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Michael E. W. Thompson

New Life Amid the Alien Corn: The Book of Ruth

Biblical scholars are increasingly turning to the category of 'story' in the interpretation of text: what do 'stories' (historical or otherwise) actually 'do'? Dr Thompson, who is Superintendent of the Bishop Auckland Circuit of the Methodist Church, approaches the Book of Ruth from this angle and finds himself led to stress the importance of prayer in the narrative.

Few would disagree that in the book of Ruth we have a fine story which is well told and of suitable length. 'Ruth is an absolutely delightful little book' says R.L. Hubbard.¹ Sasson has observed that, 'even among the artful narratives of Scripture, Ruth stands out in the power of its concentration, in the limpidity of its vocabulary, in the versatility of its language, in the balanced proportion of its scenes, in the vividness and integrity of its main characters.'² Yet it is a much discussed work that has been interpreted and understood in a wide variety of ways. I wish first to question the fruitfulness of two particular approaches to the book, and then go on – as a number of recent studies have – to consider the work as 'story', paying particular attention to the various prayers we find within it.

The first of the two approaches to the book that I am suggesting is not particularly fruitful is what I refer to as the legal. Clearly, we experience difficulty in understanding all the legal details in the book.³ These details concern rites of redemption, marriage (possibly levirate), and inheritance. While we read of similar practices in other parts of the Old Testament our problem is understanding the legal details in Ruth in relationship to those we read about elsewhere. We have legalities concerning redemption in Lev. 25.23–

¹ R.L. Hubbard, Jr. *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p.1.

² J.M. Sasson, 'Ruth', in R. Alter and F. Kermode, ed. *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (London: Fontana, 1989) p.320.

³ See, e.g., T. and D. Thompson, 'Some Legal Problems in the Book of Ruth', VT 18 (1968), pp.69–99; Hubbard, *Ruth*, pp. 48–63.

34 and 47–55, concerning levirate marriage in Deut. 25.5–10; Num. 27 and 36; Gen.38, and inheritance in Jer. 32. Yet only Ruth has all three customs interrelated in one story: as an added difficulty it combines (4.3–5) two practices which would seem to be separate (redemption of family property and the matter of an heir for a deceased relative). Many investigations have been pursued in this difficult area, but obscurities and conundrums remain. I cite but one example by way of illustration of the problem. If at 4.5 we take the Kethibh reading *qānîti* ('And Boaz said, "In the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, I will also acquire Ruth the Moabitess, the widow, in order to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance"'), why is it that the nearer kinsman then says he cannot buy the field lest he imperil his own inheritance? Although he has legally purchased the field, could it be that future descendants of the previous owner might one day have some claim upon it, and even upon the wider estate of which it is by then a part? That is a possibility, but given the extent of our present knowledge of legalities in ancient Israel something of a speculation. Alternatively, if we take the Qere reading *qānîtâ* ('And Boaz said, "In the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth, the Moabitess, the widow . . .")' why should the nearer kinsman 'marry' Ruth when he buys a field!? Why have what appear to be two practices become one in this particular instance? This matter of the Kethibh and the Qere readings at 4.5 is one of the celebrated cruxes of the book of Ruth, and while the majority read the Qere there is a case for taking the Kethibh.⁴ But whichever we take we are confronted with seemingly unanswerable questions. Perhaps the difficulty with the reading led to the Qere: but the result was another conundrum! Thus I am suggesting that we should not expect to build upon any sure results of studies and investigations into the legal details in the book of Ruth.

The second approach that I believe will not yield any great results is that of Fewell and Gunn with their character studies of personalities such as Naomi, Ruth and Boaz.⁵ While we may have vividness and integrity in the portrayal of the main characters, I am not convinced that we are justified in using the material in the book

⁴ D.R.G. Beattie, 'Kethibh and Qere in Ruth 4:5', *VT* 21 (1971), pp. 490–94; – 'The Book of Ruth as Evidence for Israelite Legal Practice', *VT* 24 (1974), pp. 251–67.

⁵ D.N. Fewell and D.M. Gunn, "A Son is Born to Naomi!": Literary Allusions and Interpretation in the Book of Ruth', *JOT* 40(1988), pp. 99–108; – 'Boaz, Pillar of Society: Measures of Worth in the Book of Ruth', *JOT* 45 (1989), pp. 45–59. See also P.W. Coxon, 'Was Naomi a Scold? A Response to Fewell and Gunn', *JOT* 45 (1989), pp. 25–37; and the reply, D.N. Fewell and D.M. Gunn, 'Is Coxon a Scold? On Responding to the Book of Ruth', *JOT* 45 (1989), pp. 39–43.

for a psychological analysis of those personalities. I question whether the author of the book was concerned to give us such character studies. More, I would say that the book of Ruth is of too brief a compass either to have been intended for, or now to be used for, such purposes: there is simply not sufficient material here to probe and expose such issues. Further, in what is already a brief work there is too much action for there to be adequate character studies. And moreover, the fact of the book's brevity should caution us against seeing too much significance in silences in the narrative – as Fewell and Gunn do.⁶ Silences at certain points in the story *may* be significant: equally, they may occur simply where the narrator must move rapidly to the next stage of the story. After all, not all can be told in a brief four-chapter story; some parts, even scenes, must be passed over in silence, or at best in a few words.

Gunkel called the book of Ruth a *novella*,⁷ and it is now commonly regarded as a 'story'.⁸ Thus we ask: what is the movement in the story? Where are we at the beginning and to what situation are we led?

I begin at the beginning. It is a scene of desperate difficulty: the opening verse of the book informs us that there was famine in the land of Judah (1.1). Thus it was that Elimelech and Naomi, with their sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah, went to the land of Moab searching for food. Parts of Moab were indeed fertile,⁹ and its geographical proximity to Bethlehem made it an obvious place to which such people might go. While there may be some significance in the sense of allusion in the trek to Moab, rather than to another place,¹⁰ it may simply be that Moab was an obvious place to which famine-beset Bethlehem people might go.

To this difficulty of famine is added the problem caused by the deaths of the menfolk. First Elimelech dies (1.3), and then also Mahlon and Chilion who by then have taken Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth, so leaving Naomi bereft of her two sons and her husband (1.5).

This leads to the third difficulty: Naomi in Moab is in an alien country. She was an alien before the death of her husband and sons,

⁶ Fewell and Gunn, "A Son is Born to Naomi!" . . . , pp. 100–3.

⁷ H. Gunkel, 'Ruth', in *Reden und Aufsätze*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1913), pp. 84–86.

⁸ To be more precise, a short story: see E.F. Campbell, Jr. 'The Hebrew Short Story: Its Form, Style and Provenance', in H.N. Bream, R.D. Heim, and C.A. Moore. ed., *A Light Unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob Myers* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1974), pp. 83–101; Hubbard, *Ruth*, pp. 47f.

⁹ D. Baly, *The Geography of the Bible* (London, Lutterworth: 1957), pp. 235ff.

¹⁰ See Fewell and Gunn, "A Son is Born to Naomi!" . . . , p. 103.

but now her situation has become parlous. How will she live in a foreign land, separated from her family? We do not hear of her working, now or later: is she too old to work, say, in the fields? Yet the problem is greater than this: given the fact that Ruth insists on staying with Naomi there is bound to be *someone* who is an alien – either Naomi if they stay in Moab, or Ruth if they go to Judah. This matter of being an alien is given marked emphasis in the story. As things turn out, it is Ruth who becomes the alien, for they hear that there is food in Judah. It is stressed that Ruth is a Moabitess (2.2, 20; 4.5, 10), that she is a foreigner (2.10), that she is a Moabite maiden (2.6), and that she is not one of Boaz's maidservants (2.13).

The situation of multiple difficulty is given eloquent expression in 1.20f with its emphasis on Naomi's bitter experiences: it is Yahweh who has dealt bitterly with her, for while she went away full now she returns empty. Thus she says to the women of Bethlehem – whose expression of welcome she seems to regard as somewhat misplaced:

Do not call me Naomi [Pleasant], call me Mara [Bitter], for the Almighty [*Shadday*] has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and Yahweh has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when Yahweh has afflicted me and the Almighty [*Shadday*] has brought calamity upon me? (1.20f)

In this complaint – in the style of certain of the Psalms, and found also in Jeremiah and Job – is expressed the full dilemma in which Naomi finds herself. For 'the hand of the Lord' has gone forth against her (1.13) Yet, as commentators frequently note, with the final verse of ch.1 there is an implied note of hope for the future: 'And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.' (1.22)

Indeed, soon there will be abundant food. Even while she gleanes in the field Ruth is given food and drink for herself (2.9, 14). Moreover, she eats until she is satisfied (2.14). She goes away with plenty of corn (2.15, 16, 17, 18). And the night time scene is enacted at the threshing floor, the place of plenty (3.2, 6) where there is a heap of grain. When other matters have been talked over, Ruth, far from going away empty-handed, is given six measures of barley to take away (3.15, 17).

Yet more than food is provided: there is Boaz, who is not only wealthy (2.1) but also a kinsman (2.20; 3.2, 9). And were Boaz to fail them, there is – as if for good measure – another kinsman (3.12f)! In fact, Boaz does take Ruth to be his wife (4.13), and with him there is no need for Ruth to be fearful about the future (3.11). She who recently was less than one of Boaz's servants (2.13), soon becomes a servant of his (3.9). What will take place will soon be settled (3.18), and all will be done properly, legally and with witnesses (4.3, 7).

And the news of the conception comes as no surprise to us, for already the language has been heavy with sexual overtones: the night time scene soon changes from that of the place of plenty to one of potential offspring (3.3ff). Commentators and exegetes have pointed out how the sexual element is implied in much of what is said in this scene.¹¹

Thus Ruth is no longer an alien, but abundant provision has been made for her – prefigured in 2.8f. Her mother-in-law has been successful in seeking a home for her (3.1), and presumably thereby for herself. For that is how the book portrays the situation: a son is born to Ruth (4.13) and thanks are given for this restorer of life, this nourisher of old age (4.15). But the child, Obed, is also a son for Naomi (4.16). We may perhaps go along with Campbell and doubt that with Obed being held in the bosom of Naomi there is any technical or even symbolic act of adoption being involved: ‘We have a grandmother delighted in her grandchild . . . all of this is arched over by the fact that here is the long-awaited male heir, who will in the course of time fulfil the responsibility of caring for his mother and grandmother alike.’¹²

It has frequently been pointed out that we have in the book of Ruth what Sasson calls, ‘sets of binary oppositions’:¹³ famine/plenty, escape/return, barrenness/fruitfulness, isolation/community, death/life, punishment/reward. I wish to go further and suggest that these ‘binary oppositions’ were uppermost in the mind of the author of the book. The author’s concern, I submit, was to tell a story that began with famine, existence in an alien land, barrenness, isolation, death, and apparent punishment, but that ends with plenty, life in a homeland, birth of a child, acceptance into a community, prospects and hope. The story that begins with a truly desperate situation for the women ends with a future opening up into boundless possibilities. Amid the alien corn in Judah there are for Ruth – and thereby for Naomi – boundless possibilities of new life: the book portrays a movement from desperation in Moab to new life in the environs of Bethlehem.

But what about the genealogy in 4.18–22, to which we must also add 4.17b, in particular whether or not it was originally a part of the

¹¹ E.g., E.F. Campbell, Jr. *Ruth* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 131f; Fewell and Gunn, ‘Boaz, Pillar of Society . . .’, pp. 47f.

¹² Campbell, *Ruth*, p.165.

¹³ Sasson, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Alter and Kermode, p. 321.

work?¹⁴ The blessing in 4.11–12 appears to suggest that the children of Ruth and Boaz will be Boaz's 'seed'. Yet in 4.14–17 it seems that Obed is in some sense Naomi's and thereby related to the Elimelech – Mahlon line. The genealogy in 4.18–22 traces Obed's ancestry through Boaz. Perhaps it may be, as Campbell suggests,¹⁵ that levirate marriage always resulted in a sort of dual paternity, and this may help us to understand the genealogy as an original part of the work. Sasson defends its contemporaneity with the rest of the work on the basis that Naomi's taking the child is one of a series of acts that symbolize the legitimacy of royal power.¹⁶

Yet the burden of the book is with famine, homelessness, lack of an heir, along with the resolution of these great problems. It seems to me highly unlikely that the purpose of the work is to do with the legitimization of David's rule – or with something else to do with David – for the reason that that would be too much of a literary tail wagging the dog. David is only introduced at the end of the story, and at that seemingly grafted onto totally different literary and theological materials. If the genealogy is original it must be there to illustrate what has been said, or implied, earlier, and not vice-versa. Indeed, if it be accepted that what was uppermost in the mind of the writer of the book was the transition from a series of death-like situations to those of life and hope, then in fact the question whether or not the genealogy was part of the original work is no longer a burning issue. If a son has been born the story will have shown that even the most deathly and unpromising situations can be 'pregnant' with and lead to those of boundless possibilities. If there be a genealogy and the son turns out to be an ancestor of the great King David there is abundant evidence of a wonderful transformation of a situation originally laden with catastrophe. But if the genealogy is not original and Obed and his descendants become known no further afield than Bethlehem Ephrathah yet has the point been adequately made.

But by whose will, enterprise, activity are these remarkable changes effected? The book portrays them as dependent, in part at least, on the will and activity of God. Hals is surely correct in his assertion that the book ascribes a large place to the actions of God.¹⁷

¹⁴ See, e.g., J. Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (NCB; Basingstoke MMS, 1986), pp. 372–74; J.M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), pp. 178–90; Hubbard, *Ruth*, pp. 15–23.

¹⁵ Campbell, *Ruth*, p. 161.

¹⁶ Sasson, *Ruth*, pp. 181–87, 232–40.

¹⁷ R.M. Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 3–19.

This action – as Hals points out¹⁸ – is not the sort of divine activity such as we read of in the book of Judges where God steps in periodically to punish or deliver his people. Rather, it is a continuous divine activity, and indeed much is ascribed to that activity. Thus it is God who has visited his people and given them food (1.6). Naomi prays that Yahweh may deal kindly with Ruth and Orpah and that he may grant that each will find a home in the house of their husband (1.8f). Naomi ascribes her own bitter condition as being due to the fact that the hand of Yahweh has gone forth against her (1.13). It is he who has dealt very bitterly with her (1.20), bringing her back home from Moab empty, and afflicting her (1.21). Boaz prays that Yahweh may recompense Ruth and give her a full reward, for it has been under his (God's) wings that she has come to take refuge (2.12). Naomi asks that this same Boaz may be blessed by the Lord (2.20), while Boaz asks that Ruth may be blessed by Yahweh (3.10). It is Yahweh who will make Ruth, about to be married to Boaz, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel (4.11): any children that Boaz has by Ruth will be given by Yahweh (4.12). Indeed, it was Yahweh who gave Ruth conception so that she bore a son (4.13). This calls forth a blessing from the lips of the women and the affirmation that it is Yahweh who has not left Naomi without next of kin (4.14). Yet, as Hals has pointed out, ' . . . there is clearly not the faintest hint that this total control exercised by the Lord in any way limits the freedom of activity of the people involved. They do as they wish . . .'¹⁹

More, the book portrays the people involved as those whose actions contribute to the eventual satisfactory resolution of the problems. This is to say, the fact that things in the end do turn out well is portrayed as being due to human activity as well as to divine activity. This is particularly so in the cases of Ruth – with the figure of Orpah, who returns home, as a foil, and Boaz – with the figure of the nearer kinsman, who does not feel able to redeem/acquire, as a foil. The successful and happy resolution of the plot does depend upon the faithfulness of both Ruth and Boaz. The divine action spoken of in the book may give the human beings freedom, yet Ruth and Boaz, at least, are portrayed as making appropriate decisions.

This blending together of divine and human initiative and activity, in such a way that each is necessary for the eventual satisfactory resolution of problems, is a characteristic of the story in the book of Ruth. But I wish to suggest that in the book there is a particular way in which this divine and human activity is portrayed as coming and

¹⁸ Hals, *Theology*, p.19.

¹⁹ Hals, *Theology*, p.18.

blending together. This is in the various prayers – in particular in the intercessions – and to a consideration of these prayers I now turn.

Hals says that all the prayers in the book of Ruth are prayers of blessing.²⁰ However, it is not particularly helpful to characterize prayers generally as 'blessings' as this fails to distinguish between those in which Yahweh is implored to bless someone (in which case we are dealing with intercession), and those in which a blessing is uttered upon Yahweh (in which case we are dealing with a thanksgiving). In fact, there are four prayers of intercession and three of thanksgiving,²¹ as follows:

1. *Ruth 1.8–9* (Intercession)

May Yahweh deal kindly (*hesed*) with you [Orpah and Ruth] as you have dealt with the dead and with me [Naomi]. Yahweh grant you to find a home each of you in the house of her husband!

v.8: Reading the Qere *ya'as* for Kethibh *ya'aseh*

This is a prayer of intercession: Naomi prays for a beneficial future for her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. The grounds upon which this prayer is made are the deeds of kindness (*hesed*) that Orpah and Ruth have shown to Naomi and the deceased members of the family. The prayer is accompanied by action on Naomi's part: she implores Orpah and Ruth to return to their mother's house. As things turn out – at least as far as Ruth was concerned – this may have been bad advice that, fortunately, was not followed. For Ruth, this prayer was fulfilled not in Moab, but in Judah. Whether or not it was fulfilled for Orpah we do not know.²²

2. *Ruth 2.12* (Intercession)

May Yahweh recompense you [Ruth] for what you have done, and may you be fully repaid by Yahweh the God of Israel under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

Here Boaz intercedes for Ruth, and the prayer is answered through the intercessor, for Boaz provides the means whereby Ruth is assured of provisions, a home and descendants. Here again, Ruth's previous acts of kindness constitute the grounds upon which intercession is made.

3 and 4. *Ruth 2.19–20* (Thanksgiving)

2.19 Blessed be he [Boaz] who took notice of you [Ruth].

²⁰ Hals, *Theology*, p.4.

²¹ In Ruth 2.4 are two formulas of Yahwistic greeting. No doubt these were conventional greetings, and need not be further considered.

²² Thus it may be observed, perhaps a little pedantically, that Hals's comment that every prayer in the book of Ruth finds an answer in the course of the plot could be an exaggeration. See R. Hals, art. 'Ruth' in *IDB*, Supplementary Volume, p. 758.

2.20 Blessed be he [Boaz] by the Lord whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead.

These two brief prayers are from the lips of Naomi. The first is a thanksgiving that Boaz took notice of Ruth. The second is less straightforward: whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead, that of Boaz or Yahweh? Expressed grammatically, is Boaz or Yahweh the antecedent of the *'ašer* which comes at the beginning of the phrase? Grammatically, both are possible, and exegetically each has its champions,²³ but perhaps we have to say that we cannot easily make such a decision and that we must live with the ambiguity. It could be that Naomi gives thanks to God that his (God's) kindness (*hesed*) has not forsaken the living or the dead. Equally, it may be that Naomi is giving thanks to God that Boaz's kindness (*hesed*) has not forsaken the living or the dead. Whichever of these is understood, there would appear to be an element of reflection from the prayer of intercession in 1.8 with its, 'May Yahweh deal kindly (*hesed*) with you [Orpah and Ruth] as you have dealt with the dead and with me [Naomi].' Naomi, who once had 'complained' about Yahweh's treatment of her (1.20f) now thanks him for the change in fortunes that she and Ruth have experienced, at least in part through the kind attentions of Boaz.

5. *Ruth* 3.10 (Intercession)

And he [Boaz] said, 'May you [Ruth] be blessed by Yahweh, my daughter; you have made this last kindness (*hesed*) greater than the former, for you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.'

This is a further intercession on the part of Boaz for Ruth. Two elements we have already noted in intercessions in the book reappear. Once again Ruth's acts of kindness (*hesed*) are mentioned, and it is on the basis of these that God is invoked in prayer. Then again, it will be at least in part by means of his own subsequent actions on behalf of Ruth that Boaz's prayer will be answered.

6. *Ruth* 4. 11–12 (Intercession)

And all the people who were at the gate, and the elders said, 'We are witnesses. May Yahweh make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah who together built the house of Israel. And may you prosper in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem. (v.12) And may your house become like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, from the offspring which Yahweh will give you from this young woman.'

²³ For example: that it is Yahweh's kindness . . . , see Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 393; Campbell, *Ruth*, p. 113: that it is Boaz's kindness . . . , see Sasson, *Ruth*, p. 60; Hubbard, *Ruth*, p. 186.

- v.11: Retaining the MT, rather than following LXX which has the people as witnesses but the elders pronounce the blessing – or even the Syriac in which the elders answer, the people say ‘We are witnesses,’ and both groups utter the blessing.²⁴

This is a prayer of intercession uttered, as the Hebrew text has it, by the people at the gate and the elders after the announcement of the marriage of Boaz and Ruth. It is an elaborate prayer that deals with themes already familiar to us: it requests offspring, prosperity and renown, all antitheses of the famine, lack of heirs and being aliens which prevailed so problematically at the beginning of the story. The prayer points to that which Yahweh makes possible (‘May Yahweh make the woman . . .’ and ‘. . . which Yahweh will give you from this young woman’), but which yet is effected through human beings (‘. . . like Rachel and Leah who together built the house of Israel.’) It is as if the prayer serves to remind us that not all the problems are as yet resolved. Campbell has put his finger on this: ‘In calling for a blessing of fertility, it reminds us that Ruth has been barren and Boaz is getting on in years – with the effect of suggesting that the drama is still not quite over.’²⁵

7. *Ruth* 4.14 (Thanksgiving)

And the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed be Yahweh, who this day has not let there cease to be a redeemer for you: may his name be renowned in Israel!’

- v.14: Retaining MT’s ‘his name’ (*š’ômô*) against the ‘your name’ (*tò ónomá sou*) of LXX.²⁶

Here we have the third prayer of thanksgiving in the book. It is uttered by the women and its object of thanksgiving is the fact that Naomi has a redeemer. The women who earlier had greeted Naomi on her return from Moab (1.19), having heard of all her sufferings (1.20f), now give thanks to Yahweh for this wondrous change of fortunes. The previous prayer (4.11) may have interceded for Boaz’s household: the present one gives thanks for good news for Naomi, for a son has been born to Ruth. Further, things look set for this child to become a great name in Israel.²⁷ Yahweh is thanked for his gracious provision.

We may now make some general observations about these prayers, and the first concerns the pattern of their occurrence in the

²⁴ See, e.g., Sasson, *Ruth*, p. 153.

²⁵ Campbell, *Ruth*, p. 156.

²⁶ See Hubbard, *Ruth*, pp. 268f.

²⁷ It seems most natural to take ‘his name’ in 4.14 as referring to the child. See discussion in Campbell, *Ruth*, pp. 163f. It could refer to Yahweh, but would not his name be renowned further afield than merely in Israel?

book. The book of Ruth has four major scenes, namely, I: The Road to Bethlehem (1.6–18); II: The Field of Boaz (2.1–17); III: The Threshing Floor (3.6–15); IV: The Gate of Bethlehem (4.1–12).²⁸ What is of interest is that each of these major scenes has within it a prayer of intercession. Further, at the close of scenes II and IV there are prayers of thanksgiving. At the close of scenes I and III, while there may not be prayers of thanksgiving, there are, respectively, notes of hope and expectancy. Diagrammatically, it is as follows:

<i>Scene</i>	<i>Prayers of . . .</i>	
	<i>Intercession</i>	<i>Thanksgiving</i>
I: The Road to Bethlehem 1.6–18	1. 8–9	None (but note of hope in 1.22b)
II: The Field of Boaz 2.1–17	2.12	2.19–20
III: The Threshing Floor 3.6–15	3.10	None (but note of expectancy in 3.16–18)
IV: The Gate of Bethlehem 4.1–12	4.11–12	4.14

The fact that each of the four major scenes in the book has a prayer of intercession suggests that these prayers are a significant part of the story and its resolution. In these prayers the aid of God is sought for those difficult or problem-beset situations in which various people find themselves (Orpah and Ruth; Ruth; Ruth; Ruth and Boaz). We have already seen how the book portrays certain events and happenings as being effected by God, and this is emphasized by the fact that individuals make such prayers of intercession as these.

Yet we have also observed that there are matters that depend upon human action and initiative, and this we see too in the fact that there is human involvement in certain aspects of the answering of these prayers. In the first intercession (1.8–9) Naomi prays for a beneficial future for Orpah and Ruth: her prayer for them is accompanied by her imploring her daughters-in-law to return to their families (action which if carried out by Orpah and Ruth would have made Naomi's situation the more desperate). But prayer to Yahweh and human action are linked. This is to be seen even more clearly in the second intercession (2.12) where Boaz prays for Ruth: here the intercessor

²⁸ This follows the analysis of the structure of the book adopted by Hals, *Theology*, p.5. Hals is following basically what was set forth by Gunkel. Another analysis is that of Hubbard, *Ruth*, pp. 74f., which in essence is the same as I am adopting.

himself becomes the means whereby Ruth is assured of provisions, a home, and descendants. Thus to Boaz's prayer to Yahweh is added his subsequent actions. In the third intercession (3.10), where Boaz again prays for Ruth, we see how the intercessor's later actions become the human means whereby the prayer is answered. In the fourth intercession (4.11–12) where people and elders (or elders alone?) pray for the newlyweds, the prayer is accompanied by a legal transaction. Thus, once again, prayer and action are joined together. Certainly, there is no thought here of prayer as some sort of magical incantation which alone and unaided by human effort will produce the desired results. Not only is prayer portrayed as necessarily being accompanied by human action, but also that human activity may well be the means whereby prayer is to at least some extent 'answered'.

It is instructive in this regard to take notice of the grounds upon which the intercessions to Yahweh are made. Whereas, for example, some of the intercessions on the part of Moses (Num. 14.13–19; Deut. 9.25–29) have as their ground the honour or reputation of Yahweh himself, the prayers in the book of Ruth have as the ground what the person being prayed for has done. Thus, in the first intercession (1.8–9) Yahweh is implored to deal kindly (*ya'as . . . hesed*) with Ruth and Orpah in the same way that they have dealt (kindly, implied) with the members of the family into which they have married. The same occurs in the second intercession (2.12) – 'May Yahweh recompense you for what you have done . . .', and again in the third intercession (3.10) with its, 'May you be blessed by Yahweh . . . you have made this last kindness (*hesed*) greater than the former, for you have not gone after other young men . . .' Although the fourth intercession is somewhat different (4.11–12) there is once again the marked emphasis on the role that humans play in the whole drama being portrayed in the book. Though conception and the establishment of a large family may depend to at least some degree on what Yahweh alone grants, yet there is much else dependent upon appropriate actions, responses and reactions of the humans involved in the drama.

The thanksgivings, as we have observed, come at the close of Scenes II and IV. Scenes I and III do not close with thanksgiving: events have not reached such stages that would make thanksgivings appropriate. Nevertheless Scene I closes with the note of hope in 1.22b, and Scene III with the note of expectancy in 3.16–18. At the close of Scene II there is the dual thanksgiving in 2.19–20 that Boaz has taken notice of Ruth, not only giving her a sufficiency of food but also opening up the way that will eventually lead to marriage and offspring. In 2.20 thanks are offered by Naomi that 'kindness (*hesed*)

has not deserted the living or the dead, but whether this is God's or Boaz's *hesed* remains an unresolved question, and one to which I shall return. The final thanksgiving at the close of scene IV (4.14) is expressed by 'the women' and is for the fact that Naomi has a redeemer now that Ruth, married to Boaz, has borne a son. Thus God is thanked for his gracious provision. Thus, in 1.19 God is thanked that Boaz took notice of Ruth, while in 4.14 God is praised for what he has done. Again, we notice those things that the humans can and do give effect to, and also what it is that Yahweh has done.

We may understand 4.14 as standing at the climax of the book of Ruth. In this verse, containing the final thanksgiving, is expressed the praise of the women – the book's Greek chorus-like group – for the fact that their friend Naomi clearly now has an adequate future. And the following verses emphasise what good things are in store for Naomi: that Obed will be a restorer of life and a nourisher of old age, and that she has the love and devotion of her daughter-in-law Ruth (v.15); Naomi finds joy in her care of the child (v.16) and the women, naming the child, regard him as Naomi's (v.17).

Thus, surely, we are intended to understand that it is Naomi above all who has experienced the providence of Yahweh. It is she who has experienced all those bitter aspects of life – she has known famine and exile, homelessness and bereavement. She has indeed known great bitterness (1.20). Yet having experienced the depths, we are also left at the end of the book with the picture of her as more than adequately provided for, having now a breadwinner and a family, a home and a child. Yet the book is not the book of Naomi, but rather the book of Ruth, because, I submit, the author of this work is seeking to probe some of the mysteries of this dramatic change of circumstances that Naomi has experienced. It is above all, humanly speaking, through the devotion, kindness (*hesed*) of Ruth that the good has come out of disaster. Of course Boaz also made crucial contributions to the eventual good outcome of these strange events, but the naming of the work after Ruth heightened the sense of mystery about the provision that Naomi came to experience, for Ruth was a Moabitess, a foreigner, not an Israelite woman. Yet Ruth and Boaz each acted in an unselfish way; they acted with kindness (*hesed*) and they – and also Naomi²⁹ – interceded for others. We may note that there are no prayers of petition in the book of Ruth; no-one is portrayed as praying for themselves. As we have observed, these unselfish acts on the part of Ruth and Boaz are given added

²⁹ No doubt for Fewell and Gunn this is a rather naive assessment of Naomi: see esp. their "A Son is Born to Naomi". . . , pp. 103–107.

emphasis through the negative example of Orpah and the nearer kinsman.

Yet overreaching all this little drama is portrayed the devotion of Yahweh. He was interceded in these matters, and as far as the main characters in the story were concerned all the prayers of intercession were answered.³⁰ Yet in no way are those prayers of intercession portrayed as magical incantations, intended to sway a deity to work a divine fiat for his people. Nevertheless much in the book is ascribed to the activity of Yahweh, and thus to him were prayers of thanksgiving also made.

I submit that the author of the book of Ruth was concerned to probe some of these mysteries of the providential care of Yahweh for his people. That there was an eventual good and beneficial outcome was due both to divine and human activity, and indeed in the prayers of intercession is portrayed something of a mysterious intertwining of those different acts. To what extent was the good outcome due to divine activity and what was the extent of the human contribution no doubt had to left shrouded in mystery. And perhaps not inappropriately is the meaning of Ruth 2.20 left shrouded in a sense of mystery for us: was Yahweh being thanked for his own kindness (*hesed*) to Ruth, or for that of his servant Boaz? Or were thanksgivings being offered for both?

Abstract

Neither seeking to resolve legal details nor undertaking character studies is likely to aid our understanding of the book of Ruth. Rather, the work is a 'story' which begins with multiple problems in Moab and ends with abundance in Judah. The book thus deals with the theme of providence which is effected by the actions of both Yahweh and various humans, especially Ruth and Boaz. The intertwining of divine and human activity is emphasized in particular through the prayers of intercession and thanksgiving. These prayers are given particular attention in this article.

³⁰ Compare n.22 above.