

RUTH:

**A Story of
Strength,
Loyalty,
and Kindness**

***By* R. Herbert**

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INTRODUCTION

If you have read the book of Ruth, you already know what a wonderful story it is, and if you have not – a beautiful story awaits you. Whether you know the book or not, this is a biblical tale that can repay a little background study a hundred-fold. Understanding the historical setting of the book and what is really happening in it transforms the story of Ruth into a rich literary tapestry with significant spiritual lessons that can apply to us all.

Many people who read the book of Ruth think of it as a simple love story, but in reality it is far from simple, and it is not really a “love story” in the modern sense of “romantic love” either! That kind of love is only implied and – as we will see – is not ever mentioned in the story itself.

Instead, Ruth presents us with a number of themes which may reflect love, but do not focus on it. In fact, Ruth is unlike any other biblical book in weaving together accounts of three different individuals who each exhibit one of the book’s actual themes.

The book tells the story of three characters – the Israelite widow Naomi, her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth, and the Israelite man Boaz – each of whom is of central importance to what is related. The three strands of the story are woven together with such great skill that we read them as one account; but to fully understand the book of Ruth, we need to look beneath the surface at the individual characters and what they represent.

The book does not name its author, but according to Jewish tradition it was written by the prophet Samuel. Some scholars think that it may have been written later in order to counter the attitude toward foreign women that was stressed in the post-Exilic period of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 10:1-5; Nehemiah 13:1-3), but there are several arguments that support an origin for Ruth in Samuel’s time.

Whoever wrote Ruth was a skilled storyteller. Despite its brevity (it is one of the shortest works in the Old Testament), this little book has been called one of the most beautiful stories ever written. Yet it is set in difficult times. The events of Ruth take place “in the days when the judges judged” (Ruth 1:1), sometime around 1100 B.C. This is a vital fact to remember because the period of the Judges was an uncertain and often dangerous one in which there was little centralized authority and, at times, much crime and violence (Judges 17:6, 21:25). Adding to this situation, the book of Ruth begins in a time of famine in Israel (Ruth 1:1).

So the story is one of a journey out of hard times – a journey toward happiness that is eventually fulfilled in the lives of all its central characters. But this is no simplistic tale of “things working out well in the end.” Ruth is a story of deep courage, strength, loyalty, determination, and kindness with an underlying message that reaches from the ancient world to our lives today. The following chapters aim to show the importance of this biblical book, its lessons for today, and why it is often called “the biggest small book in the Bible” as well as its “most profound simple story.”

R. Herbert

PART ONE:
THE CHARACTERS

1. NAOMI: STRENGTH

Asking “Who is the heroine of the book of Ruth?” may sound like the same kind of question as “Who is buried in General Grant’s tomb?” But it is actually a very valid question. While it is easy to presume that Ruth herself is the central figure of the book that traditionally bears her name, consider the following facts.

In reality, the book of Ruth tells us far more about Naomi than it does about Ruth. The book begins and ends with Naomi, and this is not simply what scholars of literature call a “framing device”; because when we look carefully we find that the narrative revolves around Naomi throughout most of the story – every event leads back to her. We can see how central Naomi is to the story when we realize that of the words spoken by all the characters in the book 120 words are spoken by Ruth, while 225 – almost twice as many – are spoken by Naomi!

It might be hard to find another story in which the supposed heroine speaks half as much as one of the supporting characters, and the more we ponder the story the clearer it becomes that Naomi is really the leading figure of the book of Ruth. Saying this is not to diminish the importance of Ruth’s character or role at all, but rather that Naomi is of far greater importance in this story than we often realize.

At the beginning of the story, a famine causes Naomi and her husband and sons to leave their home in Judea and to travel to the land of Moab. While they are there, Naomi’s husband, Elimelech, dies – as well as their two sons Mahlon (similar to the Hebrew word “sick”) and Chilion (similar to the Hebrew word “wasting”). Bereft of her husband and sons, Naomi hears that there is food again in Israel and she determines to return to her hometown of Bethlehem.

But if she is driven by hope to return, Naomi is also deeply discouraged. When she and her daughter-in-law Ruth arrive in

Bethlehem the people do not ask “Who is this woman with Naomi?” but “Can this be Naomi?” – showing that the years of difficulty and sorrow had doubtless had a visible effect on the returning woman. This is clearly seen when Naomi replies to the women of Bethlehem:

“Don’t call me Naomi [meaning “pleasant”],” she told them. “Call me Mara [meaning “bitter”], because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.” (Ruth 1:20-21).

This is a vital point in the story for it reveals to us that Naomi is, in fact, presented as a kind of female Job – a “Job for Every Woman.” Her situation is reminiscent of that of the suffering Job, and her words here are almost identical to those spoken by Job: “... the Almighty, who has made my life bitter” (Job 27:2). The parallels with the earlier book are many, in fact. Even the women of Bethlehem function in the Ruth narrative almost like the friends of Job. Although these stories differ in detail, the women of Bethlehem pose questions and make statements to the suffering Naomi (Ruth 1:19; 4:14, 17) in a similar role to that played by Job’s friends.

Like Job, the strength of Naomi is seen in the difficulties she endures. In fact, strength is the single most notable characteristic of Naomi and is seen throughout the story in situations such as that in which she urges her two daughters-in-law to return to their homes as she sets out on the trip back to Bethlehem.

Considering the lawless and dangerous times in which she lived, Naomi’s desire for the good of the two younger women shows great strength, as sending them back meant she would have to make the long journey alone, going into a totally uncertain future. We see Naomi’s strength again when she urges Ruth to seek a husband (Ruth 3:1) – knowing that this might leave Naomi herself alone and without help in her old age.

Above all, we see this woman's strength in her continuing faith despite all the misfortune that has occurred in her life. Like Job, Naomi never folds under the discouragement of her situation and that makes the outcome of the story possible. Naomi's situation shapes much of the narrative; but it is her strength and persistence that bring the story to its positive ending.

It is sometimes said that Naomi is shown as an embittered woman who simply tries to work things out through her own scheming when God fails her. But this is a sad misreading of the book. Throughout the middle section of the story, Naomi demonstrates her underlying trust in God's goodness as when she hears of the kindness Boaz has shown to Ruth and specifically exclaims "The Lord bless him!" (Ruth 2:20). This is hardly the attitude of someone who does not believe that God blesses though sometimes also allows misfortune.

Certainly, Naomi's wise counsel and guidance are directly involved in the circumstances that lead to the story's positive resolution, but that does not mean the book does not see a providential hand behind the way things work out (Ruth 4:13). So it is that the book begins with an account of Naomi's troubles and ends with an account of her blessing.

Although the son born to Ruth and Boaz was, of course, a blessing given to them, the centrality of Naomi in the story is seen in that we are told: "Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, 'Naomi has a son!' (Ruth 4:16-17). The son, Obed, is the heir of Ruth and Boaz, but he is also ascribed to Naomi whose own sons were replaced indirectly, by this child through the "kinsman redeemer" (Leviticus 27:9-25, 25:47-55).

So, like Job whose family is also replaced, the book of Ruth concludes with the same happy ending. Like Job, Naomi is presented as a memorable example of the fact that if we continue to honor God – even when we do not understand his actions in our lives – he will work things out.

But unlike Job, which is written as an epic story on a cosmic scale with heavenly councils, whirlwinds and the voice of God himself, Naomi's story is painted with less dramatic yet still powerful brushstrokes. It is the story of the same kind of persistent trust, but it is written on a smaller scale to show the difficulties and losses that occur in the lives of most people.

The story of Naomi is as compelling as it is because it is so easy to see that it is one that applies directly to all of us.

2. RUTH: LOYALTY

If Ruth is not, strictly speaking, the heroine of the book that bears her name, she is certainly the “co-heroine.” Like her mother-in-law, Naomi, Ruth is a woman of excellent character (Ruth 3:11) and exhibits many of the good characteristics of the older woman as well as others of her own. As a result, Ruth holds a very special place in the stories of the Bible. She is the only convert from a pagan society to have a biblical book named after her, and, with Esther, she is one of only two women to have been honored in this way.

There are actually many additional similarities between the stories of Esther and Ruth. Both individuals were foreigners living in a land that was not their own. Both were women of integrity who found favor in the eyes of others. Both dressed in special garments to accomplish their goals. In both books the turning point of the story is a wedding – in both cases between an Israelite and a non-Israelite. Most importantly, both individuals were women through whom God acted. Through Esther the Jewish people were saved physically, and through Ruth a single family line was saved. But, as we will see, it was the line through which a much greater salvation would eventually come.

When we read the story of Ruth it is easy to presume that she was a gentle, clinging type, because the story tells us early on that she “clung” (Ruth 1:14) to her mother-in-law when Naomi wished to return to her original home. Yet Ruth’s strength and loyalty are evident in that, unlike her sister-in-law, Orpah, she chose to go with Naomi despite the fact that the journey might be extremely dangerous and that she would be going to a strange land with no other friends or relatives and would be left alone and destitute if anything were to happen to Naomi.

Ruth’s name means “companion” or “friend,” and she exemplifies the loyalty of the true friend in staying with Naomi. But we must remember the conditions extant at the time of the Judges

to realize the strength of loyalty behind Ruth's decision. Ruth's first recorded words – among the most memorable in the Old Testament – are to Naomi and show this attitude:

... Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me. (Ruth 1:16-17).

In this regard Ruth is like the Good Samaritan of the New Testament – a non-Jew from a group despised by many Jews – who acted with great courage and kindness toward a Jewish person. Just as in Christ's parable the Samaritan stopped to assist the injured Jew in a dangerous area when even other Jews quickly "passed by" (Luke 10:30-33), so Ruth chose to stay with and assist the vulnerable Naomi on her journey.

The comparison is an apt one because Ruth, as a Moabite, also represented a group disliked by many Jews – the Old Testament equivalent of the New Testament Samaritans. This was because at the time of Israel's journeying from Egypt to the Promised Land, the people of Moab afflicted the Israelites in three ways. Not only did they refuse to supply the Israelites with food (Deuteronomy 23:4), but their women were also used to seduce Israelite men to sexual immorality and idolatry (Numbers 25:1-3), and the people of Moab also hired the prophet Balaam to attempt to bring a curse on Israel (Numbers 22:1-6). Because of these actions, the Israelites were commanded to not allow Moabites into their congregation to the "tenth generation" (Deuteronomy 23:3).

In Ruth's case, she was allowed to become part of the people of Israel because she had accepted Israel's God (Ruth 1:16). So we see in the Hebrew that Ruth progresses in the story from foreigner (Ruth 2:10), to maidservant (Ruth 2:13), to handmaid (Ruth 3:9), to wife of an important Israelite (Ruth 4:10), and to being the ancestor

of Israel's greatest king (Ruth 4:17). Even so, her Moabite background was of no small importance, and Ruth is referred to not once, but six times as "Ruth the Moabite" in the book named for her.

But in Ruth we see the mutual hatred between the Jews and Moabites overturned. Ruth becomes the antithesis of her Moabite heritage, reversing the pattern of all three of the evils Moab brought on Israel. Not only does she supply Naomi with food, but also she does not use seductive methods to win Boaz (as we will see in Chapter 4), and her actions lead to great blessings upon Naomi and ultimately, through her descendants, on all of Israel.

Once Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, Ruth's devoted loyalty is seen once more in her willingness to volunteer to go out, alone, to forage for food for herself and Naomi (Ruth 2:2). Again, we must remind ourselves of the uncertain and often dangerous times in which this story occurred to appreciate that Ruth, like Naomi, was a woman of strength, as well as a deeply loyal daughter-in-law and friend.

Beyond her great loyalty, Ruth demonstrates many virtues reminiscent of the description of the "perfect wife" of Proverbs 31. In fact, this is a comparison that merits reflection. In our English Bibles the book of Ruth is included in the historical books – as a bridge between the stories recorded in the book of Judges and the life of David that is recorded in First Samuel. But in the original order in which this book was placed in the Hebrew Bible, Ruth is set directly after the book of Proverbs. In this position the book provides a perfect example of the kind of woman Proverbs extolls in its closing chapter. Her behavior is loving, loyal, respectful, diligent and strong, just as is that of the perfect wife of Proverbs 31.

For example, Ruth displays the kind of loyalty the perfect wife does (Proverbs 31:11-12). Like the perfect wife of Proverbs, she "dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong" working from early in the morning and accomplishing a great deal each day (Proverbs 31:15, 17 and Ruth 2:6-7). Beyond these physical traits, Ruth virtuously "opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue

is the law of kindness” (Proverbs 31:26 NKJV and Ruth 3:10, etc.). We will see that Boaz particularly noticed this trait of kindness.

The extent to which the “virtuous woman” of Proverbs 31:10 is so perfectly exemplified by Ruth is seen in that this is exactly the same phrase that Boaz uses of Ruth in Ruth 3:11. In fact, it is possible that the description of the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 was actually inspired by the story of Ruth. Whatever the case, Ruth remains one of the Bible’s most beautiful examples of humility, integrity, bravery, and above all, loyalty.

3. BOAZ: KINDNESS

If we were to judge by words alone, Ruth's eventual husband Boaz might appear to be the main character in the book of Ruth. Boaz actually speaks more "lines" – a total of more words – than either Naomi or her daughter-in-law Ruth, but we are only introduced to him in the second chapter of the book when we are told: "Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz" (Ruth 2:1).

This short "résumé" tells us three things. First, that Boaz was "a man of standing." The Hebrew phrase (*gibbor chayil*) can mean "a mighty man" in military contexts, but outside of such settings it usually means "a great man" in the sense of "a man of position and wealth" – as when the expression is used of the father of King Saul in 1 Samuel 9:1.

Second, the description tells us that Boaz was a close relative of Naomi – of the same clan as her husband and thus able to act as a "kinsman-redeemer" for her family. His position and wealth would help him to fulfill this function.

Finally, we are told that his name was Boaz, meaning "strength is within him" – the same name, with the same significance, given to one of the huge pillars later built at the entrance to the Temple of Solomon – although the strength we see in Boaz in this story is the quiet strength of character found in this successful older man (Ruth 3:10).

According to Matthew 1:5 Boaz was the son of Rahab who helped the Israelites conquer Jericho (Joshua 2:1-21), but this family relationship is perhaps not a direct one as Matthew may skip a couple of generations here as he appears to do in other parts of his genealogy (Matthew 1:8, 11). Yet whether directly or indirectly, Boaz was at least partially of foreign background.

Given his actions in our story, it is not surprising that Jewish tradition states that Boaz was a just and upright judge in the period

described in the biblical book of Judges. But the most notable characteristic of Boaz displayed in the book of Ruth is his kindness. The first words spoken by Boaz in the story are when he asks the overseer of his harvesters, “Who does that young woman belong to?” (Ruth 2:5). This is not an attitude of “Whose property is this woman?” but one of enquiring who was responsible for her safety, as he did not recognize her – it was an attitude of kind concern.

When he is told who Ruth is, Boaz says to her:

... My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me ... I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled. (Ruth 2:8-9).

The kindness here is a double one. Boaz not only tells her she can freely take of the water his men have, but also and more importantly, he puts her mind at rest by letting her know she will be protected in his fields (as is also stressed in Ruth 2:22).

At the meal time, Boaz invites Ruth to eat with his men and tells her she may glean among the sheaves (rather than just following behind the harvesters). Even more, he tells his men to leave part of their harvest for Ruth to pick up, so that she is able to gather “an ephah” of barley – between 30 and 40 pounds – which would be a huge amount for the two women, giving them ample to eat and some left over to trade for other needs (Ruth 2:17).

In all of this, the kindness of Boaz is apparent. Small wonder that when Ruth tells Naomi what happened that day she exclaims: “The Lord bless him ... He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead” (Ruth 2:20). This is an interesting statement as it does not just say that Boaz had acted kindly, but that he *continued* to act in a kindly manner that was evidently characteristic of him.

Another aspect of Boaz's inherent kindness is that he comments on the kindly acts of others. It is often said that “the kind notice the

kindness of others,” and this was certainly true of Boaz. Among his first words to Ruth we find him saying “... I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband ... May the Lord repay you for what you have done...” (Ruth 2:11-12). Later, when Ruth lies down at his feet on the threshing floor he tells her: “The Lord bless you, my daughter ... This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor” (Ruth 3:10). We will return to the matter of kindness in this story in Part Two of this book, but a great deal of the theme of kindness in the book of Ruth can be said to revolve around Boaz.

The most significant act of kindness on the part of Boaz is seen in the final section of the book. When Boaz agreed to act as kinsman-redeemer for the family of Naomi, he did so at considerable personal expense. It was not uncommon for widows in ancient Israel to have to sell ancestral property in order to survive, so when Boaz tells Naomi’s nearest male relative that her land is available for purchase, the relative immediately agrees to buy it for himself (Ruth 4:4), thinking that because Naomi was childless the property would permanently become his. It is only when Boaz tells the relative that in purchasing the land he must also marry Ruth and provide a child for her (Ruth 4:5) that the man changes his mind immediately.

This is because according to biblical law, a son of that marriage would be legally assigned to Naomi and when that child of Ruth’s came of age, the property would revert to him. This meant that the relative would not only have to pay for the land and eventually lose it, but he would also have to shoulder the expense of raising a child who would not continue the relative’s family line and name. That is why the relative turns down the opportunity, saying: “Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate” (Ruth 4:6). Boaz then agrees to purchase the land and to marry Ruth – gladly, as we know – but we should not forget the personal cost this incurred for him.

While the relative selfishly declined to help Ruth, ironically it is his name (which is not mentioned in the book) that has not survived, and the name of Boaz, who made the financial sacrifice, that has survived. The name of Boaz lives, in fact, largely because of his kindness. It is because of his kindness that he becomes part of the blessing eventually bestowed on the two leading women of this story. He fulfills both of their hopes – by becoming a kinsman-redeemer to Naomi, and a husband to Ruth.

In many ways Boaz – the “just judge” who acted kindly and who humbly thanked Ruth for choosing him – exemplified the ideal later stated in the book of Micah that calls on those who love and fear God “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8 ESV).

**PART TWO:
THE STORY**

4. DETAILS: WARM HEARTS AND COLD FEET

In the book of Ruth, the heroine's mother-in-law, Naomi, tells the widowed Ruth:

... My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do. (Ruth 3:1-4).

This may sound like strange advice, and it is a part of the story that often troubles readers – especially because even some Bible commentaries have attempted to see sexual innuendos in what is said. But, as we will see, there is really nothing in the language used or in our knowledge of Hebrew culture of the time to suggest anything sexual was involved. Ruth's distant relative Boaz is shown to be an honorable man throughout the book, just as Ruth herself is shown to be honorable at every point. As we saw in Part One (and as Naomi doubtless explained to Ruth when she gave her the advice), according to the law of Moses when a man died leaving his wife without children, the man's nearest relative had the responsibility to take her as a wife and provide a child for her (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). This situation helps us understand what happened next.

The story continues by telling us that when Ruth went to the threshing floor where Boaz had been working and had gone to sleep:

... Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet! “Who are you?” he asked. “I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.” (Ruth 3:7-9).

To understand this part of the story we need to realize that in the ancient Near East servants often slept crossways at the feet of their master when working outdoors and were allowed to pull any available blanket over themselves in order to keep warm. That is probably why Ruth told Boaz that she was his servant – and thus eligible to lie at his feet – and that he was her guardian-redeemer (Hebrew *go’el*) who bore a responsibility to marry her to provide a son to perpetuate the name of her family – so he should cover her with the edge of his “garment” both literally and also figuratively in the sense of marrying her (Ezekiel 16:8, etc.).

But why uncover his feet? Certainly, this caused him to eventually awaken in the dark, but Ruth could simply have woken Boaz to talk with him. The “uncovering” of Boaz’s feet was necessary because in the culture of that time a shoe would be removed (and the foot thus “uncovered”) to signal a responsibility or to seal a contract. We see this signaling in Deuteronomy in exactly this situation when a man would not fulfill his responsibility to his brother’s wife: “his brother’s widow shall go up to him take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, ‘This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother’s family line’” (Deuteronomy 25:9).

We see the same act of uncovering the foot to seal an agreement later in the story of Ruth when Boaz shrewdly persuades Ruth’s actual nearest of kin to forgo his responsibility and allow Boaz to

marry her: “(Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.)” (Ruth 4:7).

Interestingly, Boaz fulfilled two distinct responsibilities – by redeeming Naomi’s property and also by providing an heir for the family. Perhaps that is why both his feet were uncovered as symbols of these responsibilities.

So Ruth’s uncovering of Boaz’s feet on the threshing floor most likely had nothing to do with the uncovering of any other part of the anatomy. Unlike Hebrew idioms such as “cover the feet” or “between the feet,” the Hebrew expression used in Ruth – literally “uncover the place of his feet” – is never used euphemistically of other parts of the body. Rather, it clearly fits into what we see specifically in this part of the story – the signaling of a responsibility on the part of Boaz to act as a kinsman-redeemer to Naomi and Ruth. That was a responsibility this ancient story shows Boaz gladly fulfilled – without ever experiencing “cold feet” again!

5. THEMES: WHEN STRENGTH, LOYALTY, AND KINDNESS MEET

Perhaps the single most limiting thing we can do in reading the book of Ruth is to see it only as a love story – or more precisely, the story of the love between Ruth and Boaz. Although we may tend to think of the book that way, it is not really a story of love between a man and a woman at all. It is a kind of love story, but not the kind we usually presume. If we want to see a love story in the Old Testament, we must look to the Song of Solomon – which is a story or song about the love between a man and a woman. The book of Ruth is not such a story.

If it seems shocking to say that Ruth is not a love story, we should remember that there is not a single word of love spoken between Boaz and Ruth anywhere in the story – only words of kindness and loyalty. Further, nowhere in this story does it say “Boaz loved Ruth” or “Ruth loved Boaz,” as it does of men and women in many other biblical books (Genesis 24:67, etc.). This does not mean that the two individuals did not love each other, of course, but that romantic love is not the theme of the book.

In fact, the Hebrew word for love only appears once in the whole book of Ruth – and when it does appear it is not talking about Boaz and Ruth, but about Ruth’s love for Naomi. We see this when the women of Bethlehem tell Naomi: “...your daughter-in-law, who *loves* you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given ... birth” (Ruth 4:15, emphasis added).

The book of Ruth is just as much a story of Naomi’s love for her daughters-in-law and of Ruth’s love for Naomi as it is about love between Ruth and Boaz. We must not forget that the marriage of Ruth and Boaz would never have happened had it not been for Naomi’s love for Ruth (Ruth 3:1).

So, contrary to what many people presume, love is not the most important theme in the book of Ruth. But there are other virtues, traits, or characteristics – whatever we may want to call them – highlighted in this story that are really its true themes. In Part One we saw that the three main characters in the book of Ruth exhibit many such good traits, but that individually they each exemplify one trait in particular. Naomi’s strength is evident throughout the story, as is Ruth’s loyalty, and the kindness of Boaz.

This does not mean that Ruth, for example, does not show strength or kindness – she certainly exhibits these traits. When Ruth insists on remaining with her mother-in-law for a long and potentially dangerous journey, she demonstrates strength as well as loyalty – as she does when she volunteers to forage for food for them, alone, outside of Bethlehem (Ruth 2:2). Ruth’s kindness to Naomi, and to Boaz, is noted in the story (Ruth 2:11, 3:10), but the one characteristic that defines her role is her trait of loyalty. Without that, Ruth’s strength and kindness would not have accomplished what they did.

In a similar way, Naomi displays loyalty and kindness to Ruth, and Boaz exhibits strength and loyalty as well as kindness in his dealings. But the three traits of strength, loyalty, and kindness are so linked to the three individual characters that they almost define them. We could even say that Naomi personifies strength, Ruth loyalty, and Boaz kindness – so much so, that to say the book of Ruth is a story of strength, loyalty, and kindness is simply another way of saying it is the story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz.

Interestingly, although the story of Ruth uses these three traits as its major themes, it turns them upside down as stereotypes. We might expect that Boaz (“strength is within him”) would be the character to personify strength, but it is the woman Naomi who most exemplifies this trait in the story. Similarly, we might possibly expect it would be one of the women who would be most associated with kindness in this ancient story, but it is Boaz with whom this trait is continually connected.

Yet the three traits do not exist apart from each other. Each is vital to the eventual outcome of the story. If we removed Naomi from the book, it would become little more than a detailing of how a relationship came about between Ruth and Boaz. If we take Ruth from the story and substitute any other young woman, it might well become a simple account of an ancient marriage of responsibility. If Boaz is removed from the narrative, the story loses a great deal because it is his characteristic kindness that leads to the eventual happiness of both Naomi and Ruth.

There is a practical lesson in this. So often we only see good traits and deeds in isolation. It is easy to think of virtues like loyalty and kindness without seeing the potential they have beyond our immediate interactions with others – we can miss the often very real “ripple effects” they cause.

The strength shown by Naomi, for example, doubtless helped her in navigating the long road from personal suffering to happiness, but it also helped others. Without Naomi’s strength, Ruth would not have had the opportunity to exhibit loyalty. Without Ruth’s loyalty, Boaz would not have had opportunity to demonstrate the kindness he did.

The story of Ruth shows that the expression of godly characteristics in good deeds makes it possible for others to do good deeds of their own. This is something the New Testament tells us to think about – how we might do that also: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24). The expression “to spur on” in this scripture implies actions, not just words.

It is only because strength, loyalty and kindness meet and interact in the story of Ruth that the story ends as it does, and that it is as compelling, as beautiful, and as powerful as it is. When we exhibit qualities in our own lives that help others express and use good qualities in theirs, our lives can become remarkable stories, also.

6. MESSAGE: THE BREAD OF SALVATION

We have looked at the major themes of the book of Ruth – the traits of strength, loyalty, and kindness that permeate the story and that are so clearly exhibited by its characters; but what is the underlying message of the book?

Some Christians feel they see a foreshadowing of the New Testament gospel in Ruth. According to this view – or what is perhaps the most common version of it – the story holds allegorical meanings with Ruth representing humanity, Boaz representing Christ, and Naomi the Christian Church which brings the two together.

While this symbolic reading of the book may seem attractive to some, we begin to realize the difficulties involved in this kind of interpretation when we see the almost endless variations and disagreements that exist regarding the symbolism supposedly involved. For some, Naomi represents instead the old covenant and Ruth the new covenant; others see yet different meanings. When we consider all the possibilities, we realize it would be difficult to discern which, if any, allegory might properly explain the book.

Now it is true that the New Testament finds allegorical parables in many of the events recorded in the Old Testament. The parallels that can be seen between Christ and Abraham, Melchizedek, Moses, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, and other individuals are clearly spelled out in the New Testament, but that does not mean that every Old Testament story must fit this mold.

In the case of the book of Ruth, we should remember that Ruth is only mentioned once in passing in the New Testament – in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5), where we also find Boaz mentioned in both Matthew's and Luke's versions (Matthew 1:5, Luke 3:32). But Naomi is not mentioned at all and the story of Ruth

is never alluded to, so we should be careful before we begin to make comparisons that the Scriptures do not.

On the other hand, when we look closely at the book of Ruth it does contain an underlying theme – within the story itself – that is foreshadowing in nature. At the beginning of the story, Naomi first loses physical sustenance in the time of famine and then loses her husband and sons. But when she hears that the Lord has restored food (literally “bread”) to Israel (Ruth 1:6), she leaves the mountainous region of Moab to travel back to Bethlehem (meaning “house [or city] of bread” or “house [or city] of food”) in the region of Judah called Ephrathah (meaning “fruitfulness”).

Naomi's words to her daughters-in-law at that time reflect her emptiness. She tells them, “Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?” (Ruth 1:11). Having lost her original home, her husband, and her sons, Naomi is figuratively empty. When she arrives in Bethlehem, this emptiness is summarized when she says: “I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty” (Ruth 1:21).

But in Bethlehem the narrative turns to describing the change from emptiness to fullness – both physically and figuratively. We are told that “the barley harvest was just beginning” (Ruth 1:22) and that Ruth goes to the fields to pick up the leftover grain (Ruth 2:2). As the story progresses we see Ruth moving from simply gleaning in the poorest parts of the field to receiving more and more in the better areas and from the hand of Boaz himself (Ruth 2:14-18).

This “filling” with physical bread precedes the figurative filling that occurs with the redemption of Naomi's property and the birth of “her” new son who comes as a result of the marriage of Ruth and Boaz. The “filling of the empty” through God's grace underlies the whole book – which begins with stress on emptiness and concludes with stress on the fulfillment of good things.

When we see the centrality of this message in the story of Ruth, we realize the importance of the list of names that concludes the book. Humanly, it is easy to see it as just an appendix that

functions like the credits at the end of a film. We see it, but not as part of the story itself. Some scholars even suggest this closing genealogy may have been added later; but if the book was composed by Samuel, there is no reason the genealogy could not date to that time. In any case, the genealogy forms the ending of the book as it was accepted into the canon of Scripture.

The genealogy leads, of course, to David – the king who became the ancestor of Jesus Christ. In that sense, the book of Ruth foreshadows a double fulfillment – found first in David and then in his descendant, Jesus. This is because David was a messianic (“anointed”) king in ancient Israel (2 Samuel 23:1), but he also foreshadowed a much greater Messiah (Isaiah 9:1-7).

The parallels between the messianic David, mentioned at the end of Ruth, and the later messianic figure of Jesus Christ are many and obvious. Both David and Jesus were born in Bethlehem, the city of bread which is the setting of most of Ruth. Just as David was prophesied to become king from Bethlehem (1 Samuel 16:1), so was the greater King who descended from him (Micah 5:2). David, the Bethlehemite king who provided bread for his people (2 Samuel 6:19, 1 Chronicles 16:3) foreshadowed the One who was himself the “bread of life” (John 6:35) and who would provide that spiritual bread for the salvation of his people (Mark 14:22).

Perhaps we can see a reference to this ultimate fulfillment in the words of Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the annunciation of his conception – when she exclaims that God fills “the hungry with good things” (Luke 1:53). This is, in fact, a perfect summary of the message of the book of Ruth and what it foreshadows – a message about the God who not only provides physical bread for those who walk with him, but who also provides, through Ruth’s eventual descendant, the bread of salvation.

AFTERWORD

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