

# NAOMI IN THE BOOK OF RUTH IN LIGHT OF THE MOSAIC COVENANT

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**T**O UNDERSTAND A CHARACTER in narrative literature the reader must know how that person fits into the message of the story in view of the author's ethical standard. This article examines the place that Naomi plays in the literary flow of the Book of Ruth in view of the author's ethical standard, namely, Israel's Mosaic Covenant.

Many commentators view all the main characters in the Book of Ruth—Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz—as having no major flaw. For instance Harvey states, “There is no villain in the story. No reprehensible act is done by any character.”<sup>1</sup> Since a character is evaluated according to his or her response to the tension in the story, this view means that all the main characters interacting with the tension in the Book of Ruth make only positive ethical responses. Yet not to have a major character in a negative contrast to the positive hero is unknown in any of the other narratives in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Thus the claim that there is no negative main character<sup>3</sup> in

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Ward Harvey, “Ruth, Book of,” in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 4:133.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick W. Bush notes “the moral ambiguity and even downright contradiction that mark” most Old Testament characters, and he asserts that the main characters in Ruth are exemplary (*Ruth, Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word, 1996], 46). “Clearly, then . . . the narrator presents them as exemplary characters, quite in contrast to the vast bulk of the rest of OT narrative, which dramatically depicts the moral ambiguity and even downright contradiction that mark the character of the human agents through whom God works. . . . That is, the narrator presents the major characters of his story as models for his readers to emulate” (ibid.).

<sup>3</sup> Orpah and the nearer kinsman provide negative contrasts, but they play minor roles. As to the place minor characters play in biblical narratives see Uriel Simon,

the Book of Ruth is somewhat suspect. The presence of a major negative character ordinarily contrasts with and thus heightens the portrayal of the positive character.<sup>4</sup>

Commentators agree that both Ruth and Boaz play positive roles in the book. Boaz responded to the tension in the story by providing food and children for both Ruth and Naomi. Ruth also interacted positively with the difficulty, for she too gave Naomi food and a child with Boaz.

Many Bible students likewise see no weakness in Naomi, the book's main character.<sup>5</sup> They see any negative expression of hers as reflecting justifiable frustration that anyone in a similar situation would have. She is frequently said to be a strong woman of faith, enduring through unexplained and undeserved sufferings, unselfishly caring for her daughters-in-law. For instance Bush wrote that Naomi is "the virtual enfleshment of *hesed*, that quality of kindness, graciousness, and loyalty that goes beyond the call of duty."<sup>6</sup> On the other hand some writers do see Naomi responding in a negative manner.<sup>7</sup> This article seeks to determine which assessment of Naomi is correct.

#### "COMMON VALUES" AND ASSESSMENT OF NAOMI

A story always has a moral standard by which characters are to be judged. To insure that those characters are correctly appraised, the narrator may emphasize his standard through explicit condemnation or commendation (1 Kings 11:1–10 is an example of this). Other times a prophet documents that standard.<sup>8</sup> Yet in the Book

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"Minor Characters in Biblical Narrative," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 46 (February 1990): 11–19.

<sup>4</sup> For instance in the Book of Esther Haman stands in negative contrast to the positive Esther and Mordecai. In 1 Samuel disobedient Saul is the negative contrast to obedient David. In Genesis 13–19 Lot contrasts negatively to the hero Abraham.

<sup>5</sup> "Everything in the Book of Ruth revolves around the character of Naomi, even though she is neither the heroine, nor the character in whom the audience is most interested. . . . Naomi's character accomplishes much more than this on a more subtle level as the author weaves together a garment of plenty and wraps it around the one who complains most bitterly about being empty" (Reg Grant, "The Validity of Pregeneric Plot Structure in Ruth as a Key to Interpretation" [Th.D. diss., Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1988], 183–85).

<sup>6</sup> Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 42.

<sup>7</sup> For example Warren Wiersbe, *Put Your Life Together: Studies in the Book of Ruth* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> This is true of Samuel, Elijah, John the Baptist, and of course Jesus.

of Ruth the narrator makes no such direct comment.<sup>9</sup> The author has assumed that the reader possesses the value system needed to perceive his meaning. The value system inherent in the Book of Ruth consists of two levels. The standards on the first level are “common values,” those innate to all humankind, and the standards on the second level are drawn from the Mosaic Covenant.<sup>10</sup>

Common values are those universally shared by all humankind based on human reasoning and common experience. These include ordinary needs (such as food, clothing, shelter, and security) and the normal means to attain those needs (such as labor, trade, or other natural means).

#### COMMON VALUES IN THE BOOK OF RUTH: FOOD AND CHILDREN

Common values are foundational to the narrative in the Book of Ruth. Readers can sympathize with Naomi when famine and death struck her family and can rejoice with her as food and children were provided for her later.

Readers also might appreciate the means by which Naomi met her needs. One can understand her motivation when her family moved from a place of famine to a land with food for her sickly children, Mahlon and Chilion.<sup>11</sup> The present-day observer shares her hope of children when the sons married girls from the country that had become their residence.<sup>12</sup> Naomi’s patriotism is admired when she returned to her homeland where food was plentiful again.<sup>13</sup> And her unselfish behavior might be applauded as she

<sup>9</sup> However, the author did insert comments into the text so that the reader has certain specific truths by which to evaluate the story. For instance he made sure the reader knows that only Yahweh is the giver of food (Ruth 1:6) and life (4:13) and thus by implication He is also the withholder of food and life.

<sup>10</sup> “Mosaic Covenant” in this article refers to the relationship between Yahweh and Israel as expressed in Exodus through Deuteronomy.

<sup>11</sup> The names of the children reflect their health. Mahlon is related to מָלֵן or מָלָה (“sickness” and “be sick”) and Chilion is related to כְּלִיּוֹן (“pining”) in the curses of Deuteronomy 28. “Also every sickness [מָלָה] and every plague which, not written in the book of this law, the LORD will bring on you until you are destroyed” (v. 61). “Among those nations you shall find no rest, and there will be no resting place for the sole of your foot; but there the LORD will give you a trembling heart, failing [lit., ‘pining,’ כְּלִיּוֹן] of eyes, and despair of soul” (v. 65).

<sup>12</sup> Naomi’s stay in Moab was not simply a visit. Moab became her established residence for a large portion of her life. They “went to sojourn in the land of Moab” (1:1), “they entered the land of Moab and remained there” (v. 2), “and they lived there about ten years” (v. 4). The word for sojourn (נָזַח) implies dwelling as a stranger or newcomer (Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [1907; reprint, Oxford: Clarendon, 1980], 157).

<sup>13</sup> Before Ruth 1:8 Naomi’s character is flat or one-dimensional; she was present

urged her daughters-in-law to return to their own people, where finding husbands, and thus children, would be much easier. Even later, readers might share Naomi's matchmaking desires when she placed two wonderful people together by sending her daughter-in-law to meet Boaz after making her more visually appealing and timing the meeting to take advantage of his good mood. Based on "common values" Naomi seems to be an admirable mother-in-law.

### DRAMATIC IRONY: A LITERARY DEVICE REQUIRING A SECOND LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE

While much literature works at only one level of values, not infrequently a literary device called "dramatic irony" involves a second level of knowledge. In that case the main character operates on the first level of knowledge ("common values") while readers possess a second level of knowledge that the main character does not. This introduces irony in that the main character, based on one level of understanding, pursues one direction, but that direction is clearly wrong or inadequate when seen with the more complete knowledge possessed by the reader.

#### SPECIAL VALUES (REVELATION) AS A SECOND LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE

To understand the Book of Ruth one must know specific information gathered elsewhere. For instance, while the average pagan reader would share in rejoicing at the birth of a child to sit on Naomi's lap (4:16), that reader would have no idea of the true importance of that child. From that child descended David (vv. 17, 22), the greatest of Israel's Old Testament kings and the one from whom came the promised Messiah.<sup>14</sup> Awareness of events recorded in 1 and 2 Samuel helps readers appreciate the author's meaning.

The main value system that must be brought to the text, not only to Ruth but also to the entire Old Testament and the Gospels,<sup>15</sup> however, is the Mosaic Covenant.

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but nothing is known about her or her feelings. After 1:8 Naomi's heart is clearly revealed. For an explanation of how narrators use character development see Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Second Samuel 7:16 establishes the point that David's descendants will reign on the throne of Israel forever.

<sup>15</sup> In the New Testament Jesus expected the Pharisees to know the Mosaic Law and to measure Him and themselves by it. "I did not come to abolish [the Law] but to fulfill it. . . . Not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:17–18). His criticism of the Pharisees was also appropriately based on the Law, as He stated, "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures" (22:29; Mark 12:24).

## AN ILLUSTRATION OF DRAMATIC IRONY FROM THE BOOK OF JUDGES

An illustration of dramatic irony is seen in Judges 17:1–4.<sup>16</sup>

Now there was a man of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. He said to his mother, “The eleven hundred pieces of silver which were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse in my hearing, behold, the silver is with me; I took it.” And his mother said, “Blessed be my son by the LORD.” He then returned the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother, and his mother said, “I wholly dedicate the silver from my hand to the LORD for my son to make a graven image and a molten image; now therefore, I will return them to you.” So when he returned the silver to his mother, his mother took two hundred pieces of silver and gave them to the silversmith who made them into a graven image and a molten image, and they were in the house of Micah.

*The mother’s character based on the first level of common values.* Following her son’s repentance this mother truly desired to honor her God, even mentioning His name, Yahweh. So she dedicated the silver (or at least some of it) that she could have otherwise spent on herself. She unquestionably valued the repentance of her son more highly than the money. One can appreciate the mother’s well-intentioned heart as she sacrificed personal gain to express worship to the Lord.

*The mother’s character based on a second level of values (the Mosaic Covenant).* But the reader who is familiar with the Mosaic Covenant is shocked! The mother’s actions are not to be judged by the yardstick of common values seen in human reasoning but by specific revelation from God. The Ten Commandments clearly prohibited abominable practices. “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth” (Exod. 20:4; cf. Deut. 5:8).

Without knowing the Mosaic Covenant the reader might perceive the wrong meaning. Ironically, just as the main character erred because of not understanding the Mosaic Covenant, some readers may make the same error (approve the mother’s actions) if they do not know the Mosaic Covenant.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The so-called “Bethlehem trilogy” attaches the Book of Ruth with the last two stories of Judges (Eugene H. Merrill, “The Book of Ruth: Narration and Shared Themes,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 [April–June 1985]: 131–32). This illustration is from the first of the trilogy and shows that in Judges everyone was ignoring the Mosaic Covenant by doing “what was right in their own eyes.” The Ruth narrative occurred during these same days and thus fits historically into that age of apostasy (Ruth 1:1).

<sup>17</sup> Just as in a dramatic presentation the only way the observer recognizes the irony is by seeing both perspectives.

The Bible is a book of stories where these two levels of knowledge are constantly in play. Eve chose human reasoning (sight) above God's revelation and brought death into the world. Abraham attempted to bring forth the promise of a great nation in many normal, natural ways, but ultimately he succeeded only when he listened to God's paradoxical revelation that to be obedient he must sacrifice his son. People have continually been tested as to whether they will believe God's revelation or trust in natural reasoning based on sight, and their abilities, possessions, power, or influence.

When dramatic irony is used in the Bible, a character operates at the base level of "common values." But an astute reader correctly understands the character's shortsightedness, for the reader knows that only those who follow God's revelation in the Scriptures will ultimately prosper.

#### THE SECOND LEVEL OF VALUES: THE MOSAIC COVENANT

To evaluate Israel's history without knowing the Mosaic Covenant is to ignore the imperatives of the covenant itself. It warned against doing what is right in one's own eyes (Deut. 12:8; cf. Judg. 17:6; 21:25) in contrast to God's self-revelation. It told the Israelites to place His Word in their hearts and then to teach it to their children. It was to be the constant companion in their smallest daily activities (Deut. 6:5–9). It was to be written by the king at his coronation and followed continually during his reign (17:18–19). Israel was warned not to forget it and end up being cursed (28:15). Subsequent historical events, beginning with those recorded in the Book of Joshua, were to be evaluated by the yardstick of the Mosaic Covenant. For example Deuteronomy 7:11 states, "Therefore, you shall keep the commandment and the statutes and the judgments which I am commanding you today, to do them."<sup>18</sup> To interpret post-Deuteronomy biblical narratives without an understanding of the Mosaic Covenant is to risk making the same error as some characters, that is, shaping their value system by common values instead of by the revelation of God.

People were created to be representatives of Yahweh to achieve *His* purposes,<sup>19</sup> not their own. They are to implement His

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<sup>18</sup> The instruction to keep God's commands (i.e., obey) occurs many times in Deuteronomy (e.g., 4:2; 6:6; 7:11; 8:1, 11; 10:13; 11:8, 13, 22, 27–28; 13:18; 15:5; 24:18, 22; 27:4).

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 1:26, 28 states that humans are to rule over creation on behalf of their Creator (see also Ps. 8). Deuteronomy 14:1 refers to Israel as "sons" (representatives) of Yahweh.

revealed desires without regard to the outcome. He sovereignly provides the physical outcome as He graciously desires.<sup>20</sup>

The Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1–3) established Israel as God’s national mediator to the Gentile nations. Abraham and the nation Israel were to represent God and His gracious love to those who did not know Him. “And I will make you a great nation . . . And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (vv. 2–3).

The Mosaic Law then revealed *how* they were to represent Yahweh (Exod. 19:5–6). Unlike pagans, they were not to represent God based on what *they* reasoned (human wisdom, common values), but they were to represent Him as He specifically revealed Himself in the Mosaic Covenant.

God’s (revealed) covenant love was known as חַסֵּד.<sup>21</sup> It was a gracious, one-way love based on motivation from within His character, completely apart from another’s ability to repay. It was seen in His graciousness to the helpless.<sup>22</sup> Israel had been helpless. Though they were enslaved in Egypt, God had delivered them so they could testify of His mercy from their own experience. “He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love [אֲהִיב] for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:18–19). But Israel’s response was one of self-righteousness, and the Israelites did not mediate God’s mercy to the unrighteous Gentiles. Their disobedience caused Him to implement the curses listed in Deuteronomy 28. The curses, typically affecting the fruitfulness of the womb and of the land, were enacted so that Israel would return to Yahweh.

God said that Israel would fail (Deut. 30:1) and would need to return (שׁוּב)<sup>23</sup> to Him (v. 2). The word שׁוּב is normally translated “return” (as in “turn around”) or “repent” (as in “return to covenant

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<sup>20</sup> Physical benefits are not a direct reward of obedience. The reward for obedience is the privilege of being a representative of God’s desires on earth, whether in prosperity or suffering.

<sup>21</sup> The word חַסֵּד is used only three times in Deuteronomy, and each time it refers to gracious behavior as shown in the Mosaic Covenant. The more general words for love, from the root אֲהִיב, also may indicate God’s gracious love as determined by the context.

<sup>22</sup> The exhortation to show love for widows and orphans occurs no less than eleven times in the Book of Deuteronomy. James 1:27 repeats this tenet as a reflection of true religion (or a true representation of God’s heart).

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion of the use of this word and its impact in both the Old and New Testaments see Charles P. Baylis, “Repentance in the Book of Acts in the Light of Deuteronomy 30:1–6,” *Michigan Theological Journal* 1 (spring 1990): 19–35.

relationship”). In Deuteronomy 30, following the listing of blessings or cursings for obedience or disobedience of the Lord, Moses stated that when Israel disobeyed, she would receive God’s mercy by returning (repenting) to Him (vv. 2–3, 8–10).

### THE MOSAIC COVENANT AND COMMON VALUES IN RUTH 1:1–6

Ruth 1:1–6 introduces Naomi’s difficult circumstances. Reviewing the initial events at the level of common values, Elimelech moved the family to Moab because of a famine and the sons married Moabites to provide offspring. All these are normal, natural, life-preserving activities. However, the Mosaic Covenant offers another level of understanding.

#### YAHWEH’S ACTION: FAMINE IN ISRAEL (v. 1a)

In the Mosaic Covenant famine was related to either disobedience (Deut. 28) or testing (8:2–6).<sup>24</sup> The opening sentence in the Book of Ruth makes the reader suspect disobedience, since the mention of the days of the Judges brings images of disobedience and resultant curses. That this famine was due to God’s intentional action is seen in verse 6, which refers to Yahweh as the provider of food. Leviticus 26:18–20 states the relationship between famine and disobedience. “If . . . you do not obey Me, then I will punish you . . . for your sins. I will also break down your pride of power; I will also make your sky like iron and your earth like bronze. Your strength will be spent uselessly, for your land will not yield its produce and the trees of the land will not yield their fruit.” At the level of common values, an Israelite might consider moving to another more fruitful country, but knowing that the famine was controlled by Yahweh (Ruth 1:6) would necessitate a response based on the Mosaic Covenant. If disobedience was the cause of the famine, then a return to covenant loyalty was required (Deut. 30:1–2), but if a test was involved, then the Israelites were to trust in Yahweh to provide (8:1–20).

#### ELIMELECH’S REACTION: DEPARTURE FROM THE LAND (v. 1b)

While Elimelech’s move from the land of Israel would seem to be a normal response to famine (common values), the Mosaic Covenant

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<sup>24</sup> Several times in the Scriptures a person was tested (or disciplined) but not because of disobedience. Job is an Old Testament example, as is Hannah (1 Sam. 1). Hebrews 12:5–11 states that believing but oppressed Jews were being disciplined not because of disobedience but to train them as God’s “sons.”

indicated that his action was more serious.<sup>25</sup> While there were no warnings in the Mosaic Covenant about leaving the land, departure from the land was so unthinkable it was only mentioned as a judgment.<sup>26</sup> In willingly departing from the land Elimelech had unknowingly incurred a self-imposed curse.<sup>27</sup>

**YAHWEH'S ACTION: DEATH OF ELIMELECH (v. 3)**

As the giver of life (as seen in 4:13) and thus also the remover of life, God removed Elimelech. "You will perish among the nations, and your enemies' land will consume you" (Lev. 26:38).

**THE SONS' ACTION: MARRIAGE TO MOABITES (v. 4)**

In order to obtain children Naomi's sons married Moabite women (common values). But the Mosaic Covenant was specific regarding marriage to non-Israelites, which was not only explicitly prohibited but was also considered so unthinkable that it, like the move to Moab, was a judgment of God.<sup>28</sup> "Your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people, while your eyes look on and yearn for them continually; but there will be nothing you can do" (Deut. 28:32).

**YAHWEH'S ACTION: DEATH OF THE SONS**

God, as the giver and remover of life (Ruth 4:13), removed the sons. "If then, you walk with hostility against Me and are unwilling to obey Me . . . I will bereave you of your children" (Lev. 26:21–22).

<sup>25</sup> Jack Sasson states that the narrative "speaks of the other world, Moab, where Judeans ought to have no business. . . . Moab, where the god Chemosh reigns, may not be experiencing famine when a Judean family seeks shelter there, but its fields will eventually kill a father and his sons and render their wives sterile" ("Ruth," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode [Cambridge: Belknap, 1987], 322).

<sup>26</sup> The exceptions to exile due to judgment are in the area of testing (Deut. 8:1–6). Joseph was taken by force to Egypt, where his obedience was tested (Gen. 37:23–36). When Jacob took his family to Egypt to escape famine, he did so only after God specifically instructed him to find famine relief through Joseph.

<sup>27</sup> There is a literary connection between Elimelech's departure and Abraham's departure in Genesis 12:10. Elimelech's family departed from the land because of famine, and Abraham too departed from the land of promise because of famine (cf. Gen. 12:10 and 26:1 with Ruth 1:1–2, where the phrase *יָדֵי רֵעִב קָאָרְזִין* occurs only in these verses in the Old Testament). Also, as in the Book of Ruth, Abraham's struggle to have seed through natural reasoning instead of revelation is prominent in Genesis 12–22.

<sup>28</sup> Marriage to people who worshiped other gods was explicitly prohibited in the Mosaic Covenant (Deut. 7:3–4). While some argue that Moab is not among the nations listed in verse 1, the intent of the passage includes Moab, since they were a people who worshiped a false god. This is validated in 1 Kings 11:2 by the reference to Deuteronomy 7:3–4 in the narrator's comment on Solomon's marriage to a Moabite (1 Kings 11:1, 7). Nehemiah 13:23, 26–27 also confirms this interpretation.

Naomi was now left with no sons and consequently no one to raise up children to her husband's name. Barrenness was also listed among the curses. "Cursed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock" (Deut. 28:18).

### NAOMI'S VALUES SEEN IN HER RETURN TO ISRAEL (1:7–22)

Frequently a second character in a narrative provides contrast to the first character. Ruth provides a contrast to Naomi's common reasoning and represents the second level of values, the heart of Yahweh in the Mosaic Covenant.

After covering ten years in only six verses (Ruth 1:1–6), the author elaborated on two relatively short events in sixteen verses (vv. 7–22). The first ten years are covered quickly in order to establish the setting and introduce the tensions of the need for food and children. But the story then slows down to examine only minutes on the journey. These moments reveal Naomi's heart in detail.

#### YAHWEH'S ACTION: THE RETURN OF FOOD IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL (v. 6)

As Yahweh had removed the fruitfulness of the ground (v. 1), so He could restore food. He had stated, "If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out, then I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit" (Lev. 26:3–4).

#### NAOMI'S RESPONSE: RETURN TO THE LAND (vv. 6–22)

In response to the provision of food in Israel Naomi returned to the land (vv. 6–7). To evaluate the motivation (the level of values) in her return, the author followed the record of that initial response with details of two conversations while Naomi was returning to Bethlehem (vv. 8–22).

#### YAHWEH'S REACTION: BLESSING ON NAOMI BASED ON HER RETURN

Naomi's physical return to the land is the literary pivot of the book. Before her return Naomi experienced the curses God had promised. But from the point of her return onward (chaps. 2–4) Naomi received the physical blessings promised in the Mosaic Covenant, namely, food and children.

### NAOMI'S RETURN AS THE PIVOT OF THE BOOK

#### THE JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM (1:8–18)

The geographical setting of this journey is significant. As Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah debated their choices on this dusty road from

Moab, the echo of Moses' voice should have rung in their ears. A scant two hundred years before this and in this very place (Moab opposite Canaan across the Jordan River, Deut. 1:5, 29:1; see also 34:1–8) Moses had given the lectures recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy that called for Israel to *return* to Yahweh. Yet Naomi's response ignored that voice from the covenant, while Ruth's response conformed to them.

Naomi's commands to her daughters-in-law to return to Moab are recorded in three stages, each revealing an additional depth of reasoning. Her first command (vv. 8–10) urged Ruth and Orpah to return to Moab, to their own mothers to find husbands from their own people<sup>29</sup> and then to bear children.<sup>30</sup> Both Ruth and Orpah replied that they would instead go with Naomi to Israel.

Naomi's second order (vv. 11–14) explained the basis for her previous instruction that they reject Israel for Moab and marriage. Based on the levirate marriage law in Deuteronomy 25 and the fact that she had no more sons, Naomi concluded that Ruth and Orpah could not legally marry in Israel. Naomi knew childless widows in Israel were prevented from marriage outside the family. "When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a strange man. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her" (Deut. 25:5).<sup>31</sup> In Naomi's "common" reasoning the hope of a husband, and thus children, could be found only outside the restrictive laws of Israel's God.

In response to Naomi's second imperative Orpah moved toward her homeland while Ruth stayed with Naomi. The author re-

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<sup>29</sup> It is also noteworthy that Naomi used strong covenant language in seeking to send her daughters off to Moab. She asked God to provide His  $\text{דָּוָר}$ , "covenant love," to them in pagan Moab and with pagan husbands.

<sup>30</sup> Naomi's action echoes Judah's error in Genesis 38 where, based on common values, he wrongly sent his widowed daughter-in-law Tamar back to her father's house because he was unwilling to provide his last son as a husband for Tamar. Tamār was not to marry anyone beside Shelah (brother of the deceased husband), and Judah was to give him to her. When Judah sought to execute her, he thought she had become pregnant by someone outside the family.

<sup>31</sup> The term  $\text{גֹּאֵל}$  is not used in conjunction with the levirate marriage in Deuteronomy 25:5; it is used only in regard to the restoration of land. Naomi seems to have used the term only with respect to the land in Ruth 2:20; yet Ruth, recognizing that the concept of  $\text{גֹּאֵל}$  pervaded the covenant, rightly associated it with the levirate marriage, as did Boaz. Donald A. Leggett explores the concept of redemption in relationship to the  $\text{גֹּאֵל}$ , especially in regard to Yahweh as the great  $\text{גֹּאֵל}$  (*The Levirate and goel Institutions in the Old Testament with Special Attention to the Book of Ruth* [Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack, 1974]).

corded no explanation for their choices, the implication being that Orpah was persuaded by what Naomi said but Ruth was not.

In the third section (Ruth 1:15–18) Naomi's reasoning continued. But now for the first time in the narrative the author revealed the reasoning of Ruth, in contrast to that of Naomi. Naomi added here that Ruth should join her sister-in-law, emphasizing that Orpah had made the right choice to go to the people and gods of her birth. Naomi's motive was that Ruth should go to a place where physical prosperity seemed assured. This common human reasoning, which had guided Naomi for more than ten years, was now luring her back to Bethlehem for food. But Ruth rejected that motivation, being driven instead by her desire to be identified with Yahweh. The fact that Naomi was a poor widow presented an opportunity for Ruth to represent Yahweh's love to the oppressed (Deut. 15:7–11).

But Ruth's promise to care for Naomi was heightened as she took a vow, a Mosaic Covenant provision (23:21–23). Like Yahweh, who had taken a vow to insure His continual blessing to Israel (Gen. 22:16),<sup>32</sup> Ruth assured Naomi of her support of her for the rest of her life.<sup>33</sup> "Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me" (Ruth 1:17). Knowing that vows were unbreakable, Naomi then gave up the argument, for to force Ruth to violate her vow would bring the very curse on Ruth that Naomi had been seeking to avoid.

The literary contrast between the two characters in this section is intense as Ruth contested each of Naomi's instructions. She would "walk" (הלך) with Naomi, whereas Naomi had urged Ruth to go (lit., "walk") back to Moab (v. 8) and not to go (lit., "walk") with

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<sup>32</sup> Edward F. Campbell Jr. notes the connection of the inviolability of this vow to the Abraham stories, particularly the cutting of the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 15:8–21. Referring to that passage, he notes, "The slaughtered and split animals represent what the oath-taker invites God to do to him if he fails to keep the oath" (*Ruth*, Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975], 74).

<sup>33</sup> A response of Naomi in 1:18 is noticeably absent following Ruth's vow, especially when contrasted with Naomi's earlier persistent urging that Ruth return to Moab. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn notice the literary import of this change as one of the unexpected "silences" in the Book of Ruth ("A Son Is Born to Naomi!" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 40 [February 1988]: 100). As Sasson explains, "Because of the oath, Naomi has no choice but to accept Ruth's decision" ("Ruth," 323). C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch concur. "The words . . . with an oath . . . by which the person swearing called down upon himself a severe punishment in case he should not keep his word or carry out his resolution. . . . [signify] I swear that death, and nothing else than death, shall separate us" (*Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, trans. James Martin, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 75).

her (v. 11). Ruth would lodge with Naomi instead of with Ruth's own mother (v. 8), she would become an Israelite as opposed to going back to her people of Moab (v. 15), and she would worship Yahweh and not Chemosh as Orpah had agreed to do (v. 15). When Naomi insisted there was nothing but death if Ruth followed her, Ruth emphatically accepted it by voicing a desire to be buried with her.<sup>34</sup>

Ruth refused to go back to her own mother. Instead she "clung" to Naomi by a vow, refusing to "leave" her. While Naomi had urged her to marry a Moabite man (v. 9), Ruth vowed to stay with a hopeless widow. The literary connection of Ruth's vow to Genesis 2:24 indicates the importance Ruth placed on continuing her relationship with her mother-in-law. The words for "cling" (קָרַב, v. 14) and "leave" (עָזַב, 2:11) are the same words used in Genesis 2:24. "For this cause a man shall leave [עָזַב] his father and his mother, and be joined [קָרַב, 'cling'] to his wife; and they shall become one flesh." This marriage vow was to be an example of הֶסֶד, which God displayed to Israel (Hos. 2:19). Now the הֶסֶד that Ruth had displayed to Naomi earlier through her marriage to Mahlon (Ruth 1:8) would continue.

#### RUTH 1:6–22 AND THE MULTIPLE USE OF שָׁב

In dramatic irony a character states or does things that heighten his or her misguided direction. In the Book of Ruth irony is intensified by the use of the word שָׁב ("return"), which occurs twelve times in 1:6–22.<sup>35</sup> By contrast, it is found only three times in the rest of the book and then only with reference to the journey recorded in chapter 1. As previously noted, this word is used repeatedly in Deuteronomy 30:1–10 to call Israel to return to Yahweh. Yet by contrast Naomi used the word to insist that Ruth return to Moab and other gods. Ruth, agreeing with the Mosaic Covenant, argued that she would return with Naomi to Judah and Yahweh.

*The use of שָׁב ("return") in introducing the journey (Ruth 1:6–7).* This word is used twice to establish the story's pivotal event: the return from Moab and to Judah and life. "Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return [וַתָּשָׁב] from the

<sup>34</sup> Barker identifies this beautiful literary contrast in Naomi's complaint by noting that there would be "no brightness, no *life*, in her life; and Ruth answers that she is content to die, so that she may share Naomi's grave" (*Problems in the Book of Ruth*, 41 [italics his]).

<sup>35</sup> Many commentators recognize the frequency of this word but do not comment on its significance (e.g., Murray D. Gow, *The Book of Ruth: Its Structure, Theme, and Purpose* [Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1992], 31).

land of Moab” (v. 6). “So she departed . . . and they went on the way to return [לשוב] to the land of Judah” (v. 7).

*References to שׁוּב during the journey to Bethlehem (vv. 8–18).* The repeated use of the word שׁוּב becomes apparent as Naomi urged Orpah and Ruth to *return* to Moab and pagan husbands instead of to Israel and Yahweh, and both Ruth and Orpah responded using the same word.

Naomi said, “Go, return [שׁוּבוּ] each of you to her mother’s house” (v. 8). Orpah and Ruth said to her, “We will surely return [נשוב] with you to your people” (v. 10). “Naomi said, ‘Return [שׁוּבוּ], my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?’” (v. 11). Naomi then said, “Return [שׁוּבוּ], my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons” (v. 12).

In her final imperative, following increasing levels of intensity, Naomi (in a double use of “return”) argued with Ruth to “return” to Moab and to her only hope of physical prosperity. In direct contradiction to God’s instructions Naomi, incredibly, urged them to return to a foreign god. “Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back [שׁוּבוּ, ‘returned’] to her people and her gods; return [שובי] after your sister-in-law” (v. 15).

Ruth’s adamant response contrasts with Naomi’s statement with equal intensity. Ruth desired to return to the God she had come to love. “But Ruth said, ‘Do not urge me to leave you or turn back [לשובי, ‘return’] from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried” (vv. 16–17).

#### NAOMI’S HEART REVEALED IN BETHLEHEM (vv. 19–21)

While earlier in the chapter Naomi had indicated that she perceived herself under the curse of Yahweh (v. 13b), at the end of the journey Naomi placed the blame for her circumstances squarely on שׁוּדַי (Shaddai).<sup>36</sup> She had returned, not with a heart for Yahweh, but in bitterness toward Him.<sup>37</sup> “She said to them, ‘Do not call me

<sup>36</sup> Of forty-eight uses of שׁוּדַי in the Old Testament, thirty-one are in the Book of Job. Job often used this name to point out the all-powerful nature of God in contrast to his own helpless state. Naomi used it here in the same sense. She felt that this all-powerful God had cursed a poor, helpless widow without a cause. Of course this all-powerful God is deeply concerned for widows and orphans (Deut. 10:18).

<sup>37</sup> This is an interesting contrast to the promise of “return” in Deuteronomy 30:1–6, where God said Israel would be exiled because of disobedience but would

Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty [שׁר] has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back [הֵשִׁיבֵנִי], lit., ‘returned me’] empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty [שׁר] has afflicted me?” (vv. 20–21).

Naomi claimed to have left Israel “full” (with a husband and two sons) and now had returned “empty” (poor, widowed, and childless). The only thing she brought back was a person who was not only as needy as she was (a poor widow), but also an alien. Yet in light of the Mosaic Covenant she had left “empty” (hungry and with two sickly sons), and now she returned to a land of food with a daughter-in-law whose perception and love of Yahweh stood out against her own misunderstanding. Her only positive mention of Yahweh had been her request that He bless her daughters-in-law in their return to Moab and to Chemosh (vv. 8–9). In fact her motivation for returning them to Moab was that the Lord had cursed her unjustly and she hoped they could escape her curse. “No, my daughters . . . for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me” (v. 13).<sup>38</sup> “So Naomi returned [וַהֲשִׁיבָהּ], and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned [וַהֲשִׁיבָהּ] from the land of Moab” (v. 22).

In this summary verse the narrator, utilizing שׁב in conjunction with each woman, noted Naomi’s physical return, but then surprisingly added that Ruth also “returned.” Saying that Ruth “returned” is unexpected, since she was not an Israelite and it would not be normal to say she “returned” to a place that was not her original home. However, the use of the term in light of the second level of knowledge (cf. Deut. 30:1–3) is apparent. Ruth was going to the land that belonged to her God, Yahweh of Israel. While Naomi believed that the value of the “return” was to be found in physical prosperity, Ruth realized that her “return” gave her the privilege of a relationship to the God whom she had come to love.

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return and enjoy wholehearted devotion to the Lord. They would go out empty and return to restored fullness.

Now Naomi was returning to a land of food with a daughter-in-law whose perspective of the Lord exceeded her own. “Naomi was not full when she went away. She certainly still had her husband and children, but her stomach was empty because there was a famine. . . . She no longer sees that she was not full when she went away, far less that she is not empty now that she is returning. Certainly her husband and children have died, but Ruth has come with her” (Ellen Van Wolde, *Ruth and Naomi* [London: SCM, 1997], 13).

<sup>38</sup> Gideon used similar language. He blamed God because of the oppression by the Midianites, not recognizing that the curse was the result of Israel’s sin (Judg. 6:13).

### THE SERIOUSNESS OF NAOMI'S FAILURE

To emphasize the seriousness of what Naomi did it is necessary to see Naomi's statement in Ruth 1:15 (common values) next to its counterpart in Deuteronomy 13:6–10 (the second level of knowledge).

Naomi's statement is revealing. "Then she said, 'Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back [שָׁבָה, 'returned'] to her people and her gods; return [שׁוּבוּ] after your sister-in-law.'"

This contrasts with Moses' words in Deuteronomy 13:6–10.

If your brother, your mother's son, or your son or daughter, or the wife you cherish, or your friend who is as your own soul, entice you secretly, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods" (whom neither you nor your fathers have known, of the gods of the peoples who are around you, near you or far from you, from one end of the earth to the other end), you shall not yield to him or listen to him; and your eye shall not pity him, nor shall you spare or conceal him. But you shall surely kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people. So you shall stone him to death because he has sought to seduce you from the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Yahweh opposed any move away from Him. "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God" (5:9). Yet for the sake of physical benefit, Naomi had attempted to send Ruth back to Moab and another god. To influence anyone to follow other gods was a deed so severe it was punishable by death.<sup>39</sup>

### DRAMATIC IRONY IN SENDING RUTH TO THE THRESHING FLOOR (RUTH 3:1–4)

The first tension (the lack of food) had begun to be removed by Ruth's gleaning in the field of Boaz. Naomi then sought to remove the second tension (the lack of children). Though Naomi as a poor widow had enjoyed the Mosaic Covenant's provision of food (by gleaning, Lev. 19:9–10; 23:22), she again attempted to solve the problem of children through common values instead of by those found in the Mosaic Covenant. "Then Naomi her mother-in-law

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<sup>39</sup> Bush offers a different opinion. "Her [Orpah's] decision is the sound and reasonable one; she opts for her community and her faith: she 'returned to her people and her god' (v 15a). . . . The story implies no negative judgment on Orpah's action" (*Ruth, Esther*, 86). Bush is an example of those who view Naomi as a positive character, despite the words in Deuteronomy 13:6–11.

said to her, 'My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you? Now is not Boaz our kinsman, with whose maids you were? Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight. Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes, and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. It shall be when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies, and you shall go and uncover his feet and lie down; then he will tell you what you shall do' " (Ruth 3:1–4).

Had Naomi been acting according to God's desires as reflected in the Mosaic Covenant, she should have acted in the following manner.

First, Naomi should have referred here to Boaz as a legal  $\text{גֹּאֵל}$  ("next of kin" or "redeemer"),<sup>40</sup> the legal term for one who was to redeem lost possessions or rectify other legal problems. Naomi used  $\text{מִרְעָמָה}$  ("kindred"),<sup>41</sup> a nonlegal term similar to "friend" or "kin," not a legal word. By contrast, Ruth used the term  $\text{גֹּאֵל}$  when she confronted Boaz on the threshing floor.

Second, Naomi should have sent Ruth to the city gate during the day where business and legal issues were transacted in public.<sup>42</sup> By contrast Boaz did transact the levirate marriage there (4:1–2) during the day (cf. 3:13) before the city elders. Legal proceedings were not to be transacted by a well-relaxed man and an appealing woman alone on a threshing floor in the darkness of night.

Third, Naomi should not have insisted that Ruth change from her mourning clothes<sup>43</sup> before approaching Boaz, because they

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<sup>40</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 145. While the term  $\text{גֹּאֵל}$  is not used with respect to the levirate marriage in the Pentateuch, the relationship is established legally as the one who returns what was lost by purchasing the field or continuing the deceased brother's line (Deut. 25:5–6). See Leggett, *The Levirate and goel Institutions in the Old Testament with Special Attention to the Book of Ruth*.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 396.

<sup>42</sup> "If Naomi had really intended to ask Boaz to serve as redeemer, it would hardly be proper to do so by surprising him in the middle of the night" (Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Literature*, 90).

<sup>43</sup> The clause "Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes" (Ruth 3:3) is similar to David's situation when he "washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes" after he ceased mourning publicly for his dying child (2 Sam. 12:20). Also when Joab wanted the woman of Tekoa to appear like a long-term mourner, he said, "Please pretend to be a mourner, and put on mourning garments now, and do not anoint yourself with oil, but be like a woman who has been mourning for the dead many days" (14:2).

identified her legal position as a widow.<sup>44</sup> In the legal transaction it was necessary for her to be known as a widow (Deut. 25:5), which previously gave her the right to the gleanings in the fields (24:19). However, when Naomi told Ruth to “put on her best clothes,” Naomi was presenting Boaz with Ruth’s physical appeal, not his legal obligation.<sup>45</sup> Ruth had been in mourning clothes to establish her legal right to a widow’s benefits under the Mosaic Covenant. Naomi saw those declarations as hindering her physical appeal. The first words Ruth spoke to Boaz, however, affirmed her covenant rights as a widow even apart from her widow’s garments.

Fourth, Naomi should have proposed the legal obligation when Boaz was not under the influence of food and drink.<sup>46</sup> By contrast, Ruth did present the legal case to Boaz. She unhesitatingly stated his covenant obligation by saying, “You are a אֱלֹהִים!” She had prefaced her covenant statement by requesting that he spread his wing (כַּנְּף) over her. This was an intentional reminder of the statement he had made previously in the field (2:12), when he had voiced the hope that she would find blessing under Yahweh’s wings (כַּנְּפֵי), an image also in Psalm 91:4. Ruth was pointing out to Boaz that he had been given the opportunity to express אֱלֹהִים by granting this hope on behalf of the Lord.<sup>47</sup>

Boaz responded in accord with the Mosaic Covenant, promising Ruth that she would be taken care of legally either by him or by the nearer legal אֱלֹהִים. In contrast to Naomi, Boaz pursued the matter during the day and at the city gate. It was only through God’s gracious covenant provision that Ruth would have a husband and a son and Naomi would have a descendant.

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<sup>44</sup> There is biblical precedent for wearing widow’s clothes until a woman was taken care of under the levirate marriage. Among the parallels is the Judah and Tamar story in which Tamar wore her widow’s clothes for several years, since Shelah had grown up during her widowhood and she was still wearing them (Gen. 38:14, 19).

<sup>45</sup> Physical or emotional attraction was not a necessary part of the levirate marriage. It was a covenant obligation for the sole purpose of bringing up children to honor the deceased brother. In fact the sister-in-law could have been physically and personally unappealing. Campbell points out that Ruth was likely in her late twenties, while Naomi was likely in her mid-forties, as was Boaz, who was of the same generation as Naomi (*Ruth*, 67).

<sup>46</sup> Finding a mate while the man was feeling well from food and drink has historical precedents in the Book of Genesis. Laban had tricked Jacob into a marriage with Leah in the middle of the night after he had participated in feasting (Gen. 29:22–25). Lot’s daughters had tricked Lot into providing seed incestuously after a night of drinking (19:30–38).

<sup>47</sup> For a similar comment see D. F. Rauber, “The Book of Ruth,” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, ed. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, James S. Ackerman, and Thayer S. Warshaw (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 171.

## SUMMARY

The Book of Ruth utilizes the literary device called dramatic irony. The main character, Naomi, sought to fulfill natural needs through natural means. A contrasting character, Ruth, operated by a second level of values found in the Mosaic Covenant. To care for a poor widow in a foreign land without any hope of personal benefit seemed impossible to Naomi. Yet Ruth wanted to emulate the Lord's mercy to the hopeless.

By continuing to know and embrace God's revelation, individuals are able to move beyond their human perceptions and turn to God's gracious provision for the hopeless. This revelation is seen in its fullest in the arrival of His Son Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word. The lesson to New Testament believers is that hope is only in Him, who fulfilled the Law and will completely fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant. To rely on natural motives or to give any credence to the gods of other religions instead of trusting in the revelation of the sovereign God and His Son Jesus Christ is to imitate the serious error of Naomi.



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