

# RUTH, REDEMPTION, COVENANT, AND CHRIST

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The book of Ruth is one of the most loved stories of the Old Testament. Yet sometimes it remains just that: a story from which some readers gain little in the way of doctrine or application. We identify with the story because the principal actors are neither kings nor prophets but the average people of a typical village. There are neither mighty warriors nor great conflicts, but there are intense struggles for surviving life's difficulties and genuine battles with grief. We love the story because it is so well told, because it has characters we can identify with, because it weaves a plot we can relate to that has a wonderful resolution. Yet we often do not recognize a deeper symbolism in the text.

The book of Ruth carries within its pages some of the most fundamental and powerful doctrines of the kingdom. It speaks of and symbolically demonstrates God's redeeming power; it teaches us of how we can access that power and exemplifies how we should emulate our Redeemer. Numerous elements of the story serve as types of Christ. It is about hope in Israel. I believe that some of the reason we love the story so much is

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because, whether we realize it or not, our souls intuitively resonate with the redemption of Ruth; we long for what happened to her on a mortal level to happen to us in both a mortal *and* eternal way. Ruth satisfies some of our soul's yearning for deliverance. It highlights our reasons for hope. We often sense this message without picking up on its full development.

These powerful messages are conveyed by one of the Bible's most able writers. While we do not know who the author of Ruth is nor when he wrote the book, we can recognize in this writer an extraordinary talent. Realizing this does not take away from the potency of the message, nor from the reality of Ruth's, Naomi's, and Boaz's lives. On the contrary, we can see in this biblical author attributes similar to Isaiah's or Neal A. Maxwell's in the employment of a God-given gift so that the message of salvation he carries can be delivered all the more meaningfully.

The biblical author's message is conveyed so smoothly and stylishly, yet its vehicle is a myriad of details. No other book of scripture gives us so many insights into daily life in ancient Israel in so few pages. For the author's contemporaries, these details were easily understood; they were a part of their everyday world. For us, they must be decoded. They are aspects of a culture strange and foreign. As we delve into such minutia, we run the risk of becoming detained in the details or distracted from the message that flows through the story. Thus we will first dive into the details and then return to many of the same items in a more comprehensive way, having acquired the knowledge that the writer of Ruth assumed his audience had. This will enable the story's symbols to distill upon us the way the author spoke to our Israelite ancestors.

#### CULTURAL CARING, COVENANT, AND REDEMPTION

We must first understand some important cultural and legal aspects of ancient Israel. The ancient Near East in general—and Israel in particular—incorporated into their culture many ways of providing for those who could not care for themselves. The law of Moses is filled with stipulations regarding how such caring should take place and to whom it was applied. Typically the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the resident alien were among the groups most in need. Prophets continually reminded Israel of their duty to provide for these groups. The law made particular

allowances for them.<sup>1</sup> Ruth takes advantage of these allowances in her efforts to sustain herself and her mother-in-law.

One of the ways the Mosaic law provided for the poor was through the practice of gleaning. “And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest. And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:9–10). When reaping with a scythe, the swinging-arm movement naturally created a circular motion which would leave the square corners of fields untouched without an extra step. The Lord commanded the Israelites not to take this extra step and to leave those corners for the poverty-stricken. Additionally, anything that fell was left for the destitute. Also, some grapes were to be intentionally left for the needy in each vineyard. Through these practices, Israel furnished a way for the impoverished to provide for themselves as long as they were willing and able to engage in some arduous labor. Similarly, in Deuteronomy 24:19 the Lord instructs Israel, “When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow: that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands.” These laws were given of God to help Israel aid those most in need of help: the poor, the stranger (or foreigner), the widow, and the orphan. Ruth, a poor, foreign widow, would look to these laws in her efforts to provide for herself and Naomi.

Many more elements of Israelite culture and law were aimed at helping those in need. One such needy group was the elderly. Israel had no pension plans, no social security, no assisted living. The responsibility to care for the elderly fell upon their families. It was first the responsibility of children to provide for the aged and the widow; this is one reason why the loss of children was such a staggering blow. David was even willing to waive capital punishment for a murderer in order to forestall a woman being bereft of any children to sustain her (see 2 Samuel 14:4–11).

Ancient Near Eastern societies valued having children both because of the need to care for the elderly and because of the importance of carrying on family lines.<sup>2</sup> Hence, most Near Eastern cultures, including Israel, followed some form of the levirate law of marriage.<sup>3</sup> We understand little

of how Israelite levirate marriages worked, but we know enough to decipher the basic principles. If a married man died without children, his brothers were responsible to care for his wife. Part of this care was for one brother to marry and impregnate the new widow; therewith the firstborn child bore the dead brother's name and served as his heir. This process is spoken of in Deuteronomy: "Her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her. And it shall be, that the firstborn which she beareth shall succeed in the name of his brother which is dead, that his name be not put out of Israel" (Deuteronomy 25:5-6).<sup>4</sup>

This duty was so important that it includes the only stipulated example of public humiliation<sup>5</sup> in the law of Moses for those who were unwilling to take upon themselves the levirate duty:

And if the man like not to take his brother's wife, then let his brother's wife go up to the gate unto the elders, and say, My husband's brother refuseth to raise up unto his brother a name in Israel, he will not perform the duty of my husband's brother.

Then the elders of his city shall call him, and speak unto him: and if he stand to it, and say, I like not to take her;

Then shall his brother's wife come unto him in the presence of the elders, and loose his shoe from off his foot, and spit in his face, and shall answer and say, So shall it be done unto that man that will not build up his brother's house.

And his name shall be called in Israel, The house of him that hath his shoe loosed. (Deuteronomy 25:7-10)

Clearly, failure to provide for a widow under levirate customs was viewed as a shameful thing. But how does this relate to the symbolism of taking off the shoe? While many have wrangled over the meaning, I have a suggestion. When shoes are used symbolically in the Old Testament, wearing them denotes a readiness, a preparation to do what needs to be done (see Exodus 12:11; 1 Kings 2:5; and Isaiah 5:27).<sup>6</sup> Given the context of the Deuteronomy passage just cited, it seems that removing someone's shoe shows their unwillingness to do what needs to be done. If having a shoe on indicates preparation for doing one's duty, having the sandal taken off signifies a *refusal* to perform that same duty. The shame of those

who are unwilling to serve as levirate husbands is that they will be known as someone who fails to fulfill his obligations. Since some of the reasoning behind a man refusing levirate duty likely had to do with the thought that raising up a child to another man would take inheritance away from his own family, the entire family was to share in the stigma of shame if the father did not fulfill his duty. Such a reprisal would have the effect of making a man who was thinking of his own children and their inheritance reconsider the ramifications that avoiding his responsibility would have on his children.

As noted above, the levirate husband was responsible to care for his brother's widow and her new child. As the mother and her new husband grew old, that child would assume responsibility for himself and his mother using his dead father's inheritance. Thus the levirate law both provided for the widow, partially by keeping family land within the family, and prevented family lines from dying out.<sup>7</sup>

Apparently, levirate duty could apply to relatives beyond immediate brothers. It was the responsibility of the entire family to sustain a widow, both in the short term by providing for her needs and in the long term by furnishing her with a child that would provide care in her old age. Societies who continue this practice today speak of protection of the widow as the primary consideration.<sup>8</sup> In ancient Israel, if this system were properly carried out, no widow would find herself without support; she would always be visited in her affliction, brought under the wing of a protective family.

In Israel, the family had another responsibility in looking after its members who had come under hardship. Israel and her ancient Near Eastern neighbors required that all possible means be taken in order to meet a debt. If an individual had difficulty in paying his debt, family land and even family members, including the debtor, were required to be sold as an attempt to meet the obligation. No allowances were made in justice, which demanded debt repayment. Yet the law of Moses also provided a way for mercy to be extended through family members. The closest family member had a right and an obligation to redeem, or buy back, family land or family members who had been sold.<sup>9</sup> "After that he is sold he may be redeemed again; one of his brethren may redeem him: either his uncle, or his uncle's son, may redeem him, or any that is nigh of kin unto him

of his family may redeem him; or if he be able, he may redeem himself” (Leviticus 25:48–49). The man who bought his family land or kinsman back was known as the redeemer, or in Hebrew, the *gō’el*. This was not free deliverance; this was deliverance at a price, and the *gō’el* paid that price.<sup>10</sup> He met the debt owed by his relative which that kinsman could not pay on his own.

Symbolically, it is important that not just anyone could serve as a redeemer, that only close family members had that right, beginning with the closest relative.<sup>11</sup> This law reminded Israel that they had once been bond servants in Egypt and that the Lord had served as their redeemer. Their covenant with him, beginning with Abraham, had made them eligible for redemption. “But because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 7:8).<sup>12</sup>

The Lord had created a custom among his chosen people in such a way that for those in darkest need a hope was provided;<sup>13</sup> for all such Israelites, the concept of a redeemer must have served as a strand of hope in the midst of despair. The existence of a kinsman redeemer, the *gō’el*, was the hope of Israel. This divinely mandated role stood as a bright shining comfort for those in most desperate need.

It is from the book of Ruth that we learn that levirate marriage and the right of redemption were connected.<sup>14</sup> Apparently in some places and times in Israel, the closest kinsman had the duty and obligation to serve as both the levirate husband and the *gō’el*.<sup>15</sup> The family was to rally in support of those in need and to do for them that which they could not do for themselves, whatever that need may be.

The Mosaic law’s abundant mercy and concern for all—especially those most in need—also included a provision for those who were destitute of both material means *and* family. If no family ties existed, they could be established by covenants (formed in a variety of ways), which created family ties between people.<sup>16</sup> It is this “creation of an ‘adoptive relationship’ by covenant that is the basis for the Lord’s acts of redemption.”<sup>17</sup>

One group necessitating extra care was the foreigners who had chosen to live among Israel.<sup>18</sup> The Lord extended special aid to these resident aliens in the Mosaic law, often counting them among the widows and

orphans as people in particular need.<sup>19</sup> These foreigners did not naturally possess a land inheritance as an Israelite did and thus were at an inherent disadvantage. Besides the laws designed to protect them, the Lord often reminded Israel of their obligation to care for the foreigner—or stranger—who sojourned among them. “Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21).

While the law does not address the process by which a foreigner became an Israelite, it is clear that it was possible. Before leaving Israel, Moses renewed God’s covenant with them *and* with the foreigners who dwelt among them (see Deuteronomy 29:10–13). Resident aliens were among the group with whom Joshua reestablished that covenant at Mount Ebal (see Joshua 8:30–35). Shortly thereafter he made a covenant with the Gibeonites that incorporated them into the house of Israel (see Joshua 9). Likewise, the Passover indicates that foreigners could join Israel. “And when a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land: for no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof. One law shall be to him that is homeborn, and unto the stranger that sojourneth among you” (Exodus 12:48–49). Since circumcision was the mark of Israel’s covenant with Jehovah, its application to a foreigner along with his inclusion in the Passover ritual indicates that the foreigner could, through covenant, become part of Israel.<sup>20</sup> While we do not know the exact mechanism for the covenant which changed a foreigner into an Israelite, clearly such a mechanism and covenant existed.<sup>21</sup> Having become Israelites, these people would have full access to the protections and blessings available through the Mosaic law and God’s covenant with his chosen people.<sup>22</sup> These principles were important for Ruth, who was a native Moabite.

This covenant segues to one last point which must be addressed in order to more fully understand the book of Ruth. There was a special kind of love, mercy, and kindness available only within the context of a covenant. The Hebrew word for this was *hesed*, an extra measure of kindness and love available to those within a covenant relationship.<sup>23</sup> The greatest acts of *hesed* were those performed by God on behalf of his people. In many ways, all of the provisions God made for those who were in need and could not care for themselves were provisions of *hesed*.

With a basic understanding of these cultural elements, we can more fully examine the narrative, finding ourselves more able to draw forth meaning from this powerful book.

#### RUTH, NAOMI, AND BOAZ WITHIN THE COVENANT

The story takes place during the period of the judges, before Israel has come together under a king. The book of Ruth begins with a familiar theme. A famine has come into the land of Canaan, and some choose to escape this famine by journeying to a foreign land. In this case it is Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and two sons. These sons soon take Moabite women as wives, but do not have children by these wives (despite spending ten years in Moab). In time, tragedy strikes the family as first the father and then the sons die. Besides the grief which would naturally attend the loss of her children, Naomi is now faced with the prospect that she will have no one to care for her in her old age. Confronted with these hardships and having learned that the famine in Judah has ceased, Naomi decides to return to her native home.

Initially, both of her daughters-in-law accompany Naomi on this journey, intent on remaining with her. Somewhere along the way, Naomi must have given much thought to the plight of the two women who were at her side. Being young, they still had the opportunity for remarriage and thus for a family life that could bring them joy and security. Acting on these thoughts, Naomi entreats her loyal daughters-in-law to return home and make a life for themselves. Both Ruth and Orpah maintain that they wish to remain with Naomi, but when Naomi insists, Orpah eventually gives in to her wishes.

Three things are worth noting in this situation. Naomi is very aware that the women who were accompanying her, who were her family by covenant, were volunteering to undergo extreme hardship for the rest of their lives in order to help Naomi. Thus she says to them, "Go, each of you return to your mother's house; may the Lord perform *hesed* for you as you have done for the dead and for me" (see Ruth 1:8; author's translation). Naomi recognizes the covenantal kindness, or *hesed*, that these women are carrying out. Being aware that she was incapable of performing *hesed* for them, she asks the Lord to do so. At least in the case of Ruth, the Lord will eventually show *hesed*, but he will do this through the acts



of a mortal: Boaz. Ruth's intense love and loyalty, manifestations of *hesed*, are particularly inspiring to us. We cannot read of her devotion without hoping that we will always have a Ruth in our lives, and simultaneously aspiring to be a Ruth for others. Whether we understand the term or not, Ruth motivates us to perform similar acts of *hesed*; the devotion in her soul-felt expression feels its way into our souls.

Second, the narrative is not written in a way that portrays Orpah in a bad light. Indeed, this worthy daughter has been fulfilling all that could be expected of her in a stalwart way. It is not a shortcoming on the part of Orpah that is highlighted here, but instead Orpah's goodness is contrasted with Ruth's greatness. In a theme that will recur during the narrative, Ruth shows that she is willing to go beyond what is expected of her; she will be extraordinary in her service.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, in insisting that she will accompany Naomi throughout her life, Ruth has altered who will pay the greatest price. Naomi is faced with finishing her life alone, having no one to care for her and see her through the hardships of life. Ruth is willing to forestall that fate for Naomi. However, in staying with Naomi, which seems to dictate that Ruth will not remarry nor have children, Ruth ensures that it is she who will face old age all alone. Ruth is fully willing to take Naomi's potential suffering upon herself, providing relief for a loved one by experiencing that fate instead. This emulation of the Savior is not an accidental message of the story—it is one of its main themes.

When Ruth declares she will stay with Naomi, we learn of Ruth's conversion. The bold statement "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God" (Ruth 1:16) confirms that Ruth has become an Israelite in her heart. While we are unaware of what covenant and rite must have accompanied the formalization of these thoughts, we are left in no doubt as to the actuality of Ruth's conversion.<sup>25</sup>

The great tragedies that have struck Naomi, seemingly undeservedly, raise the age-old question of the justice of God in allowing the innocent to suffer. The author of Ruth artfully raises this theme when Naomi replies to her long-lost friends: "The Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?" (Ruth 1:20–21). While Naomi's

lament does not accuse God directly, it certainly complains of the unjustness of her situation and implies that God is unjust. Her complaint is not addressed at this point in the story but will receive a resounding answer as the narrative moves on and will be fully resolved when Naomi praises God in the middle of the story, as well as when her friends praise him at the end of the story.

The next scene in our narrative begins by making the reader privy to knowledge which Ruth does not possess (see Ruth 2:1). It is crucial to the plot for us to know that Boaz is a man of great worth—a double meaning implied, for he is a man of means and character—and that he is a kinsman of Naomi. We benefit from understanding this while reading of the interactions between Ruth and Boaz, but Ruth has no idea. The actions of these two characters are not influenced by any thought of a possible *gō'el* relationship; instead we see them acting out of true intent.

Plainly, when the writer says of Ruth that “her hap” was to come to Boaz’s field (Ruth 2:3), he does not intend for us to understand that it was pure luck. The story is full of happenstances which bring about the Lord’s purposes, underscoring that all of these events are directed by God and that the happy conclusion of the story is orchestrated by him as he pours out his *hesed* on this family.

Our introduction to Boaz wastes no time in establishing him as a man of character and compassion. He goes to great lengths to help Ruth in her efforts. He instructs her to stay in his fields and to work with his maidens under the watchful eye of his men (see Ruth 2:8–9), a measure of invitation and protection that must have served as immeasurable comfort to a foreigner who was earnestly engaged in her first day of labor. He also tells her to partake of the water drawn for his workers, an important commodity in an arid land during heavy work (see Ruth 2:9). He further invited her to partake of the meal he provided for his workers, a great boon to Ruth because it not only provides her with food (see Ruth 2:14) but does so when she is not in a position to have aught with which to prepare any meal for herself. The parched corn she partakes of is more important than we typically realize. Israel and her neighbors followed a custom with grain harvesting that many Middle Eastern societies continue today. Some of the grain is harvested just before it is ripe. It is then roasted, producing a caramelized food that is both tasty and serves as a high-energy food

source for its consumers. While the preharvest production and preparation of this meal is expensive for the owner of a field, today workers are often given this food at midday because it enables them to continue their work with vigor throughout the hot afternoon.<sup>26</sup> When Ruth received such a meal, it must have served as a great physical and emotional boost.

Moreover, Boaz secretly charged his workers to leave extra grain for Ruth (see Ruth 2:16). Thus, without her knowledge, her workload was made lighter and her production ability increased. As with Ruth, we see in Boaz someone not only willing to do what the law required but also zealous in keeping the spirit of the law. As a man who far exceeded that which was expected or asked of him, Boaz possessed a greatness of generosity and love to match Ruth's.

All of Boaz's efforts proved extremely beneficial for Ruth. When we calculate how much she gathered in one day against known ration amounts and extrapolate that rate to the entire harvest season, it appears that she would have been able to gather enough food for nearly a year while spending time in Boaz's fields.<sup>27</sup> Such a rate must have been gratifying to her and Naomi.

To me the most impressive thing about Boaz is the reason he did all of this for Ruth. He tells her plainly, "It hath fully been shewed me, all that thou hast done unto thy mother in law since the death of thine husband: and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity, and art come unto a people which thou knewest not heretofore" (Ruth 2:11). Boaz's wish is that "the Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust" (Ruth 2:12). We find not only that Boaz is part of fulfilling this wish but that the picture of coming under God's wing is both a moving image and an important phrase that will come to play later in the story.

Ruth's success as a gleaner led to difficulty in her journey back to the city, for she had to carry all that she gleaned for the entire distance. The burden of the harvest she gleaned made it obvious to Naomi that someone has shown her kindness. When Ruth reveals that Boaz is the kind man, Naomi immediately sees a possible redemption, and further, she sees the hand of God in the fortuitous turn of events: "May he be blessed by the Lord, who hath not abandoned his *hesed* to the living and to the

dead. And Naomi said to her, the man is near of kin to us, he is one of our redeemers” (see Ruth 2:20; author’s translation). Once she has realized how kindly disposed Boaz is toward Ruth, Naomi sees that the wish she made in Moab for the Lord to show *hesed* to Ruth is being fulfilled. The opportunity for redemption and levirate marriage under the Mosaic law is obvious to Naomi. The possibility of a levirate marriage leading to the continuation of her husband’s and son’s seed is the reason she states that the Lord is showing *hesed* to the dead. Furthermore, Naomi’s lament in the first chapter wherein she wondered why the Lord was allowing tragedy to happen to her seems to be fully satisfied in her mind. Her words affirm that she sees the Lord is in control of things and is bringing about a merciful plan for her.

What a wonderful turn of events in the lives of these poor women! The day must have been one of hope and suspense—their first try at providing for themselves. Gleaning was a difficult and uncertain job, relying on it for their sustenance must have been a daunting and foreboding prospect, full of anxiety. Yet in that day of darkness, a potential redeemer must have been a source of great hope. Just as Israel’s hope during their darkest hour while in Egypt was answered by a deliverer, Ruth and Naomi found hope in a righteous Israelite who could serve as a redeemer. They had a hope in Israel.

The fact that Naomi recognized that Boaz was “*one of our redeemers*” (emphasis added) denotes that she realized there were others; she was probably even aware that there was a kinsman closer to her than Boaz. Yet because of Boaz’s kindness, her hopes were pinned on this magnanimous man. Her hopes were well placed. It seems that Naomi’s plan for Ruth was already hatching. She merely waited for the perfect time to put it into effect.

Such a time came during the threshing. Threshing was a joyful and meaningful event for Israelite farmers, as it represented a successful conclusion to a long series of labors.<sup>28</sup> It simultaneously represented an excellent opportunity for thieves, so husbandmen often stayed on the threshing floor after the threshing. This time of rejoicing and import, along with its assurance that Ruth could find a private audience with Boaz, seemed to be the perfect opportunity for Naomi’s plan to be put into motion. She explained very carefully to Ruth what she should do, had Ruth

prepare herself by washing and dressing (presumably in the best clothes she had), and then let events unfold.

Our writer cloaks the beginning of this scene in darkness and with shrouds of seclusion.<sup>29</sup> Boaz has been merry, has drunk, and has fallen into a heavy sleep on the threshing floor. Ruth has carefully marked where he will lie, and waits for the full cover of darkness to approach her potential redeemer. Here the tension of the story reaches its apex, heightened by the combination of Ruth's quest and the uncertainty of the outcome that is magnified by images of secrecy and darkness. In this episode of the story, we encounter only the principal actors; no one else knows of their meeting or their plans. Phrases such as "the man" and "a woman" (Ruth 3:8, 16, 18) used in place of their names are further devices of the shroud of secrecy contrived by the writer. Boaz's insistence that no one know that "a woman" had been there (Ruth 3:14), coupled with his and Naomi's initial inability to recognize Ruth (see Ruth 3:9, 16), and Ruth's departure before people could recognize each other (see Ruth 3:14) serve to convey this same mood. In contrast to the public lights of the following day, this climactic scene is set in seclusion and dramatic suspense.

These elements of isolation may serve to heighten another dramatic element in the story. The Hebrew words employed by the writer for *lying down*, *uncovering*, and *feet* are words often used as sexual euphemisms in the Hebrew Bible and were sexually charged words. It is possible that these words and this mood was chosen to raise in the mind of the reader the possibility of an intimate encounter. If this is the case, it seems most likely that our writer only did so in order that he might crush the idea, using the potential of impropriety to contrast the reality that nothing of the kind happened.<sup>30</sup> When Boaz invites her to stay until morning, the writer does not use the word for *lying down* (see Ruth 3:13) but rather for *lodging*—a word that never carries sexual connotations in the Hebrew Bible. Most likely the trip home would have been too dangerous a journey for Ruth to undertake in the full dark of night, and hence Boaz instructs her to lodge until the grey hours of the morning. It is possible that suspense about this issue was intentionally raised in order to highlight Boaz's action. Both before and after this episode, Boaz proves himself to be a man who does things exactly the way they should be done or even better. That characteristic is also exemplified on the threshing floor, where

the carefully chosen words demonstrate that Boaz does not do anything out of its proper order. Time and again our story presents Ruth or Boaz with choices, and each time they choose valiantly. This quality is strongly highlighted by creating a situation suggestive of sin and using it as a contrast to what actually happened.

Perhaps the most meaningful lines of the story take place there, in the middle of the night, on the threshing floor. There Ruth makes her plea to Boaz, and Boaz affirms his willingness to comply with that request. Most Bible translations—including the King James Version—leave out a few crucial clues that heighten the import of this conversation.

In the King James Version, when Boaz asks who is at his feet, Ruth replies, “I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman” (Ruth 3:9).<sup>31</sup> We can reach deeper levels of understanding by providing a more literal translation: “I am Ruth thy handmaid. Spread thy wing over thy handmaid, for thou art a redeemer.” To understand the implications of this phrase we must remember Boaz’s statement to Ruth during their first meeting, when he said, “The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust” (Ruth 2:12). On the threshing floor, Ruth uses similar language. By asking Boaz to spread his wing over her, Ruth draws upon Boaz’s own imagery, implying that he is the fulfillment of Ruth’s coming under the Lord’s wings. Boaz’s power to redeem her gives him the ability to fulfill this blessing. Boaz’s redemption of Ruth would justify her trust in the Lord. That act by Boaz would simultaneously spread his and the Lord’s wings over the plaintive Moabite. One of the major motifs of the book of Ruth is that people are often the Lord’s means for pouring forth his blessings, or *hesed*. Here Ruth asks Boaz to be the Lord’s wings.

This idea is furthered by Boaz’s reply to Ruth: “Blessed be thou of the Lord, my daughter, for thou has shown more *hesed* in the end than in the beginning; for thou didst not follow after young men, either rich or poor” (see Ruth 3:10; author’s translation). Boaz is also referring to their first conversation, wherein he noted Ruth’s kindness to Naomi. Here Boaz expresses his belief that while Ruth had shown *hesed* to Naomi (something Naomi has already expressed), she has also shown *hesed* to Boaz for asking him to be her redeemer and levirate husband. This implies that

Boaz was older and probably even unmarried and childless, though we cannot be sure of the latter suppositions. In any case, he feels that Ruth's covenantal kindness to Naomi leads her to seek a covenantal action from Boaz, which results in a covenantal kindness being shown to him as well.

What heightens this circle of covenant and *hesed* is the fact that Naomi had viewed the arrival of Boaz (a potentially willing redeemer) as an act of *hesed* from the Lord, or as the fulfillment of her desire for the Lord to show *hesed* to Ruth. Thus we have Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz all performing acts of kindness to each other within the context of the covenant, which in turn makes them all recipients of acts of godly kindness. This is heightened by each person realizing that *they* are all expressions of God's covenantal kindness *to each other*. The circle of covenant and reciprocity involving God and these three exemplifies what a covenant community is designed to achieve. These acts and attributes create a small Zion.

Such reciprocity being noted, we must also remain aware that Ruth is the driving force behind all of this. Ruth is the one who accompanies Naomi. Ruth is the one who gleanes and thus initiates contact with Boaz. While Naomi conceives the plan, Ruth is the one who puts it into action. While Boaz is generous and willing, Ruth is the one who approaches him and who asks for redemption. In the story we have three magnanimous actors, but the resolution of everyone's plights hinges on Ruth. Her virtue, courage, and action are the engine of the events. That being said, it is symbolically significant that with all of her character, charisma, and drive, Ruth must depend upon another to find full resolution. She is in need of redemption herself.

As mentioned above, Boaz is a man who does things the way they should be done. It is this attribute that leads him to inform Ruth that there is a kinsman who is a closer relation and who thus has the first right to be a redeemer. Boaz is unwilling to attempt to circumvent the proper fulfillment of the laws, so he tells Ruth that he will take care of the matter in the morning, but that it will be done in accord with proper practices (see Ruth 3:12–13). He then sends her home with a measure of food for herself and Naomi.

Perhaps one of the greatest compliments that can be paid to Boaz is found in Naomi's response to how Ruth carried out her plan. When she learns of Boaz's intent, she tells Ruth, "Sit still, my daughter, until thou

know how the matter will fall: for the man will not be in rest, until he have finished the thing this day” (Ruth 3:18). In Naomi’s mind there is no doubt that once Boaz has set his mind to doing this thing, it will be accomplished in short order.

Naomi’s faith is well placed. It also seems clear that the Lord is involved in the matter, for when Boaz goes to the gate in the morning in hopes of resolving this matter with the closer kinsman, “behold, the redeemer of whom Boaz spoke came by” (see Ruth 4:1; author’s translation). Our writer did not intend for us to think of this fortuitous meeting between Boaz and Naomi’s nearest relative as coincidence. Instead, as Boaz set about his task in the early hours, the Lord assisted him by bringing the right person to the right place at that same early time.

The right place to which they went was the city gate. This is where the official business of ancient cities took place. There Boaz gathers ten elders of the city and asks them to sit as witnesses and judges. Boaz informs Naomi’s kinsman of the right to redeem Naomi’s land. Boaz also expresses his own willingness to act as redeemer if the right is refused. The kinsman agrees to redeem the land, and then Boaz makes his move. It is only after the kinsman has agreed to buy land that Boaz informs him that with the land comes the care of both Naomi and Ruth. It is obvious that a levirate marriage would be part of the redemption. This would not be as intimidating if the redemption involved only Naomi. But including Ruth in the matter not only added another woman, it added the care of a child he must sire who would eventually take Naomi’s land inheritance away from his family. Such a redemption would require the kinsman to use his own means to purchase the field, and these means would not go to the children he already had. They would instead go to Ruth’s child, who would be considered of the family of Elimelech. Not wanting to siphon these means away from his own children’s inheritance, the kinsman refuses his right of redemption. He formally does this by his words and by removing his sandal and presenting it to Boaz, demonstrating his unwillingness to perform the duty of the redeemer (see Ruth 4:8). Boaz then claims his right to redemption, being willing to sacrifice his estate in order to support Ruth, Naomi, and their heritage.<sup>32</sup>

Boaz does all of these acts in the most legal and public way possible. The elders who are present recognize the greatness of both Boaz and



Ruth and wish for them blessings similar to Rachel, Leah, and Tamar. The Lord immediately blesses Ruth with conception, and all that Naomi or Ruth had ever hoped for is realized. The wording here is significant. In the first chapter, when Naomi had entreated Orpah and Ruth to leave them and return home to look for new husbands, she said, “May the Lord give you that you may find rest, each of you, in the house of her husband” (see Ruth 1:9; author’s translation). The resolution of this verse is phrased thus: “the Lord gave conception to her” (Ruth 4:13; author’s translation). The verb that Naomi uses when she wishes that her daughters-in-law will be given rest is the same verb used when the Lord gives Ruth conception. This is the only time in the Hebrew Bible when that verb is used to describe conception.<sup>33</sup> This parallel verb usage cannot be coincidental. Instead the author is highlighting that Naomi’s wish has been fulfilled. By the grace of God, Ruth has found rest in the house of her new husband. That rest culminates in the conception of a son who will ensure that Ruth will continue to find rest and care throughout her life. Again the shadows of the Messiah are striking.

At this point in the story, Naomi’s friends praise the Lord, almost as a bracket to Naomi’s lament in the first chapter. “Blessed be the Lord, who hath not left thee this day without a redeemer” (see Ruth 4:14; author’s translation). Clearly it is the Lord who has brought about this wonderful resolution. They also recognize how the Lord had worked through Ruth, because they sing of how Ruth’s child “will be unto thee a restorer of life, and a nourisher of thine old age; for thy daughter-in-law, who loveth thee, who is better to thee than seven sons, hath borne him” (see Ruth 4:15; author’s translation). These women aptly point out that the Lord had honored his covenantal *hesed* and had done so by the *hesed* of others, most especially Ruth. It was through the attempt of many to keep *their* covenants that God had kept *his* covenant. Each actor became an expression of God’s efforts to bless his children.

This is most true of Ruth. Part of the resolution of the story is the reward Ruth receives for her efforts, especially for her willingness to care for Naomi despite the eventual price she would have to pay for this generosity. Ruth had lost her own husband, but in the midst of her own pain she was willing to bear the burden of another. In this way she serves as a poignant symbol of the Savior. While Ruth was willing to take Naomi’s suffering

upon herself, eventually she did not need to because of the mercy of a redeemer. There would be no such escape for the Savior.

The redemption of Ruth was accomplished because of a number of factors. First, she chose to enter a covenant, both with Naomi and with the Lord. These covenants gave her access to blessings from the Lord and a right to a redeemer. Without this covenant, Ruth was not eligible for redemption. Having made the covenant, Boaz was obligated to redeem her. Second, the Lord built into his plan for Israel a way to deliver those who could not deliver themselves. He provided for a redeemer in order to save those who were put in a position of bondage and destitution. Third, the Lord put in place a righteous man who was both able and willing to serve as Ruth's redeemer. Thus because of her covenants, God's plan, and the righteousness of a redeemer, Ruth received redemption for herself and her loved ones. The offspring of this redemption eventually led to Israel's greatest political king, David, and to Israel's greatest spiritual deliverer, king, and redeemer, Christ. She who was willing to save, and was in turn saved by another, was ancestress to *the* Savior. It is not coincidence that our Redeemer descended from a line of redemption. I believe it is fully intentional that the Savior is progeny of a woman who was willing to take upon herself the suffering of another, and a man who was willing to redeem.

The fulfillment of hope for those who were most in need of help speaks of the Hope of Israel. These events happened and are told "in a manner that thereby the people might know in what manner to look forward to [God's] Son for redemption" (Alma 13:2). In a manner of speaking, Ruth's redemption is our own. From Ruth we can better understand the Savior, his covenants with us, the rest God has in store for us, and Christ's glorious redeeming power.

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## NOTES

1. Paula S. Hiebert, "'Whence Shall Help Come to Me?': The Biblical Widow," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 134–37.

2. Victor P. Hamilton, "Marriage," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:559–69; Michael C. Kirwen, *African Widows: An Empirical Study of the Problems of Adapting Western Christian Teachings on Marriage*

to the Leviratic Custom for the Care of Widows in Four Rural African Societies (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 12.

3. Millar Burrows, "Levirate Marriage in Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59, no. 1 (March 1940): 23–33.

4. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. David Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), s.v. "ybm; yābām; y<sup>r</sup>bāmā."

5. Hamilton, "Marriage," 4:559–69.

6. In light of the Deuteronomy passage only, this may seem as if it were related to hospitality customs of the ancient Near East, namely that the woman removes the shoe, but instead of washing the feet, she spat on the face. But in light of what happens in Ruth, where the person himself removes his shoe and no spitting happens, we must conclude that there is something else afoot here.

7. Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 56–57; Hamilton, "Marriage," 561; Millar Burrows, "The Ancient Oriental Background of Hebrew Levirate Marriage," *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research*, no. 77 (February 1940): 2–3; and Burrows, "Levirate Marriage," 31–32.

8. Kirwen, *African Widows*, 232, table 39; and Hamilton, "Marriage," 4:559–69.

9. Jennifer Clark Lane, "The Lord Will Redeem His People: 'Adoptive' Covenant and Redemption in the Old Testament," in *Thy People Shall Be My People and Thy God My God: The 22nd Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 50–51, 57.

10. Lane, "The Lord Will Redeem," 53; and Jennifer Clark Lane, "The Redemption of Abraham," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 169.

11. Jennifer Clark Lane, "Not Bondage but Adoption: Adoptive Redemption in the Writings of Paul" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1994), 35; and Robbert Hubbard Jr., "The Go'el in Ancient Israel: Theological Reflections on an Israelite Institution," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 1 (1991): 3.

12. See also Lane, "Abraham," 171–72.

13. Michael S. Moore, "Haggo'el: The Cultural Gyroscope of Ancient Hebrew Society," *Restoration Quarterly* 23 (1980): 31.

14. Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* (New York: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 68–89; Raymond Westbrook, "The Law of the Biblical Levirate," *Revue internationale des droits de l'antiquite* 24 (1997). Hector Avalos, "Legal and Social Institutions in Canaan and Ancient Israel," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack Sasson (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1995), 1:616, advises that the combination of the two customs here may be a literary contrivance, though he does not espouse this position. Neither do I. See also Millar Burrows, "The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59, no. 4 (December 1940).

15. Eryl W. Davies, "Ruth IV 5 and the Duties of the go'el," *Vetus Testamentum* 33 (April 1983).

16. William Most, "A Biblical Theology of Covenant in a Covenant Framework," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 29 (January 1967): 1–19; Stanislas Lyonnet and Leopold

Sabourin, *Sin, Redemption, and Sacrifice: A Biblical and Patristic Study* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970), 121; Lane, "The Lord Will Redeem," 54; and Lane, "Abraham," 169.

17. Lane, "The Lord Will Redeem," 54.

18. Orlo J. Price, "The Biblical Teaching Concerning the Hireling and the Pauper," *Biblical World* 29, no. 4 (April 1907): 269–83.

19. Christoph Auffarth, "Protecting Strangers: Establishing a Fundamental Value in the Religions of the Ancient Near East and Ancient Greece," *Numen* 39 (December 1992): 206.

20. Christiana van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1991), 133–38.

21. Van Houten, *The Alien*, 155; and Julian L. Greifer, "Attitudes to the Stranger: A Study of the Attitudes of Primitive Society and Early Hebrew," *American Sociological Review* 10, no. 6 (December 1945): 739–45.

22. Van Houten, *The Alien*, 16.

23. For further discussion on the term *hesed*, see Daniel Belnap's article on the subject in this volume.

24. Edward F. Campbell Jr., *The Anchor Bible: Ruth* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 78, 82.

25. For an independently reached but similar conclusion, see Campbell, *Ruth*, 80–82. See also Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), 90–91.

26. Amr Al-Azm, "The Importance and Antiquity of Frikkeh: A Simple Snack or a Socioeconomic Indicator of Decline and Prosperity in the Ancient Near East," in *Ethnobotanist of Distant Pasts: Papers in Honour of Gordon Hillman*, ed. A. S. Fairbairn and E. Weiss (Oxford: Oxbow Press, forthcoming).

27. K. Lawson Younger Jr., "Two Comparative Notes on the Book of Ruth," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 26 (1999): 124–25.

28. For the importance of the event and its applicability to Ruth, see Brian Britt, "Death, Social Conflict, and the Barley Harvest in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 5 (2004–5): 15–16.

29. See Campbell, *Ruth*, 130.

30. Campbell, *Ruth*, 131, independently reaches the same conclusion.

31. For more on this term, see Younger, "Two Comparative Notes," 127–28; and Daniel L. Belnap, "Handmaids of God and Mothers of Kings: A Study of the Terms 'Gebirah' and 'Amah' as Used in the Hebrew Bible" (Provo, UT: master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1999).

32. On the sacrifice of Boaz as opposed to that of Onan (or his lack thereof) in Genesis 38, see R. G. Abrahams, "Marriage and Affinal Roles: Some Aspects of the Levirate," in *The Character of Kinship*, ed. Jack Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 167.

33. I am grateful to Dr. Daniel Belnap for pointing this out.