**Ruth Commentary**

**Ruth Chapter 1**

Rut 1:1

**“there was a famine in the land.”** This famine happened in the period of the book of Judges, and likely during one of the periods when Israel had abandoned Yahweh and was worshiping pagan gods because famine was one of the signs of the judgment of God (Lev. 26:19-26; Deut. 28:23-24, 38-42). When people abandon God they open themselves up to the cruel attacks of the Devil. Elimelech, like Abraham, left the land when there was a famine (see commentary on Gen. 12:10). It is very unusual that there would be a famine in Israel, especially around Bethlehem, and not in Moab, the border of which was only about 25 miles from Bethlehem. One of the many lessons in Ruth is that often righteous people suffer because of the sins of the people around them. Elimelech and Naomi were righteous people, but they suffered when God’s judgment fell on Israel. The fact that the righteous suffer along with the wicked when people abandon and defy God is a major reason godly people should be invested in making sure a nation has godly rulers and godly laws. A nation that defies God will suffer many hardships.

**“Bethlehem *in* Judah.”** Since “Bethlehem” means “house of bread,” there are a couple of Bethlehems in Israel, this Bethlehem is Bethlehem in Judah.

**“went to live in the country of Moab.”** The Hebrew text reads literally, “in the fields of Moab,” but Moab was referred to by the idiom, “the fields of Moab.” The central area of Moab was a high plateau that had fields. The NAB reads, “the plateau of Moab,” which is geographically correct. The Bible never gives the reason that Elimelech left Israel. Obviously, many other people did not leave but endured the famine. It is possible that Elimelech was so discouraged by the idolatry of the people of Israel during the Judges period that he thought God’s judgment would be on Israel for years to come, and upon hearing that Moab was not experiencing the famine simply decided to go there.

Rut 1:2

**“Elimelech.”** The name means, “My God is King.” Elimelech is the only person in the Bible with that name. It is worth noting that the name is also found in the El-Amarna letters (c. 1350 BC, very close to the time of Ruth), and in a pagan context can mean “El is Milku” but that is highly unlikely in Bethlehem.

**“Naomi.”** “Naomi” means “pleasant” or “my pleasure.”

**“Mahlon and Chilion.”** The meanings of the names Mahlon and Chilion are difficult to determine with certainty. However, it is likely that Mahlon is from *malah*, “to be sick, to be weak,” and Chilion is from *kalah*, “to come to an end” thus “to be frail.” It is possible that those were the names actually given to the children when they were named because they were weak and frail. Children were not named at birth. Male children were usually named when they were circumcised at eight days old. It is also possible that these “names” were given to them due to their characteristics as they grew up, in a sense like nicknames based on character and behavior. It is common that names in the Bible tell us about the character or circumstances of the person and was not the person’s given name. For example, “Job” basically means “attacked one,” and would not have been his given name but a name he was called after his horrible ordeal of losing his children, wealth, and health. In any case, the names point to the circumstances of the boys and so it was no surprise to the Hebrew reader that they died when very young.

**“Ephrathites of Bethlehem *in* Judah.”** That both Elimelech and Naomi were “Ephrathites” means they were locals. They were born and raised in the Bethlehem area. “Ephrath” (or Ephrathah, Micah 5:2) means “fruitful,” but exactly what it refers to is debated. It could be another name for Bethlehem (and was likely used that way), or the area around Bethlehem, or a small village very close to Bethlehem, or perhaps the name of a clan that lived in Bethlehem or the general area. Ephrath was often identified with Bethlehem (Gen. 35:19; Ruth 4:11; Mic. 5:2). We see from the book of Ruth that although Naomi was an Ephrathite, she lived in Bethlehem.

Rut 1:3

**“Then Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died.”** We are not told how Elimelech died, even though we might wish to know it. This is the case with all the records in the Bible, for they are written in a way that gives the reader enough information to get the flow of the story, but not so much information as to burden down the reader with details. “They don’t tell us too much. They leave a lot of blanks….” (Eugene Peterson). The effect this has is to invite the reader into the story, to think about it, muse about it, reflect on it, and discuss it with others. The Bible is not designed for speed-reading, but for communing with God, the Creator of the Universe, who has hand-picked the records in the Bible to teach us about Him and about us. Indeed, as the reader grows and matures in their knowledge of the text and in their experiences in life, the Bible becomes richer, more enjoyable, more satisfying, more profound. The Bible encourages us to be imitators of God and Christ, but to truly imitate them one must know how they think and how life works. Those truths are in the Bible, which is why it should be read daily, and why God encourages us to discuss it and meditate on what it says. The Bible is to be a subject of thought and discussion “when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, and when you lie down and when you rise up” (Deut. 6:7).

**“And she was left.”** The Hebrew verb translated “left” often refers to someone who is left after the death of another, and often is used in the context of surviving the wrath of God (cf. Lev. 26:36, 39; Deut. 4:27; 28:62; 2 Chron. 34:21; Ezek. 6:12; 9:8; Zech. 11:9.

Rut 1:4

**“And they took wives for themselves of the women of Moab.”** It is not until Ruth 4:10 that we learn that Mahlon married Ruth and Chilion married Orpah.

Rut 1:5

**“Mahlon and Chilion both died.”** See commentary on Ruth 1:2, “Mahlon and Chilion.”

Rut 1:6

**“Then she arose.”** Ruth 1:6-7 is dominated by the feminine singular. It is Naomi, now the matriarch of the family, who is making the decisions. Ruth and Orpah follow her lead. Although there certainly would have been discussions, Naomi made the final decision.

**“Yahweh had visited his people.”** Yahweh had intervened and blessed the people. How did God “visit”? Not by a personal presence of some kind, but rather by giving them bread, which the people understood as being from God.

[For more on God “visiting,” see commentary on Exod. 20:5.]

**“by giving them bread.”** “Bread” is a common idiom for food. “Bread” came to be used by metonymy for food in general because bread was the main food in the culture and a staple of life. Bread was indeed the staff upon which the people leaned for food, and in literature it is sometimes referred to as the “staff of life” (cf. Lev. 26:26; Ps. 105:16; Ezek. 4:16; 5:16). It is not clear how Naomi could have heard there was food in Israel at the start of the barley harvest, but there are several possibilities (see commentary on Ruth 1:22).

[See figure of speech “metonymy.”]

Rut 1:8

**“Go, each of you return.”** Naomi directs the young women, who were likely in their early to mid-20s, to return. Girls in that culture were generally married around 12-14, and if they lived with their husbands for 10 years (Ruth 1:4), then Ruth was likely 22-24 years old. Naomi gave them three opportunities to return to their families (Ruth 1:8, 11-12, and 1:15). On the basis of the book of Ruth, modern Judaism gives potential converts to Judaism three chances to change their minds. The text does not say why Naomi waited until they were on the road back to Israel to tell the young women to return to their families. One possibility is that it was not until Naomi was actually on the road that it became clear to her that the better choice for the women was to go back to their own homes. But it is also possible that where Elimelech decided to settle in Moab was east of the villages where the girls lived and so as Naomi was heading west back to Israel she had to pass that area, and so it was close to their own villages that Naomi told them to return to their families.

**“the house of her mother.”** This phrase is very unusual and unexplained. It is normally, “to the house of your father,” which is so common that it is the reading of one of the Septuagint manuscripts, which was apparently altered to fit the culture. Elsewhere in the Bible, the “house (or “room”) of the mother had to do with love and marriage (cf. Song 3:4, 8:2) and Isaac consummated his marriage in his mother’s tent (Gen. 24:67), so it is possible that Naomi used “the house of your mother” as a subtle way of saying that the girls had her blessing to remarry.

**“May Yahweh show faithful love.”** Naomi had not lost her belief in Yahweh, and was not embarrassed about it, even though she had lived in Moab for ten years. The top god in Moab was Chemosh, and Naomi knew Chemosh, if he acted at all, would not deal kindly with people. Naomi may not have known the spiritual reality behind Chemosh, that he was a demon, but she knew by the way he was worshiped that he was not a kind god.

The Hebrew word translated “faithful love” is *hesed* (#02617 חֶסֶד), and it cannot be easily translated into English. It is rooted in the concept of covenant and relates itself to the faithfulness that God shows in keeping His covenants and His promises. Although *hesed* is rightly used of God because of His covenants and promises and behaviors associated with covenants and keeping them, it is also used by people in a more general way to indicate devotion, kindness, faithfulness, love, etc., depending on the context. The broad semantic range of *hesed* explains why when it is used in the Hebrew text the English translations differ so widely in exactly how to translate it. For example, when Boaz says that Ruth showed *hesed* (Ruth 3:10) some of the English translations of it are “devotion,” “kindness,” “faithful,” “loyalty,” “goodness,” “faithful love,” and “lovingkindness.”

[For more on *hesed*, see commentary on Ruth 2:20.]

It also seems clear that at this time in Israel’s history people freely spoke the name of Yahweh, which the Jews no longer do. Sadly, we do not know exactly how they pronounced the name.

Rut 1:9

**“in the house of her husband.”** In the times of the Old Testament, a woman on her own was unheard of and her life would have been extremely difficult, even impossible. A woman found “rest” i.e., safety and security, by being married and/or being a part of a large family.

Rut 1:11

**“Go back, my daughters!”** The imperative verb translated “Go back” (more literally, “return”) shows the emphatic nature of Naomi’s urging the women to go back home. She cares for them and genuinely thinks they will be better off in Moab, where they would either find protection with their family or be able to remarry. There are three emphatic statements that bring great emphasis to Naomi’s urging: “Go back, my daughters!” (Ruth 1:11, 12), and “No, my daughters!” (Ruth 1:13).

**“Why would you go with me?”** By this time in her life, Naomi was wrestling with bitterness against Yahweh and life. We see this when she asked that she be called “Mara” which means “Bitter,” instead of “Naomi,” which means “Pleasant” (Ruth 1:20), and also in the fact that in Ruth 1:20-21 she levels four accusations against Yahweh. Here in this exchange, two things show forth quite clearly: the anger and bitterness she was dealing with personally, and her love for Ruth and Orpah.

It is important to recognize that Naomi’s question, “Why would you go with me,” is a rhetorical one. Naomi is not actually asking Ruth and Orpah for reasons that they would want to go back to Israel with her, rather, she is making the statement that “It is silly (even stupid) for you to go back to Israel with me, you are much better off in your own country with your own family.”

**“Do I still have sons in my gut that they could be your husbands?”** We can see Naomi’s bitterness even more clearly in this statement. It is an absurd question, and one that comes from a bitter and angry heart, not a logical and loving mind. Ruth and Orpah were in their 20s, so how could they wait at least 15 or 20 more years for Naomi to marry and then have boys who could marry them? The suggestion is absurd.

Furthermore, Naomi reveals her bitterness when she speaks of sons in her “gut.” Naomi does not use the normal word for womb (*rechem*, #07358) or even “belly” (*beten*, #0990), which is often used for the womb, but reveals her anger by rhetorically asking if she has sons in her “gut.” The Hebrew word translated “gut” is *me`eh* (#04578 מֵעֶה), and it refers to the internal organs, bowels, intestines; the “gut.” Although *me`eh* is sometimes used non-specifically or euphemistically of a male’s reproductive organs (cf. Gen. 15:4; 2 Sam. 7:12; 16:11), the Bible never uses it that way of a female’s reproductive organs, and the English Bibles that translate *me`eh* as “womb” in Ruth 1:11 only translate it that way in this one verse. But the translation “womb” does not carry the proper emphasis of the Hebrew text, which is Naomi’s bitterness. She curtly asked if she had any more sons in her gut.

Rut 1:12

**“I am too old to have a husband.”** This statement, although possibly true in the sense that Naomi might have passed menopause, is not literally true. It is a hyperbole, an exaggeration displaying her perhaps justified emotion: her anger, frustration, and grief at her situation. In the biblical culture, just as today, men married women for more reasons than children. If Naomi married Elkanah by age 15 and had her sons by age 20, and if they married at 15 and were married 10 years, then Naomi would have been 45 or so, and even if she was closer to age 55, that was not too old to marry, and may not have even been too old for her to have children.

Especially in the biblical culture when both men and women died unexpectedly and quickly, remarriage was common. The woman the Sadducees made an example of to Jesus had married seven times (Matt. 22:24-27). Naomi’s statement misses the point entirely. Neither Ruth nor Orpah would have thought that Naomi would bear sons who could be their husbands. What they would have thought was that Naomi would look for husbands for them from among her and Elimelech’s relatives, which is in fact what happened to Ruth. Naomi’s frustration and anger were so acute at this point that she did not even mention the natural and proper course of action, which was to look for husbands for the women among her relatives.

Rut 1:13

**“refrain.”** The Hebrew word occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible. It is related to the word “anchor.”

**“No, my daughters!”** Naomi has just asked two rhetorical questions, the last being “Would you therefore refrain from having husbands?” Nevertheless, when she then says “No, my daughters,” it seems clear that she is not answering the questions she has just asked but rather is continuing in her urging Ruth and Orpah to return to their homes in Moab. She is saying, “No, my daughters, don’t come with me. Go home.” Ruth certainly seems to understand that that is what Naomi is saying because Ruth tells Naomi not to press her to go back to Moab (Ruth 1:16).

**“too much for you.”** Naomi knows that life for a widowed and unmarried young woman, especially with no family to take care of her, would be incredibly hard, and Naomi thinks that this is unfair and too much for the two young Moabite women. Naomi feels like her life has not gone well, and it is not the fault of the two young Moabite women, nor Naomi’s fault either, but Naomi does not want the difficulty of her life to become part of the life experience of the Moabite women she has come to love. There is likely some self-pity and bitterness in her words in that she thinks life has been unfair to her, which it had been. A lot of anger and bitterness that people feel in life is due to feelings that God should have somehow worked to make life better.

Rut 1:14

**“They lifted up their voice and wept.”** That is, they wept aloud. The CSB says, “they wept loudly,” which gets the sense.

**“and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law.”** That is, she kissed her to show her love and in saying “goodbye.” We should know that at no time in the text is Orpah criticized by the Author or by anyone else. Orpah had no promise from God that she would be well taken care of in Israel. Besides that, she likely had no real confidence in the goodness of Yahweh, Israel’s God. After all, in the thinking of the time, He was the reason for the famine in Israel and certainly did not protect her husband Chilion from dying. So she did the natural thing and went back to her mother’s house where in all likelihood she remarried.

**“Ruth clung to her.”** The word “clung” is the same word used in Genesis 2:24 for a man being joined to his wife. The text shows that Ruth’s bond with her mother-in-law was very strong.

Rut 1:15

**”Naomi.”** The Hebrew text reads “she,” but we substituted “Naomi” for clarity.

**“and to her god.”** Naomi’s statement is noteworthy. It is obviously true, but it reveals a kind of detachment from Yahweh that to the faithful and committed believer, is unsettling. It is as if Naomi sees no advantage to serving and worshiping Yahweh over serving and worshiping other gods; she certainly urged Ruth and Orpah to go back to Moab instead of going to Israel and worshiping Yahweh there. But then, it is likely that at this point in her life, Naomi did not see any advantage for the women to go to Israel and worship Yahweh. Naomi likely looked at herself as a good person, yet based on the evidence in her life she said, “the hand of Yahweh has gone out against me.” Given that, could she predict great blessings from Yahweh upon the young women? Also, because of the way Moab treated Israel, the command in Deuteronomy was that a Moabite was not allowed to enter the congregation of Yahweh (Deut. 23:3), so Ruth would not be allowed to worship at the Tabernacle. So to Naomi, the advantages of Ruth and Orpah going back to Moab outweighed the advantages of going to Israel with her.

The word “god” is *elohim*, which is grammatically plural. In the context of pagan worship, it is difficult to determine whether the translation should be “god” (ASV, CSB) or “gods” (ESV, KJV). In Judges 11:24 the singular Moabite god is referred to as *elohim*, grammatically plural (Judg. 11:24; cf. 1 Kings 11:33, which also uses *elohim* (plural) to refer to a singular god. The grammatically plural *elohim*, when used of the Hebrew God Yahweh, does not mean that there is a plurality of “Persons” in God any more than Chemosh has a plurality of Persons in him. The NET text note says, “it is likely that Naomi, speaking from Orpah’s Moabite perspective, uses the plural of majesty of the Moabite god Chemosh. For examples of the plural of majesty being used of a pagan god, see BDB 43 s.v. אֱלֹהִים 1.d. Note especially 1 Kings 11:33, where the plural form is used of Chemosh.”

[For more on *elohim* not referring to a plurality in God, see commentary on Gen. 1:1.]

Rut 1:16

**“Do not press me to abandon you.”** These are the first words in the book of Ruth solely attributed to Ruth, and they show her firmly, resolutely, and honestly dealing with her mother-in-law. First, Ruth lovingly demands that Naomi stop pressuring her to leave. The Hebrew word for “press me” (“urge me” in many English versions) is *paga* (#06293 פָּגַע) and it has a few different meanings, including “confront, assault, attack.” While *paga* can mean press or urge, it rarely completely loses its attachment to the idea of a confrontation, assault, or attack, and so while Ruth is in fact saying, “do not press me to abandon you,” buried in the Hebrew words she uses is her making it clear to Naomi that she feels that Naomi’s imperative pressure for Ruth to leave is an attack, and she answers with her own imperative vocabulary, “Don’t press (attack) me!” She had decided to go to Israel and support Naomi and has chosen Yahweh as her God and that is the end of the story.

What a powerful lesson we learn from Ruth. Yes, Naomi’s life had many unexpected disappointments. Yes, Naomi was angry and bitter. And there is a time to be very gentle and accommodating in such situations, but there is also a time to get gut-level honest and say what needs to be said, and that is exactly what Ruth did. She met Naomi’s frustration and bitterness head-on and told her in no uncertain terms that she, Ruth, had made up her mind that the Israelites were going to be her people and Yahweh was her God. But Ruth did not stop speaking to Naomi with this mild rebuke. She immediately confirmed her love for Naomi, saying she would go wherever Naomi went and be with her where she lived and where she died. Finally, Ruth ends her speaking to Naomi by demonstrating her sincerity by speaking an oath-curse over herself if she abandoned Naomi: “Yahweh do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me.” Ruth’s love for Naomi and her determination to be with her and help support her opened the door for her, a Moabite woman, to be part of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, showing that God cares for all people and looks on the heart, not on outward circumstances.

**“your people are my people, and your God is my God.”** Ruth 1:16 indicates that Ruth had already made up her mind who her people and her God were—she accepted Yahweh as her God—and so told Naomi not to press her to leave. Although most English versions have the future tense verb, “will be” in the verse, and thus read, “your people will be my people,” the Hebrew has a future tense verb but does not use it here. Generally in Hebrew when no verb is in the text—and there is no verb here in Ruth 1:16—then it is understood that the present tense verb is meant unless the context directs otherwise, which it does not seem to do. Young’s Literal Translation gets the sense correctly: “thy people is my people and thy God my God.”

The idea that Ruth is speaking of the future is imported in many versions from Ruth 1:17, where the future tense Hebrew verbs are used, but the events in Ruth 1:17, death and burial, are future events so future tense verbs would be used to describe those events. But here in Ruth 1:16, the reason Ruth told Naomi not to press her to leave was that she had already decided who her people and her God were, and that is reflected in the Hebrew text which would normally be translated with a present tense verb, as in the YLT and REV.

Ruth 1:16 is one of the profound verses in the Bible that shows that the attributes of Yahweh—His care and concern for people, and His fairness, grace, and mercy—are clearly displayed for anyone who cares to take the time and make the effort to get to know Him, and His arms are open to all who will come to Him. Ruth was openly accepted into the society of Israel, and God clearly accepted her, so she is in the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

Rut 1:17

**“Yahweh do so to me, and more also.”** This phrase is a curse formula. This let Naomi know that Ruth was extremely serious about her commitment to Naomi and Yahweh. Here in Ruth 1:17, we see that by using the name Yahweh the way she does, Ruth has taken Yahweh as her God. Her native god was Chemosh, but typical of pagan gods, he was cruel. According to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*,[[1]](#footnote-11500) Chemosh was essentially of the same nature as Baal. As such, Chemosh was worshiped by ritual sex (cf. Num. 25:1-4), might demand human sacrifice, and demanded other such impure and ungodly things. Ruth found out enough about Yahweh that she not only clung to Naomi, but to Yahweh as well, saying to Naomi “your God is my God” (Ruth 1:16).

Rut 1:18

**“was determined.”** The Hebrew verb is a participle and thus expresses persistence as well as determination. Ruth did not waver in her decision.

**“she said no more to her.”** After Naomi experienced Ruth’s determination to be with her and go to Israel, she said no more to Ruth about returning to Moab. Ruth 1:18 is the end of the dialogue between Ruth and Naomi, and the scene now changes to Bethlehem and the reaction and reception that Naomi and Ruth received at Bethlehem.

Rut 1:19

**“the women said.”** In the Hebrew, the word “said” is the feminine plural; it is the women of the city who asked. The women were curious and concerned about these two women who had come to their city, Bethlehem.

**“Is this Naomi?”** There is a lot of meaning in this phrase. There is the surface meaning, “Is this actually Naomi, or someone who sort of looks like her?” Yes, it was Naomi, but it was not the Naomi they had known. The “Ms. Pleasant” who had left ten years earlier had left with a husband and two sons and was in the prime of life. Now Naomi returns without her husband or her sons, but accompanied by a young Moabite woman. Furthermore, the years and the hardships of life had taken their toll on Naomi’s appearance, and almost certainly her posture as well—she did not look like the Naomi of ten years earlier. Naomi picked up on the nuances of the question, “Is this Naomi,” and responded that “Naomi” was no longer a fit name for her, that she was now “Ms. Mara,” the bitter woman.

Rut 1:20

**“She said to them.”** Naomi had not seen these women for ten years, and they had a lot to catch up on. This conversation could have lasted for hours with many women speaking in the conversation. Yet what the Divine Author wants to draw our attention to is Naomi’s four statements against Him, which reveal her bitterness; an understandable emotion given what Naomi has been through with the death of her husband and sons. It is very human to be bitter at God when things go wrong in life, but we should learn from the New Testament that there is a furious war going on between Good and Evil, and God does not cause harm to believers. The New Testament lesson is that it is wrong to blame God for evil and misfortune; those things come from the Devil (see commentary on Luke 4:6).

**“Do not call me.”** The verb is feminine plural, so it is the women of the city who Naomi is addressing.

**“Call me Mara.”** Although many names in the biblical world were like names today, just chosen because they sounded nice or the parents liked them, some names were significant. Some were used because they were long-standing family names, and other names were used because of the meaning of the name. We do not know why Naomi’s parents decided to name her “Pleasant” (“Naomi” means “pleasant”) but it fit until she lost her husband and sons, at which time her name no longer fit her circumstances and she did not want to be called “Pleasant.” Sadly, she wanted to be called “Mara,” “Bitter.” This reflects a difference between The Old Testament and the New Testament. The New Testament has exhortation to put away things like bitterness, anger, and rage (Eph. 4:31), whereas the Old Testament does not have that same exhortation, although it recognizes the value of joy and gladness.

**“*El* Shaddai.”** The Hebrew is Shaddai (also in Ruth 1:21). Naomi’s talk with the women revealed her bitterness, and the Author draws our attention to it by a beautiful introversion pattern, where Naomi speaks of (A) “*El* Shaddai” then (B) “Yahweh” then (b) “Yahweh,” and lastly (a) “*El* Shaddai.”

Rut 1:21

**“I went out full and Yahweh has brought me home again empty.”** Life is unpredictable. Jacob left the Promised Land with only his staff, and returned with much livestock, wives, and concubines, and many children (Gen. 32:10). Naomi left Israel with a husband and two sons, and in her estimation came back empty. It was the women of the town who pointed out to her that her daughter-in-law Ruth was better than seven sons (Ruth 4:15).

**“Yahweh has testified against me.”** The general thought of the time was that if a person lived righteously then Yahweh would bless them, and if they were evil then things would not go well with them. Based on that belief, Naomi said Yahweh had testified against her by way of the circumstances of her life.

The Old Testament did not reveal the Devil, nor the intensity of the war between Good and Evil, and that left a lot of questions unanswered. Even kings and prophets had a lot of unanswered questions when it came to the evil that occurs on earth (and people who read the Old Testament without realizing that it had been superseded by the teaching in the New Testament have those same questions). When Jesus revealed the Devil and demons to his disciples, he told them things never before revealed: “And turning to the disciples, he said privately, ‘Blessed *are* the eyes that see the things that you see, for I say to you, that many prophets and kings desired to see the things that you see, and did not see them, and to hear the things that you hear, and did not hear them” (Luke 10:23-24). Grace and “truth” came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

[For more on why bad things happen on earth, see commentary on Luke 4:6, that God is not in control of what happens on earth.]

**“*El* Shaddai has afflicted me?”** This statement reflects Naomi’s theology and belief, but we learn from the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus Christ that what Naomi believed is not accurate. God does not kill people (Naomi’s husband and sons) and cause pain and trouble to people like Naomi and Ruth just to bring about His ends. The greatness of God is that He works in the warzone between Good and Evil like a master chess player, working to bring good from the evil that the Devil and evil people do (cf. Rom. 8:28).

Rut 1:22

**“So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law.”** This is a summary statement, not a sequel. Summary statements are common in the Bible, and this one adds the information about the barley harvest.

**“in the beginning of barley harvest.”** This is the time of the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It generally occurs in our month of April.

**Ruth Chapter 2**

Rut 2:1

**“a relative of her husband.”** Boaz took wonderful care of Naomi and Ruth even though Naomi was only related to him by marriage. The word “relative” here is not the same as “kinsman-redeemer.”

**“a man of noble character.”** The Hebrew can be translated a number of different ways, as we see in the various English versions. The Hebrew could refer to a military warrior, a man of wealth, a person of integrity, etc. The context shows that Boaz was wealthy, but that is likely not what the text is emphasizing here. He would have been a wonderful person for Ruth not because of his money, but because of his integrity and godliness. The major emphasis about Boaz in the book of Ruth is that he was a man of noble character.

**“Boaz.”** Boaz was the son of Rahab the prostitute. This helps us understand his moral qualities and lack of prejudice, and also helps us fit the book of Ruth into the chronology of the book of Judges. Boaz was not far removed in time from the conquest of Canaan. If Salmon married Rahab during the lifetime of Joshua, which is almost certain, then Boaz would have most likely been born at the latest during the time of the first Judge of Israel, Othniel, although Rahab and Salmon would have been quite old when Boaz was born. The meaning of “Boaz” is uncertain, but it may be related to strength. It was also the name of one of the pillars in Solomon’s Temple (1 Kings 7:21).

Although it often happened in the Bible that a son differed in his moral character from his parents, it is much more likely that the children followed in the way their parents thought and acted. So much of the parents-to-sons behavior that is portrayed in the Bible occurs in royal families that without careful thought it can skew the mind of the reader. Most royal children were raised in harems which were dangerous places both physically and morally. The women of the harem lived in a terrible and demeaning cultural context. For one thing, they lived a constant contest of who would be the king’s sexual favorite, and that changed often, and with it came shifting power struggles in the harem as favorites were often granted special favors. Also, they lived in constant fear of death. It was uncomfortably common that when the king died and one of the king’s sons became king, that new king killed all his half-brothers and often their mothers as well. Also, sons of the king had to be aggressive and self-willed to do well in growing up in the tense atmosphere of the harem and also do well if they got to be the new king or of the family of the new king. The harem fostered aggressive and ruthless behavior, and that shows up in the behavior of many sons of kings.

In contrast to harem life, life for regular families was much different, and the moral qualities of the parents were passed on to the children. That certainly seems to be the case with Boaz. As a Canaanite, his mother, Rahab, was a prostitute, but we do not know why or for how long. It seems certain that her circumstances and the Canaanite culture contributed greatly to that and in fact likely forced it upon her. However, we can see from the book of Joshua that she was a wise and god-fearing woman and stood out among her fellow Canaanites. Her life totally changed when she was taken in marriage by Salmon, a godly man from the tribe of Judah. It seems clear that the two of them settled in Bethlehem in Judah and quickly rose to some prominence, which, together with Boaz’s long life of diligence and wise choices, explains how Boaz got to be a powerful landowner.

Rut 2:2

**“Please let me go.”** Ruth asks Naomi’s permission to go glean, wanting to make sure that Naomi feels comfortable with Ruth being gone and very likely in some amount of danger from prejudiced neighbors.

**“glean among the ears of grain.”** The poor were supposed to be able to glean the leftover grain from anyone’s fields, but not every landowner obeyed that law (Deut. 24:19-22). The “ears of grain” were the heads of grain in the entire kernel cluster.

**“behind him in whose eyes I find favor.”** Although the Hebrew text does indicate a man, “him” who showed her favor, she was not thinking of Boaz at this point. The culture was that men were the landowners, not women, so what Ruth said about being in a man’s field was general and cultural. In fact, she was likely thinking that the owner of the field would be the one harvesting it, which was not the case with Boaz, who had hired workers doing the work.

Ruth’s concern, “behind him in whose eyes I find favor” was genuine. She was a Moabite, and many Israelites had reason to dislike Moabites at this time. Furthermore, the fact that Naomi left for Moab with a husband and two sons and came back a broken childless widow could only add to their suspicion and dislike. It is likely that Ruth expected to be chased out of many of the fields around Bethlehem even though technically the Law of Moses allowed her to glean.

[For more on the reasons people from Bethlehem would dislike Moabites, see commentary on Ruth 2:10.]

Rut 2:3

**“And she happened to come.”** The Hebrew seems to put an emphasis on the unseen hand of God and His interaction with what would have seemed to Ruth as simply chance. The Hebrew is hard to translate into English, because it is literally something like, “and her chance chanced upon the portion...” or perhaps “and her happening was to happen on the portion….” The meaning of the text is that Ruth did not know where to go to glean, and simply picked a field that she thought would work and it turned out to be Boaz’s field. From Ruth’s perspective, that she chose Boaz’s field was pure chance, but we can see the unseen hand of God in guiding this godly woman’s decision. A wonderful lesson here is that often we don’t know what decision to make, but if we are godly and pray and do our best to make a wise choice, more often than not we will have good success. Many times in life we must press ahead with a decision even though we are not sure of the outcome.

**“the field belonging to Boaz.”** There is some flat ground just east of Bethlehem where grain can be grown, and Boaz had to come out of Bethlehem to his fields. So Boaz’s encounter with Ruth likely happened east of Bethlehem.

Rut 2:4

**“And behold.”** The word “behold” alerts us to the “coincidence” of the timing of Boaz’s arrival when Ruth was reaping. Frederic Bush tries to bring out the emphasis with his translation, “And wouldn’t you know it.”[[2]](#footnote-17162)

**“Boaz came from Bethlehem.”** Farming was not done in the ancient Near East as it is done in the USA today. Today, farmers generally live in houses on their farmland, but that was not the case in the ancient world. All the houses were close together in a town or village, and the farmland was outside the city, and depending on the geography of the area could be quite a walk from the city. In Bethlehem, the best farming land was somewhat to the east. Here in Ruth 2:4, Boaz left the town of Bethlehem and went to his fields. After the harvest, shepherds would often be allowed, and even encouraged, to graze their sheep on the fields so the sheep could eat and naturally manure the fields.

**“Yahweh be with you.”** This warm greeting from Boaz to his workers suggests the quality of man that he is and that he has fostered a good work environment for his slaves and servants. It also indicates that at this early time in Israel’s history people freely spoke the name of Yahweh, which the Jews no longer do.

**“Yahweh bless you.”** This blessing may have a connection to the harvest (cf. Psalm 129:7-8, where this is connected with the harvest). There is no reason not to believe that these men used the name of Yahweh in their blessings instead of Adonay, etc.

Rut 2:5

**“young man.”** The Hebrew is “young man.” Although many English versions say “servant,” which the man certainly was, the translation “young man” indicates much about him.

**“Whose young woman is this.”** This statement reflects the culture very well. Boaz does not ask, “Who is this woman?” He asks, “Whose young woman is this,” that is, to whom does this young woman belong? To be safe and secure, a woman would always belong to some man or family. Also, the fact that Boaz refers to Ruth as a “young woman” even though she would have been in her 20s gives us a hint that Boaz is much older than Ruth is.

Rut 2:6

**“The young man.”** The Hebrew text is “young man.” The young man was likely a servant, but that is more of an interpretation than a translation of the Hebrew text (see commentary on Ruth 2:5).

**“She is the Moabite woman.”** There is no indication that the foreman who Boaz spoke with knew Ruth’s name at this point, but he did know Naomi.

Rut 2:7

**“Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves.”** Ruth was poor and was a widow, so technically she was allowed by the Mosaic Law to glean the fields, but not every Israelite kept the Law. That seems to be especially true in the period of the Judges when “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 17:6; 21:25). Furthermore, there was a lot of prejudice against Moabites because of recent history. The Moabites had caused trouble for Israel when Israel came out of Egypt and was about to enter the Promised Land, and early in the Judges period, Eglon, king of Moab, had oppressed Israel for 18 years (Judg. 3:12-14). Historical memories are long in the Near East, and those things would not have been forgotten. Ruth wanted to be sure she was going to be allowed to glean without being run off, so she asked permission. The fact that Boaz’s foreman gave her permission is more evidence of the noble character of Boaz. Boaz treated people righteously, and in turn, his workers had that same attitude.

[For more on why the Moabites tended to be disliked by the Israelites, see the commentary on Ruth 2:10.]

**“among the sheaves behind the reapers.”** As the reapers went through the field and cut the grain, “reaped,” they would cut more than they could carry, so they would stand up little wrappings of grain, which were referred to as the “sheaves.” So the reapers left sheaves of harvested grain behind them. Ruth asked if she could glean among those sheaves that were left behind the reapers as they moved forward through the field (cf. Lev. 19:9-19; 23:22; Deut. 24:19).

**“She has been sitting a little while in the shelter.”** As worded, Ruth was in the shelter at that time. The NASB gets the sense as in the REV: “she has been sitting in the house for a little while” (Ruth 2:7 NASB). The fact is there is no consensus as to how to translate the Hebrew, which is very difficult, and some scholars consider the last phrase of Ruth 2:7 to be the most difficult line to translate in the book of Ruth.[[3]](#footnote-26844) This explains the various translations: “except for a short rest” (ESV); “her sitting in the house has been little as yet” (DBY); “with scarcely a moments rest” (NAB); “without resting even for a moment” (RSV). So the scholars differ as to whether Ruth had rested, was now resting (cf. REV), or had not as yet rested.

Rut 2:8

**“Listen carefully, my daughter.”** The Hebrew is literally “Have you not heard, my daughter? This is an idiom and basically means, “Listen carefully, my daughter” (cf. CSB, ESV, NAB, NASB, NET, NIV, NJB, NLT, NRSV). Frederic Bush writes: “Hebrew often uses a negative question in such a way as to be emphatically affirmative...the whole construction certainly has an exclamatory effect...The same idiom occurs in v. 9 and 3:1, 2.”[[4]](#footnote-24143) However, it is possible that Boaz was not sure why Ruth was in his field of all the fields around Bethlehem and was asking her if she had heard from Naomi that he was a relative of hers. But that explanation seems less likely given the fact that it does not flow with the next phrase in the verse.

The addition of “my daughter” reflects the fact that Boaz already feels some affection and responsibility for Ruth because of her relation to Naomi, and also is a reflection of the age difference between them.

**“Do not go to glean in another field.”** Boaz now knew that Ruth was with Naomi and we can see that both as a godly man and a relative of Naomi’s he felt some responsibility toward her safety and also how well she did in gleaning. As a man from the area, Boaz likely knew that there was some general animosity toward Moabites and also some ungodly behavior toward young unattached women. Furthermore, if the story of Ruth falls chronologically during the time of the judgeship of Deborah (see commentary on Ruth 4:18), there was much sexual oppression, however more so in northern Israel. The fact that Boaz told Ruth not to glean in other fields shows the wealth of Boaz. He owned enough land that just gleaning from it alone would be enough for Ruth and Naomi.

**“stay here close to my young women.”** As a wealthy landowner, Boaz had both male and female servants working in his fields. The time of the harvest was critical so birds, mice, etc., did not eat the harvest, so it was important to harvest it quickly. Harvest time was usually an “all hands on deck” type situation. This was also why Ruth worked so hard during this time. Harvest was the one-time event that provided food for the whole rest of the year. The verb translated “stay here close” is a strong word and the same as we see in Genesis 2:24 where the man “joins” to his wife and also in Ruth 1:14 where Ruth “clung” to Naomi. Ruth would be better protected and would eventually develop friends in the village if she stayed close to Boaz’s young women.

Rut 2:9

**“and go after them.”** Ruth could not go with the young women, who were harvesting, but could follow after them and glean.

**“touch.”** A euphemism for harass, especially sexually. Ruth was an unmarried woman not protected by a father or brothers, so she was very vulnerable to being harassed and even raped. The word “touch” is used of sexual intercourse in verses such as 1 Corinthians 7:1, and it is used for “harm” in Genesis 26:29 and Joshua 9:19.

**“and drink from that which the young men have drawn.”** Although Boaz could have had a cistern somewhere around his field from which water could be drawn, it seems more likely that it would have been drawn from the well close to the gate at Bethlehem (2 Sam. 23:16) and then carried to the fields where the work was being done. In the biblical culture, it was usually the women who drew water (cf. Gen. 24:11). It is possible that the men actually drew this water, or it is possible that Boaz’s fields were far enough away from the well that the men carried the water there and Boaz spoke in general terms. In any case, the water was drawn by Boaz’s servants, and water was jealously guarded in the biblical culture, particularly during the dry season, which had started by the time of the barley harvest and would last from April until late October or so. That Boaz would offer his water to Ruth shows more of his noble character and kindness toward her.

Rut 2:10

**“bowed herself down on the ground.”** The Hebrew word for “prostrated herself” is *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), which can mean to prostrate oneself, or to bow down, or to “worship.” It can be confusing to the English reader, however, that in most English versions when one person bows before another person, “bow down” is used, while if a person bows before God, “worshiped” is used. That has led to the false teaching that people only “worship” God. The act of worship was the same before people, angels, and God; it was bowing down. It was the posture of the heart, not the action, that separated bowing before God or bowing before another human.

Daniel Block writes: “Overwhelmed by Boaz’s generosity, Ruth (literally) ‘fell on her face and worshiped him’...This verse illustrates the biblical understanding of worship. ...As the first clause, ‘and she fell on her face’...explains, fundamentally “worship” [Block uses the Hebrew word] denotes the physical gesture of prostration, that is, falling to one’s knees and bowing with face/nose to the ground before royalty or deity. But that gesture was also performed in less significant contexts as a secular greeting, mark of respect, or expression of gratitude.”[[5]](#footnote-18755)

[For more on *shachah* and its referring to prostration, bowing, or “worship,” see Word Study: “Worship.”]

**“Why have I found favor in your eyes.”** Ruth was not expecting to be as well received as she was, in fact, she likely expected to be resisted most everywhere she went, so her surprise and question are genuine.

**“since I am a foreigner?”** Ruth was not just a “foreigner,” she was a Moabite. That fact alone reveals the personal courage she had in coming with Naomi back to Israel, and it reveals her love for Naomi and for Yahweh, the God of Israel. She had no idea the kind of prejudice and persecution she might face in Israel, but she bravely did what she knew was right to do and was willing to face whatever challenges or difficulties presented themselves.

The Israelites had some good reasons for hating the Moabites. The Moabites descended from Abraham’s nephew Lot, and Lot’s son Moab was the son born from the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter (Gen. 19:30-38). Although the Dead Sea and the Arnon River in the Transjordan were general borders between the two countries that prevented what could have been general border problems such as happened between Israel and Syria, there certainly had been problems between Israel and Moab. For example, the Moabites had resisted Israel when they came out of Egypt and hired Balaam the prophet to curse Israel (Num. 22-24). Also, the Moabites attempted to lure Israel away from Yahweh to the worship of their gods via the sexual rituals tied to cultic prostitution, and that eventually led to the death of more than 24,000 Israelites (Num. 25:1-9). Also, Moab was so onerous to Israel that God commanded that they be excluded from the assembly of Yahweh (Deut. 23:3-4). And most recently to the time of Ruth, there had been the 18-year Moabite oppression of Israel, especially southern Israel where Bethlehem was, under the reign of Eglon, king of Moab (Judg. 3:12-14). So Israel had reasons for disliking Moabites, but that did not deter Ruth from supporting Naomi and going to where she could worship Yahweh.

The reasons for Israel to dislike Moab also show the quality of man that Boaz was. Boaz was an old man, so he almost certainly was alive during the oppression of Israel by Eglon king of Moab, and thus could have had his own personal reasons for hating Moabites. Yet he realized that people should be judged on their own merits and not be condemned because of the nation they came from.

Rut 2:11

**“It has been told, yes, told to me all that you have done​.”** Boaz understood the genuineness of Ruth’s question and explained why he is showing her such favor. The Hebrew text uses the figure of speech polyptoton, repeating the verb “told” in different forms for emphasis (the literal is, “being told it was told to me.” The NLT expresses the idea of the text in amplified language: “I also know about everything you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband.”

Boaz’s answer is also a view into his soul, that he truly was a noble and humble believer. A proud and arrogant person would have thought, “That’s just the way I am, a great guy,” but that kind of thinking would never have even come into the mind of a wonderful believer like Boaz. He credits his treatment of Ruth as springing from her godly actions, not that he was so great.

Here we learn that Boaz had been told all about Naomi and Ruth before Ruth ever showed up in his field. He was not expecting Ruth in his field and did not know who she was when he saw her. So this tells us that Boaz was a wise man who kept abreast of the news and gossip in the village. Also, as a close relative of Elimelech, when he learned that Naomi had returned to Bethlehem and that Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion had all died, he would have known that he might have to step into the role of the kinsman-redeemer to help Naomi out, and that would have caused him to be even more interested in Naomi and Ruth than he might otherwise have been if it had been someone from another family who came to Bethlehem.

[For more on the form of the translation and the emphasis of the polyptoton, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

**“how you have left your father and your mother and the land of your birth.”** Many choices in life are very difficult, and the choice of leaving her father and mother may have been difficult for Ruth, but that is the choice she made. The fact that Boaz said, “you have left your father and mother” indicates that they were still alive. But Ruth had tasted the love and justice of Yahweh and decided that Israel was where she wanted to live and that Yahweh was the God she wanted to worship.

Communication was much more difficult in the ancient world than it is today, and we have no information about whether she ever saw her birth family again, but the chances are that she did not. When Christians make the choice to worship the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, it often happens that they lose the close fellowship with their family that they once had, but making the choice to serve God is the right choice.

Rut 2:12

**“May Yahweh repay your work and a full reward be given to you from Yahweh.”** Although in this context Boaz would have meant that he desired for Ruth to be repaid in this life for all her kindness to Naomi and her service to God, he certainly would have known that it often did not happen, so he would have also had in the back of his mind that if people did not get repaid for their service to God in this life, they certainly would in the next life.

**“from Yahweh, the God of Israel.”** Boaz knew that Ruth was a Moabite, and no doubt said this on purpose to acknowledge to Ruth that he understood that she had made allegiance to Yahweh. However, there is also no doubt that Boaz believed in Yahweh himself. Boaz was not one of those Israelites who had forsaken Yahweh to serve Baal or some other pagan god, he was a believer in Yahweh, and his kind and generous actions came from that belief.

**“under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”** Boaz uses the metaphor of a bird that spreads its wings over the young chicks to protect them. (Technically Boaz used the figure hypocatastasis, see commentary on Rev. 20:2). Psalm 36:7, 57:1, and 91:4 mention taking refuge under God’s “wings.”

Rut 2:13

**“because you have comforted me.”** This was not just something nice for Ruth to say. Boaz’s words brought great comfort to Ruth. She no doubt started the day with palpable tension, wondering if she would be allowed to glean or be driven off people’s land and wondering if she would get enough grain to comfortably feed her and Naomi. Now she was comforted and could relax in the knowledge that she would be allowed to glean and would be able to get enough food for her and Naomi.

**“speak to her heart.”** An idiom often meaning, “to speak tenderly” (cf. Isa. 40:1), but here also having the meaning of speaking encouragingly.

**“servant.”** Here in Ruth 2:13, the word “servant” (which occurs twice in the verse) is a translation of the Hebrew word *shiphchah* (#08198 שִׁפְחָה). In Ruth 3:9 the word “servant” is a translation of *'amah* (#0519 אָמָה). For the difference between the two words, see the commentary on Ruth 3:9.

**“I do not have the standing of one of your female servants.”** The literal Hebrew is “though I am not like one of your female servants,” but what Ruth meant was that she did not have the household standing of one of Boaz’s female servants.

Rut 2:14

**“And at mealtime.”** So there has been a time break between the last conversation between Boaz and Ruth and now.

**“Come here.”** As a Moabite and a poor gleaner, Ruth would have naturally kept her distance from Boaz and his workers. But Boaz intervened and made her part of the group. This may have made Ruth or some of Boaz’s workers uncomfortable, but if that was the case the Bible does not mention it. Any uncomfortable feelings would have been in the head and heart of the individual, not God or the godly man Boaz, so if they were there at all they are not mentioned. Those kinds of feelings need to be dealt with, but are usually up to the individual to deal with and overcome.

**“in the *wine* vinegar.”** This vinegar is a wine vinegar, not the apple cider vinegar that is common in the United States today. Dipping bread in wine vinegar is still done today, and often oil and perhaps some other spices are added to the vinegar. It is likely that the reason there was wine vinegar at the cross of Jesus was that some of the people or the soldiers had some to dip their bread in.

**“So she sat beside the reapers and he.”** The fact that Boaz, a wealthy landowner, would eat with his workers is still more evidence of the quality of man that he was. He could have afforded to eat a much better meal than just bread and roasted grain, and many wealthy men would not have eaten with the workers, but Boaz did not separate himself that way. While there is no evidence he tried to blend in as “one of the guys,” neither did he stay aloof from them.

**“he passed roasted grain to her.”** The Hebrew verb translated “passed” is only used here in the Hebrew OT, and its meaning is debated, which explains the diversity of the ways it is translated in the English versions (“reached her” ASV, JPS, KJV; “gave her” BBE, NLT; “served” CEB, NASB; “passed” CJB, ESV, NKJV, RSV; “offered” CSB, NIV; “handed” NAB, NET, TNK; “made a heap” NJB; “heaped up” NRSV). The word is used in modern Hebrew for “pinched,” and although the verb could have meant something different in ancient Hebrew, if modern Hebrew is a guide it might refer to some of the grain being “pinched” apart (perhaps “portioned out”) to her.

**“and had some left over.”** So Boaz gave her such a large portion that she could not eat it all. Boaz likely knew that ahead of time and was trying to help her, and that theme continues in the next verses.

Rut 2:15

**“Let her glean even among the sheaves.”** The sheaves were the bundles of grain that the reapers left as they went through the field cutting the grain and then wrapping it up into bundles. The reapers would go through the fields cutting and wrapping the grain into sheaves, then come back and gather the sheaves and put them in a cart if there was one available (cf. Amos 2:13). The fact that the sheaves were not gathered yet in Boaz’s field meant the harvesters had not finished in the field, and normally gleaners—the poor people and others who needed food—would not be allowed to glean until the field was fully harvested and the sheaves picked up. Since the sheaves were only held together by a few stalks of grain wrapped around a bundle of harvested stalks, some of the sheaves would come apart, and a gleaner would tend to act as if that grain was free for the taking when it was actually not. For Boaz to allow Ruth to gather even among the sheaves shows his great generosity toward her and Naomi. We see that generosity still more in Ruth 2:16 when he tells his reapers to leave some grain on purpose so Ruth can glean it.

**“do not reproach her.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “do not put her to shame.” In the Eastern culture, even today, being reproached or reprimanded in public causes a person to be ashamed, as the Japanese say, “to lose face.” Although the immediate context is Ruth gleaning among the sheaves without being reprimanded for it, Boaz’s general statement, “do not reproach her” (do not put her to shame) has a wider context as well. Prejudice can run deep in people and in cultures, and some of Boaz’s workers may have had animosity against Moabites (some of it well-deserved) and might well have made hurtful comments to her.

Rut 2:16

**“pull out, yes, pull out.”** The Hebrew text uses the figure of speech polyptoton, repeating the verb for emphasis.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

Rut 2:17

**“until evening.”** There was no “five o’clock quitting time” in the ancient world. Working people worked while there was daylight to do it. Job 7:2 says “Like a servant who earnestly desires the shadow,” which means that the servant looks for the big shadow cast by the setting sun because that means the end of the day’s work.

**“then she beat out.”** Ruth did not carry the grain on the stalk back to Bethlehem, but threshed it right there by the field. She would have been tired from gleaning all day, but pushed herself to complete the work she had to do by beating the grain off the stalk.

Beating out grain referred to the process of separating the wheat from the stalk, also called “threshing” (cf. Judg. 6:11). Small amounts of grain were threshed by beating the grain by hand, which is what Ruth would have done. Although a very small amount might be threshed by simply beating the stalk on the ground, it was more common to beat the grain with a stick. Often some kind of flail was used. For example, although the origin of nunchaku (better known as “nunchucks”) is unclear, they were likely invented by Okinawan farmers as a flail for threshing rice, which had to be threshed off the stalk just as wheat and barley had to be threshed off the stalk. Although the Bible does not tell us the method Ruth used to thresh the barley she had, it is unlikely she carried a flail with her and therefore much more likely that she just beat the stalks of barley on the ground.

If the amount of harvested grain was large, one way that it was threshed was by having a cow or other heavy animal walk back and forth over the grain pile. When the animal walked over the grain pile, its hoofs separated the grain from the stalk. The Law of Moses forbid the animals to be muzzled while they were working, they got to eat as they worked: “You are not to muzzle the ox when he treads out the grain” (Deut. 25:4; cf. 1 Cor. 9:9; 1 Tim. 5:18). Another way that grain was threshed was by using a “threshing sled.” Threshing sleds were heavy wooden sleds with rocks or iron pieces driven into the wood on the bottom of the sled to cut the stalks of grain up and separate the grain from the stalk (Amos 1:3).

**“about an ephah of barley.”** There is serious disagreement about how much an “ephah” was. It was apparently between 30 and 50 pounds, or between two-thirds of a bushel and a bushel.

Rut 2:18

**“picked it up.”** This is a general term for the entire process of picking the grain up off the ground after threshing it and then picking it up to carry it home.

**“saw what she had gleaned.”** Naomi noticed how much Ruth had gleaned, and recognized at this point that someone had intentionally helped her, as we see from Ruth 2:19.

**“what she had left over.”** This is referring to what she had eaten earlier in the day (Ruth 2:14).

Rut 2:19

**“Where have you gleaned today.”** Communication was very limited in the biblical world. There were no cell phones or other means of easy communication. When Ruth walked out the door of where she and Naomi were staying in the morning, the only thing that Naomi knew was that Ruth was going to walk eastward toward the fields of grain there. But from the time Ruth walked out until when she walked back in there would usually not have been any news about her. Naomi no doubt had some amount of anxiety as to where Ruth would go, how she would be treated, and how much grain she could glean to sustain her and Naomi.

Naomi’s double question, “Where have you gleaned today...Where have you worked,” followed by her emphatic blessing, “May the one who took notice of you be blessed” expresses her great surprise at Ruth’s showing up with so much grain. The questions came rapid-fire, and were more expressions of surprise than actual questions, although they were questions and would be answered later. The scene is actually like Ruth walking in the door with over 30 pounds of grain and Naomi exclaiming, “Oh my goodness! Where on earth did you glean today? Where did you work that you could have gotten all that grain! Blessed is he who helped you!” Only after Naomi was over the shock and surprise at all the grain Ruth had was Ruth able to begin to tell her where she had worked that day.

Rut 2:20

**“Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, ‘Blessed of Yahweh be the one.’”** After hearing that Ruth “just happened” to go to the field of Boaz, a kinsman-redeemer, she spontaneously speaks a second blessing on Boaz and that he be blessed by Yahweh. Naomi may have been bitter against Yahweh, but she still believed in Him and could see His invisible hand in this “chance encounter” between Boaz and Ruth. Actually, this statement by Naomi marks a shift for the better in Naomi’s life and things get better and better for her through the rest of the book. Also, her statements mark a shift for the better in her attitude toward Yahweh. Although it would be wonderful if everyone would be like Job and have a positive attitude about God through good times and bad times, most people are like Naomi—when times are good people have a good attitude about God, and when times are bad they have a bad attitude toward God. Perhaps if Naomi had been in a better state of mind to begin with, she could have directed Ruth to start gleaning by going into fields that belonged to members of Elimelech’s family, but either she was too upset to see that possibility or after being gone from Bethlehem for ten years she did not know what fields belonged to family members.

**“his covenant faithfulness.”** The Hebrew word *hesed* (#02617 חֶסֶד) cannot be easily translated into English. It is rooted in relationship and the concept of covenant and relates itself to the faithfulness that God shows in keeping His covenants and His promises. *Hesed* wraps up in one Hebrew word many of the wonderful qualities of God: covenant faithfulness, lovingkindness, mercy, grace, loyalty—wonderful qualities that come from the heart. *Hesed* is thus impossible to translate by the same word in all of its contexts; the translator/reader must understand the semantic range of *hesed* and use the meaning that best fits the context. However, since *hesed* is, on its most basic level, a relationship word, and when it comes to Israel and the Israelites it is a covenant word, it is good to try to use “covenant faithfulness” or something such as that when translating it if the context warrants it, which it often does if *hesed* is referring to the relationship actions between God and Israel.

It is worth noting that different scholars understand *hesed* to have different meanings, and this is due to the wide semantic range of the word itself. The *NIDOTTE* says, “The concept of faithfulness, steadfast love, or more generally kindness, represented by *hesed,* has a strong relational aspect that is essential to any proper definition of the term. … The divine exercise of *hesed* is based on God’s covenantal relationship with his people; *hesed* is the ‘essence’ of the covenantal relationship.”[[6]](#footnote-32337)

Scholars agree that *hesed* is grounded in the relationship between people and/or the relationship between people and God. So it is in understanding the relationship, and the spoken and unspoken promises and commitments that underpin that relationship, that are a vital part of *hesed*. It is because of the relationship, and the expectations of the relationship, that *hesed* exists and can be expected. For example, if God had *hesed* toward Israel, it is because of the relationship that exists between them. Depending on the context, that *hesed* can be expressed in many ways, “faithfulness, mercy, love, grace,” etc., but underpinning those things is the relationship (usually an expressed relationship or even a covenant) that exists between the two parties. Thus, when God moves in favor of Israel, His covenant with them is usually at play in some manner, and so in those cases “covenant faithfulness” is often a good way to understand God and why He does what He does.

Although *hesed* is rightly used of God because of His covenants and promises and behaviors associated with covenants and keeping them, it is also used by people in a more general way to indicate devotion, kindness, faithfulness, love, etc., depending on the context. For example, when Boaz says that Ruth showed *hesed* (Ruth 3:10), some of the translations of it in the English Bibles are “devotion,” “kindness,” “faithful,” “loyalty,” “goodness,” “faithful love,” and “lovingkindness.” Different scholars see the exact nuance of *hesed* in Ruth 3:10 differently, and thus the different translations. It is noteworthy that Naomi uses the word *hesed* in her blessing here in Ruth 2:20, because part of the covenant, the Mosaic Law, was that people show love and kindness to widows, which Boaz was doing.

**“to the living and to the dead.”** The “living” are Naomi and Ruth, who need Boaz’s help. The “dead” are Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion, who had the responsibility to care for Naomi and Ruth but could not fulfill it, whom Boaz has remembered and honored by taking some of their responsibilities upon himself.

**“kinsmen-redeemers.”** The Hebrew is the verb *gaal* (#01350 גָּאַל). In this context, it has both the idea of a family member and one who acts to restore and preserve the family. Daniel Block writes about the form of the Hebrew word and its meaning. “The participle form, גֹאֵ֖ל, functions as a technical legal term, related specifically to Israelite family law” (fn: More than half of its occurrences are found in four texts involving Israelite family matters: Lev. 25, 27; Num. 35 and Deut. 19). This is a kinship term denoting near relatives who were responsible for the economic well-being of other clan members.”[[7]](#footnote-11728) Daniel Block lists five responsibilities of a גֹאֵ֖ל, a kinsman-redeemer: buy back hereditary property that had passed to people outside the clan (Lev. 25:25-31); buy and free people from the clan who had sold themselves into slavery due to poverty (Lev. 25:47-55); finding and executing murderers of near relatives (Num. 35:12, 19-27; cf. Deut. 19:6, 11-13. There was no police force in the ancient biblical world); receiving restitution money on behalf a deceased victim of a crime (Num. 5:8); and ensuring that there was justice in lawsuits that involved relatives (Job 19:25; Ps. 119:154; Jer. 50:34).

It was also the responsibility of a blood brother of the dead husband to marry his brother’s widow and have children by her who would bear the name of the dead brother (Deut. 25:5-10). Although it is not explicitly stated in the Law that a relative should do what a blood brother was supposed to do, the fact that Naomi seemed to think that one of her relatives would marry Ruth indicates that in many cases a relative probably stepped up to marry the widow and be a kinsman-redeemer as if he were a blood brother. Boaz also said that by marrying Ruth he would raise up progeny to keep the name and inheritance of Elimelech and Mahlon alive, which is what a blood-brother kinsman-redeemer would do. However, what ended up happening in the biblical text was that when Boaz married Ruth who bore Obed, Obed became part of Boaz’s genealogy (Ruth 4:18-22; 1 Chron. 2:4-15; Matt. 1:3-6; Luke 3:31-33), and neither Elimelech nor Mahlon is ever mentioned again. The reason for that is not explained in Scripture, but it could easily have to do with the fact that Boaz is part of the famous genealogy that led from Adam to Jesus Christ, through King David, and that overshadowed the line of Elimelech.

Rut 2:21

**“Ruth the Moabitess.”** The fact that the text adds “Ruth the Moabitess” here reminds the reader of the cultural unlikelihood that anything could ever come of the relationship between a dedicated Israelite like Boaz (or one of his family members) and the Moabite woman, but in doing that it increases the reader’s awareness of the goodness and grace of God, and how He can make what seems impossible possible.

**“You should stay close to my young men.”** Boaz knew that without proper protection, Ruth was vulnerable to being harassed and perhaps even raped, so he acted to protect her. Naomi recognized Ruth’s vulnerability as well (Ruth 2:22). Boaz’s attitude toward this young Moabite woman demonstrates God’s heart for people who are “different from us.” All humans are descended from Adam and Eve. There is no room or reason for prejudice in God’s heart based on color or place of origin. What matters to God, and what should matter to us, is how people talk and act. There are ungodly, evil, and dangerous people, but that is not based on skin color, language, or place of origin.

Interestingly, what Boaz said was for Ruth to stay close to his “young women” (Ruth 2:8). Here Ruth said that he said to stay close to his “young men.” It is possible that he said both, or that Ruth interpreted him to mean his harvesters in general which would mean both his young men and young women. It is also possible that now that Ruth knows she will have food for her and Naomi that her primary interest shifts from her sustenance to her protection, and the fact that Boaz’s young men and women worked in close proximity meant that being close to the women also meant being close to the men who would protect her.

**“finished all my harvest.”** Not just the barley harvest, but all the harvest. Although in this context Boaz likely meant the grain harvest, depending on what he grew his complete harvest could go on through the spring and early summer grains, the summer vegetables and grapes, and the fall fruit trees.

Rut 2:22

**“It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women.”** This statement by Naomi reflects more of the change in her heart as she shifts away from being so bitter about God. Angry, bitter people focus on themselves, but in this statement, Naomi is only interested in Ruth’s welfare, not that she will have food for the year.

**“so that *others* will not harm you.”** See commentary on Ruth 2:21.

Rut 2:23

**“in order to glean.”** The Hebrew infinitive denotes purpose. Being in Boaz’s field close to his young women allowed her the safety and opportunity to glean through the whole harvest.

**“until the end of barley harvest and of wheat harvest.”** The barley harvest was associated with Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, so it usually started in our April, while the wheat harvest was usually associated with Pentecost, which was often in our June, so Ruth’s gleaning was probably at least six weeks and more likely around two months. The importance of having a plentiful harvest and storing lots of grain cannot be overstated, because there was only one harvest all year and it had to feed the family for that whole next year. So there is little doubt that Ruth worked very hard for those couple of months.

**Ruth Chapter 3**

Rut 3:1

**“should I not seek rest for you.”** A polite way of saying, “Shouldn’t I be trying to arrange a marriage for you?” In the biblical culture, it was the role of the parents to find a spouse for a daughter or son. Since Ruth had no parents in a position to do that for her, it fell upon Naomi to try to see that Ruth would marry and be an accepted part of a family clan. Here again, we have evidence of the shift going on in Naomi’s heart and her being healed of her bitterness. Here she is interested in Ruth’s welfare and not solely focused on her own, even though she would have known that if Ruth was taken care of, she would also almost certainly be as well.

The book of Ruth has many wonderful lessons embedded in the text that show that if a person is going to do well in life, they need to get busy and start doing what they can, and this is one of those lessons. Naomi does not just sit back and tell Ruth that they should pray for a husband for Ruth; she takes the initiative and puts together a bold plan for Ruth to get married.

Rut 3:2

**“Now, isn’t Boaz.”** This is one of the many rhetorical questions in Ruth. Naomi could have just made the affirmative statement, “Boaz is our relative,” but framing the statement as a rhetorical question pulls the reader into action.

**“whose young women you were with.”** Naomi is hatching a bold and somewhat risky scheme to get Boaz to accept an invitation to marry Ruth. She is trying to get Ruth to buy into her plan by reminding Ruth that Boaz had been gracious to her in the past and made sure she was protected as she was gleaning, so why would he not offer her protection now by marrying her? What is completely missing from this section of Ruth, and is without explanation, is why Naomi would not have done what parents did in that culture when they wanted to give a son or daughter in marriage, ask the parents of the prospective spouse or, in this case, due to Boaz’s age and standing in the community, simply ask Boaz himself. No explanation is given for this glaring omission.

**“our relative.”** Not the same word as “kinsman-redeemer” that occurs elsewhere in Ruth, or in Ruth 3:9. Note how Naomi now intimately connects Ruth with her plan to get a husband for Ruth by calling Boaz “our relative,” not “my relative” or “my dead husband’s relative.” On the other hand, the fact that Naomi only refers to Boaz as “our relative” shows us that there was much more conversation between Ruth and Naomi about Naomi’s plan to get Boaz to marry Ruth than is written in the book of Ruth. In Ruth, Naomi’s instructions only take four verses (Ruth 3:1-4), and she calls Boaz “our relative,” but by the time Ruth is lying at Boaz’s feet at the threshing floor, Ruth asks Boaz to marry her “because you are a kinsman-redeemer.” The development of this plan between Naomi and Ruth very likely took hours but the meat of it is the four verses in Ruth. One of the amazing things about the Bible is the way the Author captures the essence and essentials of a conversation or event so the reader gets what is necessary to understand without having to read a lot of non-essential material.

**“Look.”** Naomi uses this interjection to catch Ruth’s attention.

**“he is winnowing barley tonight.”** Winnowing was done in the evening or early night when the winds blew and it was easier to separate the grain from the chaff. Generally, cool breezes blew from the west at night, from the Mediterranean Sea, and winnowers took advantage of both the cooler evening/nighttime and the wonderful breeze. In the process of winnowing, the piles of grain, stalk, and chaff that had been separated during threshing were thrown into the air. The round, heavy grain fell almost straight down, the pieces of stalk blew a little distance away, and the small chaff blew even further away. At that point, the grain could be more easily picked up to be sieved, which happened before it was ground into flour.

The fact that Boaz was winnowing barley shows that the barley harvest was over. But the barley harvest had just started when Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem (Ruth 1:22). So it was likely only a month or so that Ruth and Naomi had been in Bethlehem, and now Naomi was seeking a husband for Ruth. The age difference between Boaz and Ruth and the fact that Ruth and Naomi needed family support meant that it was understood that this marriage was not based on romantic interests but rather on personal necessity. Also, it was likely that Ruth would not be Boaz’s only wife unless his other wife had died and he had not remarried. In fact, there is no reason to assume that a wealthy man like Boaz only had one other wife, although that may have been the case. Also, it is very likely that Boaz had children by his wife or wives, but they are not mentioned for the same reason that the wives and children of Jesus’ twelve apostles are not mentioned, they are not germane to the biblical record or the points that the Author is trying to make.

**“the threshing floor.”** the threshing floor was a flat area where the stalks of wheat could be piled and then threshed and then winnowed. The smooth, flat surface allowed the grain to be better separated and collected.

Rut 3:3

**“wash yourself, anoint yourself, put on your nice garment.”** Ruth was going to propose that Boaz marry her, and so she made herself presentable for that occasion. It is questionable how much of Ruth’s somewhat elaborate preparations were recognized by Boaz, given the fact that Ruth approached Boaz in the dark. But if Boaz noticed even some of them, many years of living in that culture would have immediately and instinctively indicated to him that this was the behavior of a bride, and that alone would have made it quite obvious to him why Ruth was there at his feet and what she wanted, which soon she would explicitly ask for. There is no indication, however, that Ruth was in any way trying to seduce Boaz at this time (although some people have suggested that) and no indication on Boaz’s part that he would have agreed to such an encounter anyway. Frankly, given Boaz’s noble character, and given the history of Israel and the fact that during their wilderness wanderings the Moabite women used ritual sex to seduce the men of Israel to worship pagan gods (Num. 25:1-9), any hint that Ruth the Moabitess was trying to seduce Boaz would have almost certainly repulsed him and soured his relationship with both Ruth and Naomi (see commentary on Ruth 3:4, “uncover his feet”).

**“go down to the threshing floor.”** The grazing land to the east of Bethlehem was a little lower in elevation than the town of Bethlehem, so people had to “go down” to the threshing floor. Then people go “up” into the city (Ruth 4:1).

**“until he has finished eating and drinking.”** It was very common that at mealtime the men of a clan ate together and then later the women and children. Naomi’s advice that Boaz finish eating and drinking was not only so he would be relaxed, but also so Ruth, who was already being somewhat aggressive in asking for Boaz to marry her, would not appear desperate, and furthermore, she had to meet him alone, when he was away from all the other men.

Rut 3:4

**“note the place where he is lying.”** How exactly to note where Boaz had laid down would take some planning. Ruth could not just go and stand somewhere close to the threshing floor without being noticed. The grain harvest was very valuable and was always the target of thieves who were looking for an opportunity to swoop in and grab some grain and run off, so grain owners had a sharp eye out for people who were just “hanging around” the threshing floor. The Bible does not tell us how Ruth did it, but it would not have been easy.

**“go and uncover his feet and lie down; then he will tell you what you are to do.”** This is an amazing sentence describing boldness yet tact and humility, and it also leaves unspoken that which everyone knows had to be, and was, spoken. To begin with, we wonder why Naomi did not follow the ancient custom of advocating for Ruth. Although the Bible does not say why, it is likely that Boaz was very old, close to 90 anyway, and perhaps older, and Ruth was almost certainly in her early 20s (see commentary on Ruth 1:8 and 4:18). Given that, it may be that Boaz did not think it appropriate to ask Ruth to marry him, and also may have felt Ruth would have rejected him. The obvious solution was to have Ruth ask Boaz herself. Also, obviously, there had to be more to what happened than just Ruth lying at Boaz’s feet and then him telling her what to do. What is graciously left unspoken is that Ruth would have to ask Boaz to marry her. This was likely discussed in some detail between Naomi and Ruth, but is left out of the text, perhaps because that it happened was so obvious.

**“Uncover his feet.”** That Naomi told Ruth to uncover Boaz’s feet is an interesting tactic. It was not that Ruth was to uncover Boaz’s feet, lie down, and then cover the feet and herself again. Ruth was to uncover Boaz’s feet and lie down next to them. Naomi likely gambled—correctly in this case—that the cool night air would eventually make Boaz uncomfortable and he would wake up and find Ruth lying there, which is exactly what happened. About midnight Boaz trembled, ostensibly because of the cold, and woke up to find Ruth at his feet. Ruth’s lying at Boaz’s feet shows proper humility and tact, but still gets the point across that Ruth was desirous to serve Boaz, which was more or less the way women were thought of in that culture—not as equals but as servants; often beloved and honored servants, but as servants nevertheless.

Some of the vocabulary that is used in Ruth 3 to describe Naomi’s plan and Ruth’s actions can be used idiomatically and in some contexts have a sexual meaning, and this has led some commentators to assert that Naomi and Ruth plotted to have Ruth go to the threshing floor to seduce Boaz. For example, that Ruth would bathe herself and put on special clothes can be confused with the way a prostitute dressed, the verb “lie” and the phrase “lie down” can refer to sex (similar to the English word “sleep”), the word “feet” is sometimes used in the biblical culture for the genital organs, etc. For example, Jeremy Schipper suggests that Ruth did not uncover Boaz’s feet, but rather he applies the word “uncover” to Ruth and translates the phrase such that Naomi instructs Ruth to “undress at his feet and lie down” (Ruth 3:4). Schipper writes, “Naomi is probably instructing Ruth to undress and lie at Boaz’s feet, as Ruth does in the following verses (3:7, 8, 14). Nevertheless, exactly what type of activity Naomi implies and Ruth carries out remains unclear because in some of the references above, uncovering the body is used with the various forms of the root *skb* (“to lie down”) as a euphemism for sexual activity...Moreover, other verbs that Naomi uses in this verse (“know” and “enter”) derive from roots that are often used as euphemisms for sexual intercourse.”[[8]](#footnote-11034) Many scholars admit that that vocabulary does not have to be taken to mean that Ruth went to the threshing floor to have sex with Boaz, but say that the way it is written, “the storyteller meant to be ambiguous and hence provocative” (Jack Sasson, *Ruth* (commentary on Ruth 3:4)).

Frankly, suggesting that Naomi counseled Ruth to go to the threshing floor to try to seduce Boaz and that Ruth would agree to that scheme casts a dark cloud of doubt and worldliness over Naomi, Ruth, and even Boaz, which is against their character as it is generally portrayed in Ruth and against the social norms of how godly people live. However, such an overtly sexual portrayal of the three characters is very much in vogue with the modern and worldly outlook on life that tosses aside the value of genuine godliness and obedience to God (and even the existence of God itself) and makes almost everything about sex and related activities that the Bible would deem immoral and ungodly. Thankfully, many conservative scholars see that Ruth 3 is not about Ruth seducing Boaz. For example, Daniel Block agrees that in certain contexts some of the vocabulary used in Ruth can be euphemistic of sex, but notes that the words also have a non-sexual meaning. In his commentary, Block first defends the non-sexual meaning of the vocabulary in Ruth 3, and then writes, “Finally, rather than noting the restraint with which Naomi chooses her words, the overtly sexual interpretation exaggerates the significance of her instructions in v. 3, and disregards the narrator’s characterization of both her and Ruth in the story. How could he have Boaz, also a virtuous person, bless Ruth for her action (v. 10) and characterize her as supremely noble (v. 11) if she was acting like a prostitute? Neither Naomi nor Ruth expresses interest in sex or even progeny at this point. Naomi’s concern was to provide more security for Ruth than she, as mother-in-law, could offer. Only a husband could give the long-range protection and support she needed. Furthermore, an attempt at seduction would undermine the entire enterprise.”[[9]](#footnote-10723)

Although the readers of the book of Ruth are not told all the “whys and wherefores” in the record, we can see that Naomi is genuinely interested in Ruth’s welfare and Ruth is bold enough to carry out Naomi’s plan, which of course would also mean Ruth herself would be cared for.

Rut 3:5

**“All that you say I will do.”** Ruth understood the wisdom of what Naomi was telling her, and the need that she and Naomi provide a family for themselves.

Rut 3:6

**“her mother-in-law commanded her.”** So Naomi took charge of making sure Ruth would have a husband and be taken care of.

Rut 3:7

**“he went to lie down at the edge of the heap of grain.”** Landowners would often participate in the protection of their harvest, and that is the main reason Boaz would sleep by the grain pile. An ancillary reason was he would likely not want to make the walk back to Bethlehem at night. Although we are not told how large the heap of grain was, given how much grain Ruth gleaned in one day indicates that this was a very large grain pile.

Rut 3:8

**“trembled.”** The Hebrew is hard to exactly translate because it can have different meanings. It can mean “trembled” for some reason such as fear, but in this case, Boaz might have simply been chilled by the night air. Or Boaz may have in some sense felt something was wrong and trembled and turned, only to discover a person was there.

**“behold, a woman was lying at his feet.”** The word “behold” in this context indicates surprise and probably even shock. The presence of Ruth there at the threshing floor and there at his feet was a total surprise. It likely took him a moment to even figure out that it was a woman. The Bible is silent about how much light there was at that time from the moon, but judging by the fact that Ruth could leave without being well seen there would not have been a full moon that night.

Rut 3:9

**“Who are you.”** Boaz did not yet know who was there with him.

**“I am Ruth your servant.”** The Hebrew word used here in Ruth 3:9 and translated “servant” is *'amah* (#0519 אָמָה), and it generally referred to a female servant or female slave, a maid or handmaid, a concubine. However, *'amah* is a different word from the Hebrew word translated “servant” in Ruth 2:13, which is *shiphchah* (#08198 שִׁפְחָה). Although *shiphchah* also means female servant or female slave, maid, handmaid, or slave girl, *shiphchah* is considered by many scholars to refer to the lowest rank of the female slave, who was also often the female slave of the mistress of the house.

The words *'amah* and *shiphchah* are often used synonymously, or seemingly without distinction in the Hebrew text, especially when they are used in Hebrew poetry. But sometimes, such as here in Ruth, the difference between the two words is important. When Ruth first meets Boaz in the field and he is unexpectedly kind and generous to her, she refers to herself as a *shiphchah* because that was how she was debasing herself and portraying herself, the Moabite girl, as the lowest form of servant girl. But here in Ruth 3:9, Ruth is about to ask that Boaz marry her, so referring to herself as the lowest possible slave would have been inappropriate. Thus, here in Ruth 3:9, Ruth calls herself an *'amah*, a female servant who Boaz could marry. So Ruth portrays herself in two different ways using two different words, depending on her situation. The fact that she takes advantage of the words available to her and appropriate to each situation displays some of the wisdom and tact that Ruth had.

Unfortunately, today’s English language does not have a large vocabulary when it comes to the status of servants. In fact, the only English word that is well recognized and that mostly fits with what Ruth called herself is the word “servant,” and so most English Bibles use “servant” in both Ruth 2:13 and 3:9, even though the English text then loses some of the richness that can be found in the Hebrew text.

**“the wing of your *cloak* over your servant.”** The same idea occurs in Ezekiel 16:8, where God spread the corner of His garment over Israel when she was young. What Ruth said was picturesque and humble, but her meaning was unmistakable. Ruth epitomized boldness with humility and tact. The Hebrew word “wing” is used of the corner or end of the garment (cf. Deut. 22:12; 1 Sam. 15:27; 24:5-6, 11).

Rut 3:10

**“May you be blessed by Yahweh, my daughter!”** The Hebrew can also be translated as many versions do, “Blessed are you of Yahweh,” but it seems more likely that Boaz is not stating here that Ruth is blessed, but rather saying “May you be blessed.” Boaz’s statement allows the reader to breathe a sigh of relief and opens the door for marriage for Ruth and protection for her and Naomi. Boaz is obviously looking favorably upon Ruth and even if he doesn’t marry her he understands what she needs and will assist her in getting it. The other possibility (a very possible alternative, actually), was that Boaz would be scandalized at Ruth’s bold and unorthodox approach and would have driven her from the threshing floor. If that had occurred, the book of Ruth would read quite differently.

**“You have shown more devotion at the end than at the beginning.”** This powerful statement shows us that Boaz was not in some “I just woke up” muddled state of mind, but was thinking and analyzing very clearly. He immediately recognizes the boldness and risk Ruth was taking in what she was doing, and makes the statement that this act of hers took more “devotion” than what she had done “at the beginning,” most likely a referral to what Ruth had done in leaving her family and the land of her birth and coming to Israel with Naomi. The word translated “devotion.” is *hesed*, which is generally a covenant word that indicates the kind of faithful and loving behavior that people in a covenant relationship show.

[For more on *hesed*, see commentary on Ruth 1:8.]

**“you did not go after young men.”** This implies that Boaz was quite old. But even if old he was capable. He traveled back and forth to his fields, diligently cared for his land and crops, and was obviously still very clear-headed in his thinking.

Rut 3:11

**“my daughter.”** Boaz sees Ruth as young enough to be his daughter, but realizing her welfare is at stake is willing to marry her.

**“do not be afraid.”** Boaz understood perfectly that Ruth (and Naomi) had reasons to worry about their future, and Boaz speaks directly to that to calm Ruth’s mind.

**“I will do for you all that you say.”** This demonstrates true humility on the part of Boaz, even in making the statement the way he did. Doing “all that you say” is generally the role of the servant, listening to the master, but here Boaz understands the need that Ruth and Naomi have, he understands his kinship relation to them, and he understands the wisdom in Ruth’s being married to him, so he makes the simple and humble statement, “I will do for you all that you say.” A man with more insecurity and pride might have understood Ruth’s need but have spoken to her differently.

**“for all the gate of my people knows.”** The word “gate” is a metonymy for the people of the gate, both the gossips and the elders, and the elders at the gate were the authorities in many cities. We now know for sure what we might have expected earlier, that Ruth had been a topic of discussion around the whole town. If “all the gate,” the elders and the gossips, knew that Ruth was a woman of noble character, then she must have been discussed and debated at some length, and certainly with some people “for” her and some “against” this Moabite girl. But in the end, her faithful devotion to Naomi and her quiet and respectful way of being had won over the people of Bethlehem such that now “all” the people (likely a hyperbole for the vast majority) understood that she was a noble woman. Since it was just now the end of the barley harvest, and Ruth came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest, it likely took four to six weeks for people to reach that opinion.

There is a great lesson in how Ruth behaved when she knew—and she would have known—that the town was talking about her. It can be very uncomfortable to know that people are talking about you, but that is often an unavoidable part of life for those who do anything noteworthy. Ruth sets a sterling example of what to do and what not to do in that situation. Ruth just kept on doing what she needed to do, working to support her and Naomi. She did not go around the town trying to run interference for herself and influence public opinion in her favor.

**“you are a woman of noble character.”** The word translated “noble character” is used here and in Proverbs 12:4 and 31:10.

Rut 3:12

**“there also is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I.”** The Levitical Law was that if a woman’s husband died, the man’s brother would marry the widow and have children by her who would then bear the name of the dead brother (Deut. 25:5-10). In this case, Boaz was not even a descendant of Elimelech, but was a relative of his (Ruth 2:1). Given the fact that people at that time tried to have large families for mutual care and protection, it is not unusual that there would be someone in Elimelech’s family who was a closer kinsman-redeemer than Boaz. It is also worth noting that Elimelech did not have a blood brother that could be the kinsman-redeemer.

Rut 3:13

**“Stay *here* tonight.”** The reason that Boaz wanted Ruth to stay the rest of the night with him instead of going right home is unstated, but there are a couple of logical reasons why he might have said it. One reason is that it was more dangerous to travel in the middle of the night than it was when it was first getting light enough to see. Another reason could be that Boaz wanted Ruth to be close in case either of them thought of something that needed to be discussed about their plans for the next day. The suggestion that Boaz wanted that so he could have sex with her is out of place (see commentary on Ruth 3:4, “uncover his feet”).

**“let him redeem *you*.”** The phrase, “let him redeem you” could almost seem too casual or perhaps too matter-of-fact and heartless for this situation because it is Ruth’s life and the man she would be married to that is undecided. Ruth knows Boaz, but who is this other man who was a closer relative to Elimelech, and if he decides to redeem Ruth, what would her life, and Naomi’s life, be like then? But in spite of these unknowns, it is important to do things in an honest way. Boaz was a fair and honest man, and he did things in a right and honest way. That is the right way to live even if sometimes things do not turn out the way one expects them to. Psalm 15:4 says that the one who is qualified to live on God’s holy mountain is one “who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change *his mind*,” and doing the right thing even when it hurts is God’s faithful way, and we certainly see that in the life of Jesus Christ.

Rut 3:14

**“It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.”** This would protect both Boaz’s and Ruth’s reputations. In the same way that thieves would try to steal from a threshing floor (see commentary on Ruth 3:4), prostitutes knew that the men at the threshing floor were generally away from their families and could pay right away in grain. So it was not uncommon to see a prostitute at the threshing floor (Hos. 9:1), and neither Boaz nor Ruth needed that accusation hanging over their heads. The Hebrew text reads “the woman” while the Septuagint text reads “a woman.” It is possible that “the woman” is a copyist’s error, or it is possible that by “the woman” Boaz meant Ruth and that people had taken notice of his concern for Ruth and Naomi.

Rut 3:15

**“cloak.”** This particular word translated “cloak” is unusual, occurring only here and Isaiah 3:22.

**“hold it.”** The idea is to hold it tightly so the grain would not spill out. The Hebrew means to hold or grasp.

**“measured six *measures* of barley.”** This is likely about 60 pounds, but the exact measure is unknown. This shows the great concern that Boaz had for Naomi and Ruth. It also would have provided some protection for him had Ruth been seen and recognized; it would have looked like Ruth came early to see about getting some sustenance for her and Naomi.

**“and he went into the city.”** The Hebrew text reads “he.” Some late Hebrew manuscripts, and the Syriac and Vulgate, read “she,” and some English versions follow them and not the Hebrew text. Which reading is correct is a difficult choice because they both ended up going into the city of Bethlehem: Ruth to Naomi with the grain, Boaz to the city gate.

Rut 3:16

**“How did it go, my daughter?”** The Hebrew text is idiomatic, literally, “Who are you, my daughter.” The Hebrew text, while idiomatic, shows a deep grasp of humanity, because “who” we are changes with the circumstances of our life. If things are going well for us, then we are calm, peaceful, happy, and tend to be giving and forgiving. But if things are not going well for us, then we tend to be more self-centered and could be angry, unhappy, etc. Although it has been suggested that Naomi said “Who are you” because it was still dark and Naomi did not recognize her, that seems hardly credible. Naomi sent Ruth to be with Boaz, and now Ruth returns, and there is very little doubt that Naomi spent the night without sleep, waiting and worrying about the situation. She was looking for Ruth and would not have mistaken her. Even though the literal “who are you” is an idiom meaning something such as “how did it go,” the idiom arose out of the truth that people are different in different situations.

**“all that the man had done for her.”** The use of “the man” here is purposeful. Both Naomi and Ruth knew Boaz well by this time, and it seems natural that Ruth would have used his name. But at this point in the record, Ruth and Naomi need a “man” who can take them under his wing and make sure they are cared for, so in this sentence, it is more important to emphasize that a “man” had promised Ruth much, and emphasize his gender, than use his name and say, “Boaz.”

Rut 3:17

**“to your mother-in-law.”** Boaz was concerned for Naomi, and exemplified the heart of the Law (Deut. 24:17-21).

**“Do not go empty-*handed* to your mother-in-law.”** This is the second time the word “empty” occurs in Ruth, the first being Ruth 1:21, when Naomi said that she had left Bethlehem full, but that Yahweh had brought her back “empty.” It surely seems that Naomi’s situation is changing, and she is getting filled by people who love Yahweh.

These are the last words spoken by Ruth in the book of Ruth, and they show the same heart that Ruth has shown ever since she first came on the scene in chapter 1; her concern for others and especially Naomi. Surely this conversation between Ruth and Naomi was long and emotional, and the Author could have chosen many different statements to be Ruth’s last words. The fact that He chose them to be about Boaz taking care of Naomi is no accident, then the scene quickly changes to Ruth 4.

Ruth 4 is dominated by Boaz negotiating to be the kinsman-redeemer, comfort to Naomi, and the royal genealogy of King David. We know that Boaz married Ruth and that Ruth had the baby Obed, but more about Ruth than that is only speculation. Also, Boaz was much older than Ruth, he likely being at least 90 and her being in her mid-20s when they married, so we can only guess at what might have happened to Ruth after Boaz died.

If the book of Ruth occurred during the judgeship of Deborah as the genealogy in Ruth 4 suggests, Ruth would have been alive and Boaz likely dead when the Israelites rejected Yahweh again and were subsequently afflicted by the Midianites and Amalekites during the time of Gideon. At that time the Midianites and Amalekites, who came from the south and east but likely entered Israel north of the Dead Sea, “encamped against them [Israel] and destroyed the produce of the land as far as Gaza, and left no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or donkey” (Judg. 6:4). Gaza is southwest of Bethlehem, so while it is possible that the Midianites bypassed the central hill country of Israel and came down from the north through the Shephelah and coastal plain, it is quite possible that they went right through the breadbasket of southern Israel and thus would have devastated Bethlehem in their attacks. In any case, the Midianites and Amalekites so afflicted Israel that “Israel was brought very low because of Midian” (Judg. 6:6), so it could not have been a good time for Ruth, who would likely have been still alive but likely in her late 40s or older.

Rut 3:18

**“Then she said.”** These are the last words of Naomi in the book of Ruth, and they are factual but as comforting as she could be given the situation. Naomi does not give glowing words of hope about the future, but her confidence in Boaz is comforting. It often happens in life that people have to rely on one another, and being a reliable person is part of being a godly person, and God has a lot to say about being a faithful, reliable person (cf. Prov. 25:19).

**“Sit still.”** The Hebrew is just “sit,” but the idea is “sit still,” or “wait.”

**“how the matter turns out.”** A more literal translation would be “how the matter will fall,” which was her way of expressing how the matter will turn out. The source of the idiom is not known, and this is the only place in the Bible where the word “fall” is used to mean “turn out” or “result.” It is possible that the idiom came from the practice of using lots or dropping other things to determine the will of God (cf. Ezek. 21:21). This does not seem to be just helpless fatalism on the part of Naomi, but based on her telling Ruth to “sit still,” it seems to be based in Naomi’s perhaps newfound confidence that things will turn out well. Nevertheless, she expresses the situation well, because good outcomes are not guaranteed in life.

**“for the man will not rest.”** Naomi had picked up upon the concern that Boaz had for her and Ruth, and realized that he would deal with the matter of the kinsman-redeemer that day if at all possible.

**Ruth Chapter 4**

Rut 4:1

**“Now Boaz.”** The action shifts from Ruth and Naomi to Boaz (see commentary on Ruth 3:18).

**“went up.”** The town was higher in elevation than the fields around it (cf. Ruth 3:3).

**“*city* gate.”** In the biblical culture of the Old Testament, it was the custom that the elders of a city would sit at the city gate (Gen. 19:1, 9; Deut. 21:19; 22:15; 25:7; Josh. 20:4; Ruth 4:11; 1 Sam. 4:18; Esther 2:19, 21; 3:2; Lam. 5:14; Dan. 2:49). The fact that Bethlehem had a wall and a gate at this early time in its history shows that it was a town of some importance.

[For more on the elders at the gate, see commentary on Ruth 4:11; and for Wisdom being at the city gate, see commentary on Prov. 1:21.]

**“And behold.”** The word “behold” is to catch our attention, but here it adds an element of surprise. We see God’s hand at work in that the very man Boaz needed to meet with showed up at the city gate apparently not long after Boaz himself arrived.

**“friend.”** The Hebrew is purposely vague and does not give the man’s name even though Boaz would have known it and seems certain to have used it in this situation. A literal translation of the Hebrew text would be more like “Turn aside, such and such” or “Turn aside, certain one.” The NET goes so far as to call the man “John Doe.” The translation “friend,” done in many versions, is interpretive. Different reasons have been proposed for the book of Ruth not personally naming the man. Some have suggested personal embarrassment, although the man would have been long dead by the time the book of Ruth was written, but his clan would almost certainly been alive. Others have suggested that not naming the man may be a literary device to contrast the fact that he refused to keep the name of Elimelech’s son Mahlon alive by not marrying Ruth.

Rut 4:2

**“ten men.”** The Mosaic Law required two or three witnesses, but in getting ten, Boaz will make the conclusion to his case indisputable.

Rut 4:3

**“is selling.”** There is a huge amount of scholarly discussion about this piece of land. There are a number of possibilities based on the Hebrew text and the Law of Moses. The verb translated “is selling” is a perfect tense (past tense) verb, so one possibility is that the land had already been sold to someone outside the family because of Naomi’s situation, and now Naomi is appealing to have the land bought back by a kinsman-redeemer and brought back into the family. Another possibility is that the verb can also be taken as a participle in which case the sense would be that Naomi “has put up for sale” the land. There are some other possibilities as well. As readers, we really do not have enough information in the text to make a firm decision, and the reason is likely that the property was ancillary to the point of the record, which was about Ruth and getting her and Naomi well taken care of.

One question that remains unanswered is that the reader was more or less led to believe that Naomi was a needy widow who was being sustained through the harvest by Ruth, but could she have land to sell? And if so, how much and how much was it worth? Or, as the text can be read, it is possible that Elimelech sold the land before he left for Moab and now there is a chance to redeem it back to the clan.

**“brother.”** Here the word “brother” is used to mean a relative, not a literal brother from the same father or mother.

Rut 4:4

**“to inform you of it.”** The Hebrew text uses an idiom, “uncover your ear.”

**“For there is no one to redeem it besides you.”** What Boaz said must be understood in the social context. When Boaz said, “there is no one to redeem it besides you,” he meant that there was no relative closer in line to redeem it than that man he was speaking to.

What is going on at this time in Ruth is not specifically addressed in the Law. The Mosaic Law only spoke of the actual brother of the deceased man, and stipulated that a brother of the deceased would marry the widow. But it seems clear that neither Boaz nor the man he was talking to were actual brothers of Mahlon. It is therefore reasonable to assume that people understood the Law to mean that if no actual brother existed, then the next closest relative could act as the kinsman-redeemer unless, as in this case, he turned it down and another person acted as the kinsman-redeemer. Thus the door was opened for Boaz to be the kinsman-redeemer for Ruth, and Naomi would become taken care of as part of the family clan.

**“I will redeem it.”** Apparently, this unnamed relative was wealthy and interested in increasing his land holdings around Bethlehem.

Rut 4:5

**“you buy it also from Ruth the Moabitess.”** That makes sense because Ruth’s husband who died was the rightful heir, and Orpah had stayed in Moab and would likely have remarried and had Moabite children in Moab.

Rut 4:6

**“serve as the kinsman-redeemer.”** The verb “kinsman-redeemer” has no object in the Hebrew text, although many translations add one and read “redeem it.” The verb without the object is better translated to act or serve as the kinsman-redeemer.[[10]](#footnote-27851)

Rut 4:7

**“this was *the custom* in former times.”** The custom that is described in Ruth 4:7 is quite similar to the custom described in the Mosaic Law (Deut. 25:5-10). It also apparently differs from the custom as it was commonly practiced at the time the book of Ruth was written down because the custom described here in Ruth 4 was the custom as it was practiced “in former times.” There were often customs such as this sandal custom that made it clear that a deal had been made and finalized and both parties agreed to it. When it comes to covenants and agreements, it is easy to forget who agreed to what, and written contracts were rare, so customs developed such that everyone knew the deal had been made. When Abraham made a covenant with Abimelech, king of Gerar, Abraham gave him seven lambs, which Abimelech accepted from Abraham (Gen. 21:28-32).

**“sandal.”** The custom of giving up a sandal when land is bought, sold, or exchanged likely comes from the idea that the right to walk on the land belonged to the person who owned the land, and when a person no longer had a right to walk on the land then he gave up a sandal as tangible proof the land was not his. It also was a clear proof that the deal was done. If someone had your sandal, then everyone knew you agreed to the deal.

Rut 4:8

**“and he took off his sandal.”** Grammatically, the Hebrew text is unclear as to who took off his sandal, Boaz or the other man, but it seems the one who had the right to walk on the land received the sandal from the other person.

Rut 4:9

**“Boaz said to the elders and to all the people.”** The city gate was a busy place, especially in small villages like Bethlehem which would have only had one gate. When Boaz gathered ten elders to be with him in the gate (Ruth 4:2), that would have gotten people’s attention and a crowd would have gathered at the gate, as we see here in Ruth 4:9, so there were “people” and “elders” who had gathered at the gate (for more on the elders at the gate, see commentary on Ruth 4:11).

**“all that was Elimelech’s and all that was Chilion’s and Mahlon’s.”** Although Chilion and Mahlon never had a chance to inherit from Elimelech, Boaz is old and wise and makes sure that everyone is clear about the fact that he is redeeming everything that belonged to Elimelech and his sons. No one is going to be able to come back later and say anything about the estate not belonging to Elimelech.

The text never mentions what might have happened if Orpah had decided to return with Naomi as Ruth did. Things certainly would have been more complicated, but this is a case, like so many in life, where speculation becomes a waste of time and energy.

Rut 4:10

**“Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon.”** This is the first time in Ruth that we learn which man married which woman. Mahlon married Ruth, so Chilion married Orpah.

**“I have purchased to be my wife.”** Boaz “purchased” Ruth by way of redemption. She was not purchased in the same way a slave wife was purchased.

Rut 4:11

**“All the people who were at the gate.”** Once Boaz sat in the gate and gathered ten elders to sit with him, the people would have known something important was about to happen and a crowd gathered. Boaz took advantage of that situation and spoke to both the people and the elders (Ruth 4:9), and they all agreed. While the witness of the elders was important, in a small village like Bethlehem the agreement of the people was important as well.

**“and the elders.”** In the biblical culture of the Old Testament, it was the custom that the elders of a city would sit at the city gate so they could learn what was going on in the city and so they could give advice and judge disputes (Gen. 19:1, 9; 34:20; Deut. 21:19; 22:15; 25:7; Josh. 20:4; Ruth 4:11; 1 Sam. 4:18; Esther 2:19, 21; 3:2; Prov. 24:7; Lam. 5:14; Dan. 2:49; cf. Amos 5:10). Sometimes even the king of the land would sit at the gate of the city (2 Sam. 19:8; 1 Kings 22:10). Most cities had only one gate, and so everyone who went in or out of the city would have to pass through that gate. Furthermore, there was usually an open space just inside the gate so there was plenty of room for people to gather.

The elders at the gate were generally older, mature men who were the powerful men of the city. As elders and often acting as judges, they were supposed to be godly and wise, which is why “Wisdom” could be found at the city gates (cf. Prov. 1:20-21). However, it was sometimes the case that the powerful men of the city were self-centered or ungodly, in which case the advice they gave would be ungodly too. Proverbs, reflecting the wisdom of the time, advises people to get advice from a multitude of counselors, and often those wise counselors could be found at the city gate (Prov. 11:14; 15:22; 24:6).

The larger cities often had a “double gate” for security. A double gate was a gate complex consisting of an outer gate and an inner gate with a space between them. The idea behind the double gate was that if an enemy managed to break down the outer gate they would not be able to break down the inner gate because while they were trying to breach it the city defenders could shoot arrows and spears, or throw rocks, or pour boiling water or oil down on top of them from the city walls surrounding them. The Old Testament city of Lachish is a good example of that.

If the city had a double gate, sometimes the elders sat “in” the gate, in the shade between the walls. The Hebrew “in” can also usually be translated “at,” so whether the elders were “at” the gate or “in” it usually has to be determined from the archaeology of the city. For example, Bethlehem was not a big city so when it did have a wall during what archaeologists refer to as the First Temple period, it would have been a simple wall with just one gate, not a double gate, so the elders would have sat “at” the gate, not “in” it.

[For more information on the elders at the gate, and that a person could seek wise advice there, see commentary on Prov. 1:21, “at the head of noisy streets.”]

**“*We are* witnesses!”** The Hebrew is simply the one word, “Witnesses!” Both the elders and the people gathered around were united in saying they were witnesses to Ruth marrying Boaz and thus the land that had belonged to the family of Naomi (her husband and sons) would now belong to Boaz and his clan. The terse, emphatic answer emphasizes that the elders and people agreed that they were witnesses to the transaction that had just transpired.

**“the woman who has come into your house.”** This phrase indicates that upon marrying Boaz, Ruth was fully accepted into Israelite society.[[11]](#footnote-23728)

**“Rachel and like Leah.”** The two wives of Jacob, together with their slaves Bilhah and Zilpah, gave birth to the twelve sons of Jacob who became the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Gen. 29-30). The fact that Rachel is first seems unusual because Leah was the first and most dominant wife and also because the women speaking were from Bethlehem in the tribal area of Judah, and Judah was Leah’s son, not Rachel’s son. It may be due to the fact that the next verse, Ruth 4:12, focuses on the descendants of Leah’s son Judah.

**“do worthily…be famous in Bethlehem.”** The literal Hebrew is idiomatic: “do strength and call a name in Bethlehem.”

Rut 4:12

**“May your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah​.”** The record of Judah, Tamar, and Tamar’s son Perez is in Genesis 38. Although one or more of the elders may have brought up the fact that Tamar bore Perez, it well could have been something added by the women in the crowd because it is part of the history of their clan and the union of Judah and Tamar produced a child that contributed greatly to their clan. Tamar was not only an important woman in Israel’s history, she was almost certainly, like Ruth, not an Israelite by birth. Other than the record of Ruth itself, the Judah-Tamar relationship is the most well-known Levirate-like sexual union in the Bible, although it is mainly well-known because of the human drama surrounding it: the selfishness, lies, and trickery. In any case, by mentioning Tamar, who was honored as an ancestor of the clan, the crowd and the elders may have also been making Ruth feel more welcome in the clan.

Boaz married Ruth in a Levirate-like marriage, and Tamar bore Perez to Judah in a Levirate-like situation (although Jacob did not know it at the time). As Genesis 38 records, Judah had three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. Er married Tamar and died before he had children. Onan should have had children by Tamar but did not want to, and he died also. Judah did not want to give Tamar to Shelah lest he die too, so he made excuses for her not to marry Shelah. Tamar then pretended to be a prostitute and had sex with Judah, got pregnant, and bore Perez. Perez’s descendants grew into a large clan, and Boaz and Obed his son by Ruth were Perez’s descendants and also, as we later learn, were in the genealogy of Christ.

**“seed.”** The Hebrew is literally “seed,” which speaks of the next generation, and it refers to offspring. The farmer needs seed from this year’s crop to continue farming.

Rut 4:13

**“he went to her.”** An idiom for sexual intercourse.

**“and Yahweh gave her conception.”** This conception was miraculous in the sense that Ruth had lived with her husband for ten years and not gotten pregnant (Ruth 1:4), but now she gets pregnant by the elderly Boaz.

Rut 4:14

**“who has not left you this day without a kinsman-redeemer.”** The wording of the text is set in the negative, that God “has not left you without” a kinsman-redeemer. We would expect something like, “Yahweh has given you a kinsman-redeemer” (cf. Solomon’s positive statement in 1 Kings 8:56). Perhaps the negative Hebrew text, which is more literally that Yahwah “has not stopped for you a kinsman-redeemer” is emphasizing that God is not against Naomi and has not stopped blessing her, in contrast to what Naomi expressed earlier (cf. Ruth 1:20-21).

The Hebrew verb translated as kinsman-redeemer is *gaal* (#01350 גָּאַל), the same word that has been translated as “kinsman-redeemer” in other places in Ruth. However, in this verse, the technical meaning of “kinsman-redeemer” is not being used (for the technical meaning, see commentary on Ruth 2:20). Here in Ruth 4:14, the women are not referring to Boaz but to the new baby, Obed. The women are referring to baby Obed as a kinsman-redeemer in the non-technical sense of one who can rescue the family from trouble, which Obed would do. This is a shift in the way *gaal* is used in Ruth, but an understandable shift since the women saw Obed as one who gave hope to Naomi and Ruth and would support Naomi in her old age. Daniel Block writes “The birth of this child was...viewed from a practical women’s perspective, the solution to Naomi’s concerns.”[[12]](#footnote-22046)

Several lines of evidence support the use of *gaal* as referring to baby Obed. The flow of Ruth 4:14-17 is all about baby Obed, Boaz is not even mentioned in those verses. Also, Ruth 4:13 and 14 are tightly connected, and when baby Obed is born, the women say that Yahweh has provided a kinsman-redeemer “this day.” Obed was born that day, but Boaz buying the field and acquiring Ruth as a wife had happened many months earlier. Also, Ruth 4:15 says that Ruth has given birth to “him,” which the context points to as being the *gaal*, the kinsman-redeemer. One has to unnaturally break Ruth 4:14 such that the first sentence segment refers to Boaz and the second segment to Obed to not apply Ruth giving birth to the redeemer to not make gaal refer to Obed, but there is no compelling reason to make that break. Also, the women say that this “kinsman-redeemer” will be a support to Naomi in her old age, but Naomi was likely only in her mid to late 40s when Obed was born, she was not in her old age and would not be for some time. Naomi likely had her sons in her teens (girls were typically married between 12 and 14), and boys were usually married in their mid-teens, so Naomi was likely only around 30 or in her early 30s when her sons were married, and they were married for ten years before they died (Ruth 1:4). So it is most likely that Naomi was only in her early 40s when Ruth married Boaz. Although 40 years old is not considered young, neither is it considered old. For example, according to the Mosaic Law, priests were not even allowed to serve until they were 30 years old (Num. 4:3, 30). So by the time Obed was in his teens and well able to marry and offer valuable support to family members, Naomi would be in her mid to late 50s, but Boaz would almost certainly have passed away (see chronology in commentary on Ruth 4:18). So Obed would be the one who could support Naomi in her old age.

**“let his name be famous in Israel.”** The “his” refers to the child who will be born (cf. Ruth 4:15).

Rut 4:15

**“and sustain you in your old age.”** Naomi was not yet in her old age (cf. commentary on Ruth 4:14), but as baby Obed grows up he will be able to sustain Naomi and his mother Ruth as they age.

**“better to you than seven sons.”** The value of sons to the family can be seen by this verse and 1 Samuel 1:8, in which Elkanah said to Hannah, “Am I not better to you than ten sons?”

Rut 4:16

**“and became a nurse to it.”** It is available for even women who have never given birth to nurse babies, although it may take some time and extra stimulation. In Naomi’s case, she had given birth and was almost certainly young enough to nurse a child. If she was married at 13 and had her children by age 16 or 17, and they were married at age 15 or so and were married for 10 years before they died, then Naomi would be in her early to mid-40s and well able to nurse a child. However, the word “nurse” in this context can also refer to simply taking care of the child. So the text is not clear as to whether Naomi participated in the breastfeeding of Obed.

Rut 4:17

**“Obed.”** The name means “servant.” In the biblical culture, the women did not usually name a child, but in this case, the women knew that Obed would be a sustainer of life to Naomi (Ruth 4:15), and thus named him Obed.

**“the father of David.”** The fact that the book of Ruth mentions David as having already been born shows that there was a long time between the time Ruth lived and when the book of Ruth was penned. Ruth could have been written by Samuel in his old age, or by another scribe such as the one who wrote down the book of Samuel. Samuel, however, could not have written even 1 Samuel because he was dead before the events at the end of 1 Samuel took place.

Rut 4:18

**“Now these are the generations of Perez​.”** Perez was a son of Judah by Tamar, and he is in the genealogy of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:3; Luke 3:33). The genealogy of Perez has been considered incomplete by almost every scholar because the generations from Salmon to David, which are Salmon, Boaz, Obed, Jesse, and David, cover a long period of time. Those generations cover the last years of the book of Joshua, the time of the book of Judges, and the time in 1 Samuel until the birth of David. That time, from the year that Joshua crossed the Jordan and conquered Jericho, which was when Salmon would have likely married Rahab, until the birth of David, was a period of 365 years, which most scholars think is too long a time for only four generations to be born.

However, the genealogy is that of Jesus Christ, and it is given four times in Scripture and all four genealogies completely agree (Ruth 4:18-22; 1 Chron. 2:4-15; Matt. 1:3-6; Luke 3:31-33). While it is true that some genealogies in the Bible are incomplete, the genealogy in Matthew 1 being a famous example, no genealogy that is recorded in the Bible in exactly the same way in four different books had ever been shown to be incomplete. Furthermore, the genealogy in Luke has never been shown to be incomplete, so it seems that even if the other three genealogies were to skip some generations in David’s line, Luke would not. The reason that the genealogy of David has been assumed to be incomplete is based on the assumption that there is too much time between Salmon and David to bridge that gap in four generations. But while covering that time period in four generations seems unlikely, it is not impossible.

If we take the genealogy in Ruth, Chronicles, Matthew, and Luke as being accurate, then we have a huge key as to when the book of Ruth and other events occurred in the Judges period. Spanning the time gap in Judges requires that the fathering age of the men in the genealogy be between 90 and 100 years, which is not the norm, but neither is it impossible, especially when we consider that God was working behind the scenes to build the genealogy to Christ, which had already had divine intervention with Abraham, Isaac (Jacob was born when Isaac was 60), and Jacob (Jacob married Rachel and Leah at age 84, then started having children). The Bible names some people who, after the Flood, either fathered children at age 100 or older, or could have, for example, Shem (Gen. 11:10-11), Abraham (Gen. 21:5), and Moses (Deut. 34:7). Also, Caleb at age 85 said he was as strong as he was at age 45 (Josh. 14:10-11) and so it seems he could have fathered children then and for years to come.

The Bible implies that Boaz was an old man when he married Ruth (Ruth 3:10), and it says that Jesse was an old man while David was still very young (1 Sam. 17:12), so we have some solid biblical evidence that the men of those generations were very old. Also, it is generally the case that older men do not father children because their wives have stopped being able to bear children. But in the biblical culture older men often married much younger women, and that could have happened with at least three of the four men in this genealogy, and especially so since the men in this genealogy seem to be men of means. For example, we know that Ruth was young but married Boaz when he was an old man, and part of her reason for that was so she and Naomi could be well taken care of. Also, long life runs in families, and we already know that at least two of the four men were old when they had sons, so that makes it more likely that the other men in the genealogy could have had long fertile lives as well.

Salmon’s age when he married Rahab, and when Rahab gave birth to Boaz are not known, but Salmon would have normally had to have been 20 years old to be counted in the army (Num. 1:3), although in the case of the conquest of Canaan, younger men might have joined the fight. Men who fought would have the privilege of taking a wife of the women who were captive (Deut. 21:10-12). So Salmon could have been quite young when he married Rahab and not have fathered a son in the genealogy of Christ for many years.

The time span for the genealogy from Salmon to the birth of David can be calculated in part by knowing that there were 480 years from the Exodus to the fourth year of Solomon, when the Temple foundation was laid (1 Kings 6:1). So the time span would be 480 minus 4 years for Solomon, minus 71 years for David’s life and reign (he was born the year before he turned one year old), minus the 40 years wandering in the desert before crossing the Jordan and conquering Jericho, and that would equal 365 years. For that 365 years to be spanned by the life of Salmon, Boaz, Obed, and Jesse before their sons in the genealogy of Christ were born would mean that the average age of those men when their sons were born was 365 divided by 4, or an average of just over 91 years old. This is unusual, but not impossible.

A hypothetical but possible reconstruction of the 365 years could be that Salmon crossed the Jordan as one of Joshua’s soldiers at 20 years old and fathered Boaz 73 years later, at age 94, early in the judgeship of Ehud. Then Boaz married Ruth as an old man at age 96 and fathered Obed that same year in the judgeship of Deborah. Then Obed married and fathered Jesse at the old age of 98 during the judgeship of Jair. Then Jesse fathered David when he was 97. These numbers could be moved around somewhat with some men being a few years younger while other men would then be a few years older, for example, if one of the men got his wife pregnant when he was 115, then other men would not have had to have been as old to fill the time gap. The point is that the genealogy from Salmon to David that is recorded exactly the same way in four different books of the Bible can be the correct genealogy, and it makes more sense to believe what the Bible says in four different places than to doubt it simply because it seems unlikely.

**“Perez was the father of Hezron.”** The Hebrew uses an active verb, that Perez fathered Hezron.

Rut 4:20

**“Salmon.”** Salmon married Rahab the Canaanite prostitute who was spared from the destruction of Jericho (Matt. 1:5; see commentary on Josh. 2:1).

1. Isadore Singer, ed., *Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Chemosh” by Morris Jastrow and George A. Barton. [↑](#footnote-ref-11500)
2. Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth and Esther* [WBC]. [↑](#footnote-ref-17162)
3. Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* [NAC], 657-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-26844)
4. Frederic Bush, *Ruth and Esther* [WBC], 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-24143)
5. Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* [NAC], 660. [↑](#footnote-ref-18755)
6. Willem VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2:211. [↑](#footnote-ref-32337)
7. Daniel I. Block, *Ruth* [ZECOT], 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-11728)
8. Jeremy Schipper, *Ruth* [AB], 143-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-11034)
9. Daniel I. Block, *Ruth* [ZECOT], Ruth 3:3b-4g. [↑](#footnote-ref-10723)
10. See Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* [NICOT]. [↑](#footnote-ref-27851)
11. Robert Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* [NICOT], 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-23728)
12. Daniel I. Block, *Ruth* [ZECOT]; see also F. Bush, *Ruth and Esther* [WBC]; David Jackman, *Judges, Ruth*, Mastering the Old Testament; de Waard and Nida, *Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Ruth*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22046)