

# The Book of Ruth

*Backgrounds and Considerations*

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# Introduction

Ruth is a little book. You can read the entire thing in about fifteen minutes. Often, it is relegated to the category of “nice little stories” that we tell Sunday School classes to illustrate how God works through mysterious ways. Naturally, there is an element of Ruth that works on that level, but the book is so much more. In the four brief chapters of this book is the key to one of the most significant events of ancient Israel’s history. Ruth frames the rise of the House of David, which rose to prominence around 1000 BC and ruled as kings for four hundred years. It is through the events of Ruth that the House of David could lay claim to their authority.

## When Was Ruth Written?

Most scholars agree that Ruth is the work of a single author, with minimal if any revisions made after its original composition. Although the Jewish tradition is that it was composed by Samuel, this seems unlikely. The use of early Hebrew language as well as references to very specific parts of the Torah seems to support the idea that the book was written during the early monarchy, probably during or shortly after the reign of David (c. 1000-960 BC). Personally, I believe Ruth represents a historical narrative, related by Ruth’s descendants first orally and then in writing around the time of David’s reign. It has marks of later composition, so it is not a contemporary version of the story but there is no reason to doubt it is not essentially the first version that was written down.

## What Can You Do with This Resource?

This is not really a book meant to be read from cover to cover. You can certainly do that if you wish, but my purpose in writing all of this out was more to provide some of the historical context and cultural background of Ruth. There is so much going on under the surface of this little book, and knowing the context will help you see the message better. It does occur in a world very different from our own, with its own values and perceptions of life. Bridging that divide is very important for understanding the simplicity of the text.

Ruth also gives us insight into rural life in the Judean highlands in the Late Bronze Age, just before the dawning of the Iron Age. It is one of the few documents from this period that offer this kind of insight, making it vital for the way we interpret large portions of the Scriptures.

Please be aware, however, that Ruth as it was written may not be appropriate for all ages. As I sometimes jokingly mention when teaching, this is a book about sex and beer. Although neither of these topics are explicit in the text, the more you understand the context, the more they come

to the foreground. We cannot shy away from this context, even if it might make us a bit uncomfortable.

Finally, understand that the modern Christian interpretation of the Bible has often been handicapped in two ways. First, many interpreters come to the Scriptures with theological bias. All readers have a subjective bias, of course, but theological bias tends to warp the biblical text anachronistically. Readers see what is not in the text because they see it elsewhere. I have tried to avoid this proclivity. The second handicap is that we tend to read the Bible with an implicit masculine dominance. Our Western society tends to focus primarily on the male players in any event. As strange as it may be for us, the Hebrew world was not as male dominated as our own context. Strong women appear frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures, and their choices often drive the narrative. Consider Sarah or Rebekah, Deborah or Hannah, Abigail or Bathsheba. These were formidable women, and Ruth ranks in the highest echelon of these women. She is a force, not some passive mousy woman waiting on the margins. She is confident and powerful.

As you read Ruth, come back to this resource for hints and tips about what is happening. Hopefully, you will be encouraged to see the humanity, the drama and the providence of God in the text.

# 1. Origins (1:1-2)

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.

## The Time of the Judges

Ruth opens in the days of *šəpōt hašōpəṭim* (“the judges judged”). In Hebrew and other Semitic languages, this kind of doubling is meant to create a strengthening and abstraction. It is the same method used in phrases like “king of kings” and “thousands upon ten thousands.”

What was a judge? Unlike modern judges who interpret the law in a courtroom, these were temporary, territorial rulers. The Book of Judges is a loosely connected anthology of the period when these judges served as rulers in various parts of the territory that became Israel. It is important to note, however, that Judges is not a chronological list of judges. There is considerable overlap in their rule, so dating anything in the book is difficult. On a famous stele, the Egyptian pharaoh Merenptah (r. 1213-1203 BC) declared Israel to be one of his fiercest enemies in the region, so it is undeniable that the Hebrews had settled there by his reign. Since the time of the Judges drew to close with the ascension of Saul of Kish as king of Israel around 1040 BC (1 Sam 8), there is at least a couple centuries that could be credited as the heyday of these judges. The events of Ruth probably occurred around or shortly before 1100 BC.

## Bethlehem (Ephrath)

With the exception of a very brief period in Moab (1:2-5), the entirety of the events of Ruth occur in and around Bethlehem. During the Judges period, Bethlehem was a pastoral village, probably little more than a family complex. There had been a town on or near the site called Ephrath meaning “fertile place,” which is where Jacob buried his wife Rachel (Gen 35:19, 48:7).

The highlands were largely pastoral, and in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, they were not very densely populated. Most of the people, Israelites and Canaanites alike, lived in large household settlements with their extended families. They seem to have coexisted fairly peacefully. Towns like Bethlehem were unfortified sites, built around a water source and serving as a sort of home base for the shepherding families who had to, by default, move around quite extensively.

Bethlehem may appear in a fourteenth century BC letter from Abdu-Heba, the Canaanite king of Jerusalem. The name in the letter (EA 290.14-18) is either Bit-Lahmi or Bit-NIN.IB, but its proximity to Jerusalem and the presence of the *‘apîru*, a sort of roaming band of invaders who

might be related to the Hebrews, seems to indicate it is equivalent with Bethlehem. Given the name, it was clearly a good place for planting crops of barley and emmer wheat, which were harvested in the spring and autumn, respectively. These grains were processed as either flour for bread or wort for beer, both of which were important for the sustenance of life in that period.

At the time of the Judges, the larger population centers appear to have been in the Ephraimite Highlands to the north. It may be that Bethlehem was resettled by a group living there at some point during the period, moving down because of the population increase. Because it is so hard to distinguish Canaanite from Hebrew in the archaeological record, we must be content to understand that there was a town there and that it was known for being a grain producer.

## Moab

To the east of Jerusalem, the Judean highlands descend steeply into the Jordan River Valley. On the other side of the river, the land rises steeply again but then forms broad plateaus rather than the rolling hills of Judah. These are the plains of Moab (Num 22:1, 36:13), which enjoyed a less temperamental climate than the highlands, and so were less impacted by famine. Of course, the plains were not nearly as hospitable either, and so the land was inhabited almost exclusively by semi-nomadic pastoralists who lived in a stateless society.

Eventually, the Moabite tribes and clans were united into a kingdom in the eighth century. This became a perennial problem for the Israelites, and one of the Moabite kings recorded their rivalry in the so called Mesha Stele. At the time of Ruth, however, no such kingdom existed.

The Moabites were not, however, followers of YHWH. In Genesis, they are depicted as the descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot and so related to the Hebrews. It is known that the Moabites were Canaanite in language and culture. Their chief god was *Chemosh*, who the Hebrews also called *baal-peor*, "the lord of the gap." This is an interesting name and was probably an intentional slur against Chemosh and the sexual practices associated with him. Their worship practices apparently included ritual prostitution (Num 25). They also worshiped their god alongside a female consort, a practice that may have leaked into Naomi's thinking, as recorded later.

## Elimelech's Family

Naming conventions in Hebrew narratives are tricky. There is no guarantee that the names provided are people's *actual* birth names. Renaming people in narratives appears to have been pretty common. This is not, I must emphasize, an attempt to mislead or deceive the reader. Ancient people often had many names. It was not until relatively recently that we humans started giving a person a name and making them stick with it for life. The Pharaoh Ramesses II was born *Ramses Meryamun* but actually reigned as *Usermaatre Setepenre*. It would have been a heresy to call him Ramesses in his own lifetime. When he was enthroned, he quite literally became *Usermaatre Setepenre*. He was no longer *Ramses Meryamun*. That name was suborned.

We see the same thing happen with Joseph in the Genesis narrative. Although born *Yosef ben Itzra'el*, when he was elevated to the *tjati* (vizier) in Pharaoh's rule, he was renamed *Zaphenath-paneah* (Gen 41:45), which means something like “the gods speak and give life.” So powerful was the concept of renaming that in the Genesis narrative, his own brothers do not recognize Joseph until he declares himself. This is not just a literary convention. The Egyptians believed that when one who became pharaoh or was appointed *tjati* that person was divinely transformed.

Given the influence that the Egyptian culture continued to have over Canaan during the period of the Judges, it makes sense that the names employed in a narrative have tremendous value. They speak to the actions and character of the people, as well as their fates. With that in mind, let us consider the names of the people we encounter in Ruth's opening words:

- Elimelech (*'ēlīmelekā*) means “god is king” or possibly “the powerful one rules.”
- Naomi (*nā'ōmī*) is “the delight” or “my joy.”
- Mahlon (*maḥlôn*) translates as “disease.”
- Chilion (*kilyôn*) means “mourning” or “longing.”

Even if Elimelech and Naomi are their birth names, it is very doubtful that Mahlon and Chilion are birth names. One might name infants who were sure to die by these names, but the rest of the narrative reveals that these two sons grow to adulthood and marry, so the names are nonsensical as birth names.

## Ephrathites

There is no indication at all that Elimelech's family were Hebrews in the “came out of Egypt” sense. In fact, they are called *Ephrathites* which would indicate that they might come from Canaanite stock since this was the name of the region *before* the Hebrews settled Bethlehem. Some believe that they were some of the early Israelite settlers.

If they were indeed of Canaanite stock, we should carefully consider what it meant to be a Hebrew in the Late Bronze Age. It has been fairly conclusively demonstrated through DNA testing on burial remains that Canaanites and Hebrews were genetically indiscernible. It is entirely possible that they were not distinguished from one another in Judah, although the distinction was made quite distinct in the lowlands dominated by some of the other Hebrew tribes.

Just because Elimelech's family might have been *ethnically* Canaanite, that does not mean that they were not followers of YHWH. Every indication is that they had adopted the worship of YHWH, such as it was in the region at the time. Just how distinct the worship of YHWH was at this time is not entirely clear but it probably only distantly resembled the worship that would later develop in Jerusalem during the Monarchy. Ruth has no mention of the Ark of the Covenant or the Tabernacle, but it does make reference to certain specific laws in the Torah.

## 2. In Moab (1:3-5)

But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

There is something ironic about the fact that Elimelech and his family fled from Bethlehem to Moab to escape a famine (*rā'āb*), literally “evil time.” They flee the threat of death, only to find death the Moabite plains. Elimelech’s death from some unknown cause left Naomi to care for her two sons. It can be assumed that these sons were married to Moabite women out of desperation.

### Marriage in the Late Bronze Age

Unlike many of their neighbors, the Hebrews did not distinguish between sexual intercourse and marriage. They were one and the same thing, which would ultimately give rise to monogamy in later Judaism (an idea that is not explicit or even implicit in the Hebrew Scriptures but is taken very seriously in the Christian testament). To them, to join in sexual union was to unite as a single being. Once that union is formed, they are part of a single being. As a result, the Hebrews took any sexual union very seriously. There are extensive laws concerning what to do with men who have a sexual relationship with a woman, how that results in marriage. Adultery was therefore a sexual relationship that could not be marriage because of a pre-existing union.

Before sexual union, a female was not described using the Hebrew word for woman (*īśah*). After puberty, a girl became a maiden (*na'ārāh*). Although translated as *young woman* or *damsel*, it derives from the verb that means “to shake.” We cannot be certain of the etymological connection, but this might have to do with male virility (the “shaking” of the testes after they have dropped) or something to do with the changes in the body that are occasioned by puberty. Both males and females were referred to by derivatives of this verb.

The transition from maiden to woman could be a very simple one. The Deuteronomic Code, although dating much later than Ruth, gives us a hint of the significance of this.

But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. But you shall do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no offense punishable by death. For this case is like that of a man attacking and murdering his neighbor, because he met her in the open country, and though the betrothed young woman cried for help there was no one to rescue her.

*If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are found, then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young*



*woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife, because he has violated her. He may not divorce her all his days. (Deut 22:25-29)*

It was as simple as that. If a young man and woman had intercourse, they became man and woman – a single union. The man was required to compensate the woman’s father for the inconvenience of not allowing the proper wedding ceremony (and more than likely the fifty shekels of silver would be used to finance a wedding ceremony), but they were united and unable to divorce or separate.

The words *open country* translate the Hebrew *śāday*, meaning “the spread out place” and is usually translated as *field*. Part of the springtime harvest was the choosing of wives. It was quite common for young men and women to participate in the early barley harvest and in the vigor and celebration of that season to "discover" one another. This practice appears later in Ruth, and we will address it when we get there.

## The Death of the Sons

The circumstances of the marriages of Mahlon and Chilion are not mentioned in the text, but it is reasonable to assume that they were all young and virile. With their father dead, it was important that the sons perpetuate their line. Some interpreters see a problem with the marriages, but there were no prohibitions against marrying Moabites at this time. It is only later in Deuteronomy 23:3 that prohibitions appear, reflective of the rise of the Moabite kingdom. The Moabites were not necessarily viewed favorably, given their history of idolatry and misconduct (Num 25), but there was no clear restriction at that time. Even later, Moab is said to have a unique relationship with YHWH (Deut 2:9).

It was actually fairly common in their pastoral, rural cultures to bring in women from other groups to ensure the depth of the gene pool. Although Mahlon and Chilion live with their wives for ten years, they have no children. Were this a problem with the women, it would undoubtedly have been noted, and since Ruth eventually does have children, it is clear the issue was with the men.

## Lineage and Land

But notice that the story does not say that the two Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth, are left childless. The focus instead is on Naomi and the emptiness of her life. Why? Here is where the narrative begins to gain dimension and depth. In the Hebrew system, a widow could manage her dead husband's property in the absence of male heirs, but if she did not remarry, the rights would pass to the next of kin and her family would essentially cease to exist. Naomi therefore is put in a difficult position. She is childless, so she is a lame duck. She is probably still virile, but the odds of finding a man willing to marry her and give up his own potential for heirs are slim indeed. The house of Elimelech will end with her.

Ultimately, the book of Ruth will bring a legitimization of David through the way that Elimelech's lands pass through Naomi to Ruth, but once again this is something we will see in due time.

## 3. Returning Home (1:6-7)

Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.

### YHWH's People

There are a few distinctions worth noting right at the beginning here. First of all, note how YHWH (the LORD) visited *his people*. Moab already had food. Naomi and her family had lived in Moab for ten years. She has probably been living off the generosity of her daughters-in-law's families.

It is not impossible, by the way, that Ruth's family was influential in the Moabite sphere. In the David narrative, there is a moment when David sends his parents to the town of Mizpeh in Moab where the king grants them asylum (1 Sam 22:3-5). Although this king was probably nothing more than a tribal chieftain or clan leader, he apparently was still a man of some influence.

Still, the people of Judah are considered YHWH's people. This does not, by the way, necessarily extend to all of Israel. There is considerable evidence in the David narrative that most of Israel did not follow YHWH. We often forget that even Samuel (the priest who appointed David as king) was himself an *Ephrathite* like Elimelech and Naomi (1 Samuel 1:1-2), even though he lived in the region of Ephraim. Time and again we notice that the entire narrative revolves around the hill country of Judah.

When the narrative says that YHWH *visited* his people, this is an accurate translation of the Hebrew *peqed*. This literally means that YHWH came and changed things, that he walked among the people. Of course, this is a metaphor but it is not without precedence. The people of this day believed that a divinity very often walked among them, often in human form. This is why Abraham has no problem sitting down to a meal with YHWH (Gen 18), and why Deuteronomy (again, a late reiteration of the Torah) commands that the Israelites' camps be sanitary lest YHWH step in a toilet ditch (Deut 23:12).

## Daughters-in-Law

It is likely that this exchange occurs at the edge of the Moabite plains or at the eastern shore of the Jordan River. Naomi understand the unlikelihood of finding future husbands for Ruth and Orpah and she is unable to provide for them, since she has no possessions in the land without claiming them in her husband's name.

The difficult Hebrew word *kalāh* is here translated as “daughter-in-law” but is also translated as “bride” (Song 4:8-10, Isa 61:10, Jer 16:19, Joel 2:16). Again we see the Hebrew view of marriage. The word derives from the idea of completion or perfecting. These are women who were united to their respective husbands and as such their union was completed, as was the duty of their father's house to them. They have come under Naomi's provision because there simply is no alternative for them. This is a descriptor, provided by the narrator. When Naomi speaks, she will refer to them as “daughter” (*bat*).

## Mother's House

The next few verses of Ruth are a formalized call and response. Naomi tells them to return to their *mother's house*, and not their father's. Take note of the prominent role that women play in Ruth's narrative. Only two male characters speak in the book, and only one of them is named. The reference to the mother's house was so troubling to later Jewish readers some later Greek translators changed this to “father's house.”

The house (Heb. *bayit*) was the primary social unit of the region at this time. Although a house was usually organized patriarchally, there is good evidence that women played a crucial part in the arrangement of marriage and the maintenance of other personal affairs (Gen 24:35, 27:46; Num 36:6). The troubling reality is that had these women, who had not born children in ten years, been returned to their father's houses, they would likely have been sold as members of a harem to some wealthy shepherd, or worse reduced to prostitution. Although probably only in their early twenties, both Ruth and Orpah were at a pivotal point in their lives.

# 4. Clinging (1:8-18)

But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!”

Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.”

But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.”

Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”

But Ruth said, “Do not urge me 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 anything but death parts me from you.”

And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

## Dialogue Begins

Dialogue is quite significant in Ruth. Fifty-nine of the book’s eighty-five verses (almost 70% of the entire length) is dialogue. This is a significant proportion, and it makes dating the text of the book difficult. In dialogue, an author will often break from his own idiolect to provide voice to the characters of the narrative. In particular, the dialogue in Naomi has a feel of covenant to them.

The text, as always, is full of unspoken irony. Just as Naomi left “the house of bread” because there was a famine, moved to a place named “of the father” (the meaning of Moab) only for her children’s father to die and her sons to die without fathering children, so too Ruth offers the women the reality that living as widows in their mother’s house is better than living in her house, even though she has become a mother to them. Naomi offers to women who have lost their husbands that they will find rest in their husbands’ houses. These constant plays on ideas will continue throughout the text.

The dialogue is characterized by Naomi’s use of the Hebrew verb *šūwb*, meaning “to turn” in command. Three times, Naomi commands the woman to return to Moab. The first time both protest they will instead return to Bethlehem with her. The second time, Orpah leaves. The third time, Ruth turns it into a covenant declaration.

## Ruth's Declaration

It is after Naomi's *third* release that Ruth makes a covenant. Ruth has twice renounced her rights as a member of the Moabite tribes. Now she makes a formal declaration that she has taken on an identity as a Judahite. This is, in many ways an example of how someone makes the transition

(conversion?) to being a follower of the God of the Bible. Ruth adopts Naomi's identity as her own. Notice the movement of the covenant

Ruth reasserts that she will be going with Naomi, then staying with her. Then she identifies herself with Naomi's people ('*am*) and her God. Most significantly, she abandons a claim to be buried in her home of Moab, choosing to be buried there in Bethlehem. There is an entire life cycle built into the expression, allowing Naomi to define her own identity.

Ruth's adoption of this covenant is reflective of a massive transformation. She surrenders what it means to be Ruth, allowing a completely new identification as Naomi's daughter to be established. She abandons the familiarity of Moab for Bethlehem.

Ruth's identification is not political, religious or ethnic but rather *familial*. Ruth is abandoning her own tribal identity in favor of Naomi's. Family language plays an important part in the text. There are three interconnected terms. House (*bayit*) can be used locally in terms of an immediate family or broader as a patriarchal connection. Clan (*mišpāhâ*) appears to represent a larger group, or perhaps a sphere of influence. Finally, people ('*am*) can be used quite broadly but here is used to denote a specific identification.

A key component of this re-identification is the worship of Naomi's god YHWH. Notice the importance of *location* to the worship of YHWH. In the ancient mind, gods were associated with locations. Sometimes this had to do with the location of a temple or cultic center. Often, it was because of the natural limitations of a people group. People are, by nature, bordered by other people. Where a people who worships one god live, the god is said to live there. Where people worship another god, that god lives there.

At this period of development, the worship of YHWH was still bound by this very natural human limitation. People thought of YHWH as Judah's god, and the people of Judah lived in the highlands. Therefore, YHWH only lived in the highlands. Outside of the mountains, he was powerless. This idea carried well into the Monarchy period and was repeated by Aramean armies when they attacked Ephraim during the reign of Ahab (1 Kings 20:23).

The concept of YHWH being the supreme God and ultimately the *sole God* would have an ongoing development throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The people of Palestine routinely vacillated between YHWH and whatever god seemed to be the most powerful at the moment. Thus, Ruth does not profess that she will adopt the God of Judah while she is still in Moab. To her thinking, Chemosh was god of the Moabite plateau and YHWH ruled in Judah. She would not bring the worship of Chemosh to Judah but rather would accept Judah's God as her own.

Accepting YHWH as her god and Judah as her land, will, however, be a lifetime commitment for Ruth. She surrenders everything to remain Naomi's daughter-in-law. This is a significant, life-

altering decision that she cannot reverse. Her words indicate that the decision was already made long before she was confronted with the choice.

## The Exodus Motif

Broadly speaking, Ruth revolves around YHWH's sovereign guidance in bringing Naomi and Ruth out of Moab. This is a reiteration of a dominant theme of the Hebrew Scriptures, namely the Exodus Motif. This is the idea that God's people must be led *out of* captivity and into redemption. Naomi is in captivity to death in Moab, just as the children of Israel were in captivity in Egypt. The children of Israel had to come *out of* Egypt and Naomi had to come *out of* Moab.

Likewise, the Exodus motif will be played out when Judah is taken into exile four hundred years later. In order to be YHWH's people, they must come *out of* Babylon. But in so doing, the narrative illustrates that YHWH is God even in Babylon. This is an echo of the realization that he was also God in Egypt and Moab. The circle of revelation gradually widens, revealing YHWH as the one true God. While we can see this, it was not as visible for those who journey through the circles. So, we must be patient with Ruth and Naomi, just as we must be patient with the children of Israel in Exodus.

## Later Influences

The law of the foreigner is a prominent theme in Torah, but there is a strong echo of Ruth's declaration in Solomon's dedication (1 Kgs 8:41-44). The provision for foreigners, a term Ruth employs to describe herself later, to worship at the temple is significant. Their conversion requires a dedication to YHWH. They are not prohibited as long as they worship YHWH.

# 5. The Return (1:19-22)

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, "Is this Naomi?"

She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"

So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

## Name change

Here Naomi chooses to adopt a new name. Where *Naomi* means “celebration,” *Mara* means “bitterness.” She accepts that she has been handed a bad hand in life and wants to wallow in it. Of course at her side is a Moabite woman named *Ruth*, which means “friend.” As mentioned before, names had great significance to the people of the ancient world. Such a change was not at all uncommon, but it is interesting that no one seems to take her up on her request. She is never called *Mara*.

## The Almighty

The modern reader is often shocked to discover that many of the titles later appropriated by YHWH were also ascribed to other gods. Naomi often speaks in couplets, pairing “the Lord” (Heb. *yhwah*) with “the Almighty” (*šaday*). The first time is here in 1:21. It may be that Naomi’s worship of YHWH includes a consort or companion deity. Of course, there is nothing definitive about this, but archaeology has demonstrated quite plainly that the inhabitants of the Judean highlands *believed* that YHWH had a female consort, whether Torah allowed for it or not. This does not make their belief correct or normative, but it would not be out of keeping with what we now know. There is no reason why Naomi would not have believed this.

This same coupling occurred often in the Book of Job, although instead of YHWH the other deity is simply God (*’ēlōhîm*) who is coupled with the Almighty (John 8:3, 5; 11:7; 31:2). Outside of these two books, the coupling is not evident.

We must always be careful about reading texts in their historical context. We assume that the people of in Ruth would have been intimately familiar with Torah and espoused strict monotheism. In fact, familiarity with Torah is incredibly variable through the early history of Israel. Consider for example that the people are rarely seen observing the proper festivals. The Passover was not observed between the time of the Judges and the reign of Josiah (2 Kgs 23:21). The same may be for the feast of Booths (Ezra 3:4). The Bible did not exist in a single compiled volume it does today.

The ancient Israelites were not strict monotheists, which is evident throughout the Scriptures. They appear to have been *henotheistic*, meaning that they revered YHWH as their people’s god, but they permitted the worship of other gods. Naomi would not have seen a contradiction in worshipping

## The Beginning of the Barley Harvest

Naomi’s arrival at the beginning of the barley harvest has significance on multiple levels. First, and perhaps most important, it means that it is too late for Naomi to plant Elimelech’s fields. These have apparently been fallow for ten years, and so would require extensive preparation. The work of plowing and planting needed to be done earlier in the year, right after the winter rains

but before the spring rains. This meant that Naomi would have to be dependent upon charity until the following year.

Second, the timeframe provides an agricultural context for the events that unfold. Much of the life of the Bronze Age and Iron Age people in the Levant revolved around the various crop harvests. Barley serves as a particular significant food source in the spring, and the bread made from it and from the later summer wheat played an important role in the religious lives of the Hebrews. The relationship of the three festivals is detailed in Exodus 23:14-17. While it is unclear if the feasts themselves were being observed in Ruth, the cycle is definitely evident.

- The Feast of Unleavened Bread (*ḥag ḥamaṣôṭ*): During *Pāsaḥ* (Passover), the people ate unleavened bread made from the last of the winter stores of wheat.
- The Feast of the Harvest (*ḥag ḥaqāṣîr bikûrê*): The initial harvest of barley, brought to the tabernacle as part of *Šābû 'ot*, which literally means “weeks” because it occurred a week of weeks or forty-nine days after *Pāsaḥ*.
- The Feast of the Ingathering (*ḥag ḥasîp*): The harvest of the summer wheat crops, usually occurring at the same time as *Sukkôt* – the feast of booths.

All Mediterranean cultures at this time were dependent upon a triad of foods: cereals, wine and olive oil. The main cereals were wheat (*ḥiṭāh*) and barley (*śə 'orah*), although others like emmer and millet were known. While wheat made a good bread, barley was more commonly prepared as either porridge or beer. Many scholars focus on wine as the “beverage of choice” in the region, but there is good evidence that beer – which had a high caloric content and a low alcohol content – was more popular with the non-elite. It was also fairly popular with YHWH himself (Num 28:7-10). In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the brewing of beer was one of the key characteristics of human beings. Probably the reason beer is not generally considered to be important is that it does not store like wine does. While wine can be stored for years, beer has a limited shelf life. Still, it is a safe way to store carbohydrates for winter. Grain can be eaten by rodents, ruined by water. Beer, on the other hand, was safer to drink than some water and did not attract rodents.

Ruth and Naomi arrive at Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest, which means the late spring. The beer would not have been brewed until the end of the initial harvest, and it would have been ready to drink probably around the end of the wheat harvest, which is when the events of Ruth 3 play out. Keep that in mind.

Third, this spring harvest time would be the perfect time for eligible bachelors to be looking for wives. Anyone who remembers being in middle school would understand the rhythms here. The transformation of girls into young women can happen suddenly, and given that women were married quite young, it is no surprise that men would be on the lookout for young wives. June weddings are not a modern innovation.



If Ruth was going to attract a husband, this season was the time it would happen. The practice of *levirate marriage* was in operation during this period. If a man died, his close male relatives could marry his wife. This was both a method of charity and of perpetuating a particular line. The practice was not monogamous, so a man could marry his brother's widow as a secondary marriage. Any children would be called the son of the dead brother. This marriage could occur within the clan (*mišpāḥâ*), a category broader than the house, usually encompassing a regional affinity group. The actual structure of relationships beyond the nuclear family and in-law relations is difficult to reconstruct, but there appear to have been clear lines which were understood by the women of the clans.

## 6. Gleaning (2:1-3)

Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers, and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech.

### Tribes and Clans

If you went to Sunday School, then you have heard about the tribes of Israel. There is an unfortunate modern meaning attributed to the word *tribe*, which has a sense of primitiveness to it. The word derives from Latin and it was used in the Roman Empire to demark clear social classes. It is the root of the words *tribute* and *tribune*.

The Hebrew idea of a tribe (*šēbet*) was borrowed from the Egyptians, who referred to their primary geographic designations as *sepat*. In the Hebrew world, it may have also indicated some dialect differences, as in the case of the Ephraimites not being able to pronounce the Hebrew word *shibboleth* correctly (Judges 12:1-6). While the Book of Joshua attributes the location of the various tribes to Joshua parceling out the Promised Land, it may be that these geographical distinctions were based on natural divides.

Tribes were divided into clans (*mišpāḥâ*), which were a loose affiliation of interrelated households. Just how each clan was organized is not really known, but these three categories appear to have been fairly consistent across all the tribes (Joshua 7:16-18). Throughout Judges and Samuel-Kings, the tribes were led by assemblies of the clan leaders. They were instrumental in the declaration of kings, although their power waned as the kingdoms became more solidified in the eighth century BC. Boaz is called a *worthy man* or perhaps more correctly a *mighty man* of

his clan is significant. This indicates that Boaz was a man of some significance in the region, and probably one of the clan leaders.

## Gleaning

In later Hebrew law, harvesters were commanded not to pick over their fields twice. They were allowed one pass, and the remainder was left behind for the poor (Deut 24:19). It is very likely that this passage in Ruth provides the support for this practice. Although most English translations have *glean* here, the underlying word is simply gather (*lāqaṭ*) and is used throughout Genesis and other books to simply indicate the act of gathering. It is used in Exodus for the gathering of manna (Exo 16).

One of the remarkable steps in agriculture was the development of non-shattering varieties of barley. Unlike wild barley, this domesticated grain was more durable and therefore could be harvested more aggressively. Still, about 10% of the barley kernels would have still broken and wound up on the ground. Ruth probably had to get on her hands and knees to gather the loose spikes of barley left behind by the harvesters. She would have collected them in the folds of her skirt and then piled them (*'āsap*) somewhere until she could take them home. This gleaning was distinct from the reaping (*qāṣar*) which involved cutting down the stalks and binding them into sheaves. It was tiring, hard work, and we find out later that she set to it with a will.

## Fields

Without knowing it, Ruth gleans into the fields owned by Boaz. The property lines of ancient Palestine were not as clear or as sacred as we treat our lines today. According to the Book of Joshua, each clan had designated lands, but how those lands were divided among the clans is a bit hazy. Most likely, there were landmarks – rocks and trees, hills, etc. – that the landowners used to distinguish. But when harvest time came, everyone worked everyone's fields.

Small communities still operate this way. Families helped their neighbors and were helped in turn. It was a matter of survival. Remember that Bethlehem was only a couple hundred people, and many of them were shepherds. The planters would have left their fields to help with the lambing, and now the shepherds would have left their flocks with the youngest sons to help with the harvest. (That little bit of information is helpful in understanding David's story.)

# 7. Boaz (2:4-7)

And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem. And he said to the reapers, “The LORD be with you!” And they answered, “The LORD bless you.” Then Boaz said to his young man who was in charge of the reapers, “Whose young woman is this?”

And the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, “She is the young Moabite woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers.’ So she came, and she has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest.”

## Boaz of Bethlehem

The name Boaz (*boʾaz*) is meant to convey strength and power. He is a formidable man in the text, both as a leader and in business affairs. His name may derive from the term *baʿal*, the root of the name of the Canaanite god Baal, but also a term for a husband (Hos 2:16). If the latter, there is clear wordplay going on in the text.

He greets his reapers with *yəhwāh imākem*, literally “YHWH be among you.” When they reply *yəbārekākā yəhwāh*, “YHWH bless you,” the workers are declaring themselves to be faithful to Boaz’s God. Although this greeting does not appear elsewhere in Scripture, it probably served to delineate Boaz’s house from the rest of the henotheistic society. It is an affirmation of faith, and it marks Boaz out as a follower of YHWH, which meant that all his laborers would also have been devotees. Unlike Naomi, who often speaks of YHWH in a couplet with “the Almighty,” Boaz never attributes a duality or consort to YHWH, maintaining YHWH alone as God.

## Who's the girl?

Boaz immediately notices Ruth. Bethlehem was little more than an expanded family network, so Boaz would have been familiar with the young women of the clan. There is then an exchange with a young man (*naʿar*) about her as a young woman (*naʿrāh*). The use of this term makes it clear that Boaz perceives Ruth as of marriageable age. Notice as well that the question he asks is not “who is this young woman?” It is, “whose young woman is this?” He naturally concludes that Ruth is spoken for, that she is already betrothed. It is only once the servant explains who she is that Boaz realizes she is unattached.

At the time polygamy was permitted by Torah, so it would not be surprising if Boaz were already married but the indication in the story is that he is a bachelor - older than most, but unmarried. His interest in Ruth is obvious, and it seems that she was attractive, but also industrious.

The servant’s answer highlights three attributes of Ruth. First, she did not have to be there. She is still identified as the young woman from among the Moabites, and everyone knows she does not

belong. Second, he notes that she asked to glean in the fields. This would not have been required since the fields were common property for the most part. Third, she worked with little rest. She is a hard worker.

## 8. Meeting (2:8-13)

Then Boaz said to Ruth, “Now, listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping, and go after them. Have I not charged the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn.”

Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, “Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?”

But Boaz answered her, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!”

Then she said, “I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants.”

### Familial Protection

Boaz addresses Ruth as “my daughter” (*bitîy*), recognizing both their familial connection and her comparative age. Familial relationships figure prominently in Ruth, more prominently than in any other text of the Hebrew Scriptures. Strong distinctions are made about the ways people are connected.

- *’iš/’išāh* – the man and woman relationship is an obvious one that goes back to Genesis. These generic terms are meant to show the deep relationship of spouses. There is no Hebrew word for “marry.” The terms employed mean to either simply take (*lqh*) or to be lord (*b’l*), and both are applied to the man.
- *’āb/ēm*
- *bēn* – the son is the most important child for the Hebrew system, since he passes along the inheritance of the father.
- *bat* – daughters were not on equal standing with sons. They were generally under the protection of their fathers until they were married. Then they shifted to his protection. In the event of the husband’s death, they usually returned to their father’s house unless they had grown sons who would take over the patriarchal role.

- *’āḥ* - although most regularly translated as brother, this has a broader relational meaning. It appears to have been applied to any cousins who were related through a common patriarch (Gen 14:14, 29:12-15).
- *dôd* – a father’s brother was recognized by a unique term (Lev 25:49), with a cousin being *bēn-dôd*, without a unique identifier. An aunt was *dôdāh*, the feminine form, only appearing once (Lev 18:14). There were no words for nephew or niece.
- *ḥām/ ḥāmôt* – the terms for father-in-law and mother-in-law are among the most interesting. They are legal terms, giving the sense of alliance (1 Kgs 3:1, Ezra 9:14), and the only reference to any kind of “wedding” employs a derivative (Song 3:11). They come from a masonry verb “to join,” clearly linking to the idea of the house (*bayît*).
- *kallāh* – although generally understood to be a daughter-in-law, the word is more closely tied to being a bride (Song 4:1-12, Isa 61:10, Jer 2:32). This is a woman who marries into the family.
- *yabbam/yabbāmāh* – The terms for brother-in-law and sister-in-law are related, probably deriving from the term for marriage (just how a sister-in-law relationship worked in the Iron Age is not entirely clear. Applied to a woman, the term appears only in Ruth and one reference in Deuteronomy 25:7, dealing with levirate marriage. It appears to be equivalent to *’išet’āt* (brother’s wife) at certain points, but there is really not enough evidence to be certain.
- *moda’* - rarely used, this term seems to be more about connection than familial relationship (Job 19:15; Ps 55:13, 88:8).
- *bāsār bāsēr* – literally “flesh of flesh,” this denotes a familial relationship within the clan (Lev 25:49).
- *qarôb* – a close relative, literally “near” (Lev 21:2, 25:25-27). This is usually taken to be the family member who can serve as redeemer.
- *’lāmānāh* – this seems to derive from a sense of loss, literally “one without [a husband].” The protection of a husband is removed, and so she has no means of provision. It does not appear in the masculine.
- *gərûšāh* – a divorced woman. There was no term for a divorced man.
- *yātôm* – an orphan, literally “alone one” (Exo 22:22).
- *bayît* – the word often rendered as “family” is literally “house.”

As a significant clan leader, Boaz had a certain responsibility toward all the young unmarried women of the area. By inviting Ruth to “keep close” (*dbq*) to his own group of young women, he is providing her with protection. She will be afforded protection from the men working in the field who might take advantage of her. It also ensures that she will be gleaning in the better parts of the fields. To the extent that he can, Boaz also protects Ruth from his own young men, who are forbidden from touching her. This may be a representation of a courting ritual, but it is hard to say.

By inviting Ruth to drink water from the vessels his young men draw, he is also inviting her into the life of the clan. Normally, a foreigner (*nāḱarîy*) would wait until the workers of the clan were finished and then draw her own water. As an unprotected widow, Ruth's social status may have been lower than the servants. To welcome Ruth at the water drawn by his workers was to welcome her as a family member, further solidifying the patronage relationship he offers to her at the beginning.

## A People You Did Not Know

There is a bit of significance here and something that we have hinted at before. In the ancient world, your identity was determined by *family* (*bayît*, or house) and not by nationality. In our modern world, we tend to think of our identity nationally. You are an American or you are French. Even within a larger category, we tend to specify like Italian-American or French-Canadian. These kinds of parameters simply did not exist. There was a broad sense of linguistic or religious identity, such as being Hebrew or Moabite but this was not a day-to-day identity. There was no sense in which one's ethnic identity was fixed. On the other hand, one's family was fixed and immutable.

Part of the confusion of reading the Hebrew Scriptures stems from modern definitions of ethnicity, but such things were fluid in the ancient world. Many of the etiological stories, such as the origin of the Moabites and Ammonites (Gen 19:30-37), were a projection of this house-based identity onto a broader context.

There has been a lot of debate about the invasion of the Hebrews into Levant after the Exodus. The archaeological record lacks destruction layers, which has led many scholars to come up with alternative explanations for the rise of the Hebrews. Due to linguistic and cultural similarities, some believe that they emerged from the native Canaanite population. What may have occurred, however, is that the "invasion" was on the house level and not on a national level, that the national narrative in Joshua-Judges was an interpretation in hindsight. Hebrew households may have simply moved in and the region became a Hebrew region. Native people may have assimilated or relocated with little in the way of disturbance to the material culture.

## Under His Wings

Take careful note of Boaz's words to Ruth. They will appear again later in the story and have tremendous significance. This is a Hebrew metaphor, drawn from the image of a bird nestling her chicks under her wings (Ps 17:8, 61:4, 91:4). The term "wings" (*kānāp*) does not only mean physical wings. It is also an idiom for the corners of a robe (Deut 22:12; 1 Sam 15:27, 24:4-5; Job 38:13) and by extension for sexual activity (Deut 22:30, 27:20). Ruth will revisit this latter metaphor (Ruth 3:9).

The concept takes on real meaning when you consider the communal nature of life in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. Houses were generally of a type called known today as the four-

room house. These were two-story buildings, with the ground floor accommodating storage and livestock with an open second floor for most family activities, including dining and sleeping. Privacy was at a premium, and extended families often lived in very close proximity. The large sleeping areas would have accommodated a number of nuclear families, including married couples. One assumes then that sexual activity also took place in these shared spaces, at least time to time.

Hebrew culture forbid public nudity, that much is clear from the Adam and Eve narrative. There was shame associated with nakedness in the presence of anyone other than one's spouse. The idiom for committing adultery was *lāgalôt 'ērāwah*, literally "exposing nakedness." Within the bounds of marriage, nakedness was celebrated because this was seen as a restoration of Eden, a glimmer of the original state of relationship. Nudity and sexuality were deeply intertwined, and nudity was *defined* by perception by others beyond the marital union.

So, how would the sexual relationship work within the confines of the living arrangements of the day? The husband would "cover" his wife with his robes, enfolding her "under his wings" or within the edges of his robe. Thus, they were able to be intimate with one another without others seeing their nakedness. It is possible then that Boaz is including a flirtatious innuendo in his blessing upon Ruth.

## Finding favor

Ruth's response demonstrates both her intelligence and her moral character. Although doing obeisance (*hwh*), Ruth asks Boaz to explain his intentions. Acknowledging her own status as a foreigner, Ruth does not leave an opening for abuse of her position. Her gratitude is both heartfelt and a warning that she will not be obligated to do favors for Boaz.

When Boaz articulates his reasoning and his knowledge of her relationship with Naomi, it is clear that he sees his act of charity and protection as an extension of YHWH's munificence. He offers his charity as a reward (*mašakorēt*), literally a wage associated with marriage (Gen 29:15). He sees the food and protection as a way of compensating her for her faithfulness to Naomi.

Beyond this very practical observation, Boaz and Ruth's interchange represents a beautiful illustration of grace. Grace is favor that we do not merit, the notice of God. In this interchange, Boaz can be seen as a type of God and Ruth as a type of the believer. He extends protection and provision to Ruth when there is no reason for it other than he has "noticed" her. In the same way, God's grace extends to us because he has taken notice of us. This theme appears later in David's psalms. Ruth establishes the redemption motif that resonates throughout David's psalms, and it is probably because of the formative nature of this story. David and much of Judah was probably familiar with the Ruth story, so it should not surprise us that it changed the way they viewed their relationship to their God YHWH.

## Not One of Your Servants

Ruth immediately wants to make it clear that although she is willing to do obeisance and call herself a servant, she is *not* Boaz's servant in the full sense. She is not going to exchange sexual favors for his kindness. The term *servant* can be easily misunderstood based on modern understandings. A Hebrew *servant* (*šipəḥāh*) was not a slave or even an employee. The term can be used, and often was used, to denote a servant for sexual purposes, such as Hagar (Gen 16:1-8) and Zilpah and Bilhan (Gen 29:24-30:12). This was not an exclusive usage, so Ruth's response is a subtle but clear statement. "I am your servant, but not *that kind* of servant!"

This is one of the more amusing interchanges to read in the book of Ruth. One wonders if when it was being told if the listeners did not giggle at their flirtatious exchanges. On one side, Boaz is using language suggestive of sexual intimacy, and on the other, Ruth was not having any of it.

# 9. Boaz's Gift (2:14-17)

And at mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed to her roasted grain. And she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over.

When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her. And also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her."

So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. (2:14-17)

## A Meal Together

Boaz's invitation to Ruth is yet another sign that she has been welcomed to the clan. This is a social meal more than a sustenance one. Because the harvest was a time of celebration, they would be eating the roasted and preserved products from the previous harvest.

The meal that they eat has all the components of the Mediterranean diet. They eat bread (*leḥem*), as well as a morsel (*pēt*) dipped in wine (*homeš*), and at one point Boaz passes roasted grain (*qālīy*) to Ruth. This term can be applied to many different dried or parched products, from roasted grain to dried spices, and perhaps it was meant as something to chew on during conversation (1 Sam 25:18, 2 Sam 17:28). The Egyptians still eat a dish called *duqqa* which dates from the time of the Pharaohs. It is bread dipped in wine and then dipped in a mixture of chopped up spices and grains. The content of *duqqa* varies but it is most likely that this is the kind of meal that Boaz invited Ruth to participate in.



The participants probably sat around shallow bowls of wine, which at this point in the year would have been nearing the end of its lifespan, and dipped their bread into the wine and *duqqa*. Their conversations would be about the day, the harvest and of course the people in the fields. The scene is a summary of the relationship of Israel to the foreigners among them who embraced their God. In theory at least, they were to be welcomed as part of YHWH's people.

## Leave it for her to glean

Boaz's further instructions to his reapers expands significantly on the idea of gleaning. First, she is permitted to glean among the sheaves (‘*omer*). The sheaf was the primary form of measurement used for grains. It was roughly the amount of stalks that one man could carry and appears to have been the amount of grain one person ate in a day (Exo 16:16). Once threshed, it worked out two liters of grain and ten ‘*omerîm* were equal to an ‘*ēfêh* (Exo 16:36).

The reapers would gather a handful of stalks (*šebet*) and cut it with their scythe. The handfuls were somehow bound together and left lying. Another reaper would then come behind and bind the handfuls into sheaves which were stood up in the field. At the end of the day, the sheaves were carried to the threshing floor. The reapers would shake the grain from the *omerîm* into ‘*ēfêh* baskets before being threshed to release the grain from its spike and husk.

Apparently, the reapers were to drop some of the grain from the handfuls and leave it around the sheaves. As the sheaves were cleared, this left a supply of grain for Ruth to pick up. While this was difficult work, it was far less work than picking up individual grains as she had been before.

At the end of the day, Ruth had collected an ‘*ēfêh* of barley, about a week's worth of food if she and Naomi were willing to eat barley bread and porridge. This was not ideal food but it was sustenance. Boaz's generosity is still unmistakable.

# 10. Close Relative (2:18-23)

And she took it up and went into the city. Her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also brought out and gave her what food she had left over after being satisfied. And her mother-in-law said to her, “Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.”

So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, “The man's name with whom I worked today is Boaz.”

And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “May he be blessed by YHWH, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” Naomi also said to her, “The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers.”

And Ruth the Moabite said, “Besides, he said to me, ‘You shall keep close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest.’ ”

And Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, “It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, lest in another field you be assaulted.” So she kept close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

## Redeemer

Naomi takes immediate notice of the tremendous amount of barley Ruth brings home. The leftovers from the meal would also have been welcome. This was not the normal take from gleaning. Generally, one would be lucky to gather enough grain for a day or two. Here, Ruth has gathered enough for quite some time. She is understandably interested in who it was that provided for her, because this much food could not be obtained without intervention.

When Ruth reveals the name, Naomi evokes the lovingkindness (*hesed*) of YHWH. This was what she wished for Ruth to find at her mother’s home (1:8) and it is instead found here in Boaz’s fields. She reveals that Boaz is *qarôb* (a close relative), a potential *ga'al* (redeemer). There is a fairly extensive portion of Torah devoted to the function of the redeemer (Lev 25:23-55, Deut 25:5-10).

Naomi One of the issues people run into when dealing with Torah is that they think of it as a *prescriptive law code*. This means a set of laws established without precedent to maintain a certain behavior. More likely, much of Torah is *precedent law* or *case law*. It records judgments made on pre-existing situations. The use of redeemers and levirate marriage was much broader than just the Hebrews. Levirate marriage appears to have existed in prehistoric times. The Code of Ur-Nammu condemned marriage to a dead brother’s wife, but the Laws of Ešnunna and other Mesopotamian codes contain positive references to levirate marriage. The Hittites, Assyrians and Canaanites all practiced it, and it continued well into the Neo-Babylonian Period.

## Young Women

Naomi immediately recognizes the advantage of being able to stay on Boaz’s fields with his young women. Although the English translation here is “assaulted,” the underlying Hebrew word (*pg'* ) means to touch or to connect. Still, the sexual overtone is clear. Naomi sees that Boaz is potentially laying claim to Ruth, if she is interested, and Naomi encourages the relationship along.

## End of the Harvest

The indication here is that Ruth continued to glean in Boaz's fields throughout the summer, until the wheat harvest was complete in the mid-autumn. The assumption is that she continued to meet with Boaz during this time, although nothing is said.

# 11. Invitation (3:1-5)

Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor.

Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do." And she replied, "All that you say I will do." (3:1-5)

## Rest for you

Earlier, Naomi had encouraged Ruth and Orpah to return to their mother's houses so they could find a new husband and rest (1:9). It was also noted that Ruth gleaned the barley fields without rest (2:7). The idea is a place of comfort, implying the healthy relationship of a man and woman resting together in completeness. It does not in any way indicate an end of work because the work of a wife was often much harder than that of a young woman, but rather the sense of a right place. Naomi recognizes that Ruth's place is with a husband and she judges that the time is right for Ruth to declare this to Boaz.

## The Threshing Floor

Because the grain harvest were so important in the Levant, we know quite a bit about threshing floors. They were generally a relatively flat area near a hill. Men would winnow the grain with whip-like sticks, breaking the stalks and loosening the husks around the grain. Then, the women would gather the winnowed grain in baskets and take it to the top of the hill where it was skillfully tossed into the air. The husks and stalks would blow away and the kernels of barley would fall back into the baskets.

After the daylight waned, the gathered group would celebrate, drinking the dregs of beer and rejoicing at the end of the season. After eating and drinking, people would lie down on the threshing floor to sleep because they would be doing the same thing the following day.

## Wash therefore and anoint yourself

A lot of commentators make it sound as if Naomi has some kind of nefarious plan to seduce Boaz here. I don't think that is the case at all, and I think it demonstrates a lack of knowledge of the context. Naomi is instructing Ruth to prepare herself for Boaz. Since Boaz was flirting with her in the fields while she was working, dirty and nasty, I doubt seriously that it mattered to him whether she was washed or not. The preparations Ruth needs to take are more to announce that she is now ready to accept him as her husband and she has cleansed herself for exactly that purpose.

Even the way that Naomi instructs Ruth to put on her cloak (*šimālāh*) implies something of a signal that Ruth is ready for Boaz. Of course, the language is poetic and somewhat obscure, but this might have been some kind of special garment, meant to conceal the clean and perfumed body beneath. Ruth is therefore purified by bathing and anointed with cleansing oils, clothed and prepared to be received by a potential husband.

## Uncover his feet

The phrase *uncover his feet* is a sexual metaphor. This is difficult for most Christian readers to accept, but Naomi is instructing Ruth to uncover her own body, wrap herself in Boaz's robe against his own naked body and then wait for him to notice. This is a totally sexual act, and as a result it makes a lot of us uncomfortable because we have an unhealthy separation of sexual contact and marriage.

As pointed out earlier, there is nothing *immoral* or even *immodest* in what Naomi tells Ruth to do. This is simply how marriage worked in this context, and in many ways it is far more moral than the way we do things today. Ruth's willingness to do this can be understood as duty to Naomi, but it also seems that Ruth is more than willing to take this step. She has now labored in Boaz's fields, eaten at his table and accepted his hospitality. She is a woman of child-bearing years, clearly active and vigorous and ready to be married again.

# 12. Uncovered (3:6-18)

So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down. At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer."

So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another. And he said, "Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor." And he said, "Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out." So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her. Then she went into the city.

And he said, "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. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the LORD lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning."

And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, "How did you fare, my daughter?" Then she told her all that the man had done for her, saying, "These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, 'You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.'" She replied, "Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today."

## His heart was merry

Boaz's household celebrated the barley harvest with *gusto*. They partied into the night. He laid down at the edge of a pile of grain and fell asleep. This is a fascinating image, isn't it?

As I have mentioned before, this celebration was not the kind of pointless drinking party that we tend to think of in our modern context. It was certainly loud and raucous, but not out of control. Although it is only speculation on my part, I tend to believe that the ancients partied better than we do because they had far more work to do. By the end of the barley harvest, people would be physically exhausted. The celebration was the culmination of hard work, which served to balance the celebration somewhat.

The idiom *wayîtab libô* includes the noun often translated as heart but more closely might mean center of understanding. There is little doubt that idiom is the similar to our own experience of relaxation and euphoria when we consume moderate amounts of alcohol. It represents a release of tension, but does not necessarily represent drunkenness.

The Scriptures are quite clear that drunkenness is dangerous and foolish (Gen 9:20-23; Prov 5:20, 20:1; Eph 5:18). But drunkenness and merriness of heart are two different things. One is a sinner seeking an excuse. The other is a righteous man in relaxation and celebration. Anyone with eyes can tell the difference. If you must make excuses or apologies for your actions, you were *drunk*. We know that Boaz still has his wits about him, even in the merriness of his heart because of the exchange that follows. A drunken man would not have the restraint or wherewithal to handle himself as he does with Ruth.

## She came softly

The exchange between Ruth and Boaz is sexually charged. The phrase “uncover his feet” almost certainly indicates the raising of his robe or blanket. Ruth lies down beside him, under the robe. This must not have been something he was used to, given that when Boaz realizes someone is lying beside him, he says, “Who are you?”

Ruth’s answer, however, is a callback to their previous conversation. She declares herself to be his servant (*šipəḥāh*), and then makes her intentions clear by asking him to “spread your wings over your servant.” It is an invitation to accept her presence as permission to join with her and make her his wife. It does not appear that there is an actual sex act involved, although it could be argued that there was. What is important is that Boaz could claim her in this way.

What is Ruth asking for? She is not asking for her own redemption. Boaz is not *her* close relative. He is not even Naomi's close relative. He is *Elimelech's* relative and Ruth is not asking for her own redemption but rather for Elimelech's. She is asking for a resurrection and reconstitution of Elimelech's legacy through Ruth. Boaz would redeem from death and give new life.

In Ruth, redemption through the *ga'al* is the exchange of new life for old. It takes place during the growing season, when the barley and wheat that will provide for the coming winter are harvested. Just as the dead ground comes to life, Elimelech's legacy is reborn. The themes and motifs of the book all come together in this single idea of a redeemer.

## Another Redeemer

Boaz speaks with absolute certainty that he will stand as the redeemer, but he points out the technicality of a closer relative. This is not an obstacle to Ruth's redemption, only a matter to be resolved. He regards Ruth as a worthy (*ḥayil*) woman, a term denoting valor, acumen and excellence (Prov 31:10, 29). This is the first time he calls her a woman (*'išāh*), a transition from previous situations.

There is a two-fold dynamic going on here. It is pretty clear that Boaz is smitten by Ruth, and the feeling is mutual. The union would be ideal, uniting two households. While polygamy was not forbidden in Israel, it would make complications for a man with children. Any children born of the levirate marriage would inherit the property of the dead relative, but if there were existing children, there was a requirement to divide properly evenly. Boaz does not have any children, so there would be no restrictions on him.

## Six Measures of Barley

What happened that night is beyond our ability to know. It would appear that Boaz literally covered Ruth with his robe, keeping her with him until the morning. She could slip away unnoticed before the rest of the men woke up. The fact that he calls her a woman (*'išāh*) and

covers her with his robes and has her leaving with the other women, before the men rise seems to indicate that Boaz now regards Ruth as his woman, his wife.

He makes this explicit by pouring six measures of barley out for her, which she carries in her robes. While six measures of barley was a substantial amount, it was hardly a bride price. It is an offer of surety, a gift of first fruits. These seeds symbolize the seed he will give to Elimelech and Naomi. Boaz does not want Ruth to return to Naomi “empty” (*rêqām*) because Naomi had returned from Moab feeling empty (1:21). Boaz promises a pregnancy to complete and fill her journey.

### The man will not rest

Naomi understand that by sending his gift, Boaz is making a commitment to Ruth and Naomi. Unlike the unworthy redeemers like Onan (Gen 38:8-10), Boaz would see the project completed. He is willing to apply his own personal righteousness to the task, because it is the right thing to do. Although not bound strictly to Torah as we have it today, Boaz prefigures the Torah-observant redeemer. This kind of devotion to God’s righteousness will become the ideal, the hallmark of Israel in the future.

## 13. The Other (4:1-7)

Now Boaz had gone up to the gate and sat down there. And behold, the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, “Turn aside, friend; sit down here.” And he turned aside and sat down. And he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, “Sit down here.” So they sat down.

Then he said to the redeemer, “Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it and say, ‘Buy it in the presence of those sitting here and in the presence of the elders of my people.’ If you will redeem it, redeem it. But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you.” And he said, “I will redeem it.”

Then Boaz said, “The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance.” Then the redeemer said, “I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.”

Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when the redeemer said to Boaz, “Buy it for yourself,” he drew off his sandal.

## Up to the gate

The gates of a town or city where the main meeting place for most business in ancient Judea. This was true whether the town was only lightly fortified or a built up city. Iron Age Bethlehem did not have casement walls. Still, most settlements had earthen barriers and trenches as basic defenses. There is a later story of a Philistine garrison occupying Bethlehem and there being only one gate to the village (2 Sam 23:13-17).

Bethlehem's hilltop situation in a mostly pastoral setting meant that most of the warfare of the region would pass it by. There were other very genuine and very real concerns. The walls probably served as protection against wild animals. Of particular interest were Syrian bears (*Ursus arctos syriacus*) and Asian lions (*Panthera leo persica*). Today these top level predators are found only in zoos and reserves, but in the Bronze Age, they were very real concerns. The Syrian bear is actually a subspecies of the same family as the kodiak (*Ursus arctos middendorffi*) and the grizzly (*Ursus arctos horribilis*) bears. The lions, although smaller than their African cousins, were still ferocious. Since both troubled the flocks and the populace, it is not surprising that settlements were walled against them.

Gates (*ša'ar*) could be made of anything, but most likely they were wooden doors of some kind, set into the wall and hinged. Most of the people associated with a village like Bethlehem would have lived and worked outside of the village walls. Their houses would be scattered through the hills, close to their fields and pastures. The gates would be locked at night against the threat of wild animals, so people who had business would gather at the gates in the morning. Since most everyone had business in town at one time or another, a lot of business was done at the gates.

## Naomi is selling her property

Boaz waits at the gates for the other related male to arrive, and then assembles a council of elders to hear the situation. When discussing the issue, Boaz is careful to only mention that Naomi is interested in selling Elimelech's property – fields and possibly herds. It is only after the kinsman says he would like to purchase the land that Boaz mentions the woman Ruth. With no wife in the picture, the land would simply pass to the redeemer's family. With Ruth involved, however, there would be no real financial advantage to a man who already had a wife.

Boaz presents this opportunity to the unnamed relative with the somewhat secretive idiom *'egāleh 'āzānāka*, literally “let me uncover your ear” or more idiomatically, “let me tell you a secret.” He offers it to him as a bit of business advice, probably in a private conversation rather than a public declaration. This is a business negotiation.

## Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead

While the nearer kinsman was more than happy to redeem the lands, he was not ready for the responsibility of a new wife. He feared it would endanger his own inheritance (*naḥālāh*), which



is an indication that he must have already had children. Were he to marry Ruth and have a son with her, he would have to re-evaluate and reallocate his legacy.

The particular term used here as “widow of the dead” (*'ešēt-hamet*) is a unique, technical term distinct from widow (*'ləmānāh*) used only here and in Deuteronomy 25:5. It seems to indicate a protection as part of the dead man’s clan, preventing her from being sold off into slavery or marriage to a stranger (*'iš zār*).

There is probably something else at work as well. People *must have known* of Boaz's interest in Ruth. He had, after all, given her favored gleaning status throughout the summer. Would you marry a woman who another man clearly has designs upon? The potential for trouble is obvious. While I am sure the other kinsman was sincere in not wanting to have to rethink his legacy, there was probably also a bit of common sense built into turning down the property.

## 14. The Public Transaction (4:8-10)

Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when the redeemer said to Boaz, “Buy it for yourself,” he drew off his sandal.

Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon. Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place.

Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem, and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman.”

### The Sandal Thing

One of the moments most readers are confused by is when the other man hands Boaz his sandal (*na'al*). As bizarre as this ritual is, it apparently was a component of Canaanite and Israelite business practices. It was then codified in Torah (Deut 25:7-10), another testament that

Deuteronomy often represents case law – things as they were. There are a variety of ideas about why this ritual existed. The fact that is referred to as an element of the past (*pānēh*) could indicate that this was no longer the practice at the time of writing, but more likely it explains the origin of the practice. The verb “remove” in the phrase is borrowed from Aramaic, a curious choice but possibly an indication that the practice was not a Canaanite one but rather something brought with the Israelites from Abraham’s original home in northern Mesopotamia.

## Then Boaz Said

Boaz’s proclamation is incredibly important for the rule of the House of David. He makes it clear that he purchased the belongings and heritage of Elimelech and his sons, and that he took Ruth as wife to perpetuate their legacy. This is a legal declaration, one with the force of law and covenant. By recording this statement in this way, the author validates David’s primacy. He explains why David’s family deserves to rule Judah and then supports that declaration with another declaration from the elders of Bethlehem in the next section.

## Witnesses

Being a witness (*‘ēd*) was a big deal in the Hebrew culture. Remember that their culture was largely oral. While writing systems existed, they were the exclusive property of the rich and artisans. Proving just about anything required witnesses, so throughout the Hebrew Scriptures there are constant calls for witnesses. One of the great commandments is, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” (Exo 20:16) Many people reduce this to simply, “Don’t lie” but false witness was much more severe. It was roughly equivalent to perjury in our judicial system, but it carried a much stiffer penalty. Under rabbinical Judaism, if someone was found to have borne false witness, they were sentenced as if they had committed the crime they accused others of committing.

By calling the elders and all the people nearby as witnesses, Boaz evokes the most powerful element of ancient society - the community. Remember that this a stateless society. There is no larger government to enforce or interpret law. Individuals had to suborn their own wishes and desires to the good of the community. It was the selfish man who elevated his own desires above that of the tribe or clan, and when such people came on the scene they were ultimately snuffed by the weight of their peers.

Boaz wisely involves the entire town with his marriage to Ruth and the redemption of the property of Elimelech. It removes any suspicion of foul play, establishes Boaz’s reputation even further, and most importantly it provides precedence for the ascendance of Ruth and Boaz’s descendant David.

To have met with the other kinsman in private and enacted this transaction without the public display would have been just as legally binding, but then the kinsman could have accused Boaz of manipulation of deceit and it would have been Boaz against the kinsman. Now, there was no

reversing the covenant, and while the kinsman or his family might have eventually regretted the decision, there was nothing they could do.

## The House of Perez

This little reference to Perez is something that most people miss, but it is crucial to the ascendancy of David. It denotes the direct lineage of David through the eldest son of Judah through levirate marriage, connecting it with his descent from Elimelech through a similar levirate situation. In short, Judah's oldest son died without child with his wife Tamar and his second son failed to produce an heir through levirate marriage. Tamar therefore tricked Judah into impregnating her. She gave birth to twins. One brother, Zerah, breached first but then withdrew. Perez then was born first. This meant that Perez was the firstborn and heir to the birthright. Elimelech therefore traced his lineage through Perez. This is yet another claim that David makes for his right to rule Judah and the rest of Israel, as the result of not one but *two* redemptive marriages.

No one should miss the significance of this declaration. The descendant of Boaz and Ruth would be directly connected to Judah. Later, in the book of Deuteronomy, an entire legal code would be adopted for when the child of incest or immorality could be admitted into the congregation. Not surprisingly, the number of generations is reported as the same as the number between Perez and David (Deut 23:2-3).

# 16. The Marriage (4:13-22)

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him."

Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.

## Boaz took Ruth

Nothing echoes back to the semi-nomadic, clan-based culture of Bronze Age Canaan like terms like “took” (*qār*) in reference to marriage. It is the idea of being carried away and it ties back to the ancient and probably prehistoric practice of snatching a woman from another clan.

It is so engrained in the consciousness of Mediterranean peoples that it even appears in much later Roman mythology recounted by Livy and Plutarch as the way the first Romans acquired their Sabine wives. The idea is simple and very old. Men would sweep down on a neighboring village or tribe and snatch the woman (or women), carry them off. Once they were safely back in their own village, the men would pair off with the women and essentially rape them. The modern wedding ceremonies have echoes of this potentially violent method of marriage in that the bride's father *presents* her to him. This is a more peaceful and amicable response to the “taking” although the phrase “Do you take this woman to be your wedded wife” still appears in most ceremonies. Remember also that the modern groomsmen are a vestige of the old practice of armed guards to prevent other suitors from taking the bride.

Unlike the Roman myths, however, the practices in Canaan were not nearly as forced. There are a few cases of this happening in the Bible (Gen 34:1-4), rape was profoundly condemned by Hebrew society. The marriages in the Bible appear to have been overwhelmingly consensual.

## YHWH Gave Her Conception

The Hebrews took the miracle of conception very seriously. If a woman was barren, it was because YHWH had chosen to deny her children. This is typified in the patriarch's wives (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel) but is present even into the time of David and beyond. Marriage might be an act of man, but children were the work of God.

To the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures, conception was a divine act. In the Hebrew worldview, God took pregnancy and childbirth very seriously. It was a sacred thing that happened in the mundane, and to interfere with pregnancy was to violate the will of God. It was viewed as an act by which God gave life to the womb. Thus, to cause a woman to lose a child carried a stiff penalty (Exo 21:22-25). Likewise, refusing to impregnate your wife had some pretty stiff consequences, extending even to death (Gen 38:9-10). During their slavery in Egypt, the hallmark of the Hebrew midwives was that they would not abort a child or inform the authorities (Exo 1:17). Hebrews adored children, even when the children were unexpected.

Our modern arguments around the right to choose to abort a child would have made no sense to the Hebrews. Modern arguments revolve around the mother's rights over her own body. The Hebrews believed pregnancy, even illegitimate ones and the product of rape, was an act of God. They did not have the advanced medical understanding of the fertilization of the egg, but they did understand what made pregnancies happen. The question of whether our greater knowledge of biology and medicine changes our perspective of God's work in pregnancy is something that

has been argued endlessly, but the fact remains that the earliest followers of YHWH revered life in the womb, and to argue for aborting that life even in the most extreme situations requires dealing with this fact.

## Blessed be YHWH

Notice the absence of “The Almighty” in pronouncement made over the child Obed. Earlier in this series of posts, I noted that Naomi seems to have believed that YHWH was not a single deity but may have had a female consort (*šaday*). Now, Naomi makes no mention of her? The author of the book may very well have done this on purpose. The birth of the ancestor of David confirms the superiority and uniqueness of YHWH among the other gods of people. We may actually have the record of the emergence (or more appropriately, *re-emergence*) of monotheism in the lineage of the House of David. This is contrasted with the henotheism of the surrounding people.

There has been a lot of discussion of YHWH’s female consort in more recent scholarship, and as I have noted before, there is no denying that there are hints of such a belief in the ancient Hebrew worldview. But it is equally true that the Hebrew Scriptures seem to intentionally point the reader away from this *status quo* belief in a consort deity to a singular monotheism. Each place that the female consort appears, there is literary evidence that this view is erroneous in the author's mind. The Scriptures report reality of people's beliefs as well as the reality of what the author knows to be true. Naomi might have embraced a dual deity, but the House of David did not so Naomi does not make the pronouncement. Instead, the people of Bethlehem do.

# Conclusion

What are we to draw from studying the Book of Ruth? Of course the story itself is a beautifully composed work, relying on several different genres – narrative, legal texts and even a bit of poetry. It also features a tremendous breadth of vocabulary. But how does the book function within the greater context of the Scriptures?

1. First of all, the book is primarily a book explaining the rise of the House of David. It develops the preeminence of the clan in Judah which sets the stage for David's rise as king and the claim his clan made on the rightful rule of all Hebrews.
2. Second, Ruth contains a lot of core beliefs like redemption and resurrection that provide the foundation for the development of monarchical and exilic Hebrew thought. The themes certainly exist elsewhere, especially in the Joseph narrative of Genesis, but here they are explicitly tied to agricultural themes, out of which emerges the practices of the Hebrews.
3. It provides glimpses into the henotheistic Hebrew culture that David overthrew in revering YHWH as the one true God. Although there are indications that Naomi may have believed in a female consort (*šaday*), by the end of the narrative it is clearly that only YHWH is God.
4. The book ties agricultural seasons, cultural expectations, human tragedy and even sexuality together in a single theme, uniting all of creation in the rhythms of YHWH's work and will.

On top of all of that, Ruth is a pre-Monarchy work, and therefore does not adhere closely to Torah observance, but it still very much reflects the values of Torah which are promulgated throughout the Davidic monarchy. It offers a glimpse into the world of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age at ground level.

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