

# **The Book of Ruth**

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A Myrtlefield House transcript



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This text has been edited from a transcript of three talks given by David Gooding at Broadway Hall, Belfast, N. Ireland in December 1993.

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Published by The Myrtlefield Trust

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Belfast

BT1 9YR

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Myrtlefield catalogue no: rth.001/dw

## [The Structure of the Book of Ruth](#)

Thank you for the stimulus of suggesting to me that I join you in a study of the book of Ruth. I'm well aware that you have not asked me to study it with you because you do not know the book of Ruth. It is rather the reverse: all of you are absolute experts on the book of Ruth, knowing it from end to end and loving every syllable of it! What you wish me to do, I'm sure, is to provoke you by calling to mind the things that you have known in the past and enjoyed. The book of Ruth is one of the best known and best loved books in the whole of the Old Testament, for various reasons.

It is, in the first place, a delightful love story, and all the more delightful because of its purity. Since the story of Ruth is set historically in the context of the book of Judges, the love story that Ruth presents stands in vivid contrast to the dark and lurid scenes at the end of the book of Judges, and makes the story of Ruth and Boaz a delightful, if not romantic, story of healthy human love and family life. If in the course of my contributions to these talks I don't stress the romantic side of the story too much, I'm sure you will understand and not be disappointed. Had you wished a speaker to stress the romantic side of it, you would have invited another speaker! Actually the story of Ruth's marriage to Boaz doesn't turn out to be quite as romantic in our modern sense of the term, as we shall see.

In the second place, the book is not about Ruth. What it is about, we shall now see as we read from the beginning and then from the end of the book. Ruth and Boaz are certainly the key figures in the action of the book, all turns on them, but the book is not about Ruth and Boaz. We now see the subject matter of the book as we begin to read:

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab . . . But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has

gone out against me.' Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.' But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you or to 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 will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.' And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, 'Is this Naomi?' She said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?' So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. (1:1-6, 11-22)

We have read from the beginning of the action of this wonderful story. Now let's read its conclusion, the end to which all the action is designed and directed.

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.' Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. (4:13-17)

## Naomi

And so it is that the book of Ruth is, strictly speaking, not about Ruth. I say again, Ruth and Boaz together are the key persons in the action of this story, but the story is about not them; it is about Naomi. You see that from the very beginning. How the story is introduced: there was this man, Elimelech, who had a wife and two sons, and when there came a famine in the land he went down to sojourn in the land of Moab. And he died, says the narrative, moving very swiftly without filling in any more details, and concentrating on what is the chief element at this stage in the story. He died and Naomi his wife was left. Meanwhile, the boys had married two Moabite girls and then they also died, apparently both of them childless. So now, says the historian, the woman was left of her sons and her husband.

That is the point the story writer wants to get to. A woman, now in middle life and perhaps beyond, who had had to uproot home and go with her husband and her sons to Moab because of the famine that had come upon her village. She is trying to make a new life for herself in that foreign country when the first disaster comes on her, the death of her husband, and she's left a widow. And then to her horror her two sons successively die

without children and she is completely desolate, left only with her daughters-in-law. What to do? She hears news that the Lord has visited her people back in Bethlehem, giving them bread. So she decides to uproot herself once more and go back to Bethlehem. At the beginning her daughters-in-law follow her but then, with all realism, Naomi turns to dissuade them. Listen to the woman talking to her daughters-in-law: the conversation is told at great length. We are meant to listen to it so that we shall begin to plumb and empathise with the extraordinary desolation that now fills the heart of this middle-aged woman.

‘Go back, my dears,’ she says. ‘I’m ever so sorry for you that this has come upon you, but the Lord has acted very bitterly against me. It’s no good you following me. We must be realists. I’m old and I’ve no more sons.’ She’s thinking as a Hebrew woman. If only she had had more sons, three or four, then, when the first two died and left their widows, the second two could have been called upon to marry the widows and continue the family line. ‘But I’ve no more sons,’ she says, ‘so there’s no hope for you young women at the threshold of adult life, with all your hopes and expectations before you now cruelly dashed to the ground. It’s no good if you’re saying you’ll wait because I’m too old to have a husband anyway. And even if I could have a husband and have children, you wouldn’t wait the next eighteen years, would you, for the boys to grow up? So, thinking of your future and all the longings of your heart, go back, and may the Lord grant you to find rest, each one of you, in the house of her husband.’

That phrase ‘find rest’ is an interesting term: it is the rest of desire and longing and ambition achieved. Nature herself has filled our hearts with longings. And if those longings are forever frustrated or disappointed, the soul tends, except for the grace of God, to be in torment and turmoil. ‘God grant you to find rest,’ says she, ‘each one of you in the house of her husband.’ Orpah eventually went back. Ruth, as we see, remained determined to cleave to her mother-in-law and followed her back to Bethlehem.

As the two women come into the village, the other women see them and exclaim in astonishment, ‘This can’t be Naomi, can it?’ Naomi, as she is about to explain, had gone out full; her very name means pleasantness. She had obviously come back much changed: gaunt, haunted and sorrowful, in her black widow’s garments. And she says, ‘Call me not Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full and the Lord has brought me home again empty.’ A woman in middle life and all her potential now come to nothing; no more prospects, nothing but sorrow and bereavement and hardship. ‘Don’t call me Naomi,’ she said. ‘The very name mocks me. Call me Mara’ (bitterness). And underneath it all, fuelling the fires, there’s not only bereavement and desolation and hopelessness but she says, ‘The Lord has testified against me.’

It’s alright saying that sorrow doesn’t come upon us because of our sins, all the time at any rate. But the godlier a person is, the more they will be inclined in their conscience to feel, ‘Why has the Lord done it? Why has the Lord allowed it? Why does the Lord grant other believers, their wives and families such success? Young men growing up to serve him and be valiant in Israel, and their proud mothers seeing it all and finding all their motherly care fulfilled. And I have nothing further to live for. The Lord seems to have testified against me.’

The action begins with this middle-aged woman—desolate, bereaved, broken-hearted, hopeless. ‘Can I have sons?’ says she. And the action takes place in all its lovely detail with its

unexpected surprises, if you've not read the story before, and comes to the climax we read earlier. It is Naomi's story that is the capstone of the book. Naomi, beyond all expectation, restored. Yes, she had begun to get a little hint of it when Ruth came back from her first day's gleaning on Boaz's farm. Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, 'May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!' (2:20). That terrible engulfing feeling that the Lord has abandoned her begins to recede. 'The Lord has not left off his faithfulness,' she says, as faith begins to revive again. That's halfway through the book. At the end of the book, faith is in full flood. For a child is born to Ruth—and you'll notice now that Ruth has virtually disappeared out of the story. Nothing was told of the honeymoon anyway, or those interesting things like what kind of a house she lived in. Simply, that they married and a child was born. And the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel!' (4:14). And this time they're not talking about Boaz because it goes on to say, 'He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him' (v. 15). From Naomi's desolation to Naomi's restoration. 'Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed' (vv. 16–17).

We could summarise the story of God's restoration of Naomi like this:

### Chapter

1	NAOMI EMPTIED
	* Left of her two sons and of her husband
	* Have I yet sons?
	* Too old for a husband!
4	NAOMI RESTORED
	* <b>not</b> left without a kinsman
	* a restorer of life to <b>you</b>
	* nourisher of <b>your</b> old age
	* a son is born to <b>NAOMI</b>

Whatever practical lessons we draw from this lovely little story, we shall not need to wander too far from what is evidently the main story of the book—the desolation and then the restoration of Naomi. The book isn't about Ruth, as we have said, but the book is rightly entitled 'Ruth' because, when we look at it, Ruth is the main figure in the action and is actually the key to Naomi's restoration. Of course, the figure of Boaz is exceedingly prominent and, likewise, a key to Naomi's restoration. But in the end it will be Ruth that is the key to the action. Let's consider Boaz first therefore.

### Boaz

The book isn't called Boaz although the redemption, the restoration, in one sense, depended on him. There were two things in this. First of all Boaz acted as the kinsman-redeemer, the

near of kin. When Naomi sold her land, forced to by near bankruptcy, Boaz bought the land from her and thus kept it in the family. And whereas Naomi had not been able to make a go of the farm, Boaz taking it over with all his resources and wealth doubtless made a tremendous go of it. But, if that had been all Boaz did, it would scarcely have satisfied Naomi. To know that some kinsman had bought it, and therefore it remained in the family, would alleviate the suffering a little but it would do nothing to secure that other thing which was so near to her heart: the keeping alive of the name of the dead upon his inheritance. If Boaz subsequently sold the land it would no longer be Elimelech's farm or Mahlon's farm; it would be somebody else's farm. It would advertise to the world the failure of Elimelech and his sons.

So it was not enough for Boaz to be the kinsman who bought the land. He could have done that without Ruth, but it wouldn't have satisfied Naomi. Not only did she want to maintain the inheritance, she wanted to maintain the name of the dead upon the inheritance. For that, Boaz was required to fulfil another institution. He had to act in what we call a levirate marriage: a marriage of brother-in-law to marry the widow of the deceased man, such that their first male child would be counted the heir of the dead man and would carry on the name of his father's family—the first husband of his mother. For that, Boaz was not enough. You'll say, 'Why didn't he marry Naomi then and have a child by her?' Well, because she was too old anyway and then she didn't come into the provision of the law because her husband hadn't died childless: he'd had two boys. It was those boys who had died childless and were now in danger of blotting out the family name completely. It would have been unsuitable, but then impossible, for Naomi to marry Boaz.

## Ruth

And now we see that the key to the whole situation is not Naomi nor, in that sense, Boaz; the key to the situation is Ruth. So let's look at that as the structure of the book brings it home to us.

### Ruth the Gentile

*the key to the restoration of  
Naomi the Israelite*

#### Chapter

1	Her conversion to faith in Naomi's God and people Her refusal to leave Naomi
2	Her initiative to go gleaning to support Naomi Boaz's commendation
3	Her willingness to marry the 'old' man Boaz Boaz's commendation
4	Ruth's child becomes Naomi's child, <i>go'el</i> and restorer of her old age

You will see from the sheer contents of the book what the action is and who moves largest in the action. We have described it as 'Ruth the Gentile, the key to the restoration of Naomi the Israelite' because that will have all kinds of implications for us when we consider the interpretation of the book. It wasn't simply that this unfortunate former Gentile girl was, by God's grace, brought into the family of God's people and thus blessed. It was far more significant than that. She was not only brought in for her own benefit, but she becomes the very key to the restoration of Naomi the Israelite, the Jewess. Notice how the proportions of the story therefore concentrate on Ruth and how she came to be that key.

Her conversion to faith in Naomi's God and people; a Gentile converted to faith in the true and living God. Her profession of faith and determination to cast her lot in with the people of God are the highlight of chapter 1. The highlight of chapter 2 is Ruth's initiative to go gleaning to support Naomi. And as she meets Boaz in the field on the first day, notice how Boaz commends her:

But Boaz answered her, 'All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!' (2:11-12)

Commendation number one from Boaz, coming there in chapter 2. We see Ruth's loyalty to Naomi and her family, and her initiative in going gleaning to work to support Naomi. The key is Ruth and all the attention is on her.

Now chapter 3 is where the romance goes out of the window a little. We need to be careful that we don't read it in terms of our modern romantic novels or something. This is an ancient story and Ruth does what Naomi suggests she should do. When Boaz discovers her and she asks him to marry her, notice where the proposal comes from—I'm told it often does! Boaz compliments her. Notice what he says,

May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. (3:10)

Ruth was a young woman—they would have married very young in those days, and she'd married a young man. And now she'd come to Israel with all her Moabite charm. She might have had other young men, or at least tried her best to get one of them. What struck Boaz was this, 'Your kindness—[the word means your loyalty, loving-kindness, faithfulness]—you show more faithfulness at the end than at the beginning. It was marvellous that you came here, following your mother-in-law instead of going and getting a husband back home. You followed her without any prospect of getting a husband and, when you came, you devoted yourself to working hard for her to maintain her by gleaning in my field. It is most marvellous that you not only have worked to maintain her but you'll be prepared to do as she suggests and seek out an old man [a middle-aged man, I suspect] instead of going after the young men.'



If Ruth had not been willing to marry such a middle-aged gentleman, Naomi would never have been restored. We must be careful just now lest we jump too precipitously into typology and say, 'Isn't our Christ lovely and who wouldn't love him?' Yes, of course, he is our great kinsman-redeemer but, starting at the ground floor of this story, the fact that Boaz is drawn to our attention rests on Ruth's willingness to do as Naomi said and go and ask this middle-aged man to marry her. What for? For the sake of keeping on the name of Elimelech and Mahlon, rather than going her own way and marrying a young man and having sons of her own.

Ruth, then, is the key to the whole story, and when it comes down to the practical application of what this story is saying, we shall have to give a great deal of attention to Ruth. The Study Bible of the NIV has suggested that kind of scheme in summarising all the contents of the book of Ruth (see [Appendix](#)). It is a very helpful scheme, highlighting again that the introduction is Naomi empty, and the very climax of the conclusion of the book is Naomi full. It notices how carefully the thing is written and how each of the significant movements is marked by 'Ruth returning'. And finally, it is Ruth's child that is to secure Naomi's restoration. Ruth is the key figure in the action of the book.

### **Key institutions**

So far we've been dealing with the skeleton or structure, which is where any interpretation of a book has got to start. Let's think now of the key institutions upon which the action of the story is going to depend. First of all there is the concept of inheritance and the desire to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance. Elimelech once had a farm; in other words he had his inheritance. There came a famine and he couldn't raise enough food from it so, for the time being, he abandoned his farm and went down to Moab. When Naomi came back it was already harvest time. Maybe somebody else had taken the land over, or it had just gone to wreck and ruin. There was nothing on it on which they could live and, anyway, how would they, as women, set about ploughing the land and doing the sowing and reaping? It is this inheritance, then, that Naomi decides to sell, with an idea that she can maintain her husband's name on the inheritance. This is the important thing, this idea of maintaining the inheritance or, should the inheritance become insolvent and bankrupt, restoring the inheritance. So let's ponder this idea of inheritance within Israel and where it started.

### **Inheritance**

It started, of course, when they were redeemed out of Egypt. Having crossed the wilderness, God gave them their portion of the land in Canaan as their inheritance. Yes, the original Israelites had to go along with Joshua and fight for it. But then, when the land had been won, Joshua and company, solemnly before the Lord, cast lots for the tribes and where the lot fell there they were given their inheritance. Each man got his few acres where he built his house and wine vat and his olive press. There he lived and there he reared his family. This was his inheritance from the Lord, and we notice as the history goes by that this attitude to life was very sacred.

There is a story in the time of Ahab, how that at one stage the king decided to take up gardening. He was going to have a beautiful garden and pleasure park, only it so happened that there was a bit of land belonging to a certain Naboth just in the way of where the king wanted to extend his palace garden. So he went along to Naboth and said, 'Naboth, my man, I want to extend the palace grounds and your little bit of a farm is standing in the way. Now I'll tell you what you'll do; sell me your ground and I'll give you a good price for it. Then you can buy another piece from someone else and I can take over your bit of inheritance and join it to my palace gardens.'

And to Ahab's astonishment and grief, Naboth said,

'I'm sorry, sir, but no thank you.'

'What do you mean, "No thank you"?'

'Well, no thank you, I don't want to sell my ground.'

'Oh, but I'll give you a good price for it.'

'Sir, but you couldn't buy it. You couldn't put a price on it that I would take for it.'

'Don't be so stupid, man. I'll give you a far better piece of ground elsewhere.'

'No ground could be better, your majesty.'

Ahab went off and sulked until Jezebel, who ruled the roost, taught him how to get rid of Naboth and take over the land (1 Kgs 21:1–16). But that story is very interesting in relation to this matter of inheritance. Why wouldn't Naboth sell Ahab his bit of ground? Because Naboth believed that that particular bit of ground, every square inch of dirt and every stone on it, was his inheritance from the Lord. It wasn't that he'd been a successful warrior and gained that piece of ground; it was that God had given it to him. God had given it to his fathers in the centuries past, and each generation had maintained it as a God-given inheritance; and Naboth wasn't giving it up. Money wouldn't buy it, it was God's inheritance given to him.

That made the farm itself seem to Naboth a sacred gift from God. It would change our attitude to life enormously if we could get round to believing the same thing. My circumstances in life, my home, my job, my abilities—they are a sacred inheritance given by God.

There was a programme on the BBC some years ago in which various people were brought before the interviewer and he would ask them, 'If you weren't you, who would you like to be?' It was interesting to hear who people would like to be. That set me thinking at one stage, 'Well, if I weren't me, who would I like to be?' I thought of all the famous names I knew, Charles Spurgeon or David Livingstone and people like that. In the end, I decided no, I would not wish to be any of them: I would like to be myself. Why's that? Well, it is by God's grace that I am what I am. That may not be much but, my dear fellow believer, you have a far bigger inheritance than I. As Paul would put it, changing the metaphor, 'Each member God has placed in the body as it pleased him.' My brother, my sister, money couldn't buy that, could it? What you are is an inheritance given you by God.

### ***Maintaining the name***

But with inheritance there comes a tremendous responsibility. The inheritance was passed down from generation to generation and was kept up and passed on. To be the generation

that ruined it and lost it would be a desperate disaster and shame. Don't ask me how I know, but the lords and ladies of this country, particularly the lords, many of them live as worried men. They've inherited vast estates from their ancestors going back many hundred years. Some of the lords have added to it, some have lost a bit, but to be the lord who, in the end, couldn't maintain it and had to sell it out of the family, this was, and is, felt to be an enormous shame. They'll do anything they can to stop that happening. So it was in Israel.

Allied with that, of course, was this matter of the name, the name of the family, the name of the individual on his estate. For Elimelech to die, and then his widow to have to sell up, and sell to somebody else so it wasn't called Elimelech's farm any more, in the small villages of those times, was a confession of utter failure and shame. So now we begin to see the importance of the twin institutions upon which the story turns.

### ***Kinsman-redeemer***

First, the institution of the kinsman-redeemer. In Israel, if a man could no longer keep up his farm and make a go of it, he could sell it. But so that the land wouldn't be sold outside the larger family group, it had to be offered to the nearest of kin and he would buy it, if he could, as a duty to keep the land within the larger family. And then, after so many years, it would revert to the former family's ownership. That is what Boaz did for Naomi. As the near kinsman, he bought the inheritance so that it wouldn't be lost outside the family and eventually, in the year of Jubilee, it would revert.

### ***Levirate marriage***

The second thing was this custom, this institution, that if a man married a girl and then he died without her having produced a son, his brother could be called upon as nearest of kin to marry the widow. And the child born of that marriage would be counted as the child of the first husband. This is called levirate marriage, *levir* being Latin for brother-in-law.

### ***Practical lessons***

What lessons could we learn from these things for ourselves? Well, first of all, the Jews had their inheritance, given them when they entered Canaan. Have we, as Gentiles, any inheritance, or are we a lot of stray dogs without any inheritance whatsoever? In the book of Deuteronomy, it says:

When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. (Deut 32:8-9)

So then Gentiles as such have been given their inheritance, just as God gave Palestine to the Israelites. Let's leave the nations a bit and come back to the point we were making earlier. Your circumstances, your piece of ground, your bungalow, your wife, your family; how did you get them? Is it just an accident? You managed to carve it out of the jungle? No, surely it's an inheritance that the Lord has given you. Just as Elimelech would have inherited the family

ground from his great-great-great-grandfathers going right back to the time of Joshua, so we have an inheritance in that sense as well. If you're one born with a silver spoon in your mouth, of course, you might have Clandeboye Estate or something and lots of silver; but, whether you have that external stuff or not, you've got another inheritance—what in medical terms is called heredity.

You are your mother and father. And from generations you have a long heredity that governs your physical shape, the colour of your eyes, shape of your nose, hair, whether you go bald or don't go bald, your good looks or otherwise, and all kinds of things. What do you believe about your heredity? Is it a complete accident or Darwin's evolution? It isn't always an easy question to answer, because along with some of the lovely things that we have inherited from our parents—and we say we believe they're a gift of God—come other things: dark things, weaknesses, physical, emotional and mental disability. Why am I not somebody else? Why did I have to start off with my heredity? That brings us up straight to the whole question of the meaning of life and the matter of inheritance. Is it one ghastly accident or, behind it all, is there a God who saw me in my mother's womb and compassed me about, and has in his providence sheltered and guided all my steps?

Let's go another step. In the Psalms, if you follow Israelite poetry, you'll find that the psalmists have extended the notion of inheritance not simply to the land around them but to all other kinds of benefits. Let's listen to the psalmist in Psalm 16:

The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance. (vv. 5–6)

You see how the man now has spiritualised the idea of inheritance and is no longer thinking of what God has given him by way of cows and grass, honey and milk, and a bungalow, a wife and some happy children. He has looked behind the material things to him who is the giver of all the gifts, and he says to himself, 'Ah, I see it. My inheritance, you couldn't measure my inheritance—I have the giver himself. The Lord is the portion of my inheritance.' And surveying his inheritance which he has in God, he says, 'The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.'

He's thinking of the land surveyors under Joshua who came along with their tape measures and laid out the lines and measured the bit of land that was to be given to each man for his inheritance. You can imagine the Israelites standing there, 'Whose turn is it? Now there's my bit of land. Joe, in front of me, I wonder what he's got. Oh, thank the Lord, he's got that bit with raised rock in the middle. Glad it didn't come out there for me. Mine is going to be on this nice luscious bit of grass. I sympathise with poor Joe but, strictly speaking, I'm glad I'm not him. I've got lines that have fallen out for me in pleasant places.' And Joe perhaps, who had that bit that was full of hard breaking rock and was disappointed in his lot, was the more ready to see that behind it all was the hand of God the giver. The Levites had nothing, they had no land given to them; God is their portion and their lot. 'I have set the LORD always before me . . . I shall not be shaken', says the psalmist (v. 8). 'Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption' (vv. 9–10).

One final thing was said of Israel. Not only was God their portion but they were God's portion, and that was in a very special sense. God gave the inheritance to the Gentiles but then he gave a special part to his people of Israel and, beyond that, it was said that Israel was God's special portion. And now in the story we hear how one Israelite, with his inheritance from God, found he couldn't keep it up and abandoned it. He left his widow virtually bereft and hopeless, with all the shame of it. We learn how she was redeemed and the name of the dead kept upon the inheritance. We read of a Gentile who had her inheritance too and it included a young Hebrew lad as her husband, but he died and they had no children. She was a Gentile, she wasn't from the nation who were God's portion; she was a stranger to it. And we looked at the lovely story of how she was brought in and made a part of God's inheritance. Indeed, she was used by God to bring about the restoration of Israel, the Israelites' inheritance, and the whole key to it would be this function of a kinsman-redeemer.

Thus far then, we have seen some of the structure and basic ideas. In the second half we shall have to get round to thinking how we apply it. We will find that the one who was for them their kinsman-redeemer, restorer of the inheritance, maintainer of the name, has been eclipsed by a greater than Boaz, who has become our great kinsman-redeemer.

## Four Possible Ways of Applying the Story of Ruth

In the first session of our study, what I was trying to do was to suggest to you first that the book of Ruth is about Naomi, her initial bereavement, distress, hopelessness and bitterness, and the way God moved so that at the end of the story and at the climax, Naomi is restored. That is what the story is about. While the story is about that, I suggested that the leading figures in it are particularly Ruth and Boaz, but even more Ruth than Boaz. She was the key to the whole situation, from her conversion down in Moab and the decision to follow Naomi and to put her faith in Naomi's God. Her initiative to go gleaning in her devotion to Naomi and her family, and then her willingness to marry Boaz; and finally the child born as the result, and her willingness to have it regarded as Naomi's child.

Then we thought of the institutions, as you might call them, that are the key elements on which the action turns. We considered the concept of inheritance, God given inheritance that needs to be maintained. Secondly, the implication of the name of a man upon his inheritance. We thought then how those things, being endangered, being lost, rescue and salvation came to Naomi and her family by two other institutions. One was that of the kinsman-redeemer who, if he were wealthy enough, when his poor brother or sister or whoever couldn't keep their inheritance going and came to sell it, the kinsman-redeemer would buy it so as to keep the inheritance within the family and let it not go lost outside.

But secondly, there was the other institution called 'levirate marriage' where, if a man married a wife and he died before they had children, then his brother would be invited to marry the deceased's widow and their child would be counted as the child of the first brother. And Naomi, it would appear, managed to persuade Boaz not only to buy the field, but to be willing also to perform the levirate marriage for Ruth. He wasn't obliged to and he wasn't her brother-in-law anyway, so it was a very big extension of the levirate institution. He wasn't her brother-in-law but he was a near of kin. He was persuaded, if he needed to be persuaded, to undertake that duty and to marry Ruth, and thus their child be counted as keeping the family name of Elimelech and Mahlon his son upon the inheritance.

These were the institutions then. In this second half, I want briefly to mention the four possible ways of applying this story. I shall not be able to preach them, and I don't need to because you know them. But if you are like me, sometimes you tend to get the application a little bit mixed up. At least I do. I start at one level to apply it and, before I know where I am, I'm like a butterfly which hopped on the rose first and then forgot it was after roses and went after dandelions! I'm all over the place with a butterfly mind, which makes it extraordinarily difficult to follow. It is helpful sometimes to see that, in holy Scripture, there is more than one level of interpretation and application. It will enrich our own personal studies and our

preaching if we can see that there are these different levels and we make some effort to keep them moderately distinct.

### **Historical Application**

The first level I call the historical context. If you were expounding a story and wanting to apply it and draw from it lessons for ourselves today, one good place to start is at the historical context of the story. That is with the first verse of the first chapter, 'In the days when the judges ruled.' So the whole story is put in that historical context, and what is the point of that? Well, look back to the last verse of the book of Judges, 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes' (Judg 21:25). If that was the state of affairs in the times of the judges, and Ruth's story took place in the times of the judges, there was no king and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. When you come to the end of Ruth, we read that the name of the child is Obed; he is the father of Jesse, the father of David (4:17). There then follows a genealogy arriving at the great climax, David, the greatest king that Israel ever knew, a prototype and ancestor of the Messiah. Ruth's claim is this also: that she became an ancestress not only of David, but of Christ himself. There is, therefore, an obvious move in history, from a time when there was no king in Israel to the time when David was born.

But what practical lesson can we learn from this historical detail? First of all, we ought to pause with that phrase about there being no king in Israel and everyone doing what was right in his own eyes. Our natural instinct would perhaps be to say, 'That serves them right, stupid Israelites, for not having a king. It was bound to end up in chaos anyway with people doing exactly what they like. Why on earth didn't they have a king?' Then to proceed from that and say, 'Well, in mercy, things got better and eventually they did have a king and his name was David.' But that would be to read it superficially.

It is the fact that, in the days of the judges when there was no king, eventually people did that which was right in their own eyes. But they didn't start off that way. They didn't have a king because it wasn't God's mind in those days to give them a king. That wasn't an oversight on God's part; the reason was that God was king. You will remember the story of Gideon when he achieved his notable victory and the people came along to him wanting to make him king. He said, 'No, I will not be your king. The Lord, your God, is your king' (Judg 8:22-23). And it was true in those early days, in the days of Joshua and the elders that outlived him; it wasn't just a theological doctrine. To those early men it was a tremendous reality, when they gathered the people of God around the tabernacle, believing that God's presence dwelt there and they came in the awe of the real and felt presence of God. Then, the kingship of God was a reality to them and worked better than any institutionalised king.

What led to the chaos? Israel lost the sense of the reality of the presence and government of God. They still held it as a theological doctrine, but theological doctrines don't work by themselves. If God's rule and kingship is going to have an effect, it's got to be a reality to his people. And the book of Judges will tell you how it was that the people lost that sense of the reality of God as king. It was, in part, because the judges broke down. The last judge was a horror of a judge. He was doing the very things from which the first judge had to deliver

God's people. By the time you come to the last judge, he's doing things that the first judge would have regarded as horrendous. But nobody seemed to notice they were wrong by the time you get to the last judge. And not only did the judges break down but the all-tribal council broke down. Then the priesthood broke down. In the days of Eli and his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, the people abhorred the offerings for God and they lost their sense of the government of God.

What was to be the answer to that? You will know the story in Samuel, how that the people got tired of the chaos that was around. They came to Samuel and said, 'Look, we're not putting up with this any more, Samuel. Make us a king like the nations have' (1 Sam 8:4-5). And Samuel was upset and God was upset because it was a virtual rejection of God. They didn't come to God and say, 'Things have gone wrong. Show us where they've gone wrong.' No, they came to God and said, 'Look, we've had it your way so long, now we're going to have it our way and that will be better.' Actually, God intended eventually to give them a king, and he did give them a king; his name was David. God objected the first time because, when the people came and asked, instead of waiting for God to give them the king, it was a virtual rejection of God in supposing they knew better than God. When God gave them his king, it was a man after his own heart. And eventually King David, who descended from Ruth and Boaz, became *the* king: the prototype of the one who would be God and man. It took many centuries to come about, but to hear these events in an historical context shows the significance of the movement that got Israel from the days when there was no king in Israel and all was moral chaos, to the time of David and, eventually, the time of Jesus Christ.

But how did they do it? Well, in the historical sense, there was this man called Elimelech. His name means *Eli*, 'my God', *melech*, 'king': 'my God is king'. I don't know how seriously his parents took the name when they gave it to the boy. Some parents today don't take names very seriously. They call a son George, oblivious of the fact that it means 'a farmer'! Anyway, in those days it had more meaning to it. The parents were godly parents and, in giving a name to their child, they expressed their personal belief: my God is king. Whether he knew it or not, being a Judahite from Bethlehem, the father was right in the physical line for the coming of the king. Listen to Micah, 'But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel' (Mic 5:2). He was in the line. His name was therefore expressive of the nation's faith: my God is king. But there came a famine and, fearing that the farm couldn't be worked any more, he went off to Moab. You mustn't blame him too much, because Abraham, when there came a famine in the land, went down to Egypt. David, when he was rejected by Israel, put his mother and father in the land of Moab for the king's sake, to keep him there until he came to the throne. So we must go easy on Elimelech. But that said, why couldn't the man take it as from the hand of God and stay put and dare to believe it? Others did. Boaz didn't run off, obviously, and so made a go of it.

We shall never know why Elimelech gave up but the disastrous result was that he went to Moab, his sons married Moabite girls, he died and his sons died. That threatened to bring an end to his family line and the name would perish off the inheritance. Some might write him off. Elimelech didn't amount to much; he came to disaster: family wiped out, his widow couldn't make a go of the inheritance. All that talk that the Lord had given them their



inheritance and the Lord was their fortune didn't work. It was theological talk that didn't have any practical merit, and the woman was left hopeless.

What brought them back? In spite of the failure of his people, God himself remained loyal. God brought them back. They heard that there was corn in Bethlehem, that the Lord had visited his people. And Naomi begins to come back. Having arrived there in all the bitterness of her soul, she's now beginning to feel the Lord has testified against her. Ah, but what about this extraordinary Gentile girl called Ruth; where had her faith come from? The other Gentile girl, to get a husband, goes back to her gods. Curiously, Naomi advises her to go back to Moab and her gods. It seems she couldn't bring herself to believe that a Gentile girl like that could get converted. But here's Ruth saying, 'I'll come with you.' Extraordinary. God *could* convert a Gentile, just imagine that! She came to believe in the God of Israel. And when she got back to Bethlehem she didn't sit there and call upon the state to maintain her, she said, 'Let me go gleaning.' And, says our King James Version, 'her hap was' (2:3) to light upon that bit of the field that belonged to Boaz. How would you read that 'hap'—it just so happened? Is there not a God in control of our circumstances and even where we work?

My brothers, my sisters, if we're going to restore God's people and their belief in the kingship of God in our own personal, practical daily life and its affairs, we shall have to have a sense of, and a strong belief in, the providence of God. It's easy to do it, you say, if you are a Boaz with endless bank balances and good health. But when you're in difficult circumstances like Naomi's, it's difficult to believe that the Lord is in it. The Lord blessed me because I got well and I got a very good job. How we do interpret the Lord's blessing as though it must always be good things. We don't say often, 'I took ill and I lost my job and the Lord blessed me in that.' But sometimes that is so.

The way back was as Naomi began to get a glimmer of hope that God was in this. If God had witnessed against her, made her bitter and emptied her, she went out full and she's coming back empty. But when Ruth came back with the ephah of grain she had got, and told Naomi that the man was Boaz and he'd invited her to come back and was kind to her, Naomi said, 'Blessed be he of the Lord, who has not left off his kindness [meaning his loyalty] to the dead' (2:20). God is still loyal, and not only to the present generation; he's loyal to the dead. He'll be loyal to those prayers that have gone up in times past. And the godly longings and aspirations of his people that prayed and have now gone home, God will be loyal to them. And Naomi is beginning to renew her faith in the providences of God.

This is no accident; it is of the Lord. Ruth had got to that particular part of the field and Boaz has shown his extraordinary interest. It moves Naomi to say, 'If that is of the Lord, I think I can, in faith, now make a suggestion to Master Boaz.' And so she did. Boaz accepted and you know the happy end of the story. And as the women gathered round Naomi and laid the child with her, they said, 'Blessed is the Lord who has given this child as a restorer of your old age.' Recovery of the sense of the reality of the government and providence of God in our daily lives. If you're going to maintain a testimony for God, you can't do it without cornflakes, if you see what I mean. You've got to live, you can't go a year without meals and think you're still going to carry on testimony for the Lord. But I can believe, surely, in God's rule and providences in life. You could elaborate on that one, of course, and quote

experiences in your life in which you had proved God's providential leading, both in sorrow and in recovery.

### **Soteriological Application**

There is the next level, not merely the practical level of these ancient people, but what the theologians would call the soteriological application. That's a magnificent word but it means simply the aspect of salvation, the way of salvation. What do I see in the salvation for Naomi in those far-off days that will suggest, as a prototype, God's way of salvation for us?

We see the widow left and how the key to her restoration is both Ruth and Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer. That notion comes over into the New Testament:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. (Heb 2:14–15)

For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers. (2:11)

He became one of us. He took flesh and blood that he might die, so that he might deliver us from fear of death. A kinsman-redeemer indeed.

We can think of his wealth—Boaz the mighty man of wealth. The other kinsman couldn't redeem, perhaps it was because he didn't have the means. Boaz had the means as well as the will, both to buy this extra estate and to afford buying it to marry Ruth so that their son should inherit in the name of the other family. That speaks its message to us at once. As to inheritance, we once were strangers from Israel's inheritance. But we have our own Gentile heritage—everything that is summed up in our name, 'Mary' or 'George' or whatever it is. That unique personality—there's not another you in the whole universe—given to you by God, but broken by sin. Is there any hope for it? Yes, there is hope, but the Saviour, Messiah of the Jews, must come and preach peace to us who were afar-off as well as them that are nigh.

And in Christ we both receive an inheritance and are made an inheritance. What does that mean? Christ becoming human stands with us and has paid the purchase price to redeem us, body, soul and spirit. And not only to redeem us in the sense of forgiving our sins, but one day to redeem our very bodies and change them to become like the body of his glory. And all the evil results of that sinful heredity will be gone forever because we'll be like him.

But there's more to it even than that. There is this matter of our name, maintaining the name. It wasn't enough for Naomi to sell the land and let Boaz buy it. That would have kept the land in the extended family, but Naomi felt that that would just leave it as it was. 'I'm a wife of failures and all the village will know we had to sell up because we couldn't make a go of it.' And so she sends Ruth down to Boaz in the night. She was to lie at his feet. She was to say to him, 'Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer' (3:9). In other words, 'Redeem me.'

And so Boaz, going in with the idea, came to the elders at the gate and said, 'Naomi is selling a piece of land. I'm not the nearest of kin; you sir, are the nearest of kin. Would you like to buy it?' He said, 'Yes, I'll buy it.' But then they'd arranged this between themselves. Naomi had put on this extra condition: 'The condition of your being able to buy it is this, and if you don't fulfil the condition, I shan't sell it. So now I'll sell it if you are prepared to acquire Ruth and marry her in the levirate tradition so that your son will take the name of the other family (4:1–6). Will you do that?' And the man said, 'No, I can't. I should mar my own inheritance.' But Boaz was prepared to do it. What a wise old woman Naomi was. She sold the estate and thus kept it. She sold it out of the family and kept it in the family! You know you can't outwit these women when they decide upon a course of action! Where else in business could you sell a thing and keep it at the same time? But she did. She sold out to Boaz, but Boaz, in the marvellous goodness of his heart, took Ruth, and their son kept the name of the original family going. What a story at the level of salvation!

### Prophetic Application

So far we have had two levels. First, there is the level of the sheer historical: of the actual people who lived those 2,000 years ago. Then we have noticed the institutions through which Naomi was restored—the whole business of inheritance and maintaining the name—are a picture, a prototype if you like, of the great redemption that is in Christ. We now come to the third level of application. Let's step back a little bit and remind ourselves that the story is about Naomi, her initial going away to Moab and her bereavement, left absolutely desolate and hopeless—Naomi, the girl from Bethlehem, the Israelite. And we found in our first session that the key to her restoration was not just Boaz, it was Ruth the Gentile. Without Ruth, Boaz couldn't have done what he did for Naomi.

So it was Ruth the Gentile that was the key to the restoration of Naomi the Israelite. And you see how the story emphasizes that all the way along. The Gentile's conversion: coming to believe in the God of Israel, becoming thereby devoted to Israel and Naomi's maintenance and the family's maintenance, gleaning to support them. And when the only way to have them redeemed, the inheritance saved and the name maintained was that the Gentile should marry Boaz, she was prepared to give up any other chance she had with the younger men. As Boaz said, 'You've not followed the younger men, you've followed me to marry this older man' (3:10). What for? In her loyalty to the dead, in her loyalty to that Israelite family, to raise up the name of the dead on their inheritance. And when finally redeemed and married, and the land redeemed, her child was counted Naomi's child.

What shall we make of that? Let's begin by noticing that very frequently in Scripture the nation of Israel in general, and Jerusalem (Zion) in particular, are thought of in the figure of a woman, notably, in the prophecy of Isaiah, where she is depicted as a woman bereft of her children:

Then you will say in your heart:

'Who has borne me these?

I was bereaved and barren,

Exiled and put away,

But who has brought up these?' (Isa 49:21)

This is not any particular Israelite speaking: it is the nation personified in the form of a woman, and Jerusalem the city personified in the form of a woman. When, at last, the great redeemer comes and brings the children back, she shall say, 'Who has borne me these?' So when our Lord was here on earth, he said, 'Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often would I have gathered your children together . . .' (Matt 23:37).

What if the story of Naomi becomes for us a prophecy, a prophetic prototype with the nation in mind? Her husband once believed most strongly that 'God is my king'. That's what Israel stood for, but see the nation wandering sorrowfully and in exile. It happened—in the time of the exile under Nebuchadnezzar and under the Assyrians, again from AD 70 onwards and even more so from AD 133 onwards. The nation that stood for its belief that God is king is scattered abroad with apparently no hope. And what next? What is the story of the recovery? Is Israel gone forever? God forbid. Israel will be restored, but what is the programme?

While Israel was in moral chaos, there came a Gentile who came to believe not just in any old God, but in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. There's a conversion for you. And still the Gentiles come in their thousands and millions to believe on the God of Israel. True conversion makes true Christians devoted to the same God the nation believes in. Alas for those misguided nations that thought that the church replaced Israel and Israel was gone forever. That is not true and has been the source of much scandal. Paul in Romans 9–11 warns us Gentiles not to be high-minded. It was through Israel's fall that the gospel came to Gentiles like us. It was by Elimelech, a man being forced out and coming among the Gentiles, that Ruth first heard and came to believe more firmly than Naomi did. She willingly devoted herself to her new people, for the preservation of Israel came through love. And then there was Immanuel's birth, and it was Ruth the Gentile that was joined with him. Isn't that marvellous?

What would it lead to? It would lead eventually to the restoration of Israel. For if we may now follow Ruth where she is on the threshing floor with Boaz, they're talking about the coming day when, in the light of day, in the dawn of a great day, he will come and perform his redemption and publicly own Ruth as his bride. And Boaz did that before the whole nation, and Naomi accepted gladly the offspring of the union of Boaz and Ruth as her redeemer. Did you notice what the women said? They said it was Obed (not Boaz) who would be for her a restorer of life and a nourisher of her old age.

How shall Israel be restored? Paul puts it this way,

So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! . . . And in this way all Israel will be saved. (Rom 11:11–12, 26)

Their exile has brought salvation and riches to the Gentiles. The Gentiles have come to know the Jew, Jesus, as their Messiah, their now kinsman–redeemer. When he comes and publicly acknowledges us and fulfils the redemption of our bodies, and the marriage supper of the Lamb takes place, it shall lead to the restoration of Israel in her old age.

## Practical Application

And finally, we come down to a practical level for ourselves. We started off at the historical level for those in ancient times. We talked then at the level of salvation, and then at the level of prophecy. Might it not be that the story has also a practical lesson for us at the level of our history; our history as the people of God, our history in our churches? We have a tremendous inheritance. Now, I'm not talking about Jewish history but other Christian history, and you and me in particular.

It's not only my personal inheritance and what I've inherited in my redemption, but what a magnificent inheritance I've had among the people of God. The Scriptures to start with; all the benefit of Israel's example. And then the New Testament, particularly the Christian bit; it was lost to people for generations and then came the great Reformation. We owe so much to Luther and company, Calvin and Knox. And then came the Baptist movement, recovering the idea of a gathered church as distinct from the church that is a mixture of believers and unbelievers—baptism of believers in a gathered church. You didn't invent that idea, did you? You inherited it. And then the great Evangelical Awakening, the Wesleys and the Whitefields: the need for personal regeneration and not just formal theology. We owe a debt to them every time we sing their delightful hymns. And then the principle of the autonomy of the church. I didn't invent it, I inherited it. I inherited it via the apostles, of course, but in more recent history, from the Congregationalists who stood for the principle of the autonomy of each local church in fellowship with others. They were forced to go to America to escape the persecution that they suffered for taking their stand on that principle.

What an inheritance we do have, not to mention men of more recent times, the Mackintoshes and the Darbys and various others. And now we're here. My brother, my sister, what have you done with your inheritance? What have I done with it? I thank God for those noble men and women that went before me. How little I have personally learned. What have we done with maintaining it? Or could it sometimes happen that, like Elimelech, we found the theory doesn't work and there comes a famine, and our old doctrines somehow lose their grip and we wander and feel there's no future? It could happen. What shall we do then?

First of all, the book of Ruth comes as a tremendous encouragement to many people. Was it with Elimelech that the blame lay? Perhaps there's no blame at all and it was simply one of those things that happened. But when Naomi announced her seeming hopelessness and helplessness with no children to carry on and no hope for the future, God was there. The God who started it all in the early generations with Perez and people like that, and Abraham before him. God was going to carry on with that, and God restored. Praise God, he is the first and major and last answer. You don't have to keep a movement going. It's God that brings the revivals and God that will do the restoring. It was God that raised up Gideon and Jephthah. It was God that raised up the Luthers and the Calvins and the Whitfields and the rest of them. And what God has done, God can do and will do again.

When you get as old as me and the gap between generations becomes immense, you'll come to find this story full of charm. Who converted Ruth, the key to the restoration of Naomi? Well, God started in the most unlikely place. Here was Naomi saying to her daughters-in-law, 'Things are so far gone, you need to go back to your gods.' Can't God

convert heathens after all? Can God do again what he did in the past when he called Abraham out of the sheer idolatry of heathendom? God did it with Ruth and, in spite of Naomi's well-meant discouragement, she persisted in her vigorous belief in God. May God do it again in our day and generation and give us young folks like Ruth. What a wonderful woman she was. She didn't sit at home with Naomi and say, 'You brought me back here with all these narrow-minded doctrines and there's nothing for me here. I don't get anything out of this.' She said, 'I'll tell you what, let me go gleaning.' Devoted to the people of God; true conversion will mean that. Conversion to God means loving the people of God and devoting your life to the people of God. You can't have a public testimony without some cornflakes to keep you alive. We need all the young men and women that are prepared to say, 'I'll put my back into it for the sake of these elderly curious people of God. I love them because they're Christ's and I'm prepared to work hard to maintain them.'

I tell you, if you've never tried it, gleaning is hard work. Under a burning sun, with nose to knees; that would break anybody's back and heart. And it was as she gleaned that she first came to the notice of the great Boaz. He didn't let on to start with, but he began to take her seriously. Interesting to know where it all started—when did he first take notice of Ruth? And when did the Lord start to take you seriously? Boaz began to take Ruth seriously when she started to go gleaning in devotion to her mother-in-law and the people of God so as to maintain them. At lunchtime he called her, encouraged her, 'Come and eat' (2:14) and he gave her some food. Then he told the foreman to let out handfuls on purpose (vv. 15–16). He didn't say what some romantic gentlemen would have said: 'Now, Ruth dear, it's heavy work gleaning. So, after lunch, you go back home. I'll send a whole sack full of stuff round.' No, after lunch he let the woman to go back to work hard. God give us some young men and women that are prepared to work hard. God save us from the notion of some old people that young people can't take to rigorous doctrine. They can take physics and they can take computers, surely they can take God's word and glean at it so as to maintain themselves and the people of God.

And not only devoted to the people of God but devoted to the Lord Jesus. Given all the other attractions of the younger men, Ruth was prepared to say no to them and submit to marry Boaz, old as he was; an old-fashioned bachelor they thought. I know you talk about the lovely Lord Jesus but it doesn't always appear to some people like that. The world has its many attractions for the young. May God raise up younger men and women that will decide that their ambition is to live for Christ. God will reward them. Ruth made her decision when, to believe God and be devoted to his people seemed to be a dead end in life, getting nowhere, even remaining a spinster for the rest of her days. But God had other plans and he honoured her faith. She gave herself to be married to elderly Boaz for the sake of God's people and the maintaining of a name. How we could do with that focus again, and the power of Ruth's life experience. To know what it is, so to speak, to lie on the threshing floor overnight and discuss with Christ the wonders that he will do when the morning dawns and the marriage supper of the Lamb takes place. The wonder of being part of the bride of Christ; to see his schemes of the restoration of Israel and the blessing of the world, and to know that we have a part in it.

These are not fairy stories. What happened in Ruth's day has happened in many a generation since. We are to believe what God could do still in our day and generation to keep

the name of the coming Messiah upon his inheritance. When he comes, Israel will be vindicated. It will be Israel's God that is proved to be the true God. And it is Jesus the Jew whose name will be read out—'The Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed to open the book' (see Rev 5:5).

Through this inspired word and by God's spirit, we have sat on the threshing floor and talked with Christ about what Christ is intending to do still in our world and in the future for the blessing of his people.

O God, we pray now thou wilt help us in our study of this thy word. We perceive the many strands and patterns in it and the various levels of its meaning. We praise thee for its wealth. This too is thy signature upon the page of thy word—the rich sophisticated tapestry of the inspired revelation of God. We praise thee for its riches, it speaks to our minds. More so, it speaks to our hearts and to our spirits. We thank thee that these are no insubstantial things. We hear them as the true sayings of God and they cause our hope to rise up again and our spirits to rejoice. Oh God, give us the grace in our old age to continue in thy work among the younger people, that they may grow up valiant men and women of God in their generation. To carry the torch of the great inheritance until the Lord comes up and the final and glorious purposes of God be fully demonstrated before heaven and earth. We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Naomi as a Prototype of the Nation of Israel

It's a great pleasure to be with you once more, for this the last of our three short studies on the Old Testament book of Ruth. Let us begin by reading once more, in the book of Ruth, and this time in chapter 4.

Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, 'You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon. Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day.' Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, 'We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem, and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman.' So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.' Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David. (vv. 9-22)

And may God give us good understanding of his word.

So now, as we begin our last study, let's sum up a little bit of what we were considering previously. We started out by asking ourselves the simple question: What is the book of Ruth about? And we discovered the book of Ruth, strictly speaking, is not in the first place about Ruth, nor yet about Boaz, but it is about Naomi. She it is that fills the scene in chapter 1, and when the book comes to its climax in chapter 4, it is on Naomi that our eyes are glued. The story is a very moving one because in chapter 1, as we saw, Naomi is bereft of her husband and her two sons. There had been a famine in their countryside in Bethlehem and she and her husband, Elimelech, had gone to the country of Moab where their two sons had married Moabite girls. When Naomi's husband died she was left a widow, and when her two sons



died their wives were left widows and childless. This is what she refers to at the end of the chapter when she comes home to Bethlehem, 'Don't call me Naomi any more, call me Mara for the Lord has given me much misery. I went out full and the Lord has brought me back empty.'

Left husbandless and without children; just her and her two daughters-in-law. As she put it to them on her way back, she said, 'Don't follow me. I have no hope of any kind. I'm too old to have a husband, and even if I had a husband or sons, you girls couldn't possibly wait for them to grow up so that they could marry you. Go back, my dears. The Lord has dealt very bitterly with me.' The future for her was empty indeed. That's how the story begins. And therefore the action of the story takes us on to its great climax, in chapter 4, where Naomi is restored. And there is Boaz, a great *go'el*, a great kinsman-redeemer, who shall be for Naomi a restorer of her life, a nourisher of her old age. The woman who complained that the Lord had emptied her, who said she had no hope of any sons and therefore no future—see her when Ruth's child is born and the women take the little baby and place it in Naomi's lap. She is not empty any more: this is God filling Naomi. This is her future, not now desolate and without any hope, but with a glorious future. God has filled her, God has restored her and the future is full of hope.

That is what the book of Ruth is about. We saw then that the key to that situation was Ruth the Gentile. It is true that the redemption, the restoration of Naomi could not have been effected without Boaz and his wonderful resources, his willingness to enact the part of the kinsman and the part of a levirate husband so as to marry Ruth and produce a child who could maintain the name of the original family of Elimelech. Though Boaz was willing to do both those wonderful things, neither of them really could have come to fruition and satisfied Naomi had it not been for Ruth. If Naomi was to be filled and restored she must, at any cost, maintain the name of her husband on the inheritance. And the key to that was not just selling the thing to Boaz and then redeeming it. It meant that Boaz would marry Ruth, so that Boaz's son by Ruth would count as Naomi's child. So Ruth the Gentile was the key to the restoration of Naomi the Israelite. You will notice in our study how the chapters are so full of Ruth and we shall come back to that in a moment's time.

### **Applying the lessons**

Now when we considered these things, we applied their lessons. We were very careful to apply the lessons at various levels, historical and practical, and then the story as an illustration of the great salvation that there is in Christ our kinsman-redeemer. Then we looked at the thing prophetically for a while. We moved on to consider it once more as a practical lesson to us as Christians in this age. It is to that third level that I want to return this evening—Naomi's story as a prototype of bigger things, as a prototype of the nation of Israel and her restoration. The wonderful story that when Israel fell, they did not stumble so that they should not rise again. God assures us in the New Testament that though they have fallen, yet one day they shall be restored. I'm going to read you a verse in the New Testament that states it explicitly, so that we might begin to take our bearings for our study this evening. This is Paul in his letter to the Romans in chapter 11. He is talking about the unhappy fact

that Israel as a whole have rejected the gospel and their hearts have been hardened. They have stumbled over the stumbling block of Jesus as the Messiah.

So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! (Rom 11:11–12)

Lovely word, isn't it? The fall of Israel, their seeming defeat, their stumbling, their diminution, is not to be permanent. One day will come their restoration and their fullness. And Paul tells us Gentiles not to be high-minded, to imagine that now Christ has come to us Gentiles it means that Israel is finished. We are not to be conceited.

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.' (vv. 25–26)

Once more, Paul is telling us that the hardening of Israel, their falling, is only temporary—until the full complement of the Gentiles has come in. And then Israel as a whole will be saved. How will she be saved? There will come forth out of Zion a deliverer, a real mighty man of wealth, the kinsman-redeemer who will redeem the people of Israel and set them free from all their bonds. So says the New Testament: these are the plain assured facts.

### **A prototype**

I want to illustrate that as we look once more to the history of Naomi, going into the Gentile land with her husband and coming to distress and despair and disaster, when it seemed hopeless that their line would continue. And the marvellous story of how eventually that Israelite family was restored and how that, in that process of restoration, the Gentile, Ruth the Moabitess, was the key to it all. It shows the story of Ruth and Naomi as, what I did call, a prototype. I better stop and explain what I mean by a prototype. You'll notice that I didn't say it's a type. I am aware I have a lot of theologians around here, so I will have to choose my language very carefully! I said it was a prototype, so what on earth is a prototype?

Well, in ordinary life, take aeroplanes. I am old enough to remember almost the first aeroplane, and when they were so new we used to run out of school if one came over, once in about six months, very proud we were of this modern invention. They were funny looking things when you look back on them now, bi-planes generally, going 'put put put' a few feet up above the ground. Nowadays, if you look up in the sky when a big jumbo jet goes over, what a different thing that is from those first humble beginnings. Yet there is a connection between the two. Those first aeroplanes were what we would call prototypes of the big things that now fly. While there are very great differences between them, there are certain basic similarities. Those humble first aeroplanes embodied certain principles of aeronautics that are the same as those behind the flying of the jumbo jet. Of course, the jumbo jet is far more

sophisticated, far more detailed and travels at a far higher level. The great God of our redemption has arranged history that way. Why? So that our minds might be prepared for the coming of Christ, so that our minds might be sure that this Jesus is the Christ and that his salvation does work this way.

How can I be sure of that? Says this God before whom we come now, 'I'll give you one or two early examples, some prototypes, at a humble level, and if you can see the principle of redemption involved there, you'll be ready to see it when it comes at its highest possible level in the person of Jesus Christ our Lord.' So the story of Naomi's emptying among the Gentiles and her eventual restoration of fullness becomes a prototype of the promise. To help us grasp that, we reminded ourselves of another very interesting thing in the Old Testament. The prophets constantly talk of Zion or Jerusalem or Israel as a woman. So Zion complains as a woman who has been bereft of her children, because it seems that God has cut her off. Amidst her sorrow and apparent hopelessness, there will come forth a redeemer, a veritable *go'el*, a kinsman-redeemer and he will redeem Israel and bring her children back again and fill her full. And when he does, it will be like a veritable salvation for the nation as a whole.

So then we begin with the story of Ruth and Naomi. And if we want an immediate example of this in the Christian era, so that we can see the prototype and then a clear example of what happened in the Christian century, let me remind you of the stories you read in the Acts of the Apostles. If you read very carefully, you will see again and again that Paul went to the synagogue in whatever town he was in. He came to Antioch in Pisidia and as his custom was, he went to the synagogue and there he preached. Or he went to Thessalonica and preached in the Jewish synagogue there, and he did the same thing when he came to the city of Corinth. The interesting thing was that he came to these Jewish synagogues that had been established in Gentile towns. How did they come to be among the Gentiles? Well, that's a long story which goes back to the days of Nebuchadnezzar and the Assyrians, when Nebuchadnezzar was allowed to take Israel and move her into exile. After that, Alexander the Great took the Jews off into all kinds of Gentile cities and they learned to live there and, as they lived there, they established their Jewish synagogues in what they called the Diaspora. They were far away from home, they were living among the Gentiles but they had their synagogues and they preached the word in their synagogue.

The interesting thing here is that as these Jews in the Gentile cities preached the word of God, a lot of Gentiles heard about it, and the Gentiles would come to the Jewish synagogue. We sometimes forget that little bit of history and think that we Christians were the first missionaries to the world. We weren't: the first missionaries to the Gentiles were the Jews. And ever since the exile, they've functioned as missionaries for the Gentiles by preaching the word of God in their synagogues. And the Gentiles would come and would listen to the rabbis expounding their Old Testament and preaching the glories of the true God of heaven, as against the miserable nonsensical darkness of Gentile idolatry. And as the Gentiles listened, crowds of them got converted. They had a name for the Gentiles who got converted and came to believe in the living and true God of Judaism and attach themselves to the synagogue. They called them God heroes or God worshippers. The famous Lydia was one like that, she went down to the Jewish prayer meeting by the river, and there were others like it all over the Roman Empire. Men and women who haven't become completely Jews, they

weren't part of the Jewish nation, the men hadn't accepted circumcision, but they used to attend synagogue. They were sort of halfway converts: they'd come to believe in the living God.

That is what happened to Ruth. Naomi and her husband left Bethlehem in Judah, blame them or don't blame them, they left it anyway and they went to Moab. And their sons married the Gentile girls who had been brought up in the crudest of idolatry. It is evident from chapter 1 that at least one of those girls has been converted to faith in the God of Israel. She says it quite clearly:

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. (1:16)

And Boaz repeats it. He has understood what has happened to Ruth:

The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge! (2:12)

She had come to put her faith in the living God. That is the beginning of conversion. We all of us have to take that step even in our day and generation if we would be saved. For instance, Paul says of the Thessalonians who were saved that they 'turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God' (1 Thess 1:9).

A large number of the converts in the early days of Christianity who got converted through Paul were men and women who had already come to faith in the true and living God through the witness of the Jews. And what did the Christian preachers tell them beyond that? Let's have a look now at the list of contents of the book of Ruth (see appendix). It starts off with Naomi empty and concludes with Ruth and Naomi filled. Ruth is married and a child is born and put into Naomi's lap in chapter 4. Ruth, away down in Moab, had come to believe in Israel's God, the living and true God. And she is now proud to take her stand with the people of God and leave her heathen family and country. Listen to the wonderful story. Naomi and Ruth come back, Naomi is still feeling absolutely empty, her future blank, the name of her husband and sons lost forever. She feels that the Lord is angry with her and has testified against her; there's no hope for her and her family. But Ruth sticks to her and so they get home.

And in comes chapter 2. It wasn't Naomi who said to Ruth, 'My dear, I have a relative who's very rich and has got a big farm. You go and glean with him.' The historian tells us that there was such a man around the place but Naomi didn't advise Ruth to go and see him. It was Ruth who discovered him. She said to Naomi one bright morning, 'I'd like to go gleaning in a field somewhere. I don't know where, but perhaps I could find grace in the eyes of one of these local farmers and get some corn to feed us. We desperately need it.' So she went and came to a field. When the farmer came along, his name was Boaz and he was a very rich man. To her surprise, he was kind to her. He asked his foreman who she was and the foreman said, 'She is that Moabite woman who came back with Naomi. And she's been gleaning hard all day long.'

So he went to talk to the girl and, of course, she was nervous. 'I want you to stay in my fields, if you will my dear,' he said. Ruth was so overwhelmed she fell on her face and bowed herself to the ground and said, 'Why have I found favour in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?' (2:8–10).

It wasn't everybody, not even in Bethlehem, who would have welcomed the girl. They should have done. At barley harvest time the law said that the farmer was to leave the gleanings in the field for the widow and the foreigner. That's what the law says, but businessmen don't always keep to the law if they can make an extra dollar! And it wouldn't have been everybody, not even in Bethlehem Judah, who would have welcomed this foreigner from Moab taking their corn. Boaz says to Ruth, 'I told my young men not to harm you; you keep close to my young women' (2:8–9). It could have been a very dangerous thing for Ruth in those dark days to have gone to another field amongst other rough men at a time of harvest. And then to her overwhelming sense of wonder he invites her to come down and join him and sit with him and the workmen and eat the bread and then, over the napkins placed on the ground, he handed her personally some food. She was absolutely flabbergasted by the grace of this farmer gentleman who would take such an attitude to a foreigner. And he said, 'I know you're a stranger but it's been fully shown me what your attitude to your mother-in-law has been since your husband died. And it's been shown me that you've come to believe and to take refuge under the wings of the living God.'

When she got home that night, can you hear the buzz of conversation? Ruth and Naomi have a real chinwag about the events of the day. And here comes Ruth with this amount of grain that she's gathered and threshed. It was an unusually large amount because Boaz had ordered the workmen to drop handfuls on purpose. She got a whole ephah of grain and she says, 'There's not only this that I gleaned, but at lunch time he personally handed me so much food. I ate until I was full, and here it is what I had left over.' The wealth and the grace of it! You can imagine the conversation as the young woman was talking to her mother-in-law of her great discovery. She had discovered this man of grace in Bethlehem, Judah.

It wasn't Naomi who had directed her. Naomi had directed her to the one true God, but Ruth the Gentile had found something else within Israel. She had found this extraordinary man of grace who, knowing that she was a Gentile from despised Moab, with its dark and immoral past, had welcomed her. When Naomi heard that, you know it was like a little snowdrop, deep in the earth under the cold of winter, suddenly hearing the call of spring, and life begins to stir. Such grace shown by her kinsman. She said, 'You know, Ruth, he's one of our kinsmen, a *go'el*.' And in the very word there was all sorts of potential; and to think that the Gentile had discovered him first! And Ruth the Moabitess said, 'He said to me, "You shall keep close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest"' (2:21). 'And Naomi said to Ruth, "It is good that you go out with his young women"' (2:21–22). It's only perhaps Boaz's young men that could be trusted, and it was only Boaz's maidens that might be worthy and practical ladies. If among these other maidens in the field there were a lot of unmarried girls, the other girls might not have welcomed the competition, if the number of eligible gentlemen was rather restricted. Ruth worked among the workmen and the maidens, because they were workmen and maidens of Boaz.

Ruth the Gentile was so excited as she came home to her mother-in-law to tell this Jewess of what she had discovered in Israel. And when Paul the apostle came to these synagogues in Corinth, in Thessalonica, in Berea and in Antioch, the Gentiles who had come to believe in the living God heard of this mighty man of wealth who was born in a manger and came from the royal stock of Bethlehem. They heard of his grace and made the great discovery—not only the true and living God, but God’s great King Messiah. And what a story they heard of this man of grace and wealth. Whereas Judaism tended to be very severe and keep a stranger at arm’s length, they heard of a saviour who was prepared to welcome them, Gentiles though they were. They could even be saved without being circumcised and becoming a member of the Jewish nation. There must have been many a conversation in those ancient cities in the early days of Christianity, as the Gentiles told those yet unconverted Jews what they had discovered in Israel, the great Messiah of God.

Ruth’s account started Naomi thinking. Naomi, we have said, is a personification of Israel, and her memory was stirred about the vow of ancient promise and the great redeemer that was to come. She eventually told Ruth to go down to the threshing floor and make herself known to Boaz. And down the Gentile girl went and approached this very approachable and gracious man and said, ‘You are a kinsman, would you not redeem?’ And he said, ‘Yes, I will. I’ll do it tomorrow. I’ll marry you, my dear. There is a kinsman who has first rights but I will test him out and, so long as he’s not willing to redeem and passes on the rights to me, tomorrow I will redeem you and I will marry you.’

And Ruth went home. What a conversation they had again that night! ‘How did you get on, my dear?’ said Naomi, as the girl came through the door staggering under six whole measures of grain. I suspect it was as much as the sturdiest of young girls could have carried in those days. For Boaz had said, ‘Now, bring your shawl here,’ or was it a cloak, ‘and let me put some barley in it, my dear. You mustn’t go home to your mother-in-law *empty*.’

How God makes us eat our words sometimes! This was the woman who, when she came back to Bethlehem, said to her neighbours, ‘I went out full and the Lord has brought me home *empty*.’ Here comes Ruth, staggering under this gift: ‘Boaz said I wasn’t to come to you *empty*.’ Oh what a gospel message and what a testimony the Gentile Ruth had to preach to that woman of Israel! She said to Naomi, ‘Tomorrow he will redeem me, he will marry me.’ So that was new. We go back to the early Christians testifying to the Jews that they had come to believe in the true and living God. They had discovered then the Jesus of Bethlehem. What a story of grace and how he would welcome even the Gentile. Next they heard this almost incredible message, that this great Redeemer–Saviour loved the church—formed not only of Jew but of Gentile. He loved it as a man loves his wife, and when his redemption will be complete, there will come the marriage of the Lamb, and Gentiles would be part of that bride.

That was a new kind of talk when the first Christians told that to their Jewish friends. The Jews knew about God as the husband of Israel. They never dreamed that the Messiah, when he came, would have a wife. This is what Ruth was saying, wasn’t it? She found a Boaz, the great kinsman–redeemer, not only to ease and satisfy her soul and fill her heart with the treasure of his grace, but a great redeemer that had proposals of ultimate marriage. I wish I had a magic carpet that would take me back to that house and hear the conversation that night! I wonder if they went to bed at all. Talking over what was going to happen tomorrow.

Could you take it in? Naomi's great kinsman was going to marry the Gentile girl. And so it was.

I had one dear Jewish friend who recently died. How difficult he found it to think of Jesus as the Messiah. He thought of Christians as people who had learned to persecute Jews. All the anti-Semitism that resulted in six million Jews being gassed and destroyed by Hitler. My friend would say to me, 'You Christians are responsible for it. You told the world, you taught the children in Sunday school that it was the wicked Jews that crucified Jesus, and you stirred up hatred in their hearts against the Jews and this is the result of it. You murdered six million of my people. How can Jesus be the Messiah?'

And I would say to him, 'But Otto, I know you don't think much of Jesus. I want to tell you something about him; he is the one Jew beyond all others that has led millions of Gentiles to believe in the God of Israel. I don't believe in just any old God, I believe in your God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And if you want to know how I came to do that, it was because of Jesus. And, Otto, I want to tell you that that was an evil thing beyond description that Hitler did, but what Jesus Christ has taught me is to love you Jews.'

Oh, what a marvellous testimony it was, as Ruth the Gentile talked to Naomi the Jewess. And what a thing it shall be for Israel when the kinsman-redeemer will acknowledge his bride not merely before the gate of some little village in Judea, but before the resplendent gates of heaven and before the whole universe, he will acknowledge and take to himself his bride. And when the full complement of the Gentiles have been brought in, what then? Well, then Israel shall come into her fullness.

So did Naomi, of course. The result of it all was not only Naomi's restored and strengthened faith but she now saw there was a future for her, such as she had scarce dreamed of. And they took the baby and laid him in Naomi's lap to be a restorer of life, to nourish her old age, to be her redeemer. So shall it be when the full complement of the Gentiles has come in, then all Israel shall be saved. Their fall proved to be the riches of the Gentiles, just as Naomi's wandering to Moab proved to be Ruth's immeasurable riches. So the receiving of them again, what shall it be but veritable life from the dead.

At the official wedding when Boaz claimed Ruth as his bride, all the well-wishers stood around and said some pleasant things, as people do at weddings. Sometimes they say funny things they wouldn't say on any other occasion, if they respected their intelligence! But these weren't funny things. They said, in the first place, 'May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem' (4:11). That was a very nice wish. They're comparing Ruth to Rachel and Leah—a wise thing, for Rachel and Leah began life as Gentiles too. They were married to Jacob, and these erstwhile Gentiles built up the children of Israel, all twelve of them.

You can understand that much, but then they added a curious thing. 'And may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman' (v. 12). What on earth did they mean? If you've read the story recently, you'll wonder why anybody dared to mention it at a wedding breakfast. Surely such history ought to have a veil drawn over it. Certainly it's not a chapter

that's normally read in public in Christian churches. I can't remember when I heard it last read, if ever. And yet, like all of God's word, it is profitable.

The story of Tamar who bore Perez to Judah is given in Genesis 38. But whatever has it got to do with Ruth and her situation? Well, two obvious similarities are at once apparent. In both stories we're dealing with someone from Judah. Elimelech came from Judah, from Bethlehem indeed. Secondly, Judah had this son born to him whose name was Perez. If you want to know the significance of that, look at the genealogy at the end of Ruth 4. There Perez is mentioned, and his significance is this: of all the sons of Judah, Perez was the one who led the royal line of Judah until it came to King David himself. And in that royal line was Boaz, who married Ruth. So Judah and Tamar produced Perez and eventually, in that same line, came Boaz and Ruth and it led to King David.

Tamar was a Gentile as well, so you will see the connection. More than that, both stories talk about the institution of the levirate marriage. But the point I want to stress at this moment is that, just as in the book of Ruth, it was the Gentile who was the key to the maintenance of the line that led to the king. So then in this far off story in Genesis 38, it was the Gentile woman, Tamar, that was concerned to maintain the line of the king, when through Judah's folly and irresponsibility the line of the king would have petered out before it started.

Perhaps Judah didn't know it at the time but he was destined to be the fountain of that line that should lead not only to David but to the Lion of the tribe of Judah himself. Perhaps it was his ignorance that accounted for his funny behaviour. But when the brothers rejected Joseph and sold him to the Gentiles, Judah went down from his brethren and he went to the Gentiles as well. So Joseph was among the Gentiles and Judah was among the Gentiles. Judah hasn't much notion of his duty to raise up the line of the king. So what good is Judah to the Gentiles? He marries a Gentile girl and he has two sons by her, and then a third. The two sons were married to the Gentile girl, Tamar. The first son was married to her, and died without children. So Judah, following levirate law, married the second son to her. He also died without children. The third son was very much younger so Judah said to Tamar, 'Go back to your father's house and wait until my third son is grown up' (v. 11). But when the boy was grown up, Judah made no attempt to give him to Tamar to be married. I don't know why. Perhaps he was afraid to give another son, who might die as well, or perhaps he just lost interest.

At that point a very curious thing happened. The Gentile woman was found to be much more interested in maintaining the line of Judah than Judah was himself. She went to very curious lengths; I won't describe it all in public. What was Judah thinking of at the time? See him one fine day going to the sheep shearers. He'd got a lot of money, I dare say, and of course he was head of the tribe. He had his staff and his signet ring—you weren't anybody if you didn't have a signet thing to sign your name with your emblem on it—and his emblem tied with a bit of cord around his neck. He was going down the town, his work was over and he'd got the money so why shouldn't he have a good time? That's what life was for, wasn't it? So he used this woman and promised to pay her. She said 'What pledge will you give me? Give me your staff and your signet ring' (vv. 16–18).



So he gave them, and because he wouldn't go himself to be seen in the area, he sent his friend to redeem the pledge. But there was no woman there and so the signet on the cord and the staff of office went missing. When some months later it was announced that his daughter-in-law was going to have a child, Judah commanded that the woman be executed. 'I won't have that kind of thing going on in my family,' says he. Hypocrite. And just as they were going to execute the woman, she sent Judah the evidence of his staff and his signet. 'You judge the man they belong to,' she said, 'he's the father of my child' (v. 25). I suspect you disapprove of what Tamar did but this comes out of it. She was more concerned as a Gentile for maintaining the line of Judah than Judah was himself. There's a little prophecy there, isn't there? Since the Christian era particularly, it's been Gentiles that have been more concerned about the line of Judah and a coming King–Messiah than Jews are. There are some orthodox Jews that still believe in the coming of Messiah but the vast bulk of Jews, even those that go to their synagogues, don't believe in the coming Messiah any more. And the liberal Jews say it's all over and there's never going to come a Messiah. The great interest in the coming of Messiah is to be found amongst Gentiles.

One last thing. Tamar and Ruth were used of God to maintain the royal line that would eventually lead to the coming of David. What does it mean, however, to be in the line of the king that shall lead to the coming of the great Lion of the tribe of Judah? Well, Master Judah has very dim notions of the future that lies beyond being head of the tribe of Judah. What do you suppose he thinks it's all about? Being head of a tribe is to enjoy yourself: you're the big man. That is the concept of kingship for many folks, and indeed it was with the holy apostles. There was one occasion when our Lord was going up to Jerusalem to suffer at Calvary, and here comes Mrs Zebedee with a couple of her sons and they say, 'We've got a request to make. Please will you grant that when you come in your kingdom that my sons, one of them will sit on the left side and one on the right hand of the throne, right next to you in your kingdom?'

And the Lord Jesus said to her, 'Are you aware of the cost of such a thing? Can you be baptised with the baptism I'm baptised with? And drink the cup I drink?'

'Oh yes,' they said, 'we don't care what it costs. We want the chief jobs.'

Said the Lord Jesus, 'That isn't mine to give anyway, that's decided by my father; but I'll tell you what, have you any idea what it means to be king anyway and what it means to have the chief jobs in the kingdom? What do you think it means?'

'Oh, we think it means sitting on thrones and bossing people around.'

'It doesn't mean that. I am the king myself. And the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many' (see Matt 20:20–28).

That's what it means to be in the line of the king.

There is another story about Judah, but about a very different Judah. Not a Judah now who thinks that being the head of the tribe is the excuse for just enjoying yourself irresponsibly, caring little about the survival of the line of the king. The story, in Genesis 42 onwards, is how the brothers have come down the second time to Egypt to buy bread, for there was a famine. The condition was that they should bring their little brother, Benjamin, with them. Jacob at first wouldn't let Benjamin go. He said, 'I've lost Joseph, I've lost Simeon. Now if you take Benjamin and some ill happens to him, it will be bring me down to the grave.'

You mustn't take Benjamin.' Judah said, 'But the man said it, and if you don't let Benjamin go, we can't go back. We shall not get corn unless we bring Benjamin. You'll have to let him go.' Reuben volunteered to go surety. 'Don't talk nonsense Reuben,' said Jacob, 'I know about you.'

So Judah stepped forward and said, 'I'll go surety for him and I'll see no harm comes to him.' And on that condition, Jacob let him go. They went down to Egypt and you know what happens. When they were on their way back, they were overtaken by Joseph's men who said, 'One of you has stolen my lord's cup.' A cup was found in Benjamin's sack and they all went back to Egypt in tremendous distress. And Joseph said, 'All the rest of you can go back home but you agreed that the man in whose sack the cup was found, he'd have to stay behind.' And at that moment Judah stepped forward and said, 'Sir, I need to talk to you. My father is old and this is his last son. He dotes on him and his whole life is bound up with this little lad. He didn't want him to come. He said, "If he goes and he's lost, it will kill me." And I went as guarantor for him. And now, if I go back and Benjamin is not with me, it will bring down my father to the grave broken-hearted. I can't go back and see my father wiped out. Please, would you let me take the place of Benjamin and suffer his penalty for him?' Joseph in his wisdom had taught Judah a lesson. What does it mean to be in the line of the king? It doesn't mean going down the street with your staff and commanding everybody and indulging yourself, careless of the line of the king. Now, being in the line of the king, Judah is following him who came to give his life a ransom for many.

I come back finally to Ruth, marvellous woman, the story of the Gentile who, coming to faith in God and discovering the great kinsman-redeemer, laid down her very life for the people of God. She had decided to follow and came with Naomi when, humanly speaking, that was the end of all her hopes. She was prepared to give her life for that nation. And says John the apostle, 'By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers' (1 John 3:16).

That is the story, and if we would be effective witnesses like Ruth the Gentile was to Naomi the Israelite, if we would be used of God in the great processes that one day shall see Jesus Christ come in all his glory to complete redemption, then we must be prepared ourselves, in maintaining the line of the king, to follow the king and lay down our lives for the brethren and for the people of God.

Lord, we thank thee for thy word. We thank thee for these ancient and superficially simple stories but, as we read them, they become not only sophisticated, they begin to speak to our hearts and they raise our hearts to the heights of joy and gladness at the contemplation of thy magnificent grace to us Gentiles. They speak to our hearts and ask us about our witness in the world, and question us about our willingness to follow in the paths of the king and lay down our lives for the brethren. Help us therefore now, as we come to the end of our study, to rejoice in thy grace, to be full of hope for the future through the comfort of thy word, and to be encouraged to give ourselves more resolutely to serve thee in the day when it is right that we suffer; that we might share the more in the glories that shall be through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## APPENDIX

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### Outline of the Book of Ruth

Chapter		
1	1:1–5	Introduction: <i>Naomi Emptied</i>
	1:6–22	Naomi returns from Moab
	A. 1:6–18	Ruth clings to Naomi
	B. 1:19–22	Ruth and Naomi return to Bethlehem
2	Ruth and Boaz meet in the harvest fields	
	A. 2:1–7	Ruth begins work
	B. 2:8–16	Boaz shows kindness to Ruth
	C. 2:17–23	Ruth returns to Naomi
3	Ruth goes to Boaz at the threshing floor	
	A. 3:1–5	Naomi instructs Ruth
	B. 3:6–15	Boaz pledges to secure redemption
	C. 3:16–18	Ruth returns to Naomi
4	4:1–12	Boaz arranges to marry Ruth
	A. 4:1–8	Boaz confronts the unnamed kinsman
	B. 4:9–12	Boaz buys Naomi's property and announces his marriage to Ruth
	4:13–17	Conclusion: <i>Naomi filled</i>
	4:18–22	Epilogue: Genealogy of David

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*This outline is taken from the NIV Study Bible.*

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.