

THE MESSIANIC MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF RUTH¹

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Introduction

The story contained in the book of Ruth is one of the most well known stories in the Bible. Yet while the overall plot of the Hebrew Scriptures leads to the Messiah, the book of Ruth is generally regarded as isolated from that storyline. The varying interpretations tend to be relational (e.g., a romantic short story³), or highly application oriented.⁴ Often, when a Messianic link is proposed, it achieved by reading back into the Old Testament from the New. The goal of

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³ “Romance” here and throughout this discussion indicates a human reasoning type of romance, that is, one draws two people together based on mutual attraction due to personal attributes. “Romance” is sometimes related to God’s relationship with His people, but this “romance” is due to God’s desire based on His sacrificial character toward one who has no beneficial traits. (See Hosea 2:14). Ray Stedman is illustrative of using the former to relate to the latter in “Ruth: The Romance of Redemption.” (<http://www.raystedman.org/bible-overview/adventuring/ruth-the-romance-of-redemption>, accessed May 27, 2016). He states, “Then we have this wonderful story of “boy meets girl,” and it never gets old, does it?”

⁴ For instance, John Piper, sees multiple purposes of the book. While he does mention one of the purposes is move the genealogical line to David, he also sees additional purposes as practical applications for the reader. One of those applicational purposes is as follows, “And it’s a story for people who can’t imagine that anything great could ever come of their ordinary lives of faith.” (“Ruth, Sweet and Bitter Providence,” Message delivered on July 1, 1984” <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/ruth-sweet-and-bitter-providence>. Accessed July 21, 2016.)

this script is to demonstrate that the book of Ruth is inherently related into the whole of the Old Testament narrative leading to Christ.⁵

**The Plot of the Book of Ruth:
From Emptiness to Fruitfulness**

The story opens as a Jewish family left their homeland to sojourn east to the land of Moab. A famine had occurred in the Land of Israel where their God, YHVH, was the provider of food, but due to His seeming inactivity they sought food in Moab from the god, Chemosh.⁶

Yet this trip was not without underlying concerns. Moabites were pagans, enemies of YHVH. From their inauspicious beginning as a product of incest between Lot and his daughter (Gn 19:30-38), they grew into a nation that worshipped other gods. Their king, Balak, had attempted to curse Israel when they paused at the Moabite border on the way to the Promised Land (Nm 22—24). It was at that time that Balaam had lured them into fornication and idol worship with the Midianites (Nm 25:1-18; 31:1-16). It was also there in the plains of Moab that YHVH instructed Israel never to seek Moab's peace or prosperity (Dt 23:3-6). Even during the days of the Judges, when the events of this book took place, Israel was forced to pay tribute to Eglon, King of Moab (Jdg 3:12-30).

⁵ This is the nature of dramatic narrative. Every event in the story is contributory to the main plot. There are no separate meanings apart from that contribution.

⁶ The use of the phrase, “there was a famine in the land” (וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ), occurs only two other times in the Old Testament beside this use in Ruth 1:1. Genesis 12:10 was the motivation for Abram's (like Elimelech's) disobedient departure from the land to go to Egypt for food. Genesis 26:1 is similar in that it contained a warning by God to Isaac not to go to Egypt as Abram in 12:10.

So, while this trip may have seemed a necessity, it was not justifiable to the God of *Torah*. And so their foray for food in the land of another god resulted in the death of the patriarch, Elimelech, at the hand of YHVH.⁷

But that death did not alter the behavior of the remaining members. Desirous of preserving their heritage with children, the two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, intermarried with two local Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. *Torah* prohibited marriage to foreign women (Dt 7:1-3, see also 1Kg 11:1-8), and so their pragmatic plans once again resulted in death as YHVH struck the sons as He had the father. Now, only five verses into the story, the family's wayward pursuit of happiness had ended in dire tragedy.

But in verse six, YHVH restored food to Israel and Naomi turned her face westward toward her homeland. From that point the story turns from barrenness in the land of another god to the provision of food and a child by YHVH in Israel. For soon after arriving in Bethlehem, Ruth met a righteous man, Boaz, who provided them with food, and finally a child. In the last scene, as Naomi held the child in her lap, the story ends happily.

And that . . . is the end of the story . . . or is it?

The Importance of the "End" In Determining the Meaning of a Story

One of the most important questions that can be asked when analyzing dramatic narrative is, "where is it headed?" The obvious answer is, "to the end." Yet many interpreters of the

⁷ For a discussion on the deaths of Elimelech and his sons as the judgment of God, refer to this author's article, "Naomi in the Book of Ruth in Light of the Mosaic Covenant," in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 161 (October—December 2004) 413-31). Also reference Daniel I. Block's commentary in *The New American Commentary*, "Judges, Ruth" on Ruth 1:3-5. (online version, accessed July 19, 2016. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999). Naomi, herself, implicated YHVH in their deaths in 1:13, ". . . the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me."

Bible never go to the very end of the story to find the story's goal. This "end" goal of the plot in dramatic narrative is called the *denouement*.

For instance, the goal of God in the whole of the Biblical plot is determined by how it ends.⁸ While the glorious return of Jesus Christ in victory and judgment in Revelation 19 is the absolutely awesome, victorious, "resolution" of the narrative, the ultimate desire of God is found at the end, in Revelation 20:1—22:5 when His Son will rule forever over the kingdom on earth.⁹

Yet regularly interpreters stop short of the *denouement*, breaking up the overall story into separate and independent pieces so as to find simple tenets for living, justify some personal doctrine, create autonomous applications, or bring forth other reader-desired outcomes. Yet few realize that every discourse and pericope in a dramatic plot is incomplete, with its only function to make its unique contribution and move the plot along to the next discourse or pericope, which in turn moves the plot along to the next, until it comes to its final resting place . . . *the end*.

Even in simple secular plots like Cinderella, it is not the wedding to the prince (resolution) that is the ultimate goal, but the results (*denouement*) of that marriage . . . "they lived happily ever after." Every scene of the story, incomplete on its own, brings its unique contribution to transporting the heroine, Cinderella, to the "end" . . . "living happily ever after."

⁸ Of course, the ending to the Biblical story has been known since the beginning when God revealed it in Genesis 1:26 and 3:15, and further detailed it in Genesis 12:1-3.

⁹ The *denouement* is related to, and completes, the beginning plans of the Hero, God. In the beginning, God desired man to rule over a physical universe. In the end, the Man, Jesus, will reign over the physical earth and skies, and thus God's achievement of that original goal will be realized.

The *Denouement* In the Book of Ruth

The goal of the book of Ruth is not found in the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, not in the birth of their baby, or even in the last scene when Naomi held the baby in her lap. The goal, the *denouement*, is found following those events, in the listing of a simple genealogy that begins with Perez and continues to David.¹⁰

At first glance, this matter-of-fact listing of a family's line appears to have little to do with the journey of a widowed, childless, alien, who travelled from Moab to Bethlehem, married and bore a child. Because of this errant perception, this ending all-too-frequently becomes an "oh by the way," an interesting aside to what became of this marriage, that is, a great grandchild, David, the King of Israel.¹¹ Yet dramatic plots do not end in an "oh by the way," but in the all-important denouement which dictates the goal of the totality of the preceding plot.

Yet, this genealogy that leads to David is what connects the book of Ruth, inherently and inseparably, into the Biblical plot that leads to Jesus, the Christ.¹² Without that ending, the book would have no literary connection to the movement of the Biblical plot and thus to the Messiah.

¹⁰ That David was the King of Israel, the one to whom was promised that the Messiah would come from his genealogical line, is known only by following the story beyond the events of the book of Ruth, to the book of Samuel.

¹¹ This typically takes the form of an author developing other, multiple, purposes for the book, one of which is to bring the Messianic line to David. But bringing about the Seed to Messiah is not just one of multiple purposes of the book. It is the single main purpose of the book. Any derivations from the narrative must be shown to be an integral part of this single main purpose.

¹² Daniel Block is one who identifies this book as performing a function to provide this segment to the Biblical Story. "This book and this genealogy demonstrate that in the dark days of the judges the chosen line is preserved not by heroic exploits by deliverers or kings but by the good hand of God . . ." (Daniel Block, The New American Commentary: Judges, Ruth (Online version, accessed July 19, 2016), Ru 4:18-22).

**Ruth, The Biblical Plot,
And the Genealogy of The Messianic “Seed”**

Since Ruth is part of the Biblical story, it must move the plot along in terms of the contextual movement, that is, God’s continuing purpose to bring forth His Christ, and Satan’s continuing opposition to that purpose. Thus, the *denouement* in Ruth, and its preceding plot, must be understood in terms of the whole of the flow of the Biblical story.

The Goal of God “In the Beginning:”
Man to Rule for God

It was in the beginning (the setting) of the Biblical story that God determined that man was to rule the created earth by representing God’s desires (i.e., “image,” Gn 1:26, 28).

The Conflict of Satan
And the Plan of God (Genesis 3)

But the serpent (i.e., Satan¹³) soon deceived Eve. The whole creation, including the man and the woman, came under the rule of Satan (the conflict, Gn 3:1-6). God then came on the scene and promised (philosophy of the Hero) that a New Adam would come, called “the Seed of the Woman” (Gn 3:15). This New Adam would replace the condemned old Adam and restore the

¹³ The serpent was the antagonist to the Hero, God, introduced in Genesis 3:1, since he is, by definition, diametrically opposed to the Protagonist. However, that he was more than a serpent is clear since he interacts with God’s theology, something beyond the ability of a natural created being other than man. For more detail refer to this author’s chapter in “How is Christ Revealed in the Old Testament,” Chapter V, in The Theory and Practice of Biblical Hermeneutics: Essays in Honor of Elliott E. Johnson. (Silverton, Oregon: Lampion Press, 2015), p. 134-35. While the name, Satan, is not attached to the antagonist until later in the Biblical story, it will be used interchangeably with the title, “the serpent,” throughout this discussion to identify the continuing nature of the antagonism from its single original source in the beginning.

rule of God over the old earth, destroying Satan and his followers (the “seed of the serpent”), and then create a new earth.¹⁴

Rising Action:
Provision of the “Seed” on the Way to the Christ

God subsequently began the long journey to His Son by providing a Seed in each generation. The Old Testament is the story of God moving unalterably (rising action), Seed by Seed, to form a foundational genealogy beginning with Adam, moving to David, and finally to the arrival of the Christ in the Gospels.

The Genesis Plot and “The Seed”

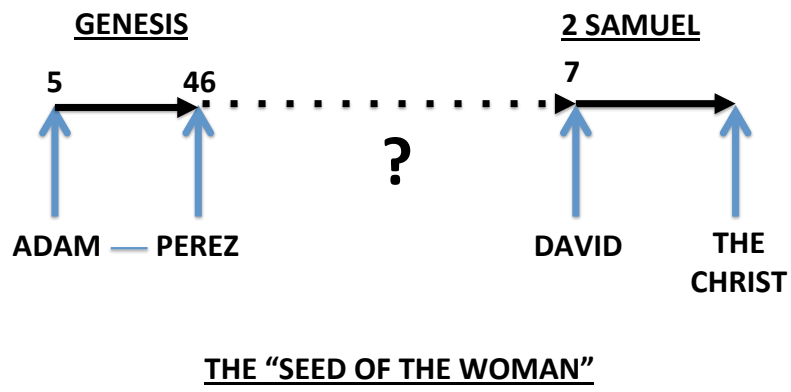
The story, beginning in the book of Genesis, tracks this Messianic genealogy through selected men; Adam to Noah (Gn 5), Shem to Abraham (Gn 11:10-32), Jacob (Gn 25:19-23; 28:13-14) to Judah (Gn 49:8,10). However, the genealogy goes one generation further than Judah, identifying that the Seed would come from Judah’s son, Perez (Gn 38:27-30).¹⁵

¹⁴ While the explanation of Genesis 3:15 presented here is terse, for details, refer to this author’s chapter in “How is Christ Revealed in the Old Testament,” Chapter V, in The Theory and Practice of Biblical Hermeneutics: Essays in Honor of Elliott E. Johnson. (Silverton, Oregon: Lampion Press, 2015). Also, refer to the Commentary section at www.BiblicalStory.org, “Genesis 3:15.”

¹⁵ This can be noted by reading the end of the story of Tamar (Gn 38:27-30, see also 46:12), where again a genealogy appears that describes the struggle of her twins to determine the firstborn. The allusion is to the earlier birth of the twins, Jacob and Esau, and the struggle of the firstborn and the identity of the future Seed-bearer by God. The narrator is noting this rare description of the birth of twins so as to identify which one will carry the “Seed” of Messiah. This is reconfirmed in Genesis 46:12, where of all the sons of Judah, only Perez’s grandchildren are listed.

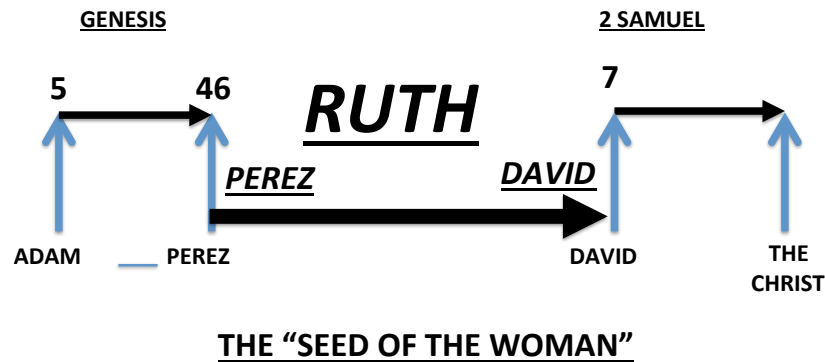
The Missing "Seed" in Exodus to Judges

Following Perez in Genesis, the Messianic genealogy is seemingly absent from Exodus through the Judges until 2 Samuel 7:16, where David was identified as the one from whom the Christ would come and would sit on the throne forever.



The Genealogy of the "Seed" in Ruth: Perez to David

Of course, this lineage is not missing, but is found in the book of Ruth, where it exactly fills in the gap from Perez in Genesis to David in 2 Samuel 7:16. Thus this *denouement* of the book of Ruth fills in the genealogical Seed movement of God to His Son, from Genesis (Perez) to 2 Samuel 7 (David).



The Plot of the Book of Ruth And its Denouement

But the denouement of the book of Ruth is only the outcome of the message of the book. The unwinding plot that precedes it is the movement of "how" this end was brought to bear. The plot of the book is therefore, the story of how God overcame the conflict (of Satan) to bring this Seed-provider, Boaz, into the genealogy that leads to His Messiah.

The Beginning: Elimelech's Connection to the Denouement

The connection from the beginning of the plot to the ending, with Boaz and the genealogy, is found in Elimelech. In the beginning, he appears as a non-descript father in a family of three. But the narrator lets the reader look ahead as he quickly makes the connection to Boaz in 2:1; Elimelech is in the same family as Boaz.

Now Naomi had a relative¹⁶ (מוֹדֵעַ) on her husband's side named Boaz. He was a prominent man of noble character (מִן־שֵׁפֶהָת) from Elimelech's family. (2:1)

Because of the importance of this family relationship to the plot, it is repeated in 2:3, acknowledged by Naomi in 2:20 and 3:2, cited by Ruth in 3:9, agreed on by Boaz in 3:12, Elimelech acknowledged as a "brother" by Boaz with the nearer kinsman in 4:3, and reconfirmed in 4:9-10.

The Blood Right to be
the "Seed of the Woman" Provider

But again, it is not until the *denouement* that it is revealed that this was not just any family, but the one family in the whole of Israel with the right to provide the Seed of Messiah.

The plot traces the Messianic Seed-provider from Elimelech at the beginning to Boaz at the end. Elimelech had that right at the beginning and passed it to his eldest son, Mahlon. But when Elimelech and both sons died and there were no heirs, the right to provide the Seed moved to Elimelech's family in Bethlehem. There the nearest kinsman, the eldest of the remaining brothers of Elimelech,¹⁷ rejected that right. Thus, Boaz, the next in line, became the one who provided the Seed. He stated this in 4:10.

¹⁶ Generally this is translated "kinsman," and is indicating a specific (close) relationship. Naomi repeated it in 3:2 when pointing out to Ruth the relationship of Boaz to both of them.

¹⁷ Boaz referenced himself and the nearer kinsman as "brothers" in 4:3. While by itself this might be taken as a general term, in the case of the Levirate Marriage, Deuteronomy 25:5-10 required that the levir must be one of the "brothers (of the deceased) who live together." Obviously, the point was that the levir must be a son of the same father and mother (i.e., immediate family), since to move outside of the immediate family would make duplicating the seed of the deceased brother impossible (not the same parents).

Boaz and the nearer kinsman were brothers to Elimelech, the deceased husband of Naomi. In the *denouement*, where the goal of the story is revealed, the women of Bethlehem

Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses today that I am buying (קָנִיתִי)¹⁸ from Naomi everything that belonged to Elimelech, Chilion, and Mahlon. I

will also acquire (קָנִיתִי) Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon’s widow, as my wife, to

perpetuate the deceased man’s name on his property, so that his name will not disappear among his relatives or from the gate of his home. You are witnesses today.”

Ruth, and the Conflict in the Biblical Story . . . the Serpent’s Deception

Yet plots do not simply follow a smooth positive movement from beginning to end, as the simple transfer of Seed rights from Elimelech to the next of kin would appear. In dramatic plots, the Hero must overcome opposition in order to achieve His goal at the end. In the Biblical story, that opposition is provided by Satan, who would deceive and kill in order to stop the rule of God as the Hero of the Bible. That contextual opposition to God’s Messiah and His followers continued from the beginning, and will continue until Satan will be thrown into the Lake of Fire in Revelation 20:10.

conclude, “A child has been born to Naomi,” indicating that the childless widow for whom these brothers were legal redeemers, was Naomi. By marrying Ruth, the childless, widowed, daughter-in-law of Naomi, Boaz would be able to bring up a child to Naomi, and thus fulfill his duty as brother to Elimelech. Since Ruth was “one flesh” with Mahlon, the son of Naomi, she was considered to be of the same “inheritance,” and as such would bear the child. Of course, this also managed to fulfill the need to perpetuate the line of the deceased Mahlon, through his widow, as well (see 4:10).

¹⁸ This word (קָנִיתִי) is used in 4:4, 5 (3), 8, 9, 10, and is translated “acquire” or “buy,” and is used as the means of implementing the redemption both of Naomi’s field and of Ruth as a wife.

The Conflict in the Beginning:
Satan' Deception of Eve

Satan opposed God's plan from the beginning. He deceived Eve to take over the rule of the earth, and he continued to deceive the Seed-providers to stop the New Adam from coming and recovering that rule for God. Satan had to stop this Seed for this coming Messiah was to destroy Satan and his followers. Satan's plan was to deceive (so as to have them reject God and follow him), and if that failed, he would kill (so as to remove them from opposing his rule).¹⁹

The Conflict:
Satan's Deception of Cain
and the Killing of Abel

And so Satan's antagonism continued. When Eve bore her firstborn, Cain, she hoped that he would be this Seed.²⁰ Yet the serpent deceived Cain ("sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you . . ." Gn 4:7). And then Cain, acting on behalf of the serpent, killed his righteous brother, Abel.²¹ But God overcame Cain's rejection of the Seed and the killing of Abel by giving Eve a "substitute" son to whom God passed the right to provide the Seed (Gn 4:25-26).

The Continuing Conflict:
Satan's Deception of Esau, David, Solomon

Later in Genesis, Esau was the firstborn with the right to the Seed. Yet he was deceived by Satan into believing that the birthright (to provide the Seed) was worthless and sold it to

¹⁹ For instance, when the Christ arrived, Satan first tried to deceive Him (Mt 4:1-11), and then failing that, killed Him (Mt 27).

²⁰ Eve voices this expectation in Genesis 4:1, when she stated (literal translation from the Hebrew text), "I have born a man . . . YHVH." This comes from her hope in the promise of Genesis 3:15. Refer to the discussion at www.BiblicalStory.org , "Commentary," Genesis 4:1.

²¹ Refer to John 8:44 where Jesus identified Satan as a murderer. Also see 1 John 3:12 where Cain is referenced as "of the evil one and slew his brother."

Jacob for a bowl of stew (Gn 25:21-34). In Exodus 1:15-16, Pharaoh, deceived by the serpent, tried to stop the Seed from coming by drowning all the male babies in the Nile. Later, the serpent deceived David as he, like Eve, “saw” that “she (Bathsheba) was exceedingly good to the sight . . . and took her”²² (1Sm 11:1-4). Following David, Satan continually deceived the kings beginning with Solomon, who was lured by Satan to worship idols and intermarry with pagans (1Kg 11:1-10).

The Conflict in the Book of Ruth: Satan’s Deception Continued

Since Ruth occurs in the progress of the plot of the Biblical story, the antagonism of Satan to destroy the coming Messiah must be essentially related into the plot of the book.

Conflict: Satan’s Deception of Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion

The first five verses of the story are the record of a family who was deceived by Satan. The man who had the right as Messianic Seed-provider, Elimelech, had journeyed away from the land of YHVH to the land of another god in a search for food. The sons had intermarried with women from among a pagan people who worshipped other gods. In response, God removed all of the males in this family. Only their childless widows remained.

But . . . and this is the crux problem of the book . . . because of the disobedience of the men in the family, Satan’s plan to disrupt the Seed from coming had brought the legal right to “bear” the Seed of Messiah to . . . a Moabite!

²² The Hebrew words for “saw,” “good,” and “took,” occur only three times in the Old Testament; here in 1 Samuel 11:2-4 when David was deceived by Satan, Genesis 6:2 when the “sons of God” were deceived, and in Genesis 3:1-6 when Eve was deceived.

**Excursus:
“One Flesh,”
the “Levirate Marriage,” and Ruth**

This is the “crux” issue of the book. The “crux” issue is the narrowest of problems that must be overcome for the goal (*denouement*) to come about. In the book of Ruth, this issue is centered in the woman, Ruth. And the issue is that the potential Seed-provider *must* marry Ruth, and Ruth alone, in order to actually provide the Seed and move into the genealogy of Messiah in the *denouement*.

Thus the actual story, the actual *plot* is about God overcoming Satan’s obstacles to bring about Ruth’s journey from Moab to Bethlehem to marry the Seed-provider and become the Messianic “Seed-bearer.

In summary of the problem:

- The nearer kinsman (the next in line with the rights as the Seed-provider) could not simply bear the Seed by ignoring Ruth, find another Israelite woman, and bear a child. He must marry this woman, Ruth, in order to enter the Messianic genealogy.
- Boaz (next in line after the nearer kinsman) *only* entered the genealogy at the end because he married Ruth and provided the Seed to her. So, he as well, must marry the one woman, Ruth, in order to provide the Seed for Messiah.

Why is this Moabite so Important?

That this Moabite named Ruth, located in Moab, is the key factor in the book has not escaped interpreters and readers through the centuries. And, not realizing the absolute necessity of her legal status, they have offered many and varied views.

The question to interpreters is, what was the main issue that prompted God to focus on this one woman in the whole world of Jews and Gentiles? Was it her Moabite status as a

Gentile, since God does pursue Gentiles to bring them to Christ (Gen 12:3, Mt 28:19)?²³ Or did Ruth possess some other inherent characteristic (the romantic view).²⁴

But a simple reading of the text reveals it was not her Moabite heritage, nor any other personal or ethnic trait,²⁵ but strictly the legal covenant position, which was simply due to her marriage to the holder of the Seed right, Mahlon. And that legality required that she be the bearer, the mother, of the Messianic Seed. And it is this through this legal covenant that God, not only honored, but also pursued Ruth with His sacrificial love toward this hopeless alien. That legality that reflected God's character was fundamental in what was known as the "Levirate Marriage."

The "One Flesh" Requirement²⁶

Most commentators recognize that the "Levirate Marriage" of Deuteronomy 25:5-10 is instrumental in this narrative. However, the "Levirate Marriage" was not some new requirement that God had originated and encoded into the Law there on the Plains of Moab. The basis for the Levirate Marriage was founded in the "one flesh" requirement of the husband and wife established in Genesis 2:18-24, and later encoded into the Law.

²³ God does pursue the Gentiles as demonstrated in Genesis 12:3, and throughout the Old Testament (see the book of Jonah). However, His main purpose here is due to the relationship of Ruth through the "one flesh" covenant of Genesis 2:24.

²⁴ Some, like Stedman (op.cit), then link human romance to parallel the romance of God with His people. Yet, God's romance of Israel (see Hosea 2:14) is based on YHVH's sacrificial mercy toward the hopeless, while human romance is typically based on mutual attraction based on personal attributes.

²⁵ However, her lack of status demonstrated God's character. That was that He would act beneficially to the hopeless.

²⁶ For a more detailed exposition of Genesis 2:18-24, refer to the Genesis Commentary at www.BiblicalStory.org.

Genesis 2:18-24 was more than just a description of how marriage came to be, but it developed woman's essential role with respect to the man's seed as it impacted into the following narrative of the Biblical story. For while the man was the Seed-provider because he inherited the actual seed from his parents by blood, the woman he married would possess the absolute legal right to bear that same seed.

So because Eve was taken out of Adam's side,²⁷ she was "one flesh," inseparable with regard to Adam's inheritance. Thus in 2:24, God pronounced the means by which this was to be continued, "For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his woman and they two shall become, with respect to flesh, one."²⁸

That right establishes that the male heir will join with a female, someone apart from his own bloodline ("leave father and mother"), and move to make her an heiress ("cleave"). It is then that God will make them indissoluble ("one flesh") to provide and bear the seed.

"A Man Shall Leave His Father and Mother"

Genesis 2:24 has often been misallocated to twenty-first century psychological tenets, frequently advocating the separation of the new union from parental influence. But the actual meaning is that this son, with right of blood inheritance from his father and mother, will "leave" that line of inheritance (i.e., not a blood relative) to find a woman who has no right to the inheritance.

²⁷ Following Eve's arrival, Adam declared, "she is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh." There he was expressing that she was identical to him with respect to his inheritance. She was . . . as he was, "one flesh." They were one, inseparable partners with respect to his inheritance. Peter expressed this to husbands in 1 Peter 3:7, "and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life."

²⁸ This reflects a literal translation of the Hebrew text.

“And Shall Cleave to His Woman”

He then “cleaves” to this “woman.” This is his one-way action (through a vow) that the potential husband makes to indicate his unchangeable commitment (i.e., sacrificial love) toward this one woman, not formerly a party to the blood inheritance of his family.

“And They Two . . . as Regards to Flesh . . . One”

While the male cleaved to the female (the heir cleaved to the new heiress), it was God alone who then accomplished the bond, the “one flesh.” While the man had the seed of his parents in him, he was helpless to have children without a “seed-bearer.” Thus this verse radically changed the legal position of this, formerly unassociated, woman to that seed. Since this couple was “one flesh,” the man would never have the choice to separate (i.e., “un-leave”) her from himself and his inheritance. Even if he should die, her relationship to his inheritance, including his family, continued.

Jesus was asked exactly this question in Mark 10:2 (“Is it lawful for a man to divorce a wife?”) as to whether a man could, in fact, separate (i.e., divorce) the “one flesh” wife from himself and his inheritance. Jesus quoted Genesis 2:24 to show that the man could not separate out (“un-leave”) the “one flesh” woman (i.e., divorce her from himself and his inheritance) since God was the One who made them “one flesh.”

FOR THIS REASON A MAN WILL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH; so they are no longer two, but one flesh." Therefore what God has joined together, man²⁹ must not separate. (Mark 10:6-9)

²⁹ While this is generally held to be “man” as in “mankind,” (i.e., the law of men), it likely references the husband. Thus having cleaved to his wife, he cannot ever go back.

The “One Flesh” Provision for Wives in Genesis

But, like all events and discourses within a narrative plot, this does not have enough information by itself, and can only be related to its function in the progressive unfolding of the story. The following events in the narrative of Genesis will show that the male could not choose to “un-cleave” and dissolve this “one flesh” inheritance, particularly with regard to the (Messianic) Seed, since that union had been made by God.

Abraham and Sarah

In Genesis 12:10-20 when famine struck, Abram sought relief from Pharaoh. But when he felt threatened because of his beautiful “one flesh” wife, Abram tried to “un-cleave” her so Pharaoh would not kill him. Yet God would not dissolve the “one flesh” relationship and so cursed Pharaoh while returning her to Abram.³⁰

Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38)

Genesis 2:24 provides the foundation that allows one to understand the story of Judah and Tamar. Tamar had become “one flesh” with Er, Judah’s eldest son, and thus held the right to provide his Seed (in this case, the Seed of Messiah). When God killed Er, Onan, the next eldest brother, was sent to impregnate her but refused, and was also killed by God. So Judah then refused to send the last son, Shelah, to Tamar since he was now afraid of losing his last heir. So he sent Tamar back to her father’s house, seeking to “un-cleave” her from the “one flesh” right to bear the Seed of the deceased eldest son.

But Tamar refused to abandon her God-given “one flesh” right and thus pursued and obtained the Seed of Messiah, not from Shelah, but from Judah.

³⁰ Abraham repeated this attempt to “un-cleave” in Genesis 20 sending Sarah to Abimilech, and again God prevented the “un-cleaving” of Sarah. Isaac did the same with Rebekah in Genesis 24, but God again prevented it.

“One Flesh,” “The Levirate Marriage,” and *chesed*

The Levirate Marriage (Dt 25:5-10) was the encoding of the “one flesh” requirement of Genesis 2:24 (played out in Genesis 38), but with specific regard to the seed of the deceased husband. If a man should die and leave his wife childless, the eldest brother in the same family would marry her and bring up seed to the deceased brother. In addition, she could not marry outside the family, as it was her legal responsibility to bear her deceased husband’s seed through the eldest of the remaining brothers. But this duty was not an easy task as it required a unique type of love, a great sacrifice on behalf of his brother for the benefit of his widow. That sacrificial mercy was called *chesed* (חֶסֶד).

***Chesed*, the Character of God**

Chesed was revealed in *Torah* as the self-sacrificing character of God (See Dt 10:17-20). God’s *chesed* was seen in Genesis 3:15, as He promised to give up His only Son for execution (sacrificially) so that His enemies (all those who rejected him in Adam) could be saved into the kingdom of His Son (mercy). It was in *Torah* that the Israelite, as God’s representative (i.e., “sons,” Dt 14:1), could discover God’s character and reflect it to others (i.e., the *Shema*, Dt 6:4-9). God’s sacrificial love was so extreme He would even pursue his enemies in order to give mercy to them (Matthew 5:44-47). Those who asked for mercy then received *chesed*, and would in turn give it out on behalf of YHVH to those who were hopeless as they.

But love your enemies, do what is good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is gracious to the ungrateful and evil. (Luke 6:35)

“One Flesh” and *chesed*

Since marriage was to represent God’s love (i.e., “the image,” Gn 1:26), the man was obligated to love this woman as if she was his own body, (i.e., “one flesh”) even to the point of giving his own life for her.³¹ Paul referenced Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:25-30, comparing marriage to the ultimate “one flesh” union, Christ and the church.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her . . .

In the same way, husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own flesh but provides and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, since we are members of His body.

The Levirate Marriage and *Hesed*

Unfortunately interpreters, assuming today’s common value system, have too often supposed that the Levirate Marriage must have brought some personal benefit to the brother of the deceased, else why would he accept such an arrangement? Yet this could not be further from the actual case as the motivation of *Torah* (which reflected God’s sacrificial love, *chesed*) was exactly the opposite of man’s self-beneficial, natural desires.³²

Hesed and The *Goel*

³¹ In the Sermon on the Mount God’s love is defined by the love that He has for His enemy (5:44-48). This then is applied in 5:21-48 to one’s love of brother, and the love of one’s wife. Thus murder and divorce were prohibited since man was to love his brother and his wife even when they became his enemy.

³² God’s *chesed* is not the same as men’s thinking. That God would give His own Son for God’s enemies is not reasonable to man’s thinking (e.g., what human would do that? See Romans 5:1-11). Not infrequently the interpreter does not understand *chesed*, and inputs his own value system into the story to explain the motivation for a character’s actions. Thus, instead of sacrificial love (i.e., *chesed*) for a hopeless widow, the interpreter errantly assumes she must have had some personal allure and Boaz must have had some self-beneficial romantic desires in mind.

Contrary to today's self-centered desires (selfish lusts, Eph 4:17-19; and reciprocal love, Mt 5:46-47, Lk 6:32-34) the Levirate marriage was a great sacrifice done solely for the benefit of the deceased and his (helpless³³) widow. In other words, the levir would give up his own marital right to choose the woman of his own desires, and instead, eagerly and joyfully accept the responsibility to marry, and provide seed for, his deceased brother's childless widow regardless of personal benefits or liabilities. He would do this solely based on God's provision for him and thus would act mercifully on behalf of God.

“One Flesh,” “The Levirate Marriage” and “Ruth”

The connection of this “Levirate Marriage” and the “one flesh” requirement to Ruth was that she was a childless widow who had the legal, God-given, right to bear her husband's Seed. Thus, any rightful Seed-provider must marry her, and her alone, regardless of any liabilities such as her Moabite heritage, financial condition, or other.

The Conflict: Ruth, the Legal Seed-bearer was a Moabite

Satan's attack on the Seed became a great problem that must be solved by God for the Messianic Seed to come, particularly with regard to this Moabite widow.

- **Ruth was a Moabite, a worshipper of Chemosh.**³⁴ Ruth was a Moabite, and as such would have been a worshipper of Chemosh from her youth. Changing one's alliance to the God of an enemy was no small issue.

³³ It was not that this woman could not have had some physical, or even financial, benefit, but it did not enter into the consideration of *chesed*, and thus the Levirate marriage.

³⁴ This is only stating that originally she would have been a follower of Moabite gods. When YHVH brought her to faith is not known, although her confession of 1:16 established that it was at least at the time of her trip to Israel. But that He brought her to faith (1:16) so as to bear His Seed is the important issue here.

- **She would have to leave her own mother, father, and family in Moab, to go with the poor, old mother of her dead husband.** The natural blood bond to one's family was a solid link from birth. The corresponding link to Naomi, her mother by marriage, was an unseen, invisible, bond made by the God of Israel through her deceased husband (i.e., "one flesh"). To go with this mother-in-law, as opposed to her own family, was a major decision to choose the invisible revelation of the God of Israel instead of a blood bond. In addition, going with her mother-in-law had no visible benefits, since Naomi was poor, past childbearing, with no husband and no children.
- **There appeared to be no qualified *goel*.** Naomi had stated it clearly. The requirement of Deuteronomy 25:5-10 and the Levirate Marriage limited her marriage options to that of brothers in the immediate family. Mahlon's only brother was dead and Naomi was too old to have any more sons (1:11-13). Thus Ruth's venture with Naomi held no visible hope of her ever marrying and having children. Thus Naomi urges her to return to Chemosh (1:15) who, unlike YHVH, had no such requirement that would prevent her from marrying and bearing children.

Conflict:

Satan's Temptation to Ruth to "Un-Cleave" (1:6-22)

As God returned the food to Israel (1:6), Naomi also returned based on her natural instincts. Since it was food that had motivated her to leave Israel in the first place, it was food that caused her to return. Naomi, relying in her own ability to self-deliver instead of trust in YHVH, then tempted both Ruth and Orpah to share her reasoning. She told them that they should

stay in Moab where, under the god, Chemosh,³⁵ they could have husbands and children and cling to their natural family. In Israel, because of YHVH's restriction that they could only marry brothers, there would be no chance of having a husband or children. So Naomi urged them both to "un-cleave" from their "one flesh" bond with her family through their deceased husbands, and return to Moab to bond with Moabite men (1:9).

Solution: God Brought Ruth to Faith, Genesis 2:24

God's solution from Genesis to Revelation was, is, and always will be, to bring one to faith in YHVH and His coming Son. Ruth would trust in YHVH and honor the Genesis 2:24 "one flesh" bond despite the insistence of Naomi to go to an alternative solution. Thus Ruth, by faith in YHVH, overcame the temptation.

Ruth, *Hesed* and "One Flesh"

Because of Ruth's bond to Naomi through the "one flesh" bond with her son, Mahlon, Ruth would not leave her mother-in-law. She claimed this in 1:14, 16 alluding to Genesis 2:24 (i.e., "cleave," "leave").

Again they wept loudly; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung (lit.: "cleaved") to her. (Ru 1:14)

But Ruth replied, "Do not persuade me to leave you (Ru 1:16)

Ruth's only visible inheritance was Naomi, and that inheritance was a poor older widow requiring care. So Ruth responded with *chesed*, that is, she would honor the "one flesh" relationship and willingly sacrifice for Naomi at her own cost. And to reassure her commitment

³⁵ That Naomi implored them to return to the god, Chemosh, is apparent in 1:15 where she tells Ruth to follow Orpah, who has returned to her people and her gods.

to the “one flesh” that had been established with Mahlon, she vowed (see Dt 23:21-23) regarding her continuing relationship to Naomi. Ruth would care for Naomi for the rest of her life, and when she died she would be buried with her.³⁶

. . . for wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live; your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.¹⁷ Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May Yahweh punish me, and do so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. (Ru 1:16-17)

God moved Ruth to Meet the Righteous *Goel*

Having brought Ruth by faith so as to overcome the natural temptation and instead come to Bethlehem, the unseen hand of God moved her to the field of Boaz (2:3) so as to meet her future righteous *goel*, Boaz. The narrator establishes Boaz as a potential *goel* in 2:3, and then shows the reader that he was righteous and acted with *chesed* as he sacrificially provided food to Ruth and Naomi through the covenant provision of gleaning³⁷ (Lv 19:9-19; 23:22).

³⁶ See Kenneth Barker, *Problems in the Book of Ruth*, Master of Theology Thesis (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1960), 41.

³⁷ Ruth 2:14-18. Note that the phrase “. . . and she ate and was satisfied and had some left” (2:14) is a phrase that demonstrates covenant blessing by the God of Israel through a covenant implementer on behalf of YHVH. See also Ruth 2:18 where the phrase is referenced again. Refer to Deuteronomy 6:11, 11:15, 14:29, 23:24, 26:12 for its covenantal foundation. It is then used in the New Testament after Jesus feeds the 5000 in Matthew 14:20 and fed the 4000 in 15:37, to show Jesus as the ultimate Implementer of covenant blessing.

Conflict: Satan's Temptation of Boaz (3:1-8)

Naomi, still seeking an earthly solution, decided (like the people of her times when “everyman did that which was right in their own eyes,” Jdg 17:6; 21:25)³⁸ to lure³⁹ Boaz into providing Seed for Ruth by appealing to his natural lusts. She instructed Ruth to make herself alluring⁴⁰ and approach Boaz when he was well relaxed with food and drink. She was to approach him in the middle of the night on the threshing floor, instead of during the daylight hours at the city gate where legal transactions were to take place.

Of course, once again Naomi's plans were headed for disaster. Boaz was not the rightful heir, for there was another before him who held the legal right. For not only did the sensual solution violate *Torah*, but it also gave a prior right to the nearer kinsman that could not be disregarded by Boaz.

³⁸ The events of Ruth are tied to the times of the book of Judges. See also a discussion on the “Bethlehem Trilogy,” by Eugene H. Merrill, where Ruth is tied literarily to the last two episodes in the book of Judges. “The Book of Ruth: Narration and Shared Themes,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 [April-June 1985]: 131-32.

³⁹ Boaz's comment regarding Ruth's visit in the middle of the night demonstrated that her trip to the threshing floor was wrong as he sent her home under the cover of darkness, and instructed those with him to keep it a secret (3:14).

⁴⁰ Naomi's language of 3:3, “Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself and put on your *best* clothes,” indicated that Ruth had been wearing her widow's garments to demonstrate her legal standing within Israel. Thus, she was told by Naomi to appear, not as a mourning widow, but as a physically appealing woman. This story is to be compared to its preface in Tamar in Genesis 38:14, 19, when Tamar, who had been wearing widow's clothes to establish her right to Shelah, changed them when she wanted to entice Judah. The woman of Tekoa was told by Joab not to change her widow's clothes and not to anoint herself with oil so as to appear to David as one who had been mourning for her only son for a long period of time. Refer to Charles P. Baylis, “Naomi in the Book of Ruth in Light of the Mosaic Covenant,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (October—December, 2004), 429-30.

Solution: Ruth's *Torah* Presentation to Righteous Boaz

But faithful Ruth rejected this self-determined solution, and before Boaz could decide what to do, she confronted him with his *chesed* responsibility as a *goel* under *Torah*.⁴¹ According to Ruth (and *Torah*), he was to marry her and provide a child for the sake of Naomi and for her deceased husband.⁴² Boaz, a righteous man, recognized the *Torah* requirement and assured her that she would have a *goel*. However, he informed her that there was a nearer *goel*, but if that man did not take her (i.e., reject *chesed* responsibility), then Boaz would perform the legal duty (i.e., accept the *chesed* responsibility).

Conflict: Satan's Deception of the Nearer Kinsman

Boaz then presented the nearer kinsman with the legal requirement from *Torah*. This *goel* had two options. First, he could exercise *chesed* and marry this childless widow. If he exercised his right, he would never be able to marry the woman of his own choice, and it would threaten

⁴¹ Naomi was correct when she said there were no more legitimate levirs for Ruth since all her sons (i.e., "brothers" to Mahlon) were dead and she was not able to have any more. What Ruth was stating to Boaz on the threshing floor was that he was qualified as a *goel*, since he was a "brother" to Elimelech. Thus he could be a *goel* to Naomi and bring up a child to her. Ruth was proposing that she, as a childless widow herself, would sacrificially marry Boaz and through her a child would be provided for Naomi. This would also provide a child for her deceased husband. (See 4:9-10).

⁴² What Ruth suggests was *chesed*, for she was proposing that Boaz marry her for Naomi's sake, so that the childless widow, Naomi, would have a child (see the ending (the *denouement*) of the story where it is concluded that "Naomi has a child"). Following Ruth's presentation on the threshing floor, Boaz responded that what she was doing was even greater than what she had done when she had left her homeland to come and care for Naomi (see his prior assessment in the field in 2:11). Thus, his reaction on the threshing floor was that this was even greater *chesed*, as she was offering to marry a man of an older generation (i.e., brother of Elimelech) for Naomi's sake, so Naomi could have a child through her. That this was a sacrifice for Ruth was evident in their age differences alone. Edward Campbell, Jr. states that Ruth was likely in her later twenties while Naomi was in her mid-forties (*Ruth*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 67).

his own inheritance as well.⁴³ Being unrighteous, he, like Naomi, Elimelech, and their sons, took the second option, the expedient, pragmatic solution, choosing to self-determine his future and reject his *Torah* duty as a *goel*.

Solution: Boaz a Righteous Man Acted with *Hesed* as a *Goel*

As always, the solution was for God's people to walk by faith. Thus, God had His man in place, Boaz, who would make the *Torah* decision and exercise his legal privilege to show *chesed* to this woman by being her redeemer. The losses that deterred the nearer kinsman did not deter Boaz. Boaz recognized through *Torah* that God had placed him in the right place and given him the ability to provide for the helpless widows of his deceased brother, Elimelech, and of his nephew, Mahlon . And so he would act in trust.

The Denouement: Perez to Boaz to David to the Christ

But that was not the end. That child was Obed, the grandfather of David the King, from whom would come the Christ (2Sm 7:16). And so, the journey of the Biblical Story continued as God overcame the threat of the serpent, who tried once again to prevent the Seed from coming.

And so the name of Boaz is remembered throughout future generations as one who trusted in YHVH and through his act of *chesed*, provided the Seed for Messiah. And that name is recorded, not only in the *denouement* of the book of Ruth, but also in 1 Chr 2:11-12, Mt 1:5, and Lk 3:32. By contrast, the nearer kinsman had his name removed forever from the annals of Scripture.⁴⁴ And, of course, Ruth is also remembered with him, since she honored her faith in

⁴³ Exactly how his inheritance would be threatened is debated. For a discussion on this refer to Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, comments on Ruth 4:6.

⁴⁴ This was the requirement of Deuteronomy 25:5-10, that if a man rejected his duty as a *levir*, his name would fall into disrepute. "In Israel his name shall be called, 'The house of him whose sandal is removed.'" (Dt 25:10)

YHVH by clinging to the “one flesh” inheritance given her. And while others thought of temporal benefits, she bore the Seed of the One who would not only deliver, her, her husband, and her mother-in-law, but also would one day resurrect the believers of her nation and of the world into the ultimate *denouement* of the Biblical story, the eternal earthly kingdom.

**Conclusion: The Father’s Purpose - the Son
(the Seed in the OT)**

The book of Ruth demonstrates God’s love for the coming Seed, as He overcame the deceit of Satan during the Times of the Judges to keep His promise to bring forth that Seed through the righteous man, Boaz, with the righteous “one flesh” woman, Ruth. And thus God’s movement in the book of Ruth brought about the all-important Messianic *denouement* that connects the book into the Messianic movement from Adam to the Christ, who will reign on the throne of the universe.

Application: Believe in the Son

The reader must always realize that he or she is in this story, the story of God’s movement to place His Son on the throne of the universe. The Book of Ruth confirms that God was always successful in bringing forth His Son and, now that He has appeared, He will still be successful in bringing forth the ultimate reign of His Son. The application for the reader is, as it was for Ruth and Boaz, to trust in this Messiah who has now appeared. It is this single application that pervades the whole, Bible . . . trust in the One whom God loves, the Son. It is that trust and that faith alone that will enable the believer to enjoy the ultimate *denouement* with His Son forever.

The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hands. ³⁶ The one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who refuses to believe in the Son will not see life; instead, the wrath of God remains on him. (Jn 3:35-36).

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