



Never Lose Hope!

A Theology of the Book of Ruth

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Historical Setting/Background

The book of Ruth is set during the time of the Judges, a disastrous time for Israel both spiritually and nationally. In fact, the book of Ruth seems to have some verbal links to the two sordid stories found at the end of the book of Judges (chs. 17-21) in that all three mention *Bethlehem-Judah* (Judges 17:7-9; 19:1-2, 18; Ruth 1:1-2). The specific time during the period of the Judges in which the scenes of Ruth took place is not known. Gideon's era has been suggested, since we know there was a famine during his time. But no doubt there were other times of famine as well.

The author of Ruth is not named, but he may very well have been the author of Judges (inferred, in part, by the verbal link we have already noted).¹ He is evidently someone "in the know" about customs in the time of the Judges, but has lived long enough to see some of those customs change (Ruth 4:7). The Jewish Talmud identifies Samuel as the author of Ruth, but no one knows for sure. We know God used him to write (I Sam. 10:25; I Chron. 29:29). He fits the bill as someone who had his origins in the time of the Judges but lived long enough to see that time period come to an end (1:1).² We also know the author must have known that David was God's anointed king for Israel but died before the time of Solomon (Ruth 4:17-22). If our inference is correct that the same author wrote Judges and Ruth, it is obvious that the author views Ruth as the bridge between the repulsive nadir to which Israel had sunk and the hope that David would bring to the young Israelite monarchy.

Ruth beams hope to a nation mired in hopelessness. Spiraling into chaos, anarchy, and disunity, without the needed Godly leadership to right the nation on its feet, Ruth reveals that *even during that very time of anarchy* God was at work in surprising ways to provide that much-needed leadership through the house of David.³ The story in Ruth is a timeless story of hope, as a redeeming God shows His sovereignty through surprising acts of kindness to bring hope out of hopelessness. The birth of Naomi's "redeemer" (4:17) not only delivers her but will provide the King through whom God will deliver Israel—and ultimately—the world.

Literary Genre⁴

The book of Ruth is narrative genre—the genre of story that is the favorite of many. As such, the book must be read as a story in order to discover its main emphases. The book has four main characters: Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, and Yahweh Himself. In the setting to the story (1:1-5), we are introduced to a family of four who leave Bethlehem Judah, the land of

¹ Gleason Archer further notes that Ruth seems to have been composed about the same time as the book of Judges. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (1994 ed), p. 307.

² Bruce Waltke writes of the author, "although he writes of a time when warlords ruled, he certainly did not write at that time." *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*. Zondervan Publishing House, 2007, p. 851.

³ Daniel I. Block even views this as the author's primary aim. He writes, "the author's aim is to explain how, in the providence of God, the divinely chosen King David could emerge from the dark period of the judges." *Judges, Ruth*. The New American Commentary (vol. 6). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999, p. 595.

⁴ Frederic W. Bush discusses the narrative genre of Ruth in extensive detail, including a helpful analysis of the story's structure (p. 39). *Ruth, Esther*. Word Biblical Commentary (vol. 9). Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998, pp. 30-47.

their nativity, in a time of famine. The author does not comment on the wrongness or rightness of their action. What he does underscore in the setting is that a series of tragedies (the details of which are not mentioned) leave Naomi alone, bereaved of a husband and two sons. An analysis of the plot of the book reveals that the primary problem the book is resolving is that of Naomi's hopelessness: Naomi has no one to deliver her.

As the story unfolds scene by scene, God is seen providentially at work in various surprising⁵ and kind ways to deliver Naomi from her hopelessness. Ruth and Boaz, especially, are the instruments through whom Yahweh (THE main character) brings about the resolution of Naomi's hopelessness. Her problem is resolved in 4:13ff. Ruth (and Boaz's) son becomes Naomi's *deliverer* (4:14) and assures her a brighter end to her life than she thought possible. In a surprising end to this story, the conclusion takes us far beyond the time and setting of Naomi to one of her most famous sons—David (4:17-22). By doing such, the author suggests literarily that the beautiful story of Ruth is part of an even larger story.

Four Subthemes

1) God turns hopelessness into a surprising, unforeseeable hope.

The author takes pains in the story's setting and in its opening scenes to communicate Naomi's sense of hopelessness. Objectively, her circumstances have left her in penury (1:5). She knows she has nothing to offer her daughters in law (1:11-12). Furthermore, she has a strong sense that her misfortune is a kind of chastisement from the Lord (1:13, 20-21). The hopelessness of Naomi—a widow woman who has no one to deliver her—is the problem that the story in the book of Ruth resolves.

Naomi's first inclination that not all God's thoughts toward her are evil and that there is hope comes in 2:20, one of the key turning points in the book. When Ruth comes home with an unusually large amount of barley from her day's work,⁶ Naomi is rightly curious. When she realizes that Ruth worked in Boaz's field and this largesse is the result of his kindness to Ruth she, for the first time in the book, is revitalized with hope. Even then, her hope seems to be primarily for Ruth (3:1)—that through Boaz she sees a way for Ruth to be well provided for. As it turns out though, in the denouement of the story, the townswomen view Ruth's newborn son as a birthing of hope for Naomi (4:14). Naomi is all the focus in these verses, as she who had become empty is now once again full (4:15-17).

2) God mediates His kindness through surprising kindness in human relationships.⁷

⁵ I must confess my debt to Mark Dever for the idea of *surprise*. His theme for the book of Ruth is "Surprise," and it was his comments that first enlightened me to the thematic element of surprise that permeates Ruth. See his book, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Crossway Books, 2006), 223-244.

⁶ An ephah of barley may be approximately 30-50 lbs, an extremely large one-day gleaning when one considers that the male grain ration during that time may have been 1-2 lbs/day. See Bush (WBC), p. 133. If these numbers are legitimate, Ruth's one-day harvest was over 12 times what these ladies could have expected or "needed."

⁷ See "Introduction to Ruth," *ESV Study Bible*.

The key word used to convey this theme is the well-known word *chesed*, used commonly of a kindness that exists in a relationship.⁸ *Chesed* first occurs as Naomi wishes God's *chesed* upon her two daughters-in-law who have both shown kindness to her (1:8). Both God and humans can evidently display *chesed*, and there is an expectation that God will show humans kindness in proportion to the kindness they have shown—*with the merciful thou wilt show thyself merciful* (Psa. 18:25).

Chesed also occurs in 2:20, when Ruth comes home with her large one-day harvest (2:17-19). Naomi's general wish for blessing upon the benefactor turns to a recognition of *chesed* at work when she hears that the benefactor is none other than Boaz (2:19-20). The verse illustrates something of the covenantal obligation aspect involved in *chesed*, as Naomi sees Boaz' kindness as fulfilling his ethical obligations to both the living and the dead. His kindness creates an *expectation* in Naomi that he has recognized something of his obligation to her and Ruth (because of his relation to Elimelech) and that he is willing to do something about it.

Chesed occurs for the last time in 3:10. Boaz sees in Ruth's plea for marriage a further marked example of her ongoing *chesed* to her mother-in-law. Boaz is (evidently) an older man and maybe not Ruth's first idea of a romantic mate; Ruth's choice magnifies the selflessness in *chesed*.

Even though the word *chesed* only occurs three times in the book of Ruth, many have rightly viewed it as perhaps the key word in the book, not only because it occurs in key turning point passages but because *chesed* permeates the actions of the characters in the book. Both daughters in law had evidently shown kindness to Naomi (1:8). Naomi in turn exhibits a complete lack of selfishness in sending them back home rather than face her own barren future (1:11). Kindness also motivates Naomi's sending Ruth to Boaz to ask for marriage (3:1). Of course, Ruth herself is commonly viewed as the example *par excellence* of kindness. Whereas both daughters-in-law had shown kindness (1:8), Ruth evidences the unusual level to which she is willing to go in her attachment to her mother-in-law with words which are now justly immortal (1:16-17). Her words are not empty promises. She takes initiative in providing for the two of them (2:2) and demonstrates unflagging diligence (2:3, 7, 15, 17). She deliberately sets some of her lunch aside for Naomi (2:14) and shares all her day's hard work (2:18; see also 3:17). She obeys her mother-in-law with reference to petitioning Boaz as a relative (3:1-5, 18). Ruth's kindness is not only lauded by Boaz (2:11-12; 3:10) but also by the townswomen, who in a fitting encomium declare her to be better than seven sons to Naomi (4:15). Ruth does not take the baby and run but allows him to be a solace and refreshment to Naomi (4:16).

Boaz also reveals remarkable kindness. In fact, Boaz is probably intended by the storywriter to model God's kindness. From the moment we meet him he imbues kindness by his gracious treatment of his workers (2:4), which has earned him their respect—he can expect that they will abide by his wishes and demands (2:9, 15-16). He shows marked kindness to Ruth, presumably because of her loyalty to the widow of his own dead kinsman (2:11, 14). He ensures for her a large harvest for her day's work (2:15-16). He graciously consents to Ruth's

⁸ "In her careful examination of the term, Sakenfeld finds that it denotes a loyal and gracious act that (1) springs from an existing relationship; (2) involves an urgent need on the part of the recipient; (3) is a free act of the one performing it, i.e., an act of moral not legal responsibility; and (4) involves an extraordinary element of mercy or generosity, a 'going beyond the call of duty.'" Quoted in Bush (WBC), p. 170.

request for marriage (3:10-12) and will even do more than she (and Naomi) anticipated (4:1-10).⁹ He is concerned for her testimony (3:14) and, as the story bears out, the well-being of Naomi (4:3, 5). Boaz's kindness is in fact Naomi's first inkling that God may not be totally against her (2:20). One cannot help but make the observation that where there is so much kindness there can be no real hopelessness.

However, the book of Ruth is not merely extolling the strength and prowess of human kindness. The human kindness is really viewed as one way of God's mediating His kindness in hopeless situations. It is intended to indicate that all hope is not lost, that God still works on behalf of His people, and that such human kindness is one of the instruments of His sovereignty and providence.

3) God's sovereignty and providence oversee the welfare of His people to unforeseen finales.

God's sovereignty can probably be inferred from the very beginning of the book, when there is a famine in the land (1:1). Such famine in Israel was the direct result of promised chastisement for disobedience (Deut. 28:23-24; 45-48), and it is God's expressly stated sovereignty that restores food to His people (1:6). Naomi sees God's providence in her disastrous state, as five times she credits Him directly with her disrepair (1:13, 20-23). The author clearly desires us to understand that it is God's providence that leads Ruth *accidentally* to Boaz' field (2:3). Even if the kindness in 2:20 is Boaz's,¹⁰ Naomi still rightly recognizes God's providential hand at work on her behalf. Toward the close of the story, it is God who expressly opens Ruth's womb and gives her a son (4:13). The conclusion to the book of Ruth also suggests God's providence, as the author leads us on a genealogical journey from Naomi to David, then to Perez and back to David again (4:17-22). God in His providence works things out far better than we could have ever imagined. Not only does Naomi get a deliverer, but the nation of Israel—and, ultimately, the world—does too! Surprise!

Finally, the sovereignty of God is suggested via all the wishes for and expectation of divine blessing in the book of Ruth¹¹ (1:8-9, 17; 2:4, 12, 19-20; 3:10, 13; 4:11-12, 14). They swear oaths by Yahweh, recognizing His sovereign disposition over them (1:17; 3:13). Because of a firm belief in God's sovereignty, the people in Ruth can wish God's blessing upon others. Naomi wishes God's blessing on her daughters-in-law (1:8-9) and upon the man who has shown himself her and Ruth's benefactor (2:19-20). Boaz wishes God's blessing upon his reapers (reciprocated also by them, 2:4) and upon Ruth (2:12; 3:10). The townswomen wish God's blessing upon Boaz because of his kind actions (4:11-12). All this wishing of blessing is not just hopeful thinking or "wishing upon a star." The wishes reflect a *genuine expectation* that a sovereign God (who demonstrates *chesed*) will effect certain blessings in the lives of His people (4:14), as He most certainly did on behalf of Naomi to a finale far more grandiose than she could every have anticipated (4:17).

4) God is pictured by a redeemer who goes far beyond the call of duty to reclaim a relative from irreparable ruin.

⁹ Frederic Bush (pp. 168ff) argues that Ruth was just asking for marriage from a relative who could protect and provide for her. Boaz takes her request to the next level by treating it in connection with the property rights of Elimelech and his need for an heir.

¹⁰ There is some debate as to whether *who* in 2:20 refers to Boaz or Yahweh.

¹¹ This thought was first suggested to me by a note in the MacArthur Study Bible at Ruth 1:6.

The Hebrew word *goel* occurs 22 times in this little book, proportionately more often than in any other OT book.¹² It first occurs in 2:20, and then becomes a dominant element in chs. 3-4. A *goel* in the OT was a relative who had an obligation to assist another relative in a dire condition, whether in helping him/her repossess a lost piece of property (Lev. 25:23-28), avenge the death of a loved one (Num. 35:19), or carry on his family name and inheritance (Deut. 25:5-10). We can debate as to what extent the obligation of a *goel* was compulsory, but there was obviously a certain level of ethical and social pressure, as we see from our story.

The first use of *goel* in Ruth coincides with the turningpoint in Naomi's fortunes, as Naomi sees in Boaz a relative who not only has some level of obligation to help but has demonstrated a desire to do so (2:19-20). However, it does not seem that Naomi viewed Boaz as obligated to make a levirate marriage with Ruth.¹³ When Naomi sends Ruth to Boaz to seek marriage, she does so for Ruth's benefit with no thought of her own future in the matter (3:1). As a relative, Boaz is the most natural protector for Ruth (3:9-10). Boaz, however, evidences (as we have seen) God-like *chesed* in taking his obligation to a level higher than what either Naomi or Ruth expected (3:12-13). Surprise! He will link Ruth to the forfeited property of Elimelech,¹⁴ thus "creating" an obligation for a Levirate-type marriage (4:5).

Boaz' words put the closer *goel* in an awkward position (4:6). If he marries Ruth, then his projected outlay of expense to redeem the land will not really accrue to his benefit. (The outlay to provide for the needs of Naomi and Ruth until their death would be relatively small, in comparison to having to deed the property he purchased to Ruth's child in Elimelech's name.) If he just took the property and not Ruth, he would look very selfish. If he took the property and Boaz took Ruth, any child of the latter might end up owning the field anyway.¹⁵ The only way out without losing face or fortune was to give the right to Boaz, who gladly took it (4:8-10). The nearer *goel* (called "Mr. So and So" by one theologian¹⁶) actually serves further (as a literary foil) to heighten our admiration for Boaz and the God-like character of his *kindness*. He is not only a wealthy relative willing to be generous, kind, and helpful; he is willing to go "above the call of duty" in reclaiming a fellow relative from irreparable ruin.

Boaz in many ways pictures God as Redeemer who, especially in the book of Isaiah, presents Himself as He who will reclaim Israel from the ruin in which they have fallen during the Babylonian Captivity (Isa. 41:14; 43:1, 14; 44:6, 22-24; 47:4; 48:17). All of this becomes a beautiful illustration in the concrete world of what Christ does for us in the spiritual realm as the One in Whom we have redemption (Eph. 1:7). He becomes our "Brother" (i.e., takes on humanity; Hebrews 2:14-17) and puts His "resources" to work to reclaim us from the irreparable ruin into which sin has brought us. In so doing, He manifests to us God's great kindness (Eph. 2:7; Titus 3:4).

¹² It occurs 25x in Isaiah and 22x in Leviticus, but obviously those books are significantly longer.

¹³ According to Deut. 25:5-10, it was only required of actual brothers. Even in Genesis 38, the custom was evidently confined to actual blood brothers.

¹⁴ This is probably the best interpretation of 4:3. Naomi is selling a field in the sense that she is selling to a relative the rights to Elimelech's property, which he evidently sold before they left for Moab. Some, such as Waltke, argue that Naomi is selling a field that she actually owns but is unable to work and is therefore of little use to her (p. 859). But if it is hers, why is she the owner not present at the town gate? And why are she and Ruth living as virtual beggars if they own property?

¹⁵ Bush (p. 232) makes this observation.

¹⁶ Waltke, pp. 859-860.

Main theme

Summarizing the main theme of Ruth requires assimilating the data here assembled. The historical setting is in a hopelessly dark time in Israel's history, a time when God's people desperately needed deliverance. The story of Ruth shows us how God solves a problem for one family that is really part of His solution for the nation of Israel. The small story of Ruth is actually part of a much bigger story. The themes of Ruth show us a God who, much to our surprise!, has marshalled all of His kindness and providence in order to bring hope where there was none—not only for one Jewish family, but for the nation and, ultimately, for the world (through David's Greater Son). In other words, **Our Redeemer is Sovereign and Surprisingly Kind—Never Lose Hope!**

Conclusion

Never lose hope! This is the conclusion to which God surely brought Naomi. Surprised by a kind and sovereign God, she was brought forcefully to the realization that one whose God is Yahweh is never hopeless. In fact, the dark background of desperate circumstances, in which our short lives are often plunged, only serves to better illuminate our God who surprises us with His kindness. His ways are not our ways, but when we see the end to which His lead, we realize the vast superiority of His to ours. Life is full of surprises, some grim (from our viewpoint), some not. But let us hold fast to our confidence in Him under whose wings we have come to trust. We must believe that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him. At the end of the journey we will no doubt find that behind all of its twists and turns a kind and sovereign God is achieving purposes far beyond our wildest expectations—absolutely conformity to His Son (Romans 8:29-30).