

Understanding the Book of Ruth

David Gooding

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



**MYRTLEFIELD
HOUSE**

www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

Contents

| | | |
|----------|---|----|
| 1 | Understanding the Book of Ruth | 3 |
| 2 | The Narrative and History of the Book | 13 |
| 3 | Naomi's Plan to Solve the Problem | 20 |
| Handouts | | |
| 1. | Ruth the Gentile — the key to the restoration of Naomi the Israelite | 30 |
| 2. | The Book of Ruth (1) | 31 |
| 3. | The Book of Ruth (2) | 32 |
| 4. | The Book of Genesis (36:1–50:26) | 33 |
| | Question | 35 |

David Gooding has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

© The Myrtlefield Trust, 2016

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the *King James Version* of the Holy Bible. Scripture quotations marked RV are from the English Revised Version of the Holy Bible (1885). Sometimes Dr Gooding gives his own translations or paraphrases.

This text has been edited from a transcript of four talks given by David Gooding at Timothy Studies in Castlereagh Gospel Hall, Belfast, N. Ireland on 10 December 2005. It is made available for you to read or print out for personal or church use. However, you may not publish it either in print or electronic form.

Published by The Myrtlefield Trust
180 Mountsandel Road
Coleraine, N. Ireland
BT52 1TB
w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com
e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

© Myrtlefield Trust, 2016

Myrtlefield catalogue no: rth.002

Understanding the Book of Ruth

It is a pleasure to be with you once more, Gentlemen. When I was last with you we were discussing the Epistle to the Romans. Today we study a very different book. Not only is Romans a New Testament book and the book of Ruth an Old Testament book, but the two books are very different in their character. The Epistle to the Romans is given up largely to a doctrinal statement of the basic principles of salvation. The book of Ruth is not a statement of doctrine; it is a narrative—a story carried on through the characters and doings of a number of people. Romans is doctrinal, Ruth is historical and therefore it presents us with some basic questions. How do we go about interpreting a historical book, a book that is narrative? How do we go about understanding it and its relevance to us, and how in the end do we set about preaching it?

We start, of course, with the basic belief that this too is the inspired word of God. And therefore our first question is to ask, *What does this book contribute to the ongoing self-revelation of God?* The Bible itself is evidence, is it not, that God did not speak everything he had to say all at once. God has spread his self-revelation across many centuries, and therefore study of Scripture will reveal what has been called the ongoing self-revelation of God.

If we would understand the place of the book of Ruth in the self-revelation of God, we need to read it against the background of its historical situation and the opening words of chapter one do precisely that, 'In the days when the judges ruled.' That is made easy for us to see by the order of the books as we have them in the canon, where the book of Ruth comes immediately after the book of Judges. In the Hebrew canon the book of Ruth does not come there, but is placed in the third division of the canon.

There are three divisions in the Hebrew canon:

| | |
|---|--|
| 1. THE LAW. The <i>Pentateuch</i> , the five Books of Moses | Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy |
| 2. THE PROPHETS | Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi |
| 3. THE WRITINGS, <i>Hagiographa</i> | Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles |

Among the historical books, forming one of 'the five rolls',¹ is the book of Ruth. It is therefore very helpful, in view of its position in the Hebrew canon, that the book of Ruth itself tells us the historical context of this story, 'In the days when the judges ruled' (1:1).

The importance of the inheritance

So let us begin by thinking about those days. In the Old Testament second division comes the book of Joshua, telling how Joshua did what Moses couldn't do. How he brought the Israelites into the land of Canaan, subdued the opposition of its kings and then distributed the promised land to the sundry tribes so that each tribe was given its inheritance in the land that God had promised to give them.

The tribes of Judah and Ephraim of course got the biggest parts and they were the first ones to be allotted their inheritance (Josh 15–16). The two-and-a-half tribes had been given their inheritance by Moses on the eastern side of Jordan and the remaining tribes were given their inheritance in the following manner. First, Joshua sent out men to survey the remaining territories and to write the details down in a book, then the tribes gathered before the tabernacle at Shiloh and they cast lots for their inheritance. So you will read such phrases as, 'The third lot came up for the people of Zebulun in such and such a district' (see 19:10). They measured with their lines, like surveyors do, and then they cast lots for each particular tribe. Those ideas are central to the book of Joshua and then to the book of Judges.

So let us think now of some of the leading terms that became prominent in this period and therefore in the experiences related in the book of Ruth. The leading term is inheritance, *naḥalah* in Hebrew. You will see the matter coming up in the book of Ruth. For instance, in chapter 4 it is a question of raising up the name of the deceased Elimelech upon his inheritance, his *naḥalah*—the bit that was awarded to his family.

How did the Israelites regard their inheritance? Let's take an example from 1 Kings 21, the story of Naboth and his vineyard. Naboth lived in the time of Ahab, king of the ten tribes of Israel. Having nothing better to do for the time being, Ahab became interested in gardening, but in the course of planning his new look gardens Ahab found that Naboth's vineyard was in the way. So he went to Naboth and said he would like to buy his vineyard and incorporate it into his royal gardens and Naboth refused. 'O but, look here,' said Ahab, 'I will give you a good price for your little patch of ground.' But Naboth still refused; 'I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers,' he said (v. 3).

In Israel, if you wanted to, you could sell what you had inherited from your fathers through many generations. Naboth didn't want to sell his inheritance. His family, as did many families, held the strong belief that, when the tribes were given their inheritance, they were given it by lot.

The theory behind casting of lots was. 'The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD' (Prov 16:33). It was an appeal to God by his providence to arrange the falling of the lot, and therefore when you got your inheritance by lot you felt you were given it directly by God—it was a God-given inheritance. For many Israelites it didn't matter whether

¹ Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther.

the lot was full of luscious grass and could support endless cattle, or whether it was a stony place and rather arid—if it was given to them by God then the gift was sacred.

‘I don’t care how much you are prepared to pay,’ said Naboth to His Majesty. ‘What I have you couldn’t put a price on it!’

The importance of the family name and heritage

Central to the events in the book of Ruth is another matter. Not only the inheritance given by God, but the fact that the name of a husband was on the inheritance handed down from generation to generation, so the maintenance of the name of the family on their inheritance was to them exceedingly important.

If you should happen to spend your holidays visiting stately homes, they will tell you when the house was first built and how it was given to the first Duke of Somewhere, and what the second earl did and what the third earl did and so forth—all down the centuries the family name is on the inheritance.

It was a chief concern of Naomi that the name of her husband, Elimelech, should not die out upon the inheritance. So this is going to be one of the major terms in this book, and relevant to our interpretation eventually will be the meanings that came to cluster round this basic idea of *inheritance*.

So let us look now at Psalm 16, and in so doing we have moved from history into poetry. Devotional poetry of course, but poetry where we must expect the notion of inheritance to have become extended.

Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the LORD, ‘You are my LORD; I have no good apart from you.’ As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight. The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips. The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot [Heb. *goral*]. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance. (Ps 16:1–6)

You will notice the terms are the terms of a surveyor—‘the lines have fallen for me’ [Heb. *hebel*]. If you like, you can go back in your imagination to the time of Joshua standing before the tabernacle of the Lord in Shiloh, and the surveyors coming with their book and the details of the various parts that they have now marked out. As you stand there wondering, ‘What’s my lot going to be?’ you notice what someone else has got. ‘I happen to know that part of the country, it’s beautiful and luscious. I can see what I would do with that.’ Then they come to the part where there are hills and it’s a bit difficult, and you hope your lot doesn’t come out there!

The surveyors with their lines and now the casting of the lots. ‘The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance’, is a metaphor from the verse before: ‘The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.’ It is as if the poet is moving from the idea that this bit of ground is my inheritance given to me by God and therefore sacred, going beyond the gift to the giver and perceiving that it is the giver himself

ultimately that is my inheritance—the Lord is my inheritance. ‘Take the world, but give me Jesus’,² we might say.

But you cannot forget the history, particularly in the days of the Judges. Having been given its lot by Joshua, a tribe and a family might find the enemy coming in at full pelt because the nations and the tribes had departed from God and compromised with the heathen and gone and served other gods. Therefore God, in his providence and discipline of the tribes, allowed their enemies to come in and subdue them and sometimes to take their inheritance from them. At the beginning of the psalm you will notice that the psalmist is relating the failures of his contemporaries who have gone after other gods, affirming that God alone is his God, ‘The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot’—my *goral*. His earthly possessions might be taken from him, but if the Lord is the portion of his inheritance and of his cup then the Lord will maintain his lot.

Let’s move ahead in Scripture now to the third division of the Old Testament, to the prophecy of Daniel, its last chapter and the last verse. After all the tremendous commotions, national conflicts and great tribulations, persecutions and so forth that have been revealed to Daniel in his visions, the angel says to Daniel personally, ‘But go your way till the end. And you shall rest and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days’ (Dan 12:13). Daniel is now very elderly, and whereas he prophesied that the nation would be taken back to the land (as did happen under Cyrus the Persian), Daniel himself apparently never went back to the land from which he had been rudely removed by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. What about his lot, then? He is told, ‘Thou shalt stand in thy lot at the end of the days’ (RV). Perhaps that will be also in Canaan, who knows—in the millennial reign? But I personally hope I have got a lot beyond the Millennium myself, nice as a lot in the Millennium would be! When life is done, shall you have a lot to stand in?

So, then, *naḥalah*, inheritance, and the terms relating to it—the lines of the surveyor marking out the particular inheritance and the lot given by the providence of God—form the major technical terms in this story. Much is going to turn upon them.

What has the story of Ruth got to do with me?

But we could pause at this moment, because eventually in the understanding of the book of Ruth, learning the mind of God in it and feeling the wonder of it, we shall be asking, ‘How does it affect me?’ And if I am going to preach it responsibly I must ask myself, ‘Why does the congregation in front of me need to know this story?’ Some lecturers proceed regardless of the fact why the undergraduates need to know what they are saying; so long as they have given the lecture they have earned their dollars and that’s that! But the preacher can’t do that, a preacher has business to do. Why does the congregation need to know what I am saying about this book, or what the book is saying?

² Fanny J. Crosby 1820–1915.

The Lord's inheritance

There is not a comma in Scripture that is not directed to the saving of people. A preacher can be a teacher and the most pedestrian of teachers at that, but he had better be aware that he has a job to do. How does this part of Scripture save people? We have to ask whether this term *inheritance* has anything to say to us in our modern Christian times.

When the Most High gave to the nations [notice the plural] their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.
(Deut 32:8)

In the Septuagint there is a slightly different wording at the end of that verse, 'according to the number of the angels,' but I don't pause to discuss that now. All I want to point to in this verse is that it was not only Israel that was given an inheritance in the Old Testament—it wasn't that God gave Israel their inheritance and let the other nations go and find what they could. 'When the Most High gave to the *nations* their inheritance,' so the nations have a God-given inheritance.

How far can we bring that down into the modern era, and then to ourselves? Well, of course, the New Testament epistles, particularly the Epistle to Ephesians, uses this term 'inheritance'. 'In him [and now the translations go differently] we have obtained an inheritance,' or, 'were given an inheritance,' or it could be translated, 'in whom we were made an inheritance' (1:11). Any of those translations would point to a fact. It could be that here Paul is saying, 'In him [in Christ] we have received an inheritance,' because in the context Paul is talking about God's purpose—the secret of God's will for an administration of the fullness of times to sum up everything in Christ. The whole thing in heaven and in earth is to be summed up in Christ, he will be its head and when everything is summed up in Christ it is the fact that believers in him will have their particular inheritance—'in him we have obtained an inheritance.'

On the other hand, if you translate it (and you will need to consult the experts on this), 'In whom we were made an inheritance, or a heritage,' then that could turn us back to Deuteronomy 32:9: 'But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage [*goral*].' Astonishing! The Lord has his lot, does he? The Lord has his inheritance? What might that be? It says here, Jacob! Would you congratulate God on having that bit of the inheritance, given what you know about Jacob? Is that all the Lord has got out of this vast universe? But before you answer that question, are you part of God's inheritance, are you part of the Lord's lot? You are! Then may I ask if you think that God has done very well out of it?

It is an astonishing fact, and the verse goes on to say how God found this Jacob. 'He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye' (v. 10). God, having found this rascal in a wilderness, kept him as his most valuable possession, like the very apple of his eye. It is an amazing story.

To change the metaphor, God, through Jeremiah, says to Israel (now gone off on her adulterous folly), 'I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown' (Jer 2:2). God went courting Israel in the

wilderness ‘in the day of his espousals,’ (RV), when he took them for a peculiar possession and treasure. Let’s look at those verses because they also bring to us this same term of ‘a treasured possession.’

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel. (Exod 19:4-6)

This is not what Israel got out of their redemption from Egypt; this is what God got out of it. ‘You shall be my peculiar treasure’ (RV). ‘Peculiar’ doesn’t mean, as you know, odd, strange and curious; it comes from the word for private possession—‘You shall be a specially private, valued possession.’ This is God then, talking about Israel and what God got out of their redemption—a peculiar treasure, a portion, his allotted heritage.

So, however we translate Ephesians 1:10, ‘received an inheritance,’ or ‘made a heritage,’ it is the fact that we are God’s heritage, God’s own possession, his ‘peculiar people’ (1 Pet 2:9; Titus 2:14).

So now we are thinking of the Lord’s people in the New Testament period and how this notion of inheritance and lot and portion may be related to us. Notice Paul’s prayer:

Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. (Eph 1:18)

That surely will need the revelation of God’s Holy Spirit to us. We can read his written revelation in the Bible, we are the Lord’s inheritance, but it will need the active working of the Holy Spirit in our minds, hearts and imaginations to come to see the reality of what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. May the Holy Spirit help us in our preaching to convey to the Lord’s people that salvation is not just a little entrance certificate to heaven. We do need to get some grasp of the wealth, the riches of the glory of God’s inheritance in the saints.

Now let’s look at a practical passage,

Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honour to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life. (1 Pet 3:7)

Notice the term, *heirs with you*—this is the idea of inheritance once more—‘joint-heirs of the grace of life’ (RV). My purpose, gentlemen, in reading this verse, is not to admonish you who are experts in the field of which I know nothing, that is not my job in life. But I cannot refrain from noticing this expression, joint inheritance of the grace of life. It is talking about physical life, or emotional life.

Which raises a question. The Israelites got their lot, their inheritance, in terms of territory in the land of Canaan and we know that the nations are given their heritage, their part, their inheritance, but what about us individually? Has each of you an inheritance, a heritage from

the Lord? You say, 'I got what I am largely by heredity—genes and all those things.' So you did, over generations! What do you think about that matter? Are you—your body, your health, your brain, your emotions that make up you—simply nothing other than the result of a multitude of random chances? Or are you the inheritance of the Lord; what the Lord has given you? Do you think there is any control of heredity? I am aware it causes very big problems and some people's heredity contains faulty genes. We are all sinners, aren't we? We all live under the curse of Eden, the fall of grace; but could you honestly raise your heart and eyes to heaven and thank God for being you because you feel that you have come to be under his providential care? What do you think about that?

This does bring the matter of inheritance down to very personal and practical issues, with wide implications. It is easy for those who have been born 'with a silver spoon in their mouths', as we say in English—those who have been born with a beautiful physical, mental and emotional inheritance. But what about the less fortunate, did God have anything to do with their inheritance, had he any control of it? I raise the matter because ultimately the book of Ruth will raise these questions with its major terms. Literal to start with, then metaphors in the Psalms, and now, as we have just seen, with the terms borrowed to use of spiritual things in the New Testament. This is not just an innocent little story to while away your interest in the doctor's surgery, or to distract your mind when you are sitting in the dentist's waiting room, thereafter to be forgotten!

The kinsman-redeemer

But then there are other terms in this book of Ruth, big terms upon which the story turns. And two of them are the terms of institutions in Israel at the time the book was written. The one is this matter of the kinsman-redeemer (Heb *gō'el*)—though I should point out to you that the word kinsman-redeemer/*gō'el* intertwines so closely with the idea of kinsman and redeemer that it is sometimes difficult to know in any one context how you should translate it. The English Standard Version in the book of Ruth constantly translates the term *gō'el* by 'redeemer', whereas others translate it 'kinsman'. The Hebrew word involves both. So let's read the key passage on this matter of the institution of the kinsman-redeemer,

If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. If a man has no one to redeem it and then himself becomes prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it, let him calculate the years since he sold it and pay back the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and then return to his property. But if he has not sufficient means to recover it, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of the buyer until the year of jubilee. In the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property . . . If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: he shall be with you as a hired servant and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee . . . If a stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich, and your brother beside him becomes poor and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner with you or to a member of the stranger's clan, then after he is sold he may be redeemed. One of his brothers may redeem him, or his uncle or his cousin may redeem him, or a close relative from his clan may redeem him. Or if he grows rich he may redeem himself. He shall calculate

with his buyer from the year when he sold himself to him until the year of jubilee, and the price of his sale shall vary with the number of years. The time he was with his owner shall be rated as the time of a hired servant. If there are still many years left, he shall pay proportionately for his redemption some of his sale price. If there remain but a few years until the year of jubilee, he shall calculate and pay for his redemption in proportion to his years of service. (Lev 25:25–28, 39–40, 47–52)

We have here two situations:

1. A man has sold something of his possession because he is poor and needs the money. For instance, in our day, a young couple, on the birth of a child, might decide they haven't enough ready cash, so they sell their car. At that time in Israel you could sell some of your possessions and later on, if you got more money, you could redeem them, buy them back. You would have to take into account the terms on which you sold them, because at the year of jubilee (every 50 years) the inheritance had to return to its original owner. There were exceptions to the rule, such as property in the cities that didn't return in the year of jubilee. But territory/land and certain other possessions had to return at the year of jubilee, so you always sold them on those terms. If you wanted to buy them back, you had to ask how many years were left until the year of jubilee and you had to pay the price.

If you couldn't pay it and you were poor, your kinsman, your next near relative, could redeem them, hence the word *gō'el* in Hebrew. He would be a relative, but one that was in a position to buy back your possessions, your *naḥalah*.

2. A man was so poor that he sold himself into slavery. If he sold himself to a foreigner, an immigrant in the land, who had become rich, the immigrant had to do business under the laws of the land and it would be pointed out to him on the occasion of a sale that it was only until the year of jubilee.

There were two conditions under which the man could be redeemed— if he had enough money himself, or if a near relative could redeem him.

This is the basic idea, then, and one of the prominent ideas in the book of Ruth. The story turns on it, that Naomi eventually found a near kinsman who was prepared to redeem the land, the original inheritance that had belonged to Elimelech. Each family was given land as they entered Canaan and it became the family's capital to be developed and farmed to bring in the income, but there will be no income if you haven't got capital to start with. If somebody couldn't manage his farm and had to sell it and become a wage earner without any capital, at the year of jubilee the capital had to return to the particular family whose original farm it was.

That institution of kinsman-redeemer is no longer practised in a modern Gentile commercial world.

Let's come to 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. For

surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Heb. 2:14–18)

These are magnificent words. In fact, if you penetrate the darkness of Calvary and ask how Christ could bear the wrath of God for us, you will come to the very heart of this matter. Some critics of the doctrine of atonement have argued that the very notion is unjust. ‘How would it be just,’ they say, ‘for God to punish an innocent third party instead of punishing the guilty?’ No judge would ever contemplate doing any such thing as punishing an innocent third party for the guilt of the criminal. The answer to that is that Christ surely was innocent, but he wasn’t a third party, he was one of us.

Listen to it again: ‘Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood . . . he had to [*it behoved him* (RV)] be made like his brothers in every respect (v. 17) That is very strong language. Earlier in that chapter you will read, ‘For it was fitting [*it became him* (RV)] that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering’ (v. 10). That was a fitting thing to do, but if Christ put his hand to our redemption it was not only a fitting thing, it was something that he had to do. The Greek says *he had to* take on flesh and blood like them. Human as we are, he is our representative and was able to stand in our place, though innocent himself. So that when he died, in the sight of God we died, when he was buried we were buried, when he rose again we rose again (Rom 6:3–4). He is our representative man before God, ‘For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Cor 15:22). He is the last Adam, the second man (vv. 45, 47). As member of our race he is our kinsman redeemer.

Levirite marriage

One other technical term, another institution in ancient Israel, must occupy us now and that is what is called *levirate marriage*. *Levir* in Latin is the word for brother-in-law, so it is ‘brother-in-law marriage’.

If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. (Deut 25:5–6)

So this is not merely the name upon the inheritance, but a man’s name itself—‘that his name may not be blotted out of Israel,’ as though he had never existed. This is the point of this system, therefore.

Let’s notice, to start with, the enormous significance attaching to a man’s name. The name represents the person and all he is as an individual and what he stands for. The thought that a man’s name could be blotted out as though he never had been, what an ultimate nihilism, if

that is the destiny of a man. Of course it raises a bigger question. Suppose you marry and have four children and each of them has four children, and so on and so on, and you are a big name in history. What if something were to happen to our planet and you and your name and your family name were blotted out as though it never had been? Michael the Archangel, having heard a little bang somewhere in the remote parts of the galaxy, says to Gabriel, 'What was that?' and Gabriel replies, 'I think that was earth—it's gone now!' (If there is such an evolutionary view!)

The significance of the name of a man, therefore, and that it shouldn't be blotted out. If a man died and had no children, his wife was to marry the deceased's brother, and their first child would be named after the brother who is now dead. That had implications for the inheritance and the heritage; because his first child's name would be upon his dead brother's inheritance, it wouldn't belong to the child's father! It would have to be the second son that took over that brother-in-law's heritage. This is the institution therefore, of levirate marriage and we shall see at a crucial point in the story of Ruth how these two ideas come together. They certainly came together in Naomi's mind—the question of inheritance and the question of levirate marriage.

So at least we have done some groundwork in our understanding of the book of Ruth.

The Narrative and History of the Book

Now we come to the book itself. It contains four chapters and is a story with a number of individual parts. We have to ask another question, therefore, *Is it one whole story that hangs together coherently?* Or is it a story, such as may be written in the life of, say, a Mr Smith? It happened to be a Saturday and he stayed in bed longer than he usually does. When he got up his wife said they had to go out to do the shopping. Then the news came on and somebody had climbed Mount Everest—that was very interesting. At the shopping centre there was an advertisement for car racing in America. Then they went off and had lunch and so forth. Lots of incidental things, not really to do with each other, they just happened on that particular day.

Is Ruth a collection of incidents like that—interesting in themselves but not really related—or is it a coherent story? It is easy with a book like Ruth, which has only four chapters, but similar questions would have to be asked about, say, the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles.

It starts, therefore, by putting the book in its historical context, 'In the days when the judges ruled' (1:1). There was often general confusion in the time of the judges, but let's turn back to the book of Judges and notice one interesting feature in each of these verses.

'In those days there was no king in Israel. And in those days the tribe of the people of Dan was seeking for itself an inheritance to dwell in' (18:1).

'In those days, when there was no king in Israel . . .' (19:1).

The confusion that follows is remarkable indeed. Let's come then to the final verse of the book of Judges: 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes' (21:25).

The trajectory of the book

So the book of Ruth posits itself in this historical background—in the days when the judges ruled and there was no king in Israel. We can therefore ask, 'If it starts in those conditions, where is it going to and where does it end up?' The end is indeed remarkable, 'Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David' (4:22). David was the biggest king that ever reigned in Israel and therefore you are going to ask, 'How do you get from verse 1 of chapter 1 and the situation hinted at there, and the mention of David the greatest king? In a Greek tragedy, you would call this *the action of the play*.

The cohesion of the book

Chapter 1. Naomi's emptying. She goes off to the Gentiles and her sons marry Gentiles.

Chapter 4. Naomi's return and restoration. (This is the *action*, in the literary sense, of what happens.) It is Naomi's story, but the book is called *Ruth* because Ruth was the key to it. As a Gentile in her Gentile land she was converted to faith in the God of Israel and now, as her mother-in-law returns, Ruth the Gentile is the key to the Jewess's restoration.

Chapter 2. Ruth meets Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer. She goes out and gleans in his fields and meets him, and comes back and tells her mother in law. That is the tentative climax—she comes back and tells Naomi. At the end of chapter 2 we have them talking. Ruth is telling her about this marvellous man she has met and his kindness, and the Jewess realises that he is her kinsman and possible redeemer.

Chapter 3. Ruth goes down to the threshing floor with Boaz at Naomi's suggestion. The chapter ends with Ruth coming back and telling Naomi the news.

These two chapters, from a literary point of view, have the same pattern. What a marvellous message they contain. It happened as a historical thing but it is also a prototype of a very much bigger story.

So let us look at the chapters in a bit more detail.

Chapter 1 begins with a certain man of Bethlehem-Judah who went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and their two sons, his name was Elimelech. Names were given in the ancient world, very often deliberately, because the meaning of the name was significant. *Eli melech*³—my God is king—was not just a nice-sounding name, to go along with Trevor or something like that! It stood for Israel's faith.

Let's go back to the book of Judges for a moment, to the story of Gideon.

Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, 'Where are the men whom you killed at Tabor?' They answered, 'As you are, so were they. Every one of them resembled the son of a king.' And he said, 'They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the Lord lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you.' So he said to Jether his firstborn, 'Rise and kill them!' But the young man did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a young man. Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, 'Rise yourself and fall upon us, for as the man is, so is his strength.' And Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and he took the crescent ornaments that were on the necks of their camels. Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, 'Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian.' Gideon said to them, 'I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you.' (8:18–23)

These were the days of the judges, when some of the leaders at any rate still adhered to the faith that Israel was a theocracy. They didn't have a king, God was their ruler, it was a

³ The different spellings, Elimelech/Eli melech and Abimelech/Abi melech, indicate Dr. Gooding's pronunciation of the names to highlight their meaning.

direct theocracy. The tribes had their elders and the elders were the people that sat in the gate and expounded the law. They had an all-tribal assembly (see the first and last chapters of Judges) that dealt with legal matters, such as travelling from one tribe to another tribe and therefore it involved the laws of hospitality and security. But it wasn't chaired by a king; it was a fellowship, an arrangement among the tribes. They still adhered to the claim that it was God who was their king and Gideon believed it.

So when he was invited to rule over them and start a dynasty—'You, your son, and your grandson'—he rebuked them and said, 'The LORD will rule over you.' This was their faith, but it began to wobble even in the days of Gideon.

And Gideon said to them, 'Let me make a request of you: every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil.' (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) And they answered, 'We will willingly give them.' And they spread a cloak, and every man threw in it the earrings of his spoil. And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and besides the collars that were round the necks of their camels. And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family. (vv. 24–27)

The glitter of the gold of the Midianites, the purple raiment that was on the kings of Midian and the chains that were about their camels' necks became as superstitious objects to the Israelites, leading them away into idolatry.

Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and lived in his own house. Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. (vv. 29–31)

Abi melech? 'My father is king.' Really? Well, somebody called Gideon's son that—was it his wife or his concubine? What a pain he was in the neck of Israel, as subsequent chapters will tell you. He was in the process of destroying a city in Israel and there was a dear, motherly, good woman preparing the family's food, milling the corn with a millstone. She was sitting by a wall and when she looked over it there was this Abimelech, come to destroy a city of Judah. She got hold of the millstone and threw it over the wall, hit his head and that was the end of his nonsense!

But here was the beginning of the wavering, even with Gideon. Holding to the doctrine, *the Lord is King, the Lord is ruler*—but secretly longing after the status of kingship, and his son by the concubine is called 'My father is king.'

So this good man's name in the book of Ruth is *Eli melech*—'My God is king'—given to him, presumably deliberately, by his parents because of their faith that their king was God. As the final chapters of Judges tell us three times over, 'in those days there was no king in Israel,' but it had gone to moral and spiritual confusion without a king—witness the end of the book of Judges. Because of the breakdown of the judges, the Levites and the all-tribal assembly, the institutions of that age, were crumbling. Not because they were wrong in themselves but

because of the people's lack of faith and their compromise with idolatry. The result was there was moral and spiritual confusion and the disciplines of God came upon them. Judges constantly tells us that the people did evil in the sight of the Lord and the Lord delivered them into the hand of their enemies, until they cried to the Lord and he sent them a deliverer. But every time the circle went round it got worse and worse.

The consequences of Elimelech going to Moab

There came a point, I suppose, when *Eli melech* felt these basic principles weren't working any more. There came a famine in the land and he left and went to Moab; but with a name like that was he right to leave? Was it simply a matter of convenience, or what was it? Was it a lack of faith in the basic principles on which Israel was meant to be governed in those days, and they don't work any more? The irony is that he came from Bethlehem-Judah; *Beth* = house, *lehem* = bread—the house of bread. But there was a famine in the land and that seemed an empty phrase, so he went off to Moab to make his living.

It seems to me that it might well have been that under the trials he gave up his position and his basic faith and went to Moab. Did he then sell his inheritance, take the cash and go off, or did he just abandon it? Your answer to that question will affect what you think of Naomi's proposition when eventually she sells the land. What was she doing? Was she selling the land that already her husband had sold to somebody else in Israel, and now she was selling the right to redeem it? If she had sold it to a fellow Israelite, fifty years later in the day of jubilee it would return to her automatically. But now it was in the hand of the man who bought it, but the right of redemption still belonged to her nearest of kin. So did she now want Boaz to take over the right and redeem it from the person who had bought it? Or was she saying, 'I can't manage this farm any more and I haven't got the cash to make a go of it, nor the strength. We are a couple of widows.' Was she selling it outright on the market to get enough cash to survive? You will have to decide that when we come to it and people take different views about it.

Whether he sold the land or not, they had gone to Moab. The boys married Moabite girls, Elimelech died and the two husbands died. Now what? This would seem to end in disaster. As for preserving the name of Elimelech on the inheritance, Naomi was hopeless.

So the attention in the story goes to the two girls, Orpah and Ruth. At first they follow Naomi to go back to Israel, because Naomi had heard that the Lord had intervened and given them food. And so she decided to go back, for at least there was food there.

The preacher in me niggles at this moment (miles beside the point!). If you want to keep the folks in your church you had better start feeding them, and not with stale food either! It used to be said in my youth by older men, using rather homely language, 'You have to tether sheep by their teeth!' If you want to keep God's people, you must feed them with a sense that the Lord has given them food. It won't do just to repeat hackneyed phrases, it has to be living bread with the sense that the Lord is giving it in our day and generation. But, as I say, that's beside the point just now!

Naomi had heard that the Lord had visited his people so she was going back, but she pointed out to Orpah and Ruth that there was no hope for them,

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. (1:11–14)

So Orpah went back, and within the story and in the Bible you never hear of her again. She went back, maybe got married and had a good time, but the sacred record doesn't mention her again. Ruth clung to her mother-in-law and returned with Naomi because she had come to believe in the God of Israel to start with, and she went back in loyalty to her mother-in-law and to her mother-in-law's God. Naomi herself told Ruth that there was no hope for a husband. 'Never mind,' said she. This is what she wanted to live for.

Well, you know the story, and it's a subsequent love story, how Ruth got married to this mighty man of wealth. But it isn't just a love story; God took that love story and made it a part of his centuries-long purpose. Look at the codicil:

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. (4:18–22)

Scholars argue as to whether this genealogy is an original part of the story or whether somebody added it on afterwards, but we needn't stop to discuss it. It is a stroke of genius, for it takes this love story, pulsating with life and human interest and the ambitions of the two girls. One of them said, 'There's no hope this way; I'll go back and make the best I can of life in Moab.' And the other one dared to trust God and follow her mother in law in loyalty to God and his people. When you come to the end, it is not only that Ruth had a marvellous marriage and Naomi was restored, but look at it in the grand scope of history.

It takes us right back to Genesis to the time of Judah, the original patriarch of the tribe of Judah, and God's purposes for him. 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah' (Gen. 49:10). Then it takes you far beyond Ruth, a decade or two and a generation or two, to King David of the tribe of Judah and ultimately to the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5). It shows you how God took that girl and her ambitions, her objectives, purposes and decisions, and the love story and all the rest of it, and put it into his age-long purposes.

If I am not mistaken there is a practical lesson for us! Most young adults would say, 'You've got to live in this life; it's no good being so heavenly minded that you're of no earthly use! You have to be realistic and make your own way in life—you won't have your Mum and Dad forever.' For the majority, that involves getting married and bachelors are the unusual, 'Each has his own gift from God,' says Paul, his *charisma* (1 Cor 7:7). Therefore, I am charismatic because I have the charisma of being a bachelor! Don't try it, gentlemen, if God doesn't give you that gift.

Yes, we have life to live and we must be practical. But, beyond life's ordinary ambitions, it is not a question of, 'I will work out the practicalities of my life and in addition I will serve the LORD.' The better question is, 'How does the whole of life, my relationships and my career, fit into the ongoing purposes of God?' When we see that, it adds a sense of value, a sense of importance and significance to life. We are part of the great purposes of God that began in an eternity past and were always looking forward to the coming of the greater King of kings and Lord of lords.

The providence of God

Notice how Ruth's decision was also responsible for her being taken up into that scheme. On the road she and Orpah made their choices, not knowing what the future could hold. Through her decision (as well, of course, as God's good providence), Ruth's career from now on became part of God's great system for bringing in the king—David. Surely it is so with us, or it ought to be. It's not merely in our spiritual moments that we become cogs in the wheel that is moving towards the coming of the kingdom of Christ; the whole of our careers, our personalities and our relationships could become part of it. We must make the decision. This is the old fashioned term that the theologians have used for the way God interacts with our circumstances. God has given us free will and the power to decide, but he doesn't dictate by a word from heaven every step that we are to take.

General guidance

A mother who has a newborn baby doesn't need to get down on her knees and say, 'Lord, I need guidance today as to whether I shall I feed this baby or not.' Normally mothers don't do that! God has given the woman a baby and with it comes the general responsibility and guidance that she had better start feeding the baby and the father has got a general duty to get the food.

Particular guidance

God doesn't leave us altogether by ourselves, he honours our free will. But God still rules and guides and in his providence organises things and situations and circumstances. His dealings with us guide the course of our life and its development.

Looking back over the past, Naomi feels the Lord's hand in what has happened. If this is the only way God could bring them back, bitter as it is she will acknowledge the Lord's hand in it. Back in Bethlehem and living with her mother-in-law, Ruth was a very practically minded, sensible young lady. They had to eat and she didn't say, 'O Lord, I am now in faith, send us some food to day!' The Lord could do that, but she said to herself, 'Naomi is getting old and can't do much work, so I shall have to do some.' So she said, 'Let me go and glean.' You've got to eat so she took the initiative and went off to get the food. She was prepared to work for it—that's marvellous guidance!

She went down looking for the fields. 'So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers, *and she happened* to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech' (2:3). I don't know what attracted her to that field, perhaps she thought the corn looked better or there was more of it. What enormous things turned on that

happening. The providence of God was working alongside her responsibilities—and we can rely on that providence still.

When I was young I heard missionaries talk of guidance and I got the impression that it was marvellous. Just when the last farthing had disappeared out of the purse, when all hope was done, there came the postman or some stranger, or something happened and the exact amount that was necessary to pay the bills came to hand. I pondered it, but I thought you had to be a missionary for that to happen, to start with, and you would have to be pretty holy to expect anything like it! I was looking on guidance as something you have to deserve, a standard you have to achieve to. That is not so, for the very fact that the Shepherd has undertaken us and we are his sheep, it is his basic responsibility to do the guiding. He will use general guidance where it is sufficient and if there is need of particular guidance he will grant it.

I like the thought of an Eastern shepherd. He has led his flock to this particular place, perhaps on the side of a mountain where there is some grass and he sits down while the flock goes around munching the grass. If you didn't know better you would think that he had forgotten all about the sheep. One sheep goes here, another goes to a bit of grass there and the shepherd does nothing. He leaves it to the sheep to decide which particular blade of grass it munches, but if a sheep goes somewhere that the shepherd doesn't want it to go, he will lift up a clod or a stone and throw it, just skimming it by the ear of the sheep. Not damaging the sheep, of course, but just warning, 'Don't go down there!'

We mustn't suppose that because the Lord seems inactive he's not guiding. Where it is necessary he will. Paul had a particular guidance when he first set out on his missionary programme and he gathered with the elders of the church at Antioch. The Holy Spirit said, 'Separate me Paul and Barnabas for the work that I have for them to do.' So they did that and there was definite guidance as to where they should go. Eventually they came back and after a while Paul said to Barnabas, 'Oughtn't we to go back to those churches and those converts that we made and see how they are doing?' He didn't have a direct voice from heaven telling him to do this, but like a mother has a duty to feed her baby, these evangelists who had led these folks to the Lord had a duty to feed them and shepherd them, if they could. So they went off to do their general duty without any great message, as far as we know, from the Holy Spirit saying, 'Do this, or that.'

And of course they had a duty to evangelise and they tried to go, but the Holy Spirit kept them from preaching the word in the province of Asia (Acts 16:6). How that happened, I don't know—perhaps a 'stone' came alongside Paul's ear! So they tried to go into Bithynia but 'the Spirit of Jesus' would not allow them to go there either (v. 7)—which, incidentally, shows that Paul had no specific guidance. He was not in the habit of going against the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but the fact that he attempted to go somewhere and the Holy Spirit didn't try to stop him shows that he didn't have any special guidance at that point. He carried on with his general guidance, preaching the gospel and teaching the believers, until Macedonia, when they got the particular guidance (vv. 9–10).

Guidance, therefore, is a mixture of God's providences—his particular guidance and his general guidance. Above and beyond it all, his providence is in organising circumstances and

very often it is only when we look back on things that we see that there was very special guidance.

I don't think Ruth ever imagined the implications when 'she happened' to light on this particular field belonging to this particular man! She hadn't a clue as to what was going to happen. But God had; he had had it in mind ever since Perez was born to Judah and long before then he had it in mind that Ruth should become an ancestress of Christ.

Naomi's Plan to Solve the Problem

For this session I would like to concentrate on the decision that Naomi came to and the device she adopted for the solution of her problem. That will involve us in thinking about why she used not one institution but two. Not merely the law of the kinsman-redeemer but also the law relating to levirate marriage.

Of course, a good deal depends on what Elimelech did with his land before he left Bethlehem. Did he sell his field and use the cash to finance his journey and his settlement in Moab, which would mean that when Naomi came home with Ruth they had no farm and no inheritance? What Naomi therefore needed was for the kinsman-redeemer to buy back the farm and install her and Ruth in it. Or did he simply abandon the farm when they left, so that when Naomi came back she was able to possess the land and live in the house? But she was completely unable to make a go of it because she was old and she and Ruth were women, or she didn't have the cash to make a go of the farm.

Anyway, we shall look at the decision she made and the device she adopted was to appeal to both the institution of the kinsman-redeemer and the institution of levirate marriage. If it had originally been sold she could have called upon Boaz as her near kinsman to redeem, buy back the farm and install her in it. If it had not been sold and she was in it but couldn't work it, she could sell it to Boaz anyway and get the necessary cash to carry on living. But that would have left her deeper problem unsolved. Seeing she was a widow with no hope of marriage and Ruth was a widow with little prospect of marriage, it would have still meant that the name of Elimelech would die out on that estate as though he had never lived, the family tradition broken and there would be no hope for the future.

As things went, during the months of harvest when Ruth was gleaning in the fields, Naomi thought she saw the way things were developing. It is true that Boaz was middle-aged and he seemed to be pretty confirmed as a bachelor. On the other hand, his treatment of Ruth right from the beginning could perhaps be seen that he had fallen in love for the first time in life. Could he be prevailed upon, then, to launch out and propose marriage to Ruth? If that happened Naomi could appeal to the law of levirate marriage and advise him, before he took the step, that if he married Ruth their firstborn son would have the farm named after him and he and his children would inherit it, not Boaz's other children, if he had any.

But first she had to discover what his intentions were, so she sent Ruth down to the threshing floor, which might have looked a very risky thing to do. Boaz wasn't unaware of how it could be misinterpreted, for he told Ruth eventually to get home while it was still dark and you can't see who's who. 'Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing

floor' (3:14). So she went and lay down at his feet (v. 7). When he awoke and asked, 'Who are you?' she said, 'I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer' (v. 9). That phrase, 'spread your wings,' is very interesting, because it is the same as Boaz himself had used, '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). Ruth had come to shelter under the wings of the God of Israel and now she was asking Boaz to spread his wings over her for protection and welcome. It is a metaphor that our Lord himself used, 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!' (Matt 23:37).

The character of Ruth

Let's notice a little detail in the story, who it was that put the proposal to Boaz. It wasn't Naomi, she left that to Ruth. It was Ruth who said to Boaz, 'Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.' She had married into the family, and therefore Boaz was a near kinsman. We are back with the history of what this middle-aged man said.

And he said, '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.' (v. 10)

She was following him and he felt flattered, of course. Most girls would have gone for much younger men, so he felt very complimented that she should seek him and put the beginnings of the proposition to him. He then notices her character, she is 'a worthy woman' and you will see that he already perceives what the proposition is going to be.

And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. Remain tonight, and in the morning, *if he will redeem you*, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the LORD lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning. (vv. 12–13)

'*The part of a kinsman*' (v. 13 RV)—which part? The text leaves it uncertain, but it becomes apparent from what Boaz says the next morning that he had realised that there would be two parts to this. 1. The kinsman, for buying the land; 2. The brother in law, to perform the duty of a levirate marriage (4:5).

And so Naomi solved the problem by selling the farm and yet keeping it. The advertisement in the local paper could have read, 'Very desirable farm, needing some redevelopment but with great potential. May be bought for [such and such a price]; for conditions see the small print!'

Boaz sat down in the gate with the elders,

Then he said to the redeemer, 'Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it and say, "Buy it in the presence of those sitting here and in the presence of the elders of my people." If you will redeem it, redeem it. But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there

is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you.’ And he said, “I will redeem it.”(4:3–4)

You will notice that the story indicates that Boaz didn’t put both propositions at once. He put the redeeming of the land first and the man said, ‘Yes, I will buy it.’ But then Boaz puts the second condition, ‘Then Boaz said, “The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance”’ (v. 5). That was the second part and Naomi was selling it on that condition.

Then the redeemer said, ‘I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.’ (v. 6)

Why couldn’t he redeem it? Well, he said he was afraid that he would mar his own inheritance. If he redeemed it then the first child of that marriage would be regarded as the rightful owner of the farm, and when he married his children would be the heirs, and not the redeemer’s other sons. The money he invested in it would therefore go to Ruth’s descendants and on those terms he wouldn’t redeem it. When Boaz redeemed it on those terms it meant that the name of Elimelech would be maintained on the inheritance, so Naomi’s problem was solved.

Is there another lesson there for us? Well, gentlemen, here you must allow me in my old age to be fanciful. Your inheritance is you! What a ‘field’ you are, full of potential with your heredity and your name and your abilities. Whatever your name is, it is not just a label, it sums up a whole human being with all that that means. How are you getting on farming your own particular bit of ground that is you? Are you making a go of it, is it going to last with your name on it for all eternity? Or, being descendants of Adam, have you not coped as you should with that bit of your inheritance that is yourself and the weeds have overgrown it?

That is the verdict of God’s law on our handling of the bit of inheritance that is us. How shall we make a go of it—is it possible to redeem it? There is only one answer that will redeem your inheritance and yet keep your name on it, even when you get to heaven, I suspect—and that is to sell out to Christ. In redeeming it, God will let you keep your name on it, though we have become his. Isn’t that the secret? ‘You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body’ (1 Cor 6:19–20). And yet your redeemer will not only let you retain your name, he will develop that name and what it stands for, for God’s good pleasure to all eternity.

Paul puts it like this, ‘For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God’ (Gal 2:19). There was never a man better than Saul of Tarsus for trying to keep his ‘farm’ and develop it for the glory of God, and he thought he had succeeded and was blameless according to the righteousness which is of the law. Then the law caught up with him and he became aware that Jesus was the Son of God and the figure on the cross was the Messiah. But why did he have to die? For all his law keeping there was no way of saving Saul of Tarsus other than for Christ to die and pay the penalty of his sin. And so our Lord died, bearing the

curse of the law for Saul. 'I through the law died to the law—the law convicted me and I must die.' There was no way of escaping the penalty but then Christ took his place, becoming a curse for him. That is the wonder of it, *'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me'* (v. 20). And yet *it is I*, for our Lord does not suppress our individuality or our name. He will write on us his new name. We are his, but we will maintain and develop our personalities for all eternity. The psalmist said, 'You hold my lot,' (Ps 16:5), and so will our great kinsman-redeemer maintain my lot.

The restoration of Naomi

And so we come to the happy story of the filling and complete restoration of Naomi.

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.' (4:10–11)

The Gentile constituent in the forming of the House of Israel

That was a very perceptive remark to make, for Jacob and his father Isaac before him married people that were Gentiles. Abram left his family, Nahor and company, and came out into the land of Canaan, became a pilgrim and never went back to his place of origin. He arose from the Gentile nations to begin this new, unique, historical entity that was the Hebrew nation, later to become Israel (a very latecomer among the nations, incidentally). The rise of Abraham, therefore, is an exceedingly significant move in history. But when Abraham was old and he felt it was time for Isaac his son to get married, he said to his servant, 'Don't let my son take a wife out of these local Canaanites,' and sent him back to his own kindred. But they were Gentiles, not Israelites, and there came the second move out of the Gentiles in the person of Rebecca to join Isaac and become his wife.

It was the same with Jacob. He ran away from Esau (he had to run, for fear of getting murdered), but he went back to his mother's people who were Gentiles and he got his two wives, Leah and Rachel plus their handmaids, from his mother's people. They eventually left, though in sad circumstances, and came back to Israel with Jacob.

It was a perceptive remark therefore to say, '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.' But they continued, '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). That will involve us presently in searching out what they were talking about, and why they committed such a gaff at the wedding breakfast. It was like saying, 'Tamar and that crowd!' Wasn't it family tactics to cover up that part of ancient history? Because they mention it, we shall have to go back and study it in Genesis 38.

But first let's come back to some of the practical things that the book of Ruth may teach us and look at the ground floor of history.

What attracted Boaz to Ruth?

When he first met her, he said,

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! Then she said, 'I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants.' (2:11-12)

In the small village Boaz would have heard the report of how this converted Gentile was so fervently diligent in her kindness and loyalty and love for the Jewess, Naomi, and for the people of God. So he had been watching her, even though she didn't realise it.

It is a very simple point, gentlemen; I nearly blush to make it. But what will attract you to Christ and what will Christ find attractive in you? Surely an evidence of your genuine conversion will be your love and kindness and devotion to his people, be they Jew or Gentile? It has been a horrific blot on Christendom for many years that they have felt that the Church has replaced Judaism and Jews ought to be persecuted, hounded and destroyed for the sake of Christ! What a fearful thing it has been. Our blessed Lord, humanly speaking, is a Jew. Boaz marked the genuineness of this woman's conversion by her kindness to his Jewish family. We may extend it of course, 'We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers' (1 John 3:14).

Then he valued her get up and go! She went to work and didn't sit at home; she came to glean in the fields. At lunchtime he himself handed her some food and, before he left and she went back to work, he had a word with the reapers to tell them not to rebuke her if she came too near the sheaves. Gleaners were not supposed to come too near the sheaves, lest they should steal some grain out of the sheaf. He said, in fact, 'Pull some out of the sheaves and leave them on purpose for her!' That was a nice little gesture, so that she came home with more than she ever could have got by gleaning in the field herself.

It was when she started gleaning that he began to take her seriously. If we want the Lord to take us seriously—of course, he takes us all seriously in one sense—but if we want him to take us seriously we too would be well advised to start gleaning systematically in the field of his word or in the field of his work. I know that the Lord leads us, but sometimes he looks for a little initiative on our part to seek him.

So Boaz had a word with the workmen to encourage the dear lady, and sometimes to leave a handful so that she would find it—which isn't a bad hint to those who teach God's word. Now and again, accidentally on purpose, to drop a bundle of this, that and the other that people can discover later on and begin to explore. I have known the Lord to do that kind of thing many times.

The story of Tamar

But now let me come back to the remark that the wedding guests made, '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).

The story is in Genesis 38 and on the surface it seems unsavoury. The background is in the previous chapter, when Judah and his other brothers (Judah in the vanguard) engineered first the death but then the *selling* (RV) of Joseph to the Midianites and thus into Egypt. Jacob had made Joseph a coat of many colours and the brothers hated Joseph, particularly because he brought their father an evil report about them. When they had sold Joseph they took his coat and covered it with the blood of a goat that they had killed. They showed Jacob the coat and said, 'We don't know what's become of Joseph, Sir, but this is his coat—the one you made him! Do you think that a wild animal has destroyed him?' How much Jacob believed of that story is another thing.

The situation immediately began to disintegrate and Judah went down among the Gentiles.

It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. (38:1–3)

So here is an ancestor of the royal tribe, Judah, of whom Jacob eventually said, 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be' (49:10 KJV). Joseph has gone to the Gentiles and now Judah goes to the Canaanites, so the family begins to divide up. That is significant, for this reason. God chose Abraham and all the promises were made to Abraham and Sarah that this king should be from their offspring. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and God said, 'That's not what I meant, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named' (21:12). Isaac eventually had two sons; twins, Esau and Jacob. And God said, 'Not Esau but Jacob.' So Ishmael and Esau were sent away.

Jacob had twelve sons, but notice how the pattern changes. It's not a matter of sending all eleven away and keeping one, now the problem is how to keep all twelve together and make a nation of them. Hitherto Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were but families. Granted, they had more than one wife each, but they were families. How would you keep the twelve boys together so that they could begin to form an extended family and then a tribe, and eventually become a nation that would be known as the nation of Israel? That is a far more difficult thing. How do you keep these brothers together, with all their jealousy and their evil doings?

Now you see the whole thing beginning to disintegrate before your eyes. The brothers sold Joseph to the Canaanites who took him down to Egypt, but as far as they are concerned he could be dead. Joseph has gone down, what will happen next? The story goes on until Jacob has lost a quarter of his sons; Joseph, Simeon and Benjamin are in Egypt. Jacob let Benjamin go under protest—it was the only way they could survive. So how do you keep the sons together and begin to make a nation out of them—the nation of Israel, formed of twelve tribes?

Judah and the question of levirate marriage

The problem that immediately confronts us is Judah (ch. 38). He goes down to the Canaanites and has three sons to a Canaanite woman. The first son, Er, was wicked so the Lord slew him. Er had been married to another Canaanite woman by the name of Tamar and they had no children, so the law of levirate marriage came into play and the second son, Onan, was called upon to marry his brother's widow. He refused the responsibility and for it the Lord slew him. Judah began to get nervous for his third son, Shelah, in case the Lord should slay him as well. So instead of letting him be given to Tamar, his daughter in law, under the institution of levirate marriage, he held the boy back (v. 11). Tamar, a Gentile woman, devised a means of maintaining the name of Judah's eldest son, upon the family. She was more concerned than Judah was for the maintenance of his name.

So you can see what the people were thinking of at the wedding breakfast, when they said, 'The LORD make this Gentile woman [Ruth] like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel [Jacob] and like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah' (Ruth 4:11–12).

There is an additional part to the story of Tamar. When she became pregnant to Judah, she was found to have twins (Gen 38:27–30). As she was in labour one baby (Zerah) put out his hand and the midwife bound a scarlet thread on it, saying, 'This one came out first.' Then the infant withdrew his hand and his brother (Perez) came out first when he should have been second and after the second twin was born the first twin was born! So God altered the process, even in the birth.

Who knows whether such a thing also was a prototype of bigger things to come in the course of history? Judah's children, the nation of Israel, born first so to speak, should have been pointing the way to the coming Messiah. When the Jews as a nation rejected their Messiah, they were set aside and that task was given to the Gentiles, until eventually the Jews are restored. I just submit that to your better intelligence!

But while I am at it, I can't refrain from the temptation to point out to you how the rest of that last part of Genesis runs. How would the twelve sons be kept together so that they might form the nation of Israel? It began to disintegrate as the brothers sold Joseph into Egypt. Judah and the others tried to convince their father, *Israel*, that Joseph was dead.

(The Jewish rabbis handed Christ over to the Gentiles for execution, and laboured to tell *Israel* that Jesus was dead and there had been no resurrection. 'That's him finished!' they said. He's alive among the Gentiles though—very much alive.)

Then there came a famine, you will remember, and Jacob sent his sons down to Egypt to get food so as to survive (ch. 42). They did get food, but there was a man down in Egypt, who seemed to have a lot of power.

'I think you are spies,' he said.

And they said, 'No, we are honest men—sons of one father.'

'Have you any more brothers?' he said.

'Yes, we've got one, but he's a young boy. Father dotes on him so we left him at home.'

'I think you are spies.'

'No, we are not.'

‘All right,’ he said, ‘I’ll give you the corn, but next time you come you must bring your brother with you. Meantime, I’ll keep one of you as a guarantee,’ and he chose Simeon.

So back they went and told this to Jacob. ‘You certainly won’t take Benjamin. Joseph is gone, Simeon is gone and now you are asking for Benjamin. Everything is against me!’ Reuben offered his own two sons, if he didn’t bring Benjamin back again but Jacob wasn’t having it—‘on my life you are not going to get Benjamin.’

But they ate up the corn and the famine continued and they were starving. So Jacob said that they had better go back to Egypt and get more food (43:2).

‘It’s no good going, we won’t get anything unless we take Benjamin,’ said Judah.

‘Why did you tell that man in Egypt that you had a brother?’ said Jacob.

‘Well, he asked us!’ they said.

At last, forced by famine, Jacob said, ‘All right, take Benjamin.’

‘I’ll be a pledge of his safety,’ said Judah.

‘Do it,’ said Jacob, ‘and take the man down in Egypt a few spices and nutmeg and things.’

That is poignant; ‘the man’ —it was Joseph! Jacob always loved pulling wires. This man down in Egypt had the key to every granary in the whole of Egypt and Jacob says, ‘Carry down the man a present, a little balm, and a little honey . . .’ —a little bribe to please him!

They got to Egypt and you know how the story unfolds. This man sent them all back, Simeon included, but when they got a little way along the road the Egyptian guard overtook them and said,

‘Why have you rewarded evil for good and stolen my lord’s silver chalice?’

They said, ‘Nobody here has taken it!’

He said, ‘You have!’

So they said, ‘Well if any man’s sack is found to have that cup let him die, and we also will be my lord’s servants’ (see 44:9).

So they opened the sacks and eventually the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack. They were distraught. Why didn’t they go home? They couldn’t do that, so they all went back.

‘Why have you done this?’ asked Joseph. ‘Only the one who took the cup shall be my servant and the rest of you can all go home’ (v. 17).

Then Judah stood forward. ‘May I speak to you? We can’t go back without that boy! Our father loves him and if we go back without him it will break his heart and he will die—“your servants will bring down the grey hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol” (v. 31)—let me stand in as a substitute for him!’

Wonderful story that! How did you keep those lads together? First there was innocent suffering—Joseph was prepared to suffer at their hands and suffer at the Egyptians’ hands without any thought of retaliation. Then there was *substitutionary suffering*—Joseph has got Judah to the point where he will face the need to give himself as a substitute for Benjamin.

Judah—a changed man

What a change now in Judah. Go back to the story in chapter 38, he is wealthy and successful, a big man in town on a Saturday night! He has got his staff in his hand and he feels he is important. What is the point in being Judah, if he can’t enjoy himself! He sees Tamar (he thinks she is a harlot) and she says, ‘What will you give me as a pledge?’ ‘What do you want?’

he says. 'Give me your signet, your cord and your staff of office' (38:18). This is Judah, the man destined to be king, and he gives his belongings to the woman for the sake of a little pleasure. And it was the guarantee that when he got home he would send her a whole calf, but when he sent his servant to take the calf, there wasn't any woman there!

When he was told that his daughter in law was pregnant he said, 'I can't have this kind of behaviour—she should be burned!' (v. 24). As she was being brought out, she said, 'Please tell Judah that I am with child by the man who owns these things' (the signet and the cord and the staff). Such was Judah, from whom the Lion of the tribe of Judah would come, simply indulging himself as many monarchs all down history have often done.

See Joseph now, in his wisdom, bringing Judah to the point where he pleads to be allowed to suffer in the place of Benjamin so that the rest can go home—substitutionary suffering! For the role of his suffering our Lord is called 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah'—'The Lion that is of the tribe of Judah . . . has overcome, to open the book and the seals thereof . . . for he was slain' (Rev 5:5, 9).

Excuse that sermon, gentlemen, but it is surprising what after dinner speeches at weddings lead you to start thinking. You can wander all over the place, particularly if you have enjoyed the meal! This all rose out of what the guests had said at the wedding breakfast for Ruth and Boaz. 'Let this Gentile woman be like Tamar, that other Gentile woman who was more concerned than Judah was with the maintenance of the name and the family of Judah.'

It is a very curious thing! If you ask modern Jews what they think about Messiah and the fulfilling of the Old Testament prophecies, they don't think anything about it. The vast majority of them are atheists. A fellow student of mine in Cambridge is now the Rabbi in a big London synagogue. He holds that everything has been fulfilled and there is no future in that sense for Israel, as Israel; Gentiles are more concerned about the fulfilment of the prophecies of the coming Messiah from the tribe of Judah than the Jews are! Perhaps you think that I am exaggerating and mistaken, but there are more millions of Gentiles interested in the coming fulfilment of the prophecies about Messiah as the root and the offspring of David than there are Jews (see Rev 22:16 RV). And perhaps the majority of Jews now hold that there is no future for that kind of thing anyway.

What a mercy it is, in the grace of God, that we Gentiles have somehow come into this big thing and for the moment bear the biggest responsibility of witnessing to the Messiah among the Gentiles, devoted nonetheless to his ancient people and looking for their full restoration.

HANDOUTS

1

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 |
-
-

2

The Book of Ruth (1)**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 |

3

The Book of Ruth (2)**Chapter**

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

Zion, 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?
Behold I was left alone;
from where have these come?’
—Isaiah 49:21

4

The Book of Genesis

SECTION VI 36:1-50:26

- I. GENERATIONS OF ESAU: Esau went into a land away . . . 36:1-43**
-
- II. JACOB DWELT IN THE LAND 37:1**
- a. Joseph's dreams: Joseph sold: Joseph's coat, false evidence:
Jacob's false deduction: *discern now . . . (37:32)*
 - b. **JUDAH** goes down . . . *the harlot*: false dress:
Judah's signet, cord and staff: *discern . . . (38:25)*
Judah's CONFESSIOIN: Judah's sons!
 - c. Joseph in Egypt: Potiphar's wife: Joseph's garment: false evidence;
Joseph interprets dreams: Pharaoh's signet, chain, robes:
Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.
- III. JACOB SAW THAT THERE WAS CORN IN EGYPT 42:1**
- a. 1st expedition: climax: Jacob: *Joseph is not, Simeon is not, and will you take Benjamin? No!!*
 - b. 2nd expedition: climax: **JUDAH**, as surety,
pleads to be allowed to suffer as substitute for Benjamin.
 - c. Joseph made known: sends for father:
climax: Jacob discovers truth: evidence of wagons:
decides to go to see Joseph.
-
- IV. AND ISRAEL TOOK HIS JOURNEY . . . 46:1**
- a. Beersheba—Well of Oath:
God: *I will go down with thee and bring thee up again.*
Names of sons—Egypt.
 - b. **JUDAH** sent in front to arrange meeting with Joseph:
climax: Jacob blesses Pharaoh.
 - c. Joseph's treatment of Egyptians and of Israelites:
Joseph buys all Egypt and Egyptians for Pharaoh: Israel prospers.
- V. AND JACOB LIVED IN EGYPT . . . 47:28**
- a. Takes oath of Joseph: bury not in Egypt, but in father's burial place;
Joseph introduces his sons to Jacob: Who are these? (48:8-9).
Jacob blesses them.
 - b. Jacob's prophetic blessing of 12 sons:
JUDAH to have the sceptre (49:10); final charge re burial.
 - c. Jacob dies: taken back to Canaan and buried there:
Egyptians accompany and join in mourning.
-
- VI. JOSEPH RETURNS TO EGYPT 50:14**
- a. Renewed promise to preserve brothers.
 - b. Dying charge: *God will visit you and bring you back into land which he swore to Abraham. Carry my bones up hence.*

Question

Why did Ruth uncover Boaz's feet? What does this mean? What do you say to those who suggest immoral activity here?

[If you want to see some suggestions to that end, you could read the *Talmud* and the *Midrashim*; so very often as the *Talmud* and the *Midrashim* and the *Haggadah* are crude beyond belief. And so is the comment on this particular passage in Ruth. You would be better not reading it.]

That is a suggestion that comes from their own imagination. It is not in the text. 'She lay at his feet,' is what the text says. If you were to add that that is immoral and there were some immoral goings on, as the rabbis sometimes say there were, then you are adding to that text. It doesn't say so and Boaz observes that everybody knows that she is a virtuous woman.

And secondly, let there be no occasion for misunderstanding. 'Go home before it is light'—as if there had been immoral behaviour and Boaz is now covering it up. That is suggesting an enacted lie, but there is no need to suppose there was anything immoral. What she appealed to was the fact that he was a kinsman, and therefore she uncovered his feet and took her position there at his feet, signifying her submission. That she asked him to put the edge of his garment over her, is a symbolic act as a kinsman would do, guaranteeing her protection 'under his wings,' It is the same word as, 'God—under whose wings we have come to trust.' So here now as a kinsman he acknowledges the kinsman's responsibility to act in her interest and to protect her as a widow. But beyond that, of course, he promises to marry her.