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# 'Faith" in the Book of Ruth 

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## Background

TThe refreshing story of Ruth takes place "in the days when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1). This was in general a morally and religiously abysmal era, when "Israel had no king" and "everyone did as he saw fit" (Jud 21:25; cp 17:6; 18:1; 19:1). With no central government to encourage stability, Israel cyclically invoked God's help against her enemies but quickly fell away once it was received (Jud 2:10-19; 10:6-16). The nation's neighbors exploited her weakness by invading and oppressing her citizens.

Against such a background, Ruth's protagonists demonstrate that even in the darkest times people may be found who love God and live righteously. On the one hand, Micah's idolatry and opportunism (Jud 17), Dan's rapacity (Jud 18), Gibeah's debauchery, Benjamin's preference for tribe over justice, and Israel's rash vows and antidotes (Jud 19-21), depict the general tenor of the times. By contrast, the decisive faith of Ruth and the generous character of Boaz blaze as novae in the midnight sky. Further, we see God's grace in mellowing the embittered Naomi and in keeping his word to provide a ruler (and later messiah) through Judah.

The Talmud teaches that Samuel wrote the book of Ruth, though not all modern scholars concur. It falls in the third part of the Hebrew canon, the kethubim or "writings" (parts one and two
being the torah or "law" and the nebi'im or "prophets." ${ }^{1}$ In the Talmud Ruth was the first book in the kethubim, but was later transferred to the megilloth, a collection of five rolls within the kethubim. Each of the megilloth is read during one of the Jewish feasts; Ruth, the second, is read during the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost at the end of the grain harvest. ${ }^{2}$ Later, the Septuagint or Greek translation of the Old Testament, followed by the Latin Vulgate and subsequent Western translations, placed Ruth after Judges because of their close relation in time.

${ }^{1}$ See Luke 24:44 where Jesus spoke about "the Law (torah) of Moses, the Prophets (nebi' im), and the Psalms (which is often the first and certainly the longest book of the kethubim)."
${ }^{2}$ The other books of the megilloth are Song of Songs (which is read at Passover), Lamentations (read on the ninth of Ab), Ecclesiastes (read during the Feast of Booths), and Esther (read during Purim).

## A Homiletic Approach

This article will not attempt to exegete the book, but rather suggest one homiletic approach and then propose further themes for study. It is possible to trace the development of Ruth's faith through the book as follows: the decision of faith (1), the work of faith (2), the request of faith (3), and the reward of faith (4).

## The Decision of Faith (chapter one)

Chapter one begins with Elimelech and his family moving to Moab to escape a famine. The text does not state whether he inquired of God before leaving Judah, or instead made this decision on his own. However this may be, his actions recall those of Abraham, who earlier had left the land of promise for Egypt because of famine with no recorded authorization by God, and demonstrated a lack of faith while there (Gen 12:10-20). It is possible (but not certain) that Elimelech's lack of faith in God to provide in Judah stands by design in the story in contrast with Ruth's decision to abandon Moab for Judah, and its gods for Yahweh. At any rate Elimelech, whose name means "my God is king," leaves Bethlehem, the "house of bread," because of a famine. His purpose was to "sojourn" or "live for a while" (גּ) there. But then as now such "temporary" departures often have a way of becoming more permanent than intended. Elimelech himself died, his sons married, and after ten years they too perished. The "sojourn" out of the land of promise had taken on the appearance of a settled change of address.

In time the widowed ${ }^{3}$ Naomi hears that Yahweh has "come to the aid of" his people and lifted the famine. So she and her two daughters-in-law start out for Judah. Before they have gone far Naomi counsels them to return home, praying that they find "rest" in the home of another Moabite husband since they could not wait

[^0]for sons from her even if (as seemed unlikely) she were to bear them. Naomi (נָעָמִי), a name which means "pleasant," laments that her life has become "bitter," and adopts that name (מָרָא, "Mara") for herself ( $1: 20$ ). Not only has the "pleasant" woman become "bitter," but the "full" is now "empty" (1:21). The fullness the family had hoped to gain by leaving Judah had not materialized. Her life has become bitter and empty because in her view Yahweh's hand had gone out against her. God never rebukes her for that assessment, but by the story's end has so worked that she has a "son" (4:17) who will "renew [her] life and sustain [her] in [her] old age" (4:15). Thus the bitter one will once again enjoy pleasantness; the empty will again be full. But, not imagining that such a happy outcome could await her, Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to Moab to seek "rest" while she goes home to Judah to pursue her lot alone.

At first both assure Naomi they would go with her. But after Naomi outlines her own plight and their prospects, Orpah returns to Moab. By contrast, in her classic reply Ruth binds herself to her mother-in-law. She commits herself firmly to share her lot. As part of that commitment, Ruth declares that Naomi's God will be her God (1:16) and takes an oath in Yahweh's name (1:17), so that Boaz later correctly observes that the Moabitess has come to take refuge under the wings of Yahweh, the God of Israel (2:12). This is Ruth's decision of faith.

This decision is worth examining. First, it was made in the face of the negative prospects it entailed. Humanly speaking her future looked better if she were to follow Orpah back to Moab-a husband, a home, and "rest" more likely awaited her there. A biblical decision of faith often means abandoning what appear to be good earthly prospects for seemingly poorer ones. ${ }^{4}$ Second, the

[^1]decision was made firmly. One reason God honored her faith, and her story is told today, is that the choice she made was clear and decisive. Throughout the scriptures, that is the kind of faith God wants. ${ }^{5}$ Third, Ruth's decision determined her destiny. Orpah chose one way, apparently based on her human vision and analysis-what may be called "walking by sight, not by faith" (in contrast with 2 Cor 5:7)-and we hear no more of her. Ruth made a contrary choice, and all the good that she soon came to enjoy followed as a consequence. Despite the bleak prospects, Ruth chose decisively to accompany Naomi and trust Yahweh, and that decision set in motion the events which produced all the good she soon enjoyed.

## The Work of Faith (chapter two)

But does faith stop with a decision, or even a verbalization of that decision? Does a decision to trust God mean that the new believer sits and waits for God to act on his or her behalf? Do we "claim" a blessing and wait for God to supernaturally bestow it upon us? Is faith divorced from works?

Not so with Ruth. She acted on her word, accompanying Naomi to Bethlehem in Judah as the barley harvest was beginning (1:22). Barley, often considered inferior to wheat, ${ }^{6}$ was harvested in April-May; wheat followed a few weeks later. Rather than wait for her and her mother-in-law's needs to be miraculously supplied, Ruth proposes that she glean in the barley fields. As standing grain was cut and bound into sheaves, some would inevitably be missed or dropped. The Mosaic Law prescribed that these should be left

[^2]"for the poor and the alien." This good law simultaneously provided for the poor and encouraged their dignity by allowing them to work for their food rather than simply beg for it. Thus the twin evils of tight-fistedness on the part of the wealthy and a sense of entitlement to unearned welfare on the part of the poor were avoided. Gleaning was hard work, it was humble work, it did not generally yield an abundant return, but it did provide something. Ruth was humble and committed enough to be willing to undertake the task of seeking permission ( $2: 2,7$ ), of gleaning, and of gleaning barley. In doing so she displayed not a lack of faith that her new God would provide, but rather a living faith ${ }^{8}$ which was willing to pursue the means that this God had already ordained to supply her needs. Not only does she work, but she works long and hard. ${ }^{9}$

Unbeknown to Ruth, she happened to choose a field belonging to Boaz, a respected relative of Elimelech (2:1, 3, 20). The greetings exchanged between him and his harvesters (2:4) suggest his godly, kindly character. Even in the dark days of the judges God has those who fear and honor him. He will later be seen to be a generous ( $2: 14-16 ; 3: 15$ ), honest ( $3: 18$ ), prudent and hardworking man (4:1-10). He notices and inquires about Ruth, and provides generously for her once he learns who she is. He does this because he has been told about her work of faith-how she has taken refuge under Yahweh's wings and worked hard for her mother-in-law (2:11-12). He prays that God would bless her (2:12)-little knowing that he will be the means through whom that blessing will come. He urges Ruth for her safety to stay with his fields and workers (2:8-9)-a matter with which Naomi
${ }^{7}$ Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut 24:19-22. Boaz went beyond what the Law required ( $2: 15-16 ; 3: 15$ ). The result was that Ruth came home with an extraordinarily large quantity for a gleaner-about 22 liters (2:17). Thus in one day's work she gathered enough food to feed the two women for three weeks or so. This surprising amount prompted Naomi's question of Ruth and blessing on the as yet unknown landowner (2:18-19).
${ }^{8}$ See James 2:14-26.
${ }^{9} 2: 7,17-18,23$. The two harvest seasons mentioned in $2: 23$ would have lasted about seven weeks.
concurs (2:22)-again suggesting the general darkness of the times.

## The Request of Faith (chapter three)

Faith may be strong to make a decision which apparently contravenes common sense and then to act decisively on that decision. But biblical faith is not content with what it alone can achieve. It acknowledges its need, and asks God to do what it cannot.

Earlier Naomi had prayed that Yahweh would grant her daughters-in-law "rest" (מְנוֹחָה) in the home of another husband (1:9). It had seemed highly unlikely to her that Ruth-a foreigner ${ }^{10}$-would ever be so blessed in Judah. But now, with her own needs being met and hopes renewed, Naomi turns her thoughts away from her bitter bereavement to her daughter-in-law, and suggests that she will now try to find "rest" (מָנויחא, translated in the NIV as "a home") ${ }^{11}$ for her (3:1). The one through whom she will seek it is Boaz, who has already shown himself to be kindly disposed toward Ruth.

The Torah provided that if brothers were living together and one died without a son, the surviving brother should marry the widow. The first child born to that union would bear the deceased's name (Deut $25: 5-10$ ). It was this practice which lay behind the Sadducees' question of Jesus in Matt 22:23-33 and parallels. By outlining the plan of $3: 3-4$, Naomi is urging Ruth to tacitly ask Boaz to perform this responsibility of levirate marriage. Spreading the corner of one's garment over another (3:9) is a request for marriage, as Ezek 16:8 suggests.

[^3]This may strike the reader as rather forward, but faith is willing to humble oneself and ask for big things. The persistence of the Syrophoenician woman (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30) further illustrates that truth. Here Ruth, who through her work of faith has been supplying the needs of both herself and Naomi, makes a bold, tacit request of faith that more be done for her.

A "threshing floor" was an elevated level place of smooth rock or pounded earth, usually east or downwind from the city. Workers tossed the threshed grain into the breeze that usually rose in the afternoon from the Mediterranean. The chaff would blow away, but the heavier grain fall to the ground to be gathered. Here the unpretentious Boaz would spend the night, whether to guard his harvest or in celebration of it. Although some interpreters see lewdness in Ruth's action of "uncovering Boaz' feet," both Boaz' statement in 3:11 that Ruth is known as a woman of character, as well as the whole tenor of the story, argue against that assessment. She is simply-but admittedly quite clearly-asking that Boaz perform his obligation as kinsman-redeemer (גֹאֵל). Her bathing, perfuming, and dressing (3:3), of course, were not designed to discourage his response to her.

Whether or not Ruth knew it, Elimelech had a relative closer than Boaz who retained the first right to buy his estate and take Ruth as his wife. Boaz, startled in the middle of the night as he sleeps on the threshing floor, awakes to find-of all things!-a woman at his feet. Learning her identity and hearing her request, Boaz proposes to Ruth that in the morning he will inform this relative of his option to redeem and then, if this closer kinsman declines, promises to do it himself. He then has Ruth lie down until morning, and before she leaves gives her six measures of barley.

Naomi naturally is eager to hear how things went. When she hears Ruth's story and sees the grain Boaz has sent, she urges Ruth to wait to see the outcome, assured that Boaz would act on his promise that very day.

And so the request of faith becomes the rest of faith. Faith takes courage to ask for big things-even that mountains be
removed (Matt 21:21-22)—and then rests in faith that God will act. One is reminded of Jehoshaphat, who interceded with God against the coalition marching against him, and who was told to rest and wait for God's deliverance (2 Chron 20). Hannah pled for a son and then, resting in faith for God's answer, "went away and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast" ( 1 Sam 1:18). These and others made requests of faith to God-not for extravagant items for self-indulgence, but for basic needs in line with his covenant-and then rested in anticipation of the answer. Again it is helpful to remember that Ruth's request followed both her decision of faith and her work of faith, and did not comprise a lazy or escapist approach to life's needs and responsibilities. Her request was made for what God had already promised in the Law but which was beyond her ability in herself to make happen.

## The Reward of Faith (chapter four)

Chapter four finds Boaz hard at work fulfilling his promise. He will do everything with energy, propriety, and thoroughness.

The "town gate" (4:1) was a public center where business was often transacted and judgments rendered. ${ }^{12}$ Boaz went to the gate and, when the closer relative approached, had him turn aside to this "courtroom." He then invited a full quorum of ten elders to witness his discussion. Upon hearing Boaz' word that Elimelech's property is for sale, the kinsman expresses interest in acquiring it. But when he learns that that entails marrying Ruth and raising an heir for Elimelech, he demurs. Then follows a description of a practice which had become archaic and required explanation by the time the book was written-that of giving a sandal to legalize a transaction (4:7-8). Boaz then states his intentions to redeem the property and marry Ruth as clearly and firmly as did Ruth to

[^4]abandon Moab and follow Naomi (4:9-10, cp. 1:16-17). ${ }^{13}$ The ten elders affirm that they have witnessed the transaction, implying that all is in order. They invoke Yahweh's blessing on this proposed marriage, praying that God would bless it with children. In time Yahweh answered their prayer. He enabled Ruth to conceive (4:13) and bear a son.

And now Naomi's fortunes have turned full cycle. She left Judah full, returned empty ( $1: 21$ ), and now has been filled again. The woman named "Pleasant" who assumed the title "Bitter" now has the "pleasant" prospect of a גֹאֵ who will renew her life and sustain her in her old age (4:15). ${ }^{14}$ She takes the child in her lap and cares for him (4:16). All this because the blessing of Yahweh has come to her through her return to the land of promise, and the ministry of her faithful daughter-in-law who was better to her than seven sons (4:15). ${ }^{15}$

The genealogy that follows demonstrates just how significant and far-reaching Ruth's decision, work, and request of faith proved to be. Perez, with whom the genealogy starts (4:18), was a son of Judah, ${ }^{16}$ to whom rulership was promised by Jacob. ${ }^{17}$ Sure enough, Obed-the child born to Boaz and Ruth-becomes the father of Jesse, who himself was the father of David-king of Israel and human ancestor of Jesus the Messiah. ${ }^{18}$ Who ever knows

[^5]how significant will be one person's decision, work, and request of faith? Who ever can tell how great the reward of faith for any one person will be? Not only was Ruth blessed with "rest" in the home of a husband and child, but she enjoyed the respect of those who knew her ( $3: 11 ; 4: 15$ ), and became an ancestor of the messiah. All this for a foreigner who put faith in the God of Israel and acted on that faith. ${ }^{19}$

## Other Considerations

As stated at the beginning, this article does not attempt to exegete the book of Ruth, but simply to suggest one line of thought-the character and development of Ruth's faith-that runs throughout it. Other themes which may be profitably pursued include:

- a character study of Naomi who, though living in a foreign land for a decade or more and at the end of that time berating the lot assigned to her by Yahweh, nevertheless was so compelling a personality that Ruth would abandon her home, her prospects, and her gods to follow her to Judah.
- reflections on the sovereignty of God, who works behind the scenes so that Ruth "happens" to choose Boaz' field in which to glean, causes Boaz to awaken at this right time, ensures that the close relative passes the gate the next

[^6]morning, enables Ruth to bear a son, etc. Similarities may be drawn to the book of Esther, where God's name is not mentioned but his work in the events of the story is very clear.

- a study of "harsh" prayers to or statements against Yahweh in the Bible on the part of his believers, including Naomi, Job, Asaph, Jeremiah, etc.
- a study of the גֹאֵ or kinsman redeemer, who 1) must be a close relative, 2) must be able to redeem, and 3) must be willing to redeem. Parallels can be drawn to Jesus, the great antitype of the Old Testament גנֵֵ, who 1) took on humanity that he might be our "close relative" (Heb 2:14 18; 4:14-16), 2) is able to redeem (Heb 7:25), and 3) was willing to redeem (John 10:17-18; Luke 22:41-42). The word גָּנֵל גָּ is a participle, occurs 23 times in Ruth. ${ }^{20}$
- the contribution of the book of Ruth to the concept of covenant-loyalty or loyal-love (חֶ, $1: 8 ; 2: 20 ; 3: 10$ ).
- the role that Ruth's submission to her mother-in-law and willingness to obey her played in the good that came to her.
May God grant that as we study the faith and character of Ruth all of us-men and women-would appropriately follow in her steps.

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[^0]:    ${ }^{3}$ The repeated note that Naomi "was left with her two sons (v. 3)" and that she "was left without her two sons and her husband (v. 5)" underscores her loss and desolation.

[^1]:    ${ }^{4}$ This motif runs throughout the scriptures. Notable examples include Abraham's willingness to take the arid regions of Canaan in contrast with Lot's choice (Gen 13), and Jesus' instruction that the one who seeks to save his life will lose it, while the one who loses his life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel will find it (Matt 16:25-26 and parallels).

[^2]:    ${ }^{5}$ See, for example, Joshua's challenge to decisively choose which god they would follow (Josh 24:14-15), Elijah's call for decision in the question of Yahweh vs. Baal (1 Ki 18:21), and the glorified Lord's revulsion against lukewarmness (Rev 3:15-16).
    ${ }^{6}$ For example, wheat was twice as expensive as barley in $2 \mathrm{Ki} 7: 1$; three times as expensive in $\operatorname{Rev} 6: 6$. The comparison of Gideon and Israel to "a round loaf of barley bread" in Jud 7:13 aptly symbolizes their inferiority to Midian.

[^3]:    ${ }^{10}$ Repeated references to Ruth as "the Moabitess" throughout the book ( $1: 22 ; 2: 2,6,21 ; 4: 5,10$ ) emphasize her foreignness.
     only absence of movement but being settled in a particular place (whether concrete or abstract) with overtones of finality, or (when speaking abstractly) of victory, salvation, etc." מָנוֹחָ "denotes a place of nûah (motionless, security) for animals or people, i.e. a place to settle down, a home" [TWOT, s.v. ננוחָ]. The word here thus implies security, not leisure.

[^4]:    ${ }^{12}$ See, e.g., Gen 23:10, 18; 34:20, 24; Deut 17:5; 21:19; 22:15, $24 ; 25: 7$; and throughout the O.T.

[^5]:    ${ }^{13}$ Just as Boaz' selfless, faithful character parallels that of Ruth, so the unwilling kinsman-redeemer's more self-centered and "pragmatic" character parallels that of Orpah.
    ${ }^{14}$ Previously in the book Boaz had been considered the גֹאֵל. But now in $4: 14-15$ that title is applied to the child born to Boaz and Ruth as well. Obed (עוִֵֹד) will serve (עָבַד) to "redeem" Naomi from emptiness, insignificance, and insecurity.
    ${ }^{15}$ This is very high praise in a day when sons often seemed to be valued more than daughters.
    ${ }^{16}$ Gen 38 tells the story of Perez' conception and birth. Cp. Gen 46:12.
    ${ }^{17}$ Gen 49:10.
    ${ }^{18}$ Having Ruth the Moabitess in his ancestry may help explain why, though Moab was included among Israel's enemies (1 Sam 12:9;

[^6]:    14:47), David took his parents to the king of Moab for safekeeping during the time he fled from Saul (1 Sam 22:3-4).
    ${ }^{19}$ The genealogy of Jesus in Matt 1 lists four women, none of whom would ordinarily be expected to have been granted such an honor. Tamar had been Judah's daughter-in-law, and his liaison with her was immoral (Gen 38). Rahab was a foreigner from the doomed city of Jericho, and by many translations a prostitute. Ruth was a foreigner and a Moabitess-a fact reiterated throughout the book (see footnote 10). Deut 23:3 states that ordinarily no Moabite could enter the assembly of Yahweh even down to the tenth generation. Finally, Bathsheba or "Uriah's wife" should not have been David's spouse. God's dealings with Israel--and with humanity as a whole-are a matter of grace.

[^7]:    ${ }^{202} 2: 20 ; 3: 9 ; 3: 12$ ( 2 times), 13 (4 times); 4:1, 3, 4 ( 5 times), 6 (5 times), 7, 8, 14.

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