

# STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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## OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Although the inspiring quality of the characters represents a major theme of the Book of Ruth, this was not the author's primary purpose in writing. His goal was broader on the one hand and more specific on the other. He may have focused on the lives of one particular family in Bethlehem, but their experiences had significance for the readership primarily because of the link they provide between the Canaanized period of the judges and the hopeful reign of David. Writing in the aftermath of the fall of Samaria and the resurgence of the house of David under Josiah, the narrator tells his readers that the same LORD who raised up the house of David in these most unlikely circumstances has preserved it all these years in fulfillment of his promise to David in 2 Samuel 7. But Yahweh still seeks people of *hesed* through whom to effect his plans.

Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 1999), 615.

## Ruth

### I. Introduction

Every commentary on the Book of Ruth seems to open with the exact same sentiment—there is no other work of literature quite like Ruth. It is one of the most well known stories of the Bible. In fact, it has been called the most beautiful short story ever written. Yet the familiarity of the book may actually be a hindrance rather than a help, for it may influence readers to draw certain conclusions while not allowing them to break free of their long-held notions of what the book is about.

#### A. *Title*

The book is titled after the most well-known character of the book. And yet the book's title is actually quite deceiving. In fact, Block notes several reasons why it is actually quite remarkable that the title bears her name. First, Ruth is a non-Israelite. She is a Moabitess, a fact to which the narrator and Boaz emphasize with the repeated use of the phrase, "Ruth the Moabitess" (1:22; 2:2, 21; 4:5, 10). This is, in fact, the only book of the OT to be named after a non-Israelite.

Second, Ruth is not the main character of the book. The book opens with a description of the crisis that occurred in Naomi's family, and it ends with the resolution to that crisis. Even at the end of the book, the narrator seems to draw attention away from Ruth and

toward Naomi, as it is she and not Ruth who is praised and celebrated at the birth of Obed (4:13-17). In addition, Ruth speaks the least of the three main characters, and her speeches are always the shortest. This fact is remarkable given that over fifty percent of the book is direct discourse—the highest dialogue-to-narrative ratio of any OT narrative book.

Thus, Block concludes,

Based on the plot, the book is more appropriately titled "The Book of Naomi"; and on the dialogue, "The Book of Boaz." On the other hand, given the concluding episode and genealogy, as well as the purpose of the book, it might even have been called "The Book of Obed." No doubt the present title reflects the narrator's and reader's fascination with and special admiration for the character of Ruth.<sup>1</sup>

### B. *Canonical Placement*

The Book of Ruth seems to have received early recognition within Jewish tradition. In our English Bibles, it appears right after Judges, following the order of the Greek LXX. No doubt this is based on its similar historical context to Judges. The same order may be deduced from Josephus' 22-book arrangement of the OT, where Ruth is attached to Judges and Lamentations to Jeremiah. Block notes that

with this arrangement of the canon, after the Book of Judges the Book of Ruth offers the reader welcome relief. Whereas Judges had developed the theme of Israel's increasing spiritual infidelity in the premonarchic period, this book highlights the presence and nature of genuine spirituality during this same period. In contrast to the Canaanized characters like Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson, all of the personalities in Ruth display authentic faith and true covenant faithfulness. The Book of Ruth demonstrates that the lights of God's grace and human integrity still shone in the small rural community of Bethlehem.<sup>2</sup>

Yet this arrangement is most likely of later development. In fact, the earliest placement of Ruth appears to be before Psalms at the start of the Writings, a position which Rooker remarks is probably meant as an introduction to David, the main contributor to the Psalms.<sup>3</sup> Its current position in the prevailing Hebrew manuscripts places it at the start of the *Megilloth*—the "Five Scrolls" which are traditionally read during the five major Jewish festivals. The *Megilloth* is placed directly after Proverbs, assumingly because its lead book—Ruth—propitiously embodies the very virtues expressed in the acrostic poem on the "excellent wife" (Prov 31:10-31).

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 1999), 588.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 588-9.

<sup>33</sup> Mark F. Rooker, "The Book of Ruth," in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2011), 301.

### C. *Date & Authorship*

The date of the events of the book can be broadly narrowed to the period of the Judges, as the opening verse attests (Ruth 1:1). Kaiser dates the events to the period of Midianite oppression (c. 1165-1125 B.C.), but this dating is in no way definitive.

The date and authorship of the work itself is a slightly more complicated subject. On the one hand, Jewish tradition holds that Samuel composed the Book of Ruth (*Baba Babthra* 14b). This position has been rightly rejected by contemporary scholarship on the grounds that Ruth 4:22 presupposes David to be a well-known figure in Israel, and yet 1 Samuel 28:3 records the death of Samuel before David even took the throne.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, critical scholars since the time of Wellhausen have tried to push the writing of Ruth to sometime in the postexilic period. Nevertheless, their evidence has not been overly convincing, leaving even some critical scholars skeptical of a postexilic date.

In between these two extremes lies several proposed dates for the book. All of them attempt to explain the *Sitz im Leben*—the life setting—which necessitated the writing of the work and explains its unique features, such as the focus Ruth as a Moabitess, the setting in Bethlehem, and most particularly, the emphasis on King David.

#### 1) *Option 1: Time of David*

One segment of scholars dates the book to within just a few generations of the events it describes. This theory supposes that the Book of Ruth serves as a defense of the Davidic kingship, which met with stiff resistance, particularly from the Benjaminites from whom Saul came. Here, the book portrays Bethlehem not as a humble town, but as an oasis of honor and faithfulness in an otherwise corrupt time. Likewise, David's Moabite pedigree is portrayed not as contemptuous but rather as including a woman as virtuous as Ruth the Moabitess.

#### 2) *Option 2: Time of Solomon*

Other scholars have preferred to date the book to the time of Solomon's reign. Their rationale is based on the premise of Solomon's rather violent ascendancy to the throne and, which may have elicited questions as to the validity of his kingship. According to this position, his long and peaceful reign provided the ideal conditions for the development of Israel's chief cultural phenomena, of which the Book of Ruth has been identified by nearly all scholarly as the crowning jewel of Israelite literature.

#### 3) *Option 3: Female Author*

Within the vein of option 2, A. J. Bledstein has suggested that Ruth is actually written by a female author, quite possibly David's daughter Tamar. Against the backdrop of the tragedies that characterized the latter half of her father's life, Bledstein argues that the Book of Ruth offers "a radical redefinition of 'a mighty man of valor'...and present[s] an ironic if idealistic female view of life within the Covenant."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 593.

4) *Option 4: Time of Elisha*

According to another viewpoint, the linguistic peculiarities that led critical scholars to a postexilic date actually reflect a distinct Northern Israel influence on the book. To this end, Weinfeld argues that the book was written in Northern Israel during the ministry of Elisha. The book, then, becomes a polemic against Northern Israel's leadership and a means of convincing Northerners to abandon their allegiances and reunite with Judah and the Davidic dynasty.

5) *Option 5: Time of Hezekiah*

Some scholars have pointed to the resurgence of the Davidic house under Hezekiah (716-687 B.C.) as a likely genesis for the Book of Ruth. Since the author of Kings seems to especially link Hezekiah to David's reign (2 Kgs 18:3, 7, 8; cf. 1 Sam 16:18; 18:14; 2 Sam 5:17-25), the book may have sprung out of this Davidic renaissance.

6) *Option 6: Exilic Period*

Because of supposedly linguistic features of the book which evidence a mix of both standard and late Biblical Hebrew, Bush suggests that Ruth could not have been written earlier than the time of Ezekiel, whose own work reflects a transition from standard to late Biblical Hebrew. According to Bush, the book has the primary goal of revealing its three main characters as models of covenant loyalty and faithfulness and providing them as models for its readers to follow. At a secondary and tertiary level, the book highlights God's sovereign and providential control of the world and thus on the eventual rise of King David.

7) *Option 7: Time of Josiah*

Finally, Block posits that the primary reason for the writing of Ruth is the "elevation of David," or more specifically, "how, in the providence of God, the divinely chosen King David could emerge from the dark period of the judges."<sup>6</sup> Thus Block suggests that the renaissance of the Davidic house under Josiah is the best scenario for explaining the various linguistic and thematic features of the book. Block writes,

The Book of Ruth may have been written by a resident of the formerly Northern Kingdom, an Israelite whose family had survived the Assyrian conquest and deportation a century earlier.... No doubt there were many in the North who objected to Josiah's political ambitions. In response to his detractors who may have pointed to the ethnic blemish in the royal family, our author demonstrates that nobility is more than an issue of blood; it is a matter of character. There may indeed have been Moabite blood in Josiah's veins, but Ruth represents all that is noble in Israel and outside the nation.... The Moabite blood flowing in Josiah's veins represented all that was virtuous and authentically pious (*hesed*) in Israel's own covenantal tradition.

Even more important than silencing Josiah's detractors, by writing the Book of Ruth the author celebrated the return of his own region to the only legitimate dynasty the Israelites had ever known.... In retelling the story for his own generation the author sought to in-

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 595.

spire his fellow Northerners to cast their lots with the revived Davidic house. Indeed he may have found in the story grounds for hope for his own time. Just as Yahweh had preserved the lineage of David through the dark days of the judges, so he had preserved the residents of the North through the night of Assyrian domination. In Josiah the hope is renewed for the entire nation of Israel. Just as a person like David had emerged from the dark days of the judges, so, in the providence of God, Josiah had been raised up in these dark days to bring light to all Israel.<sup>7</sup>

## II. Major Themes

It is important to recall that OT narrative books are not aimed simply at the recounting of historical events. Rather, as Block reminds us, they are "primarily ideological in purpose. The authoritative meaning of the author is not found in the events described but in the author's interpretation of the event, that is, his understanding of their causes, nature, and consequences."<sup>8</sup> This is a helpful reminder as we look at the book of Ruth. While the events occurred, the author has not remained neutral in his depiction of the events. He *wants* us as readers to come to certain conclusions, and these conclusions help frame the major themes of the work.

### A. *The Providential Hand of God*

The Book of Ruth is by no means a "secular" work. God's name appears on the lips of its characters on more than a few occasions. And yet the narrator highlights God sparingly in his telling of the story. As Block explains:

Despite the fundamentally theological perspective of the characters in the book, commentators have often recognized the relative secularity of the narrator himself. Yahweh's name is on the lips of his characters at every turn, but the narrator acknowledges the involvement of God only twice, in 1:6 and 4:13.... By framing the story with these two references, the narrator highlights his conviction that in the end the book is more about the providence of God than the deeds of human beings.<sup>9</sup>

By keeping God mostly in the background, it allows him to highlight the providential hand of God in the various events that transpire. Block identifies four ways the Book of Ruth evidences God's providential work:

#### 1) *Apparently Natural Events*

The introductory verse of the book cites a famine in Israel as the impetus for Elimelech's sojourning into Moab. Such a detail could easily be dismissed as a mere note stating the historical context for the family's location in Moab and the acquiring of Ruth the Moabitess as a daughter-in-law. But when read within the backdrop of the covenant curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, the famine in Israel becomes theologically significant. Yahweh had promised to Israel for covenant infidelity by

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 597-8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 604.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 607.

"making the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze," with the result that "your soil will not yield its crops, nor will the trees of the land yield their fruit" (Lev 26:19-20; cf. Deut 28:23-24).

It was no accident that Israel was experiencing famine. Just as God rose up adversaries against them because of their rebellion, so he also enacted other covenant curses as a means of humbling them and bringing them to repentance. The text does not directly condemn Elimelech's departure as symptomatic of a general lack of faith, but it is not too difficult to conclude that the deaths of Elimelech and his sons in Moab were in some way the consequences for the overall spiritual issues that had arisen in the land, leading even Naomi to conclude that Yahweh himself had effected her current circumstances (1:20-21).

## 2) *Seemingly Chance Events*

In 2:3, the narrator describes Ruth's seemingly random discovery of Boaz's field with a unique phrase which literally translates, "Her encounter encountered," or in more idiomatic language, "Her luck brought her to."<sup>10</sup> The NET Bible notes that "the text is written from Ruth's limited perspective. As far as she was concerned, she randomly picked a spot in the field. But God was providentially at work and led her to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who, as a near relative of Elimelech, was a potential benefactor." Obviously, the narrator is deliberately drawing his reader's attention to the divinely directed nature of this "chance" discovery.

Likewise, one could point to the arrival of the kinsman-redeemer just as Boaz sat down at the city gate (4:1-2) as another evidence of a seemingly random event that was actually guided by the providential hand of God.

## 3) *Delicate and Daring Human Schemes*

Although there is no evidence of impropriety on the part of Ruth as she visits Boaz at the threshing floor, as some have suggested, the move—even the entire scheme concocted by Naomi—was potentially dangerous and fraught with risks of scandal. At worst, she could have come under the accusation of prostitution. Yet just the opposite occurs. Her request to marry Boaz is received warmly and with joy. Block points out the remarkably odd nature of these events:

If Ruth's actions are questionable ethically, her demand that Boaz marry her are highly irregular from the perspective of custom: a foreigner propositioning an Israelite; a woman propositioning a man; a young person propositioning an older person; a destitute field worker propositioning the landowner. But instead of taking offense at Ruth's forwardness, Boaz blesses her, praises her for her *hesed*, calls her "my daughter," reassures her by telling her not to fear, promises to do whatever she asks, and pronounces her a noble woman.... This extraordinary reaction is best attributed to the hand of God controlling his heart and his tongue when he awakes.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 609.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 610.

#### 4) *The Legal Process*

Even the legal processes at work point the reader to the conclusion that Yahweh is at work behind the scenes. Boaz arranges to resolve the legal issue regarding the redemption of Naomi's land by sitting at the city gates. By "chance," the nearer kinsman—literally "a certain one of a certain one" (4:1), or more colloquially, "Mr. So-and-So"—passed by the gate, much to the surprise of Boaz (cf. "Behold!"), yet perhaps not by now to the reader! After Boaz explains the basic circumstances, the kinsman initially agrees to purchase the land, but quickly declines when he learns that he must also marry Ruth, thus allowing Boaz to act as redeemer, purchasing the land for Naomi, marry Ruth, and provide an heir for Elimelech's line.

There is no doubt that providence was at the forefront of the narrator's mind as he carefully crafted his story. Though he recounts historical events, he nevertheless directs his readers to see the fingerprints of God on the circumstances that finally lead to the birth of the grandfather of David. As Block eloquently writes,

Despite the relative secularity of the book as a whole, it must be interpreted as a glorious account of divine providence. Underlying every episode is God's determination to produce David the king from the depressing and chaotic Israelite environment during the days of the judges. Unlike the Book of Judges, however, here his hand is not driving the movers and shakers in Israel. David does not emerge because of divine manipulation of the ruling class. On the contrary, the seeds of the great dynasty that would raise in the future are being sown in this private family of Bethlehem. This family consists of the most unlikely candidates for divine service: a widow left without husband or sons, an alien in a similar state, and a bachelor from the humble town of Bethlehem.<sup>12</sup>

#### B. *The Faithful People of God*

In 1:8, Naomi introduces a key theological term—*hesed*. It is a term so rich and complex in meaning that any one English fails to capture the totality of its significance. Block asserts that the term "wraps up in itself an entire cluster of concepts, all the positive attributes of God—love, mercy, grace, kindness, goodness, benevolence, loyalty, covenant faithfulness; in short, that quality that moves a person to act for the benefit of another without respect to the advantage it might bring to the one who expresses it."<sup>13</sup> What is clear is that the term finds its fundamental expression through *action* rather than thought, word, or emotion.

Block remarks,

The book is most eloquent in portraying the practical ethical implications of membership in the Israelite community of faith. In stark contrast to the Book of Judges, where many of the major characters are spiritually compromising at best and pagan in outlook and conduct at worst, every person in this story is a decent person; they are presented as authentic people of faith. Although *hesed* is only attributed to Ruth (3:10), the kindness, goodness, loyalty, and

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 605.

faithfulness that are characteristic of God are true of his people. Indeed, ranking just below the narrator's concern to essay God's providential care and direction of history is his goal of describing what *hesed* looks like in the context of personal, family, and communal life. But unlike the emphasis of some today, the symptoms and effects of the life of faith are totally unspectacular. No one in the book demands of God that he meet his/her needs, and no one demands specific miraculous divine intervention on his/her own behalf. On the contrary, true covenant faith is expressed by concern for the welfare of others. In the story this concern is expressed by loving actions that promote the next person's well-being and by verbal expressions of prayer for the next person.<sup>14</sup>

A general expression of the faith of these characters is witnessed in their natural and sometimes spontaneous verbal expressions of faith. We consistently find them blessing others, rejoicing in God's work, or even recognizing God's heavy hand upon them (1:8-9; 1:13, 20-21; 2:4, 12, 19, 20; 3:10; 4:11-12, 14-15).

Individually, each character exhibits *hesed* in very practical ways. Whatever moral judgment we may conclude from Elimelech's flight into Moab and subsequent death, Naomi, bereaved of all male companionship and family, pleads with her daughters-in-law to return to their own people so as to be spared from the destitution and emptiness she faces (1:8-14). Even when Ruth returns with her, she looks out for her and blesses the individual who provided her with food (2:22), and looks out for her by devising a plan for Ruth to marry Boaz (3:1-4). She even adopts Ruth's child as her own, despite Israel's hostile attitude toward Moabites.

Ruth, for her part, shows remarkable loyalty toward her mother-in-law, choosing to abandon all previous ethnic ties, returning with Naomi despite the uncertainty of their future (1:15-18). She voluntarily departs to gather food for her and Naomi (2:2), shows humble thanks for Boaz's kindness (2:10, 13), works hard to glean in the fields (2:17-18, 23), heeds Naomi's counsel despite the obvious risks to her own safety and reputation (3:6-13), submits to Boaz's own legal concerns (3:14-18), and allows Naomi to adopt her own son (4:16).

Boaz, too, shows remarkable kindness and grace. His workers are aware of his generous and honorable reputation (2:1), and he makes it a habit to bless those who work in his field (2:4). He shows great sensitivity and care for Ruth in her helpless circumstances, providing abundantly for her, despite her ethnicity (2:8-16). In response to her dangerous proposition, he blesses her, sending her home with as much food as she can manage (3:6-16), and shows selfless determination to act as a redeemer while remaining sensitive to the legal processes. He allows the nearer kinsman the opportunity to redeem Naomi and Ruth, yet jumps at the chance to fill the role himself (4:1-10). "Despite tradition Israelite hatred of Moabites and despite Ruth's destitute state, he receives her first as a worker, then as a night guest, and finally as his wife. Never does he or the narrator hide her ethnic identity."<sup>15</sup> Block goes on to write,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 612.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 614.

In contrast to the Book of Judges, where the nation of Israel as a whole and most of the characters are portrayed as thoroughly Canaanized in heart and mind and deed, this story describes an oasis in an ethical wasteland.... In the account we witness the sincere piety of the human characters expressed in the sensitivity of Naomi, the devotion (*hesed*) of Ruth, the kindness and tenderness of Boaz, the openness of the first candidate for the rights to Ruth, and the whole-hearted acceptance of Ruth by the townsfolk.

In retelling the story of these long-ago people from Bethlehem, the narrator describes for the modern reader what the life of faith should look like. The measure of a people's or a person's faith is not found in the miracles that one can wrest from the hand of God nor in one's personal health and prosperity, but in demonstrating ethical character. If the words of James are true [and they are], that "faith without works is dead" (Jas 2:17), then this book paints a picture of a lofty theology and an inspiringly vibrant faith. In this respect it speaks to readers of every age.<sup>16</sup>

### C. *The Sovereign Plan of God*

As we have already seen, the primary goal of the narrator is demonstrated in the genealogy he provides at the close of the book. Though the spiritual qualities exhibited by the characters comprise a major facet of the book's message, the real thrust is God's providential guidance of these individuals so that his ultimate plan is accomplished—the birth of King David.<sup>17</sup> In the end, the book demonstrates that the Davidic Covenant was not the result of the Mosaic Covenant. Rather, the advent of the Davidic monarchy finds its roots in the promises to the patriarchs.

Israel, as the servant people of Yahweh, might rise or fall, be blessed or cursed, but the Davidic dynasty would remain intact forever because God had pledged to produce through Abraham a line of kings that would find its historical locus in Israel but would have ramifications extending far beyond Israel. The kings (plural) promised to Abraham (Gen 17:6, 16) became more specifically identified by Jacob as one (singular) to whom the royal scepter and staff would belong (Gen 49:10). He, this one from Judah, would moreover exercise dominion over Moab and Edom (Num 24:17-19). When Samuel was sent to Bethlehem to anoint a successor to Saul, he was told that Yahweh had provided for a king from among the sons of Jesse (1 Sam 16:1). David's anointing with oil, accomplished as it was by the descending of the Spirit of God upon him, confirmed not only that he was the proper selection from among Jesse's sons but also that he was the long-awaited fulfillment of the patriarchal promise.<sup>18</sup>

Yet the story is about more than simply tracing David's ancestry. The intentional narration of a story about Ruth completes the picture of God's sovereign direction of history to his intended ends.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 614-5.

<sup>17</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 201.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-5.

The most noteworthy link between the stories, however, is the ironic fact that a descendant of the wayward and schismatic Lot, the pure and noble Ruth, effected a reunification with the Abrahamic clan from which he had separated. She was thus not only a vital link in the messianic chain from Abraham to David (and eventually to Christ) but also an instrument to bridge the chasm between Judah and Moab, a type or paradigm of the reconciliation that God desires among nations, a reconciliation that will fulfill the patriarchal promise.<sup>19</sup>

### III. Purpose

*Yahweh sovereignly, but in a hidden way, effected the birth of His King through the actions of His people.*

### IV. Literary Structure

From a literary perspective, the Book of Ruth is a masterpiece of narrative storytelling. The narrator utilizes all the literary devices at his disposal, including suspense, characterization, repetition, reticence, ambiguity, wordplays, inclusions, etc.

From a structural perspective, he frames the plot of the story in a series of crises and resolutions:

#### **Exposition (1:1-2)**

The opening verses establish the background and historical circumstances of the plot, explaining the family's flight from Israel and their presence in Moab.

#### **Complication A (1:3-22)**

The death of Elimelech and his sons introduces the first crisis of the story. It is a crisis for Naomi, whose land is put in jeopardy, as well (as we learn later) for the royal line. Unless something happens, the royal line of David will be cutoff.

#### **Solution (2:1-23)**

The solution to the first crisis seems to present itself in the chance discovery of Boaz, a potential redeemer of Naomi's land and the means of continuing the family name. His generosity and willingness to bless the family provide a ray of hope that their name might not be cut off forever.

#### **Complication B (3:1-18)**

Though Ruth's marriage proposition is accepted joyfully by Boaz, a second complication is introduced to the plot—the presence of a nearer kinsman. Will he step in to redeem the land and Ruth? If he does, the royal line may still be in jeopardy, for it is through Boaz that David will ultimately be born.

#### **Resolution (4:1-17)**

The final resolution reveals itself quickly, when Boaz confronts the nearer kinsman with an opportunity to redeem the family. When he learns that his purchase of the field also

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 206.

includes marrying Ruth, he ultimately declines his right to redeem it, allowing Boaz to step in and act as redeemer. In time, a son is born to Naomi, who will be the grandfather of David. In the end, Naomi's land is spared, Elimelech's name is preserved, and the royal line lives on.

**Epilogue (4:18-22)**

The story closes with a genealogical epilogue which solidifies the intent of the story. Drawing on official records of David's genealogical history, the narrator provides makes the link between Perez and David, placing Boaz is the numerically significant seventh position—the key link between Judah's son Perez and David the King.