

RUTH

PART 1 **INTRODUCTION**

Romance or The Seed of the Woman?

The Book of Ruth has enjoyed many varied interpretations over the years. Probably the most prevalent of these is that it is a short story of romance (lost love and death), intrigue (lost hope of finding a mate), mystery (multiple suitors), and the happy ending (marriage and children), very similar to the pagan stories of Walt Disney's Cinderella and the Fairy God Mother. The difficulty with these interpretations is that they are missing one very important tenet. That principle is that the short story contained in the Book of Ruth is simply an episode in a larger story, and that episode does not have enough information in it to interpret it correctly. The very nature of this story is that it is part of the larger and complete narrative of "The Biblical Story" that flows from Genesis to Revelation. Like a scene in a play is non-understandable without finding its place in the larger story, so also Ruth must be seen in the larger movement to which it contributes a part.

Because the story does not have enough information in it, the interpreter, not understanding this, fills in and adds the missing parts from his/her own perspective. Thus the story becomes what the interpreter wants, not how the episode fits into the larger story. Since the interpreter's background is love and romance, he then fills in the parts necessary to come to the conclusion of how he feels the story is to come out. So for this limited-information interpreter, Ruth becomes an attractive young widow who falls in romantic love with a handsome young man. Yet Ruth's appearance is not mentioned at all in the text and in fact she is likely in her mid to late twenties, not the prime age for women in Israel to be married. Boaz's looks are not mentioned, but regarding age was likely about the age of Naomi, a generation older than Ruth. In fact, he did not have anything physically that would attract Ruth as he mentions to her that she did not approach him due any physical allure (3:10).

Thus in literary actuality, the story of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz comes along, does its part in contributing to the overall message of the Biblical metanarrative, and leaves the stage, never to appear again. Following the closing of the Ruth story, other characters will come, appear, play their part, and also leave, never to be heard from again. It is impossible to know what is going on in the Book of Ruth without knowing what preceded it in the Biblical Story.¹

¹It is also necessary to know what follows it, as with the interpretation of any story. But fortunately, The Biblical Story tells us how it is going to end so that the interpretation of the Book of Ruth can be completed without actually having the final events of the story happen. They have been detailed in earlier prophecy, particularly Genesis 3:15 and the following events

The Message of the Book of Ruth by its Contribution to the Biblical Plot

There are two things that must be known in order to interpret the Story of the Book of Ruth, or any other story occurring in the Grand Narrative of the Bible. First, it must be seen in its place in the Biblical plot, and then its own plot will reveal its part, its contribution to the overall plot.

Characters to be evaluated by the Covenant

The second thing that should be noticed is the standard by which the characters are to be judged.² The movement of the characters through the story always determines the plot. But characters are not to be judged by the standard that the reader brings to the text, but by the standard that the author requires. That standard is found in the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. It is there that the character of God required by the story is revealed.

Unfortunately, not recognizing that the story is part of the plot, the reader inserts his own value system into the story and thus analyzes the characters by that. So Naomi, who is the actual antagonist of the story, errantly becomes a loving caring mother-in-law who can do no wrong. Ruth is seen as a young maiden who is looking for her knight in shining armor. And Boaz the handsome young man is only too glad to assist Ruth to the altar. Of course, this type of reasoning is no different from that in romance novels, television movies, and stories created by humans to fulfill their selfish desires apart from God. But the Book of Ruth is not among those, as God is very present, not only in Ruth, but in the Biblical Story as a whole.

However, when seen from the value system of the covenant of YHWH found in the Pentateuch, Naomi becomes one who disregards the covenant, blames God when she is corrected, and blatantly tries to send both daughters-in-law back (2:15) to worship Chemosh, the god of the Moabites (a death sin in Israel, Deuteronomy 13:6-11), sends Ruth up to the threshing floor in the middle of the night, looking pretty, to approach a man who is feeling very good from eating and drinking, and then relying in the man to tell this woman what to do? Ruth, by covenant, is a lover of YHWH, one who is willing to show YHWH's love to a childless widowed mother-in-law, Naomi. Boaz is the same, willing to sacrifice himself to his nephew's widow to bear her children in accordance with the Law even though it would cost him personally.

² The evaluation of characters according to the covenant is fully discussed in this professor's article, "Naomi in the Book of Ruth in Light of the Mosaic Covenant," in *Bibliotheca Sacra*. It can be referenced under "Articles" at www.BiblicalStory.org, "Resources."

The Biblical Movement: The Seed of the Woman from Genesis 3:15³

But those who follow the plot of the Biblical Story and the hope of Messiah and now begin to read Ruth, they have not heard of where this Seed of Messiah is since Genesis 49:8-12 when Judah was clearly named as the tribe from whom He would come. Back in Genesis 38, when Perez was named the son of Judah, the Seed had now moved to him.

But the hope of the Seed and its place has gone unrevealed in Exodus, Numbers, and Joshua as the land is captured. And seemingly, the reader is left pondering the hope of this Seed line until a young lad appears from Bethlehem of Judah (1 Samuel 17:12). Of course, he is anointed as king by Samuel and then promised a continuation of his seed on the throne of Israel in 2 Samuel 7 (the Davidic Covenant). As the king, the Seed of the Woman is perpetuated in David.

The Seed: Where is it from Genesis 49 (Judah/Perez) until 2 Samuel 7 (David)?

But the question is, where is the Seed during that period of time known as “the Judges,” or even from the Exodus until 1 Samuel? Of course the Times of the Judges is known for its godlessness, a time of chaos, of deliberate ignorance of God and His covenant. It is marked by the common phrase, “everyone did that which was right in his own eyes”⁴ (17:6, 21:25), meaning no one was paying attention to God’s covenant instructions.

So, while the reader reads the Judges and wonders where this Seed of the Woman is, the Book of Ruth opens its first page and the opening line is “In the days that the Judges judged . . . “ This line inserts this book squarely in the middle of that era, precisely during Gideon’s judgeship.

The Purpose of the Plot of the Book: The Denouement

From that entry line of the book it is difficult to see where this book is going, only noting a time of theological chaos. Then, the reader is introduced into an individual family, one family in all of Israel . . . why? What makes this one family important? There is the head of the family, Elimilech. Why is he important . . . this one man in Israel?

³ The reader is forwarded to foundational articles at www.TheBiblicalStory.org. Information regarding the plot, which involves the “Seed of the Woman,” can be accessed in brief in “Finding Jesus in the Old Testament,” under “Articles.” For a more developed treatment, refer to the “Introduction to the Biblical Story,” and “Genesis,” under “Commentaries.”

⁴ To understand these divergent perspectives on “good” and “evil,” see the “The Knowledge of Good and Evil,” listed under “Articles,” at www.TheBiblicalStory.org, “Resources.”

But this is how stories begin, not necessarily revealing their purpose immediately. So how may the reader analyze this book and find its purpose? In narrative literature one may determine the purpose by going to the end and reading the denouement, the “tying up of strings,” the “happily ever after.” The ending reveals the purpose of the plot since it is there where the success (literary comedy) or failure (literary tragedy) of the hero, or the hero’s purpose, occurs.

Read the ending. Read the denouement, found in the last word of the book . . . “David” (4:22)! So the book starts with the Times of the Judges, and a relatively unidentified man named Elimilech. It ends with “David” . . . the Old Testament “Seed of the Woman.” So whoever Elimilech is, he will begin a story which will lead to the Seed of the Woman, this hope of the future. It begins with an unknown individual man in Israel . . . and ends with the hope of the Messiah in David, the King.

Now, a note should be made here as to how romance infusion into this book, by the imagination of the interpreter, doesn’t work. If romance was the point, there is a major problem. While Ruth, the imagined romantic heroine, appears early in the book and is a major character, the romance ends with the marriage and the birth of the baby. But the romance does not include the all-important denouement. There is more. There are the genealogies that lead to David at the end. What do these have to do with the romantic theme . . . virtually nothing. So they tell the story of romance, and then add an “oh by the way,” look who came from this romance. And then the reader adds, “Isn’t that nice!” Nice? This David is the point of the Biblical Story. He is the Old Testament Messiah. There will never be another David until Jesus of Nazareth appears. So the birth of David is not an aside. It is where the whole of the Biblical Story is going. The Book of Ruth is not a nice little tale. It is God’s moving in history to bring forth His Son into the world. Don’t miss it.

The Mysterious Beginning is Solved by the Denouement

But the story doesn’t start with this identification of where it is going. And, in fact, the reader may wonder why, of all the families in Israel, this story is about one family, actually one man, Elimilech and one woman, Naomi.

Who is Elimilech and why is he important?

Who is Elimilech? To understand who Elimilech is, the reader has to start where the story ends. The ending is . . . “David.” But who was David’s father? . . . Jesse . . . then before him, Obed . . . and before him, Boaz!

Genealogy from David (2 Samuel) back to . . . Perez (in Genesis)

Now that may be the last name of interest to the reader because now he has the tie back to Ruth in the story, since Boaz is Ruth’s husband. But that is not where this line stops in tracing Messiah’s Seed. It goes further back . . . Salmon from Nahshon, from Amminadab, from Ram,

from Hezron, from . . . *Perez!* *Perez?* Where has the reader heard him before . . . Genesis 49 where the Seed line left off, where it was last mentioned. So Ruth has actually demonstrated that it is showing the reader what happened to the Seed of the Woman after the last place it could be found . . . Genesis 49 and . . . *Perez*, Judah's son. And it continues until the next mention of the Seed line in David in 1 Samuel 17. The Book of Ruth is about bridging the gap of the Seed line from Genesis until 1 Samuel.

Why does the Story begin with Elimilech?

But let us go back to the Book of Ruth and genealogy of Boaz at the end of the book, the Great Grandfather of David. So who is Boaz and how does he relate to where the story started? Tracking the story backward from Boaz is important. Beginning with Boaz . . . Boaz was not first in line to be this patriarch of the Seed. The "nearer kinsman" was before Boaz, meaning he was Boaz' elder brother, and as the elder brother he had the prior right to the Seed before Boaz. The "nearer kinsman's" elder brother⁵ was Elimilech, the very one who starts off this story.

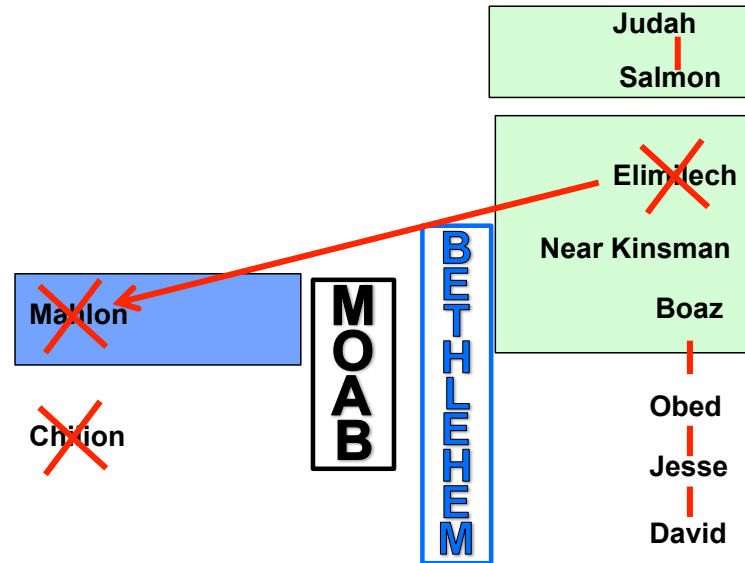
Thus they were all in the same family, and thus Elimilech was the oldest, the first one with the right to the Seed. And that is where the story starts . . . Elimilech. The story starts with Elimilech, because he is the man with the Seed of the Woman in him.

But the reader doesn't find out until the end. The reader doesn't know why this one man in all Israel is so important when the story opens. As the reader starts the story, "In the days when the Judges judged . . .", no one knows where the Seed line is. But . . . God did! Now it is starting to come together. It's about God's desire to put His Son on the throne of the universe. The reader has lost sight of the line of the Seed, but God is well aware . . . it is in Elimilech.

What happens to the Seed of Messiah that Elimilech had?

So now that Elimilech has been tied to the one who has the Seed of the Woman in him, what happens to him? Elimilech bears two sons. The eldest is Mahlon. So . . . Mahlon has the Seed line. So the Seed was in Mahlon. But Mahlon dies. Now normally it would pass to the next eldest, who would be Chilion, but he had died as well.

⁵ Notice that in Ruth 4:3, Boaz points out that the piece of land that Naomi was selling was family land, which belonged to "our brother, Elimilech."



So where is the one who has the Seed? It goes back to the nearest family blood relative. Elimilech and his sons are dead. So it goes back to Elimilech’s next younger brother . . . the nearer kinsman. He now has the Seed in him. And he is in Bethlehem.

What does Ruth have to do with all of this?

Returning to this other main character, Ruth, one wonders what function she plays in this? Since the Seed is now identified as being in this “nearer kinsman,” why can’t he just marry anyone have a baby and continue the Seed in his son? Why must he seemingly limit himself to Ruth?

Well, there’s more.

Genesis 2:24: The Promise of Inheritance to the Woman of “One Flesh”

So far, the Seed line has followed the Patriarchal line, father to son-to-son, etc. There is another part that readers often miss. That is the matriarchal. In all this, God has not forgotten the part that the woman plays in this whole scenario. It is the “Seed of the Woman” (Genesis 3:15). So the “desire of the woman” (Genesis 3:16) is very important.⁶

⁶ See the Genesis Commentary at www.TheBiblicalStory.org , “Resources,” “Commentaries.” See the passage on Genesis 3:16 which is misinterpreted as being a woman’s desire is for her “husband,” but is actually referring to the desire she has for her “man.” This is referencing the verse previous where she is to bear her Deliverer. The 3:16 continues by stating she will desire to bear this Deliverer, who will rule. The Biblical Story then follows these

According to Genesis 2:24 (see the Genesis 2:24 notes for the discussion), the wife was “one flesh” with the husband. As such she had exactly the same full rights to his inheritance from his parents as he did . . . which was the Patriarchal Seed. As a full participant (“one flesh”), she had the right to inheritance of his Seed, even though he might die. Thus when Naomi married Elimilech (the Seed bearer), she had full rights to bear a son who would have the Seed of Messiah. This is the reason for what is known as the “Levirate marriage” (Deuteronomy 25:5-9). If the husband died, the next eldest son had to provide the seed to the wife of the deceased husband, so that the Seed would not only be passed on in the brother’s name, but the childless widow would be able to inherit what she had been guaranteed in Genesis 2:24, the seed of her husband (from his parents). In other words, she possessed the right to the inheritance, the seed, and even if he died, the brothers would be required to provide it to her. Elimilech, the Seed bearer, had born Mahlon the eldest, and so Mahlon became the Seed bearer. He married Ruth, but then he dies. Thus Ruth, a Moabite, became the one who had the right to bear Messiah’s Seed.

Except, this is the Times of the Judges and no one knows the covenant at all, and so it is not likely that anyone is paying attention to the fact that the guarantee of bearing the Seed had come to this widowed Moabite. Certainly Naomi does not recognize it as she tells Ruth to go back (to Moah) after her sister-in-law (Orpah), and her gods (Chemosh of Moab.)

What had happened that this right had come to this unknown alien widow? It had happened because of disobedience. Elimilech, the Seed bearer, had left the land of Israel (covenant disobedience) to go to Moab (a pagan land of another god), and then his boys (the eldest of which carried the Seed) married Moabites. So now the right of bearing the Seed has passed through the ignorant disobedience of Israelites, to a Moabite widow who lives, not in Israel, but in Moab.

So . . . who knows, or even cares, that this Moabite widow has the right to bear the Seed? Certainly not the reader, nor Naomi . . . no one. And Naomi is only to intent to leave her in Moab with Chemosh. After all, it is the Times of the Judges.

But . . . God knows. . . God cares. God honors Genesis 2:24. So God cares about caring for a Moabite widow in Moab all because she has the right to bear His Son. God hasn’t lost track of His Seed . . . nor the rights to it.

But . . . (and this is a big BUT!)

Ruth lives in Moab, is a Moabite, and is poor, and is a widow . . . and is not of prime marriageable age . . . ?

But . . . (and this is a big BUT!)

heroine’s who longed to bear Messiah . . . and did. . . Eve (Genesis 4:1), Sarah, Rebekah, etc., and now Ruth.

The one who has the Seed is the nearer kinsman and he is living in Bethlehem, is an Israelite, of the Tribe of Judah, and is well off, not really needing to pick up the cost of a dead nephew's wife.

So the problem is . . . the one who has the Seed, the nearer kinsman, and the one who has the right to bear the Seed, Ruth, are miles, and nations, and gods, apart. And no one knows or cares . . . except God. And the God of all creation cares about one thing . . . putting His Son on the throne of the universe . . . and that Son is inherently tied to "the Seed of the Woman."

"The Father loves the Son and has placed all things into His hand. He who obeys the Son has eternal life. He who does not obey the Son shall not see life and the wrath of God abides on him. (John 3:35-36).

What will God do?

One should always recall that it is not only that God is sending His Son (Genesis 3:15), but He is controlling and rearranging history to bring about the enthronement of His Son over the universe. There is nothing anyone can do to change that movement. No individual can do anything so evil or so good, that will change the plot one little bit. No nation can reject this Son, or accept this Son, and change God's sovereign movement one iota. He is in control.

Thus Ruth is the story of a God who keeps His promise by finding the Moabite who has through a chain of disobedient events, the right to bear Messiah. He will bring her to faith in YHWH that she will pursue Him and His covenant, His nation, His people, His land. She will not let anything stop her from returning to YHWH in Israel, with her Jewish mother-in-law to whom she is bound by Genesis 2:24. And God will move circumstances so that she is brought back providentially to Bethlehem and introduced to the "nearer kinsman," the one with the Seed in him. And on the way to that "nearer kinsman," God will providentially introduce her to Boaz, who will see her through until she receives her rightful place in the covenant, the right to bear the Messianic Seed. That is the story of the Book of Ruth.

But there is a glitch! There is a problem that is thrown at God's plan to interrupt it (the serpent is at it again). The "nearer kinsman" rejects his obligation to give his Seed to Ruth since it is a bad deal monetarily for him. But God is not fazed at all. That man is rejected by God, by removing his name from the book and the record. The Seed line then moves to a righteous man, Boaz the next younger brother. Boaz, like the woman Ruth, is a man of faith. And, like Ruth, he is willing to sacrifice materialism and physical benefits of the world, for the covenant of YHWH and the Levirate marriage. He will sacrifice to provide this childless widow her rightful inheritance. And that inheritance is . . . David the King, and ultimately. . . Jesus the Christ.

So, no one knows where the Seed is at the beginning of the book, and if one is not following the Biblical plot, they don't even care. Yet it is clear that while the reader does not know . . . God knows. And so in the Times of the Judges, these disobedient Jews, Elimilech and Naomi, who are typical of the times, move out of the land, and their sons intermarry with pagan women. Yet God . . . moves in history to bring this Moabite wife with the right to bear Messiah,

to faith in YHWH, back to Israel, to Bethlehem, and to Boaz, the man with the Seed. And the reader has hope at the end of the book because God has provided His Messiah, and nothing will change His determined path. And so the serpent still works to stop Messiah, through the Judges, through a disobedient man of Bethlehem, through two disobedient sons, and even through a disobedient covenant ignorant widow who tries to alter God's plan by sending Ruth back to Moab and her gods, and then up to the threshing floor in the middle of the night. But the deceiving serpent will not stop God moving toward enthroning His Seed, Jesus. And nothing will stop him, not man, not woman, not demons, not a snake, not Satan, not even the death of His own Son . . . nothing. And so the book's last word is "David."