of God's purpose across the ages. Ruth in her bold obedience, resourcefulness, and devotion to Naomi and her conception given by God is a parallel figure of Mary the mother of Jesus. The role of Obed, as redeemer, restorer of life, and nourisher of old age anticipates the role of Jesus Christ the Savior of all.⁷⁰

E. *As a message from God* to this writer and a close friend, a turning point took place in our friendship when I shared Ruth's escapade (Ruth 3) while in the process of writing this paper. He perceived himself in Boaz's shoes. After much prayer and repentance, He committed the rest of his life to serve the Living God. He is now convinced that we are "called to be partners" in The Overcomers Internet Ministry. Therefore, the book of Ruth enlightened him and brought new meaning into his life. Since then, this close friend has been used as an instrument of peace to lead two of his best friends to Jesus Christ as Savior. (Wahoo! Jesus is Lord!) Who would have thought that this story of Ruth could provide enlightenment and salvation even today? Truly, all the plans and purposes of God in this writer's life are becoming reality because of obedience-- "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all these (blessings) will be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). (In obedience, I became a full-time Divinity student at Liberty University very late in life--born in 1941).

⁶⁹ Charles Halton, "An Indecent Proposal: The Theological Core of the Book of Ruth," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament: An International Journal of Nordic Theology* (Vol. 26, 31 Aug 2012, Issue 1), 30.

⁷⁰ Hamlin, 75-76.

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