

CONCORDIA COMMENTARY

A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture

RUTH

John R. Wilch



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Introduction

The Story

Simple Narrative

The book of Ruth is a unique masterpiece of picturesque literary artistry among OT narratives. Wolfgang von Goethe praised it as “the loveliest small entity handed down to us that is epic and idyllic.”¹ More than being one of the earliest dramas of human literature, it is in a special dramatic class in the Bible with, especially, the accounts of the patriarchs (Genesis 12–35), Jacob’s sons (Genesis 37–50), David’s successor (2 Samuel 11–20; 1 Kings 1–2), Jonah, and Esther, besides shorter stories in Scripture. Also bearing some of the hallmarks of a novella, the historical dimension of Ruth better identifies it as a short story² (see “Historical Account” below).

From the traditional viewpoint of Western philosophy that basically asks the question “What is?” the Ruth story might be evaluated as nothing more than a beautiful novella. However, as Franz Rosenzweig discerned, Scripture more often reflects the question “What happens?” This leads to presenting theological truths not in the form of abstract propositions but in that of narratives. This form facilitates a divine-human dialogue by arousing in the listener the recognition that a divine message is being revealed that is essential for one’s life. The biblical narrative’s sense of a timeless presence as well as suspense is achieved through “strategically placed repetitions of words, phrases, and sentences” and through the progression technique (see “Orality” below in this section and “Storytelling” in “The Motifs” below), which hint at divine purpose.³ The divine inspiration of the narrator will become evident to the readers as the Holy Spirit, working through the inspired Word, leads them to recognize the divine purpose revealed in the narrative.⁴

Complex and sophisticated (see “Complex Situation” below), the book of Ruth operates on several levels: religious, legal, familial, national, moral, and

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Noten und Abhandlungen zu besserem Verständnis des West-östlichen Diwans” (cited by Schildenberger, “Das Buch Ruth als literarisches Kunstwerk und als religiöse Botschaft,” 102). For Schildenberger, Ruth exhibits dramatic artistry.

² Gunkel, “Ruth,” 84–86; Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth*, 2; Campbell, *Ruth*, 5–6; Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 562; Murphy, *Wisdom Literature*, 86; LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 614; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 47–48. According to Larkin (*Ruth and Esther*, 9), a short story “sketches a tense situation, introduces a number of complicating factors, and finally produces a resolution; it will be self-contained, and more interested in characters and plot development than in reporting historical events.”

³ Galli, “Time, Form, and Content,” 469–72 (the quote is on p. 472), reflecting the ideas of Franz Rosenzweig, “The Secret of the Biblical Narrative Form,” written in German in 1928 (ET: *Scripture and Translation: Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig* [trans. Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994], 129–42).

⁴ Cf. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 32, 101, 125.



romantic. Using elevated prose and semipoetic rhythm, it is written with great economy of carefully chosen words so that their well-placed recurrence may signal important emphases. The audience is engaged by the fine and sharp depiction of ordinary but distinctive individuals in an extraordinary but real and plausible situation.⁵ The story is complete in itself and leaves no expectations unfulfilled and no character with an ambiguous role as it portrays how heroes overcome a critical disadvantage: “*Heroes* find their mates, *villains* meet their fates, *dispatchers* find their ultimate reward, and *donors* fulfill their obligations.”⁶

Such a divinely inspired story has the power as a theological vehicle to point its readers in unexpected directions, even transforming them (see “Orality” and “Wisdom Source” below).⁷ Ruth’s classic story, which “so skillfully combines faith and form,”⁸ is that “of great art in the employ of deep religious conviction.”⁹ Yet the historical events narrated by the author do not merely reveal his own skill and convictions; he was guided by the Holy Spirit in such a way that his words are also the very words of God, spoken to reveal his plan of salvation, which would culminate in the incarnation, unblemished life, atoning death, and bodily resurrection of the Son of “David” (Ruth 4:17, 22), namely, Jesus Christ^a (see further “The Theology” below).

Complex Situation

This simply-told story actually relates the most complex legal situation presented in the Bible: an Israelite family from Judah was forced by a famine to emigrate to Moab, where the father died (1:1–3). The two sons married local residents, but also died, without leaving offspring (1:4–5). The mother, Naomi, now lacked anyone who was bound to help her in Moab. Her only hope was to return to her home in Bethlehem, where her husband’s closest relative (גֹּאֵל, *goʿel*, “redeemer”) would be obligated to buy back (“redeem”) their property inheritance (Lev 25:23–25).¹⁰ Normally, she would be expected to remarry

(a) See
Psalms 2 and
110; Mt
22:42–46;
2 Tim
3:16–17;
1 Pet 1:11;
2 Pet 1:20–21

⁵ Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth*, 4–7, who refers to Heinrich Ewald, as cited by S. Oetli and J. Meinhold, *Die geschichtlichen Hagiographien (Chronika, Esra, Nehemia, Ruth, Esther) und das Buch Daniel* (Kurzgefaßter Kommentar zu den heiligen Schriften Alten und Neuen Testaments, Altes Testament 8; ed. H. L. Strack and O. Zöckler; Nördlingen: Beck, 1889), 214; Berlin, “Ruth,” 262; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 47.

⁶ Sasson, *Ruth*, 216; see also pages 217–18 (in Ruth, Naomi is the “dispatcher” and Boaz the “donor”) and Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth*, 6; Larkin, *Ruth and Esther*, 38–39.

⁷ This reflects the ideas of Brown, “The Nathan Syndrome,” 51, 59, about the power of stories. He says that a story “can tell us things about ourselves that we would prefer not to know” (p. 59).

⁸ Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth*, 63.

⁹ Ap-Thomas, “The Book of Ruth,” 369, who goes on to say: “It is, perhaps, the supreme literary exemplification of *suaviter in modo, fortiter in re* [‘something both charming in manner and strong in substance’].” See also P. Tribble, “Ruth, Book of,” *ABD* 5:842.

¹⁰ Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 548–49.

or return to her father's household.¹¹ However, since she was too old to marry again and there were evidently no survivors from her father's household, she would have been at the mercy of her property's redeemer to care for her.

When the famine in Judah finally ended, she returned to Bethlehem with one of her daughters-in-law, Ruth (1:6–7, 15–18). But Naomi felt thwarted by God (see 1:20–21) in not being able to fulfill her marital and covenant duty to keep her family viable through having an heir, who would retain their divinely given inheritance, for Naomi was now too old to bear a child (1:12). Ruth, as a foreigner, was ineligible to provide an heir unless an Israelite man would make her an Israelite by marrying her. However, no man could be expected to consent to marry a widow who was barren in her first marriage unless he was required to do so. Ruth had no living Israelite brother-in-law, who would have been the only one required by Law or custom to marry her (Gen 38:8; Deut 25:5–6; cf. Mt 22:23–28).¹² Besides, the redeemer surely was already married and had children of his own, which would make him even more reluctant to marry Ruth and father children, who then could lay claim to part of his inheritance, which he would have desired to go solely to his existing children.

However, after Ruth as a gleaner was treated magnanimously by the second-closest relative, Boaz (2:8–16), Naomi conceived a plan by which Ruth obtained from him his agreement to redeem and marry her (3:1–13). Boaz correctly understood that Ruth had asked him not only to make her eligible (by marriage to an Israelite) to provide an heir for Naomi's family, but also to redeem their inheritance for the heir (3:10–13; 4:9–10).

If Naomi had merely tried to seek a husband for Ruth, she could have arranged that in direct conversation with Boaz, a known relative (2:20). But since she sought redemption, she could not openly bypass the relative who was the "redeemer" closer to her than Boaz (3:12–13).¹³ Naomi would have known both close relatives well enough to discern that the primary (closest) redeemer would not have been open to her proposal (see 4:4, 6), so she directed it to the second-closest relative, Boaz. Besides, Naomi could hardly speak for Ruth, for Ruth was not her daughter, but only her daughter-in-law, and a foreigner at that. Further, it would have been socially impossible for Ruth, a young foreign widow, to approach openly an older married gentleman with a proposal of marriage, for she would appear to be a prostitute. The marriage had to be proposed in secret.

Already middle-aged (see 3:10), Boaz in that society must have been long-since married and probably had children. The assumption that the nearest relative too (the "redeemer" in 4:1–8) was already married with children best explains his situation: Boaz promised that if that redeemer redeemed the inheritance, Boaz would marry Ruth anyway in order to provide an heir to

¹¹ De Vaux, *Social Institutions*, 54.

¹² See Anderson, "The Marriage of Ruth"; van Wolde, "Texts in Dialogue with Texts," 28.

¹³ Hubbard, *Ruth*, 217.

Naomi's family (4:5; see "The Crux" in "The Text" below). The primary "redeemer" thus realized that he would then "ruin" his own inheritance (4:6), since his expense of redeeming the property would be lost when the redeemed property would be inherited by the potential heir and not by his own children. That the redeemer would not have expected Boaz to take the same risk explains why Boaz's proposal surprised him (4:9–10).

All of this makes the best sense for a cohesive story if we presume that both men were not only married but also had children. The closer relative might have countered the proposal of Boaz in 4:5 by agreeing to marry Ruth himself, but this too would have damaged his own inheritance. For a child born to him and Ruth would not only inherit Elimelech's property and carry on his name, but would also receive a portion of the redeemer's own inheritance (cf. 4:21; 1 Chr 2:3–5).

Thus we can appreciate the ingenuity and necessity of Naomi's plan, the daring of Ruth to carry it out, and Boaz's sacrifice in agreeing to it. Naomi, an ancestress of Solomon, concocted a Solomonic solution to cut the Gordian knot to the delight of every reader. Involved are areas of Law and custom dealing with inheritance, redemption, and remarriage, which converge in one account only here in the Bible.¹⁴ Boaz solved the singular quandary by outmaneuvering the closest relative with his personal sacrifice. He was the means used by God, who also enabled Ruth to conceive a son, to save a covenant family in Israel by granting a new heir.

Far beyond its dramatic entertainment, this story reveals much more through its purpose, motifs, theology, and relevance, partly through solving the story's major crux (see the sections on each of those topics below).

Orality

An essential characteristic of the literature of the Bible that has been greatly overlooked by most exegetes is its "orality," which involves the dynamics of the spoken and heard word. Today scholars are rediscovering this characteristic that was implicitly known long ago.¹⁵ Ancient Israel may be described as a secondary oral culture, that is, a culture where writing was already known, so that there was no preliterate stage of Israel's existence as a nation.¹⁶ Since we have little evidence for literacy among the general populace, it may be that written documents were scarce and restricted to professional writers and readers. People largely depended upon *hearing* news, laws, stories, hymns, liturgy—in short, everything that was made known to them. Thus, "the Old Testament Hebrews were a deeply oral people."¹⁷

¹⁴ Hubbard, *Ruth*, 49. For more detail, see "The Motifs" below.

¹⁵ Winger, *Orality as the Key to Understanding Apostolic Proclamation in the Epistles*, 308, 315; Maxey, "Oral Evocations of the *Kerygma*," 1.

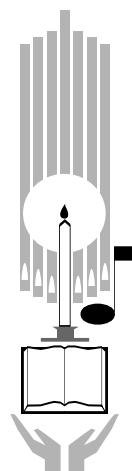
¹⁶ Alter, "Introduction to the Old Testament," 13.

¹⁷ Winger, *Orality*, 203. See also Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, 4, 141.

It is no accident that the verb קָרָא can mean (depending on the context) either “call, proclaim” or “read,” for reading was done aloud (see, e.g., קָרָא, “read aloud,” in Josh 8:34–35; 2 Ki 23:2; Jer 29:29; cf. ἀναγινώσκω, “read aloud,” in Acts 8:30). The public lector was concerned with enfleshing the writer for his hearers.¹⁸ Thus, the writer in a secondary oral culture often used words in special ways in order to maximize both their immediate effect and their lasting retention. For the sounded word (especially if it is God’s) can influence people into action or to a change in their outlook or circumstances. A writing in the ancient oral world that was meant to be read aloud and heard was replete with rhythms and sounds, patterns and parallelisms, so that the audience would be aided in experiencing the influential power of the words.¹⁹ Thus reading is an experience that involves the author, speaker, and hearers.

An oral culture is concerned that words be delivered by the living, personal presence of the speaker, and what is conveyed verbally is essential.²⁰ This experience can transform people, changing their lives.²¹ In an oral culture, when a book was read publicly, it spoke words that could powerfully influence the audience. Moses had written down the Law of God (Ex 24:4, 7; 34:27; cf. Josh 8:31–32; 23:6), and God stipulated that it would be proclaimed publicly to Israel so the people would learn and retain it. The written Torah was God’s Word, and his covenant with the people was reinforced by its public reading every Sabbatical Year at the Sukkoth Festival (Deut 31:9–13). When Moses was read, Moses was speaking, and more importantly, God himself was speaking to the people. God’s will and promises were made known in the context of worship and teaching through the reading of his Word.²²

The telling of actual reality in the historical narratives of Scripture can move people to faith and action because it is God speaking to them through his Word.²³ Indeed, the oral Word remains a great power today in sermons, prayers, liturgy, hymns, and anthems. For Martin Luther, “the New [Testament] was first and foremost the spoken Christian gospel, the proclamation, or *kerygma*, of the Christ,”²⁴ the *viva vox* (“the living voice”).²⁵ As Thomas Winger put it: “A genuinely-confessional Lutheran theology of the Word of God is deeply



¹⁸ Cf. Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, 65; Winger, *Orality*, 204–5, 306; on page 204, Winger mentions Shaphan, evidently the royal lector, who read the Torah to Josiah (2 Ki 22:8–10).

¹⁹ Sasson, “Ruth,” 321; Maxey, “Oral Evocations of the *Kerygma*,” 26.

²⁰ Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 42, 113; Winger, *Orality*, 61, 174, 305; Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, 19, who speaks of an “oral synthesis” of speaker and hearer.

²¹ David Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Biblical Studies” (to be presented at the meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2005), 10.

²² Ong, “*Maranatha*,” 437. Winger, *Orality*, 203–4, 313, who says that the oral approach to the Scriptures was bequeathed to Christians from their OT heritage (p. 313).

²³ Cf. Aitken, *Jesus’ Death in Early Christian Memory*, 23, 76; Hancher, “Performative Utterance, the Word of God, and the Death of the Author,” 27; Winger, *Orality*, 23.

²⁴ Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 145; see Luther, AE 35:123 (WA 10/1¹.17).

²⁵ See Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 149, quoting Luther, WA 12.259 (cf. AE 30:1).

oral. . . . Valuing the Scriptures as spoken Word is recognizing in them the power of the Gospel for the salvation of all who believe (Rom. 1:16).”²⁶ Although the Holy Spirit certainly has the capability to work efficaciously even through a “poor performance” of reading or preaching his Word, the lector and preacher today should always prepare carefully in advance for the oral delivery, lest it become a hindrance rather than a help in conveying the message of the Word.

The following characteristics of oral communication can be employed to aid the hearers in remembering what they hear, in contrast to conventions of writing: (1) additive clauses (with coordinate conjunctions) rather than subordinate clauses; (2) gathering phrases together, rather than arranging them analytically; (3) employing redundancy (such as chiasm, refrain, foreshadowing, and retrospection) rather than concise style; (4) using language that is traditional (though with variation) rather than creative, (5) acoustical rather than visual, (6) life-experiential rather than abstract; and (7) verbally combative or enraptured praise.²⁷ All these aspects are utilized in the Ruth narrative. The author was a master storyteller whose art is fully appreciated only when we recognize that the medium of “writing is permanently and ineluctably grounded” in orality.²⁸ He wrote so that the meaning of the Word of God, through which the Holy Spirit works, could be readily transmitted by the oral reader to the audience.

Biblical narratives betray their oral background with episodic structure, flashbacks, and themes. Commonly told or read before an audience, as in the village gate (cf. Ruth 4:1–12), they were a communal matter and were written with this in mind. Having been written with a purpose, OT histories such as Ruth are didactic stories that are easily remembered.²⁹ Trusted members of an oral community, aided by the divine Spirit, could memorize and recite long poems or narratives.³⁰

A community can be defined at its most essential level by a historical narrative,³¹ as exemplified by the way the Lutheran church is defined by the Reformation and the Lutheran Confessions it produced. Thus, ancient Israel was

²⁶ Winger, *Orality*, 320–21.

²⁷ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 35–57; Lord, “Characteristics of Orality”; Maxey, “Oral Evocations of the *Kerygma*,” 14. Specifically on repetition, see Lohr, “Oral Techniques in the Gospel of Matthew,” 409–11; Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, 147; Harvey, “Orality and Its Implications for Biblical Studies,” 104–5; Winger, *Orality*, 278, 313. On life-experiential, see Alter, “Introduction to the Old Testament,” 34.

²⁸ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 77.

²⁹ Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 30; Bartholomew, “Feed My Lambs,” 72; Winger, *Orality*, 32, 40, 60–61, 175; see Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” 42–45; cf. Propp (*Morphology of the Folktale*, 70) on folktales. Sternberg considers the narratives not didactic but ideological (*The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 36–38).

³⁰ Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” 42–45; Harvey, “Orality and Its Implications for Biblical Studies,” 108.

³¹ Maxey, “Oral Evocations of the *Kerygma*,” 20.

defined by the divinely inspired narratives of creation, Israel's patriarchs, the exodus, the conquest, the Davidic kingdom, and the return from exile, alongside the Prophets and the Writings, which are inseparable from the historical narratives. In the same way, the Gospels and Acts—historical narratives—define the NT church along with the NT epistles, which are inseparable from those narratives.³²

An oral culture promotes memory skills by emphasizing thematic recall.³³ The writer of Ruth took advantage of the patriarchal narratives, which had the closest affinity to his narrative, by implicitly alluding to them whenever possible.³⁴ The author of Ruth was divinely guided in his composition, not only in faithfully recording the history as it actually happened, but also in highlighting the purpose for writing the story: to convey God's salvation, which was to be fulfilled in a preliminary way in King David (Ruth 4:17, 22) and would culminate in the Son of David, Jesus Christ.³⁵

The OT historical narratives were told to remember and transmit how God had worked according to his Law and Gospel in the history and lives of his people. The Israelite secondary oral culture had a highly developed historical sense, and the narratives were accurate and trustworthy accounts of the facts. History had to be passed down “with absolute fidelity to succeeding generations.”³⁶ In that way God's authorized messengers—eyewitnesses, prophets, wise men, and later evangelists and apostles—preserved the Word. As the Word was read, the Holy Spirit testified to the spirit of the hearers (cf. Rom 8:16), who acknowledged that the narratives were and conveyed God's Word. In essence, then, the writing and the speaking of the Word served the same evangelical purpose.³⁷ Because Israel's historical narratives, including the book of Ruth, were recognized by the believing community of Israel (the OT “church”) to be divinely inspired, authentic, and reliable accounts that conveyed God's intended message, they were honored as divine Scriptures and incorporated into the canon.



³² Working primarily with the NT epistles, Winger, *Orality*, 314–15, concludes that they have a homiletical or hortatory tendency and make use of certain formulas of expression. The oral reading of the Scriptures belongs in the worship liturgy. Their text mediates a dialogue between the divine Author, reader, and hearers, so the divine Author is uniquely present in the reading of the text.

³³ Sasson, “Ruth,” 321; Winger, *Orality*, 162; Harvey, “Orality and Its Implications for Biblical Studies,” 102; Botha, “Letter Writing and Oral Communication in Antiquity,” 26–27; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 611; Maxey, “Oral Evocations of the *Kerygma*,” 4–5.

³⁴ See “Patriarchal Parallels” in “The Motifs” below and Alter, “Introduction to the Old Testament,” 13–14.

³⁵ See “The Purpose” and “The Theology” below.

³⁶ Winger, *Orality*, 315–16.

³⁷ Cf. Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, 4, 161; Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, 71; Koester, “Written Gospels or Oral Tradition?” 294–95.

Historical Account

All that can be said with certainty about the author of the book of Ruth is that he was a master storyteller—perhaps the best of his craft represented in the Bible, rivaling the author of the story of Jacob’s sons (Genesis 37–50).³⁸ This fact has been duly recognized by both biblical commentators and literary experts, including recent ones investigating narrative literature (see “Simple Narrative” above and “Storytelling” in “The Motifs” below). The narrator followed in the wake of earlier Israelite history writers such as Moses, the author of the Pentateuch.³⁹ The literatures of other ancient Near Eastern nations contained some historical annals, but also polytheistic epics of gods and legendary humans that reenacted cosmic events. It was the Israelites who first composed real history with delineation of personal character and motivation, and thus achieved “true historical composition”⁴⁰ in the Scriptures God inspired them to write. They produced true historiography, tracing “the broad sweep of political events through a process of cause and effect.” Along with this, as exemplified in Ruth, is the human interest in individual people that portrays their character, thoughts, and emotions.⁴¹

The internal evidence clearly indicates that the story of Ruth is coherently intelligible, credible, and self-sufficient for its intended audience.⁴² The authors of *Midrash Rabbah Ruth* (which was completed about A.D. 600) thought of Ruth historically, for Ruth’s entry and acceptance into Israel explains and influences what happened later. Jacob Neusner therefore concludes that “we learn lessons of theology from history” and that “history taught moral lessons.”⁴³ Although Jack Sasson demonstrates in great detail that the Ruth narrative has the genre of a folktale, he must admit that it is really historical,⁴⁴ or as Roland Murphy puts it, “a Hebrew historical short story.”⁴⁵ Edward Campbell identified four characteristics of the Hebrew short story, which pertain to Ruth: (1) The distinctive literary style was semipoetic, artistic, and elevated prose with rhythmic elements. (2) The content portrays ordinary people in mundane affairs,

³⁸ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 5–12, demonstrates that Genesis 37–50 is a unity of which Genesis 38 is an integral part. Many other scholars deny the place of Genesis 38 in the account and so wrongly consider it to be the story of Joseph.

³⁹ With their historical arrangement, the books Exodus through Deuteronomy appear to be for the most part recordings from Moses’ diaries. To them Moses, under inspiration, may have prefixed the material of Genesis from the store of Israel’s written and oral traditions.

⁴⁰ C. Gordon, *The World of the Old Testament*, 166–67; see also R. Gordon, “Simplicity of the Highest Cunning,” 70.

⁴¹ Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth*, 60–61, who speaks of a “new humanism”; see “Orality” above.

⁴² Beattie, “Ruth III,” 39–40; see also Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh*, 507–8; Gow, *The Book of Ruth*, 139, 144–45; Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 601–3.

⁴³ Neusner, *The Mother of the Messiah in Judaism*, 115, 119.

⁴⁴ Sasson, *Ruth*, 214; Sasson, “Ruth,” 322.

⁴⁵ Murphy, *Wisdom Literature*, 85–86.

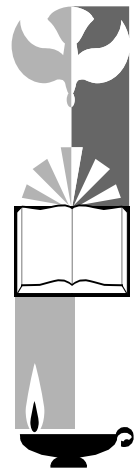
even though they may have very significant effects. (3) The purposes are manifold, both instructive and entertaining, with ordinary events the scene of God's providential activity and the characters having genuine individuality. (4) The artistry of the storytelling is engagingly excellent.⁴⁶

It is most significant that the Holy Spirit inspired writers to record historical events and led the church of the Old and New Testaments to recognize and preserve those records as divine Scripture. Other religions also have scriptures that are believed to be divinely inspired and are given divine authority.⁴⁷ However, whatever in them is in story form, with very minimal exceptions, is not the account of truly historical events but only of legends and myths, that is, human wishful thinking about imagined situations that have never taken place. In contrast, the events in the biblical narratives, including the story of Ruth, actually happened, and they relate divine activity in human lives and people's faith in the true God who so acts.

Therefore, when these events are retold today as the Word of God is read and preached, the Holy Spirit uses them anew to actualize their past effects in the present of today. God thus utilizes the principle of historical analogy: since our Scriptures report God's activity with believing people in historical events, we do not just believe what someone else in the past believed, but we believe in the one faithful God who acts among us today as he did in the past. The apostle Paul therefore emphasized some of Israel's experiences in the wilderness recorded in Scripture as applying to the contemporary church by means of analogical prophecy (1 Cor 10:1–11; see "Christotelic Interpretation" in "The Theology" below).

Wisdom Source

As for the profession of the storyteller of Ruth, one may first postulate that he might have been attached in some way to the royal court where he could have access to the history of David's family. The highly polished narrative style of Ruth and its rich variety of vocabulary and idiom indicate that it originated in well-educated circles.⁴⁸ We may then compare the style with that of the other historical books in the Bible, probably written by either prophets (Joshua to Kings) or by scribes (Chronicles to Esther). Yet Ruth's historiographical style differs from that of those books.⁴⁹ Since the book of Ruth downplays the overt activity or intervention of God while stressing that he accomplishes his will through the actions of people who believe in him, it may be compared to the story of David's successor (2 Samuel 11–20; 1 Kings 1–2) and the book of Esther.



⁴⁶ Campbell, *Ruth*, 5–6.

⁴⁷ "The use of story is the most characteristic feature of the biblical tradition, and the extensive use of narrative distinguishes the biblical tradition from the Scriptures of the other major religions of the world" (Ramsey, *The Quest for the Historical Israel*, 123).

⁴⁸ Sasson, *Ruth*, 225, 227; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 23.

⁴⁹ Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh*, 506–7.

Ruth is in some ways comparable to the stories of Jacob's sons (Genesis 37–50) and of David's successor (2 Samuel 11–20; 1 Kings 1–2), and a prophet or priest could have written an engaging story such as Ruth as well as those other accounts.⁵⁰ However, there is a difference: the story of Ruth more explicitly emphasizes the concepts of fidelity and redemption (see “Fidelity” and “Redemption” in “The Motifs” below) as it relates how people lived or refused to live according to the covenant. The motif of fidelity is also fairly prominent in Proverbs (much of which is by Solomon), where אֱמֶת (*hesed*, “fidelity, faithfulness”) occurs ten times. The expression “it so happened” (Ruth 2:3) has its only parallel in Eccl 2:14–15, by Solomon (see the textual notes on Ruth 2:3). Thus the author of Ruth might be found not in the guilds of priests, prophets, or scribes, but rather in that of wise men (cf. Prov 3:3–4; 11:17; 19:22; 21:21).⁵¹

The wise were best known for their proverbs (see especially Proverbs 10–29), allegories (i.e., extended comparisons, see Proverbs 1–9; 30–31; Eccl 12:1–8; cf. Song of Songs⁵²), and philosophical-theological treatises (Job; Ecclesiastes). However, there is also some evidence for them telling stories with theological and educational objectives, similar in intent to the allegories (see 2 Sam 14:2–7).⁵³ While Ruth might be described as a “didactic narrative”⁵⁴ authored in Wisdom circles, it is better not to classify it in the genre of Wisdom literature, but as a historical account written by a wise man (see “Historical Account” above).

Since there were some wise women in Israel (e.g., 2 Sam 14:2; 20:16) and the book of Ruth is very sympathetic to women in its portrayal of them (see “Women” in “The Motifs” below), the thought has been entertained whether it was written by a woman. Phyllis Tribble tries to identify an inner conflict between restoration for dead males and justice for living females, with the patriarchal interests for a male heir (Ruth 4:10–12) being finally reinterpreted from the perspective of women (4:14–17): the restoration of Naomi and the praise of Ruth.⁵⁵ However, this is a false dichotomy (even if widows were often at the

⁵⁰ Gow, *The Book of Ruth*, 208–10, argues that the author of Ruth was Nathan, David's prominent court prophet (see 2 Sam 7:1–17), an accomplished storyteller (2 Sam 12:1–4; see 1 Chr 29:29; 2 Chr 9:29) who was sympathetic to women (1 Ki 1:11–27).

⁵¹ See Würthwein, “Ruth,” 6; Gordis, “Love, Marriage and Business in the Book of Ruth,” 243; Murphy, *Wisdom Literature*, xiii, 8, who argues that Hebrew Wisdom literature has royal associations; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 23–24; Gow, *The Book of Ruth*, 139. Literary skill belonged to the repertoire of Israel's wise men, as epitomized by Solomon (1 Ki 5:9–12 [ET 4:29–32]; Gutstein, “Proverbs 31:10–31,” 36).

⁵² See Mitchell, *The Song of Songs*, 111.

⁵³ Murphy notes that Sumerian wisdom literature includes folktales (*Wisdom Literature*, xiii, 9).

⁵⁴ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 46, describes the Joseph narrative (Genesis 37–50) in that way, but the description is more appropriate for Ruth than for part of the Torah of Moses.

⁵⁵ Tribble, *ABD* 5:843–45. See Bledstein (“Female Companionships”); Bauckham (“The Book of Ruth and the Possibility of a Feminist Canonical Hermeneutic,” 30–32); and the rejection of feminine authorship by Meyers (“Returning Home,” 89). Another basis for the suggestion of a female author of Ruth is its emphasis on female initiative. However, Israelite men

mercy of unscrupulous men). For the new heir fulfills the expectations of vindication and security for the widows, as well as family continuity and covenant fidelity. In other biblical accounts, women were just as intensely concerned with these patriarchal interests. Men and women shared the common concern to protect the family continuity and to provide for it. By God's grace this eventually resulted in the ultimate Heir, the Son of God with his divine and human natures, the "Seed" whom God had promised would come through a woman (Gen 3:15; Galatians 3), born of a virgin (Is 7:14; Mt 1:23; Lk 1:27).

That the story of Ruth places special emphasis on caring for widows reflects not an exclusively female interest, but also the concern of the Mosaic Law (e.g., Ex 22:21 [ET 22:22]; Deut 10:18; 24:19–21; 27:19). One may compare the provision Christ himself made for his mother Mary, apparently a widow (Jn 19:25–27). Likewise, NT epistles advocate charitable concern for widows even though they were written by men, for example, the apostle Paul (1 Tim 5:3, 16) and James (1:27).

It may thus be conjectured that the author of Ruth's story was a wise man who fully understood women, as did Solomon, the preeminent wise man (see 1 Ki 3:23–27; Song of Songs). The author was accomplished in storytelling with a didactic theological objective, applying here his best talents to the telling of a historical account.

The Setting

Historical Dates

The events of Ruth 1:1–4:17 took place within a span of about eleven years (see 1:4), sometime during the period of the judges of Israel (1:1). It is in this historical context that the story must be understood (see "Piety" in "The Motifs" below). The references to other Israelites from the patriarchal era down to David (4:11–22) firmly anchor the story in the greater context of Israel's history between the patriarchs and the monarchy.⁵⁶

The traditional conservative dates are that the exodus was about 1446 B.C., the conquest in 1406, the judges period from 1406 to 1050, the reign of David from 1010 to 970, and the founding of Solomon's temple in 966.⁵⁷ The events in



did not hesitate to write favorably about women taking the initiative to act courageously in faith (e.g., Gen 4:1; 24:19–20; Ex 1:15–21; 2:1–9; 4:24–26; Num 27:1–7; Josh 2:4–16; Judg 4:4–10, 18–22; 1 Sam 25:3, 14–35) because they valued women as created and redeemed by God no less than men (Gen 1:27; 2:23–24; Ex 20:12). The Song of Songs is another biblical book that involves female initiative and a highly favorable view of a woman, and it was written by Solomon (Song 1:1), a wise man. Likewise, the namesake heroine of the book of Esther displays initiative and courageous faith, but that is no reason to preclude authorship of the book by a man.

⁵⁶ Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 566–67.

⁵⁷ See Archer (*A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*), Schultz (*The Old Testament Speaks*), Bimson (*Redating the Exodus and Conquest*; Bimson dates the exodus at 1470 B.C.), Aling

Ruth 3:1–6

Strategy

Translation

3 ¹Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, “My daughter, should I not seek for you security, so that it will be good for you? ²Now, is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you have been? Look, he is winnowing at the threshing floor of barley tonight. ³So bathe, anoint yourself, and put your cloak on yourself, and go down to the threshing floor. Do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴But when he lies down, note the place where he lies down. Then approach, uncover the place of his feet, and lie down. He himself will tell you what you should do.”

⁵Then she [Ruth] said to her, “All that you say to me, I will do!” ⁶So she went down to the threshing floor, and she did according to everything that her mother-in-law had commanded her.

Textual Notes

3:1 **וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ נָעֲמִי חֲמוּתָהּ**—The first word of chapter 3 begins with a simple *waw* consecutive verb, which is sequential. However, the end of the previous chapter (2:23) indicates that a time interval of perhaps seven weeks elapsed between 2:23 and 3:1.¹ Naomi was the last person to speak (2:22). After the short narrative conclusion in 2:23, **נָעֲמִי חֲמוּתָהּ**, “Naomi, her mother-in-law,” resumes speaking in 3:1–4. See the textual note on **חֲמוּתָהּ** in 1:14. The third feminine singular suffixes, “to her” (**לָהּ**) and “her” (**הִיא**), refer to Ruth, even though she is not named in this chapter until 3:9.

בָּתְרִי—That Naomi calls Ruth “my daughter” indicates Ruth’s age inferiority and also a close relationship of familiarity between the two (see the commentary on 1:11, with “my daughters”). Naomi calls Ruth “my daughter” also in 2:2, 22; 3:16, 18, and Boaz addresses Ruth in that way in 2:8; 3:10–11.

אֶבְקֶשׁ לָהּ מָנוּחַ—The Piel imperfect **אֶבְקֶשׁ** has a modal nuance: “I *must/should* seek” (see Joüon, § 113 m). The negative rhetorical question, “Should I not seek for you ... ?” does not expect an answer. Instead, by it Naomi declares her motivation for formulating the plan she will outline to Ruth (cf. Boaz’s question with **הֲלֹא** in 2:8 that was a declaration). In the OT the noun **מָנוּחַ**, derived from the verb **נָח**, usually refers to a physical “resting place” (e.g., Deut 28:65; Is 34:14; Lam 1:3) rather than abstract “rest” (Ruth 3:1 ESV). Naomi had used its cognate synonym **מְנוּחָה** to refer to “security” in the house of a husband in 1:9. The larger context here too suggests that **מָנוּחַ** pertains both to marriage (hence “a home,” Ruth 3:1 NIV) and to rest

¹ See the last textual note on 2:21 and Hubbard, *Ruth*, 196, n. 1.

from the toil of the manual labor necessary for the widow to eke out a living.² “Security” (NASB) conveys both aspects.

וְיִטֵּב לָךְ אֲשֶׁר—The same phrase (but with לָךְ instead of לְךָ) is in Deut 4:40; 6:3, to which Naomi may allude. As there, the relative pronoun אֲשֶׁר introduces a purpose or result clause, “so that” (BDB, s.v. אֲשֶׁר, 8 b). The Qal imperfect of יִטֵּב is impersonal, with no stated subject: “it will be good/go well for you” means “your circumstances/life will be good.” See the similar expressions in Gen 12:13; Deut 5:16; 2 Ki 25:24.

3:2 וְעַתָּה הֲלֹא בָּעוֹ בְּדַעְתָּנוּ—Literally, “and now,” וְעַתָּה introduces a new phase in the conversation: Naomi’s quest for security for Ruth leads her to focus on Boaz. As in 2:8 and 3:1, the negative rhetorical question with הֲלֹא is actually a strong assertion.³ בְּדַעְתָּנוּ is the feminine noun בְּדַעַת, “relative” (*HALOT*), with first common plural suffix (usually -נוּ but here -נָנוּ).⁴ בְּדַעַת occurs only here in the OT,⁵ but the corresponding masculine noun בְּדַעַת, “relative,” was the Qere in 2:1. The feminine form of the noun may have an abstract nuance; BDB (s.v. בְּדַעַת, under נִדַּע) gives “kindred, kinship.” Or it may have an intensive nuance, “close relative.”⁶ Since it is from נִדַּע, “to know,” it exemplifies the narrator’s frequent use of words from this root (see the first textual note on 2:1).

אֲשֶׁר הָיִיתָ אֶת־נַעֲרֹתָיו—This is, literally, “Boaz ... *who you were with his young women*.” In Hebrew אֲשֶׁר (“who”) regularly takes a pronoun complement (“his” on נַעֲרֹתָיו) that is redundant in English, as also in 2:2 (בְּעֵינָיו) and 2:12 (כְּנֶפְאִי). English requires rearranging the syntax and translating אֲשֶׁר by “whose,” as in 2:20.

הִנֵּה הִנֵּה־הוּא זָרָה ... הַלַּיְלָה—The interjection הִנֵּה (“look!”) serves to attract attention and introduce a statement (as in 1:15). זָרָה is the Qal participle of זָרַה, “to scatter; winnow,” that is, to toss the threshed stalks into the air with a winnowing fork or shovel so that the wind would blow away the chaff and separate the lighter straw from the grain, which would fall at the feet of the winnower. This was often done in the evening, when the breeze was optimal (see the commentary). In this context the participle could be translated as a future (“will be winnowing”) because the verse ends with הַלַּיְלָה (“the night,” that is, “tonight,” in pause with *qamets*, -ָ), a temporal accusative that identifies the time of an action.⁷

² See De Waard and Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Ruth*, 47; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 147; Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 681.

³ De Waard and Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Ruth*, 48; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 197, n. 4.

⁴ On the form of the suffix, see GKC, § 91 f; Joüon, § 94 h.

⁵ It occurs in rabbinic Hebrew with the weaker meaning “acquaintance” or “friend” (Jastrow).

⁶ Joüon, § 89 b; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 199, including n. 16. To support this point Hubbard cites GKC, § 141 c, which states that the construction here, with a noun as the predicate of a nominal clause, is more emphatic than if the predicate were an adjective. However, Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 148, rejects the view that the nuance here is intensive.

⁷ Waltke-O’Connor, § 10.2.2c; Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 3:126–31; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 150.

אֶת־נֶגֶן הַשְּׁעָרִים—The most likely literal meaning of this phrase is that Boaz was winnowing “at the threshing floor of the barley,” though it could be paraphrased as “he is winnowing barley at the threshing floor.”⁸ The noun נֶגֶן, “threshing floor,” will recur in 3:3, 6, 14. It refers to “a flat surface of rock or pounded earth located in an open place exposed to the wind.”⁹ The construct phrase הַשְּׁעָרִים הַנֶּגֶן uses “barley” as an attributive genitive of species,¹⁰ equivalent to “the threshing floor *for* barley” or “the barley threshing floor.”

The syntax of the phrase within the verse is challenging. After the preceding participle וְנֶגֶן, “winnowing,” one would expect אֶת to introduce the direct object (e.g., אֶת־הַשְּׁעָרִים “winnowing the barley”) since the Qal of נֶגֶן usually takes a direct object. But נֶגֶן intervenes, and the “threshing floor” itself cannot be the object of “winnowing.” With נֶגֶן one might expect a preposition, for example, בְּנֶגֶן, “winnowing *at* the threshing floor,” which would be similar to “I winnowed ... *at* [בְּ] the gates” in Jer 15:7. Here אֶת could be the preposition, which normally means “with,” though the Qal of נֶגֶן does not take the preposition אֶת elsewhere. However, the second occurrence of אֶת in 1 Sam 7:16 may be another instance where it means “at” (BDB, s.v. אֶת II, 2).

Commentators have also pointed out an apparent chronological difficulty. Ruth 2:23 seems to indicate that this scene of Boaz winnowing barley occurred after both the barley and wheat harvests were completed. Normally the barley was harvested before the wheat, and the two harvests together lasted about seven weeks.¹¹ It strikes some commentators as unlikely that Boaz did not winnow the barley until after he finished harvesting the wheat, several weeks after the barley harvest was completed. An alternative chronology of the story seems even more unlikely: that this scene is a “flash-back” that occurred at the end of the barley harvest but before the wheat harvest. Since Boaz married Ruth (4:10) within a day or so of this scene (3:18), that alternative chronology would mean that Ruth continued to glean (and live with her mother-in-law) even after Boaz had married her, until the wheat harvest too was completed (2:23).

Campbell argues that הַשְּׁעָרִים, “the barley,” should be emended to הַשְּׁעָרִים, “the gates,” in which case the construct phrase הַשְּׁעָרִים הַנֶּגֶן would be a genitive of location,¹² and the clause would mean “he is winnowing (the grain of) the threshing floor near the gate.”¹³ Campbell gives the following reasons for his emendation: (1) The

⁸ So Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 149–50; many English translations also have this reading or one similar.

⁹ H. N. Richardson, “Threshing,” *IDB* 4:636.

¹⁰ For examples of genitives of species, see Waltke-O'Connor, § 9.5.3g.

¹¹ See the last textual note on 2:21 and the commentary on 2:21–23.

¹² For examples of genitives of location, see Waltke-O'Connor, § 9.5.2f.

¹³ Campbell, *Ruth*, 114, 117–19. His translation (p. 114) assumes that אֶת is the direct object marker. It also follows the proposal by Joüon (*Ruth*, 67) that “threshing floor” is metonymy for “(the grain of) the threshing floor” (Campbell’s translation on page 114), even though Campbell seems skeptical of Joüon’s proposal when he refers to it on page 117. To explain why he translates his emended plural הַשְּׁעָרִים as the singular “gate,” Campbell argues that “gates” theoretically could refer to a single entryway consisting of an inner and an outer gate; in 2 Sam 18:24, “two gates” refers to the double-entry gate structure common in ancient

consonants ש and שׁ were not distinguished in writing until the Masoretes added the pointing (ca. sixth–ninth centuries A.D.), and before that both were written as ש . Thus in Gen 26:12, the LXX and Syriac (ancient translations that predate the Masoretes) read “barley” where the MT has שְׂעָרִים .¹⁴ (2) The narrator of Ruth may be creating wordplay between “barley” and “gate,” as one finds in some other OT passages (2 Ki 7:1–20). “Barley” was important in Ruth 1:22; 2:17, 23, and the story will turn its focus to the action at Bethlehem’s city “gate” in 3:11; 4:1, 10–11. (3) Threshing floors were often situated near the town gate (1 Ki 22:10; Jer 15:7).

However, evidence against Campbell’s emendation includes the fact that the LXX, Syriac, and Vulgate all translate the phrase in 3:2 as “threshing floor of barley.” Also, Boaz will fill Ruth’s shawl with “barley” in 3:15, and “barley” remains in focus in the story through 3:17.

The conclusion must be that, although Boaz and his workers harvested the barley first, they did not winnow it until after the wheat had been harvested too. Thus the story is sequential, and 3:1–6 takes place after the months of harvesting briefly narrated in 2:23. Whether or not the harvested wheat was also on the threshing floor at this time, the point is that Ruth’s work of gleaning during the harvests had ended (2:23), but Boaz had not yet completed his work of winnowing the barley.

3:3 וַתֵּצֵא —After Naomi’s introductory statements in 3:1–2, this verb begins an extended set of directives to Ruth. It is the first in a series of eight verbs in 3:3–4:

$\text{וַתֵּצֵא} \mid \text{וְסָכַתְּ} \mid \text{וְשָׁמַתְּ} \mid \text{וַתִּרְדִּי} \mid \text{וַיִּדְעֵהָ} \mid \text{וּבָאָתְּ} \mid \text{וְגִלִּיתְּ} \mid \text{וְשָׁכַבְתְּ}$

Each of these verbs is a second feminine singular perfect with *waw* consecutive with an imperatival meaning (“bathe, anoint yourself, and put ... and go down ... note ... approach, uncover ... and lie down”). The verbs are sequential: Ruth is to perform the actions in that order, one after the other. All are Qal except וְגִלִּיתְּ , which is Piel. The forms themselves could either have *waw* consecutive or conjunctive *waw*: with *waw* consecutive the accent on a perfect verb usually shifts to the final syllable if possible (Joüon, § 43; Waltke-O’Connor, § 32.1.1b–d), but that shift is not possible with most of these second feminine singular perfect forms because final תְּ cannot be accented. Two of the forms already have the accent on the final syllable regardless of the *waw* (וּבָאָתְּ וְגִלִּיתְּ). That all these forms have *waw* consecutive is an inference from the fact that often elsewhere Hebrew uses a perfect with *waw* consecutive to express an imperative (GKC, § 112 x, aa). Often a series begins with an imperative form, which is then followed by perfects with *waw* consecutive that have an imperatival meaning.¹⁵

cities. However, Bush (*Ruth, Esther*, 149) argues against the emendation of הַשְּׂעָרִים , “the barley,” to הַשְּׂעָרִים , “the gate(s),” and considers the suggestion that the plural הַשְּׂעָרִים (produced by the emendation) could refer to a single city gate “quite unexampled, both in Ruth (4:1, 10, 11) and in the rest of the OT.”

¹⁴ In Gen 26:12 שְׂעָרִים probably is the plural of a homograph שֶׁעַר that refers to some kind of “measure” (BDB, s.v. שֶׁעַר II). Since it follows “one hundred,” it is usually translated by the suffix on “hundredfold” (so KJV, RSV, NIV, ESV).

¹⁵ Joüon, § 119 l; Waltke-O’Connor, § 32.2.2b. See also Campbell, *Ruth*, 119–20; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 197, n. 9; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 150.

וַיִּסְכֶּה—The Qal of סָכַךְ can have a reflexive meaning, “anoint oneself,” as here, or a transitive meaning, to “anoint” someone else (BDB, s.v. סָכַךְ I, Qal, 1 and 2, respectively). The *waw* consecutive is pointed with *qamets* (־) before the tone syllable, though rarely as here when not in pause (GKC, § 104 g). Elsewhere the verb is often used with שָׁחַן, “oil” (Deut 28:40; 2 Sam 14:2; Ezek 16:9; Micah 6:15). It refers to applying perfumed olive oil as a cosmetic, and thus it could be translated, “put on scented oil.”¹⁶ Ruth would not have adorned herself with oil while she was still mourning for her deceased husband. For her now to apply fragrant olive oil would signal that her mourning was over and that she was available for marriage.

וַשְׂמַת שְׂמֹלֶתָּהּ עָלֶיהָ—This clause with the Qal second feminine singular perfect of שָׂמַת is, literally, “and put your clothing upon yourself.” This means that Ruth should wear her normal clothing, not mourning attire. The definite direct object lacks the object marker אֶת.¹⁷ The Qere is the plural noun with second feminine singular suffix, שְׂמֹלֶתָּהּ, “your clothes,” which is the reading in a few manuscripts, but preferable is the Kethib, which is the singular שְׂמֹלֶתָּהּ, “your clothing,” the reading in many manuscripts. שְׂמֹלֶתָּהּ refers to an “outer garment, cloak, mantle” (*HALOT*, 1) that can be worn for sleeping at night for warmth (as in Ex 22:26 [ET 22:27]).¹⁸ Hubbard proposes that “the context suggests the probable meaning ‘to get dressed up, to dress one’s best’ ” and cites the Vulgate and Targum for support.¹⁹ The Vulgate has *cultioribus vestimentis*, “finer clothes,” and the Targum has תְּכַשִּׁיטֶיךָ, “your adornments/jewelry.” However, Bush correctly states that the Hebrew term refers to a large outer garment “covering the entire body and extending well down on the legs”; neither here nor in any other context does it refer to dressy clothes.²⁰ A different term in 3:15 refers to a “shawl” she also wore.

וַיֵּרֶדְתִּי הַגֶּרֶן—The Qere, וַיֵּרֶדְתִּי, is the regular Qal second feminine singular perfect of יָרַד, while the Kethib, וַיֵּרֶדְתִּי, has an archaic form of the second feminine singular perfect ending, as also does the Kethib וַשְׂכַּבְתִּי in 3:4.²¹ Because these archaic forms occur in Ruth only in this speech by Naomi, they indicate the speech of an older person. After the verb of motion, the noun הַגֶּרֶן is an accusative of place indicating direction (see Williams, § 54; Waltke-O’Connor, § 10.2.2b): “and go down to the threshing floor.”

אַל-תִּהְיוּ יָדוּעַ לְאִישׁ—The Niphal can have a causative-reflexive meaning, and the imperfect (Qal second feminine singular of יָדַע) with אַל forms a negative imperative: “do not make yourself known to the man” (Waltke-O’Connor, § 23.4h, example 21).

¹⁶ Cf. Hubbard, *Ruth*, 197, n. 6; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 150.

¹⁷ Another such case was in 2:14. See Waltke-O’Connor, § 10.3b.

¹⁸ Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 150–51.

¹⁹ Hubbard, *Ruth*, 197, n. 7.

²⁰ Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 150–51.

²¹ See Joüon, § 42 f; GKC, § 44 h; Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth*, 11; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 197, n. 8; Sasson, *Ruth*, 245. This archaic ending also appears in Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

כָּלָה עַד בִּלְתּוֹ לֶאֱכֹל וְלִשְׁתּוֹת—The preposition עַד and Piel infinitive construct of כָּלָה with third masculine singular suffix forms a temporal clause: “until he has finished” (see Waltke-O’Connor, § 36.2.2b, including example 8). Following are two Qal infinitive constructs with לֶאֱכֹל (from אָכַל) and לִשְׁתּוֹת (from שָׁתָה), that serve as verbal complements (cf. Waltke-O’Connor, § 36.2.3b, including examples 5–11): “until he has finished *eating* and *drinking*.”

3:4 וַיְהִי בִשְׁכָבוֹ—The first verb is the Qal jussive of הָיָה with conjunctive *waw*. וַיְהִי is much less common than וַיְהִי, which commonly introduces a command or wish (GKC, § 112 bb), but וַיְהִי can have the same force (GKC, §§ 109 k; 112 z). Here (as also in 1 Sam 10:5; 2 Sam 5:24 || 1 Chr 14:15; 1 Ki 14:5), וַיְהִי is followed by an infinitive construct with preposition and suffix, forming a temporal clause. בִּשְׁכָבוֹ is the Qal infinitive construct of שָׁכַב (Joüon, § 65 b) with the preposition בִּ and a third masculine singular suffix. The temporal clause introduces the following commands,²² literally, “and may it be, when he lies down . . .” However, a translation of the imperatival jussive (“and may it be”) is not needed in English because the following verbs are translated as imperatives.

וַיֵּדַע אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב־שָׁם—The first verb is the next in the series of Qal second feminine singular perfects with *waw* consecutive that have an imperatival meaning (see the first textual note on 3:3). Here יֵדַע means that Ruth is to “take note of” (see BDB, Qal, 1 b) the place, a different meaning than יָדַע had in 3:3b. Hebrew characteristically uses the pleonastic adverb שָׁם, literally, “the place where he lies *there*,” which need not be translated.

וַיָּבֹא—This is the Qal second feminine singular perfect of בָּא with *waw* consecutive. From the perspective of Boaz, Ruth is to “come to” or “approach” him.

וַתְּגַלֶּה מִרְגְּלֶיהָ—The verb is the Piel perfect second feminine singular of גָּלָה with *waw* consecutive. The Piel of גָּלָה, “to uncover, reveal,” with the object עֲרֹנָה, “nakedness,” is often used in reference to forbidden sexual relations (e.g., Lev 18:6–19; 20:17–21; Ezek 22:10; 23:10, 18). But its object here is מִרְגְּלָיו, literally, “his foot-places,” meaning “the place of (or the area around) his feet.” מִרְגְּלוֹת occurs also in Ruth 3:7, 8, 14 and elsewhere only in Dan 10:6. The noun is a feminine plural of extension, referring to a location (GKC, § 124 b; Waltke-O’Connor, § 7.4.1c; cf. § 7.1d). It corresponds to מִרְאָשׁוֹת, the “place at the head” (BDB) of someone lying down (Gen 28:11, 18; 1 Sam 19:13, 16; 1 Ki 19:6). The clause “uncover the place of his feet” avoids the suggestion of sexuality that could have been present if the object were רַגְלָיו, “uncover his feet.”²³ In the OT the verb גָּלָה is never used with רַגְלָיו, but in other contexts רַגְלָיו (“legs/feet”) occasionally seems to be euphemistic, though never does it pertain to sexual intimacy.²⁴ But מִרְגְּלָיו clearly has a literal meaning in 3:8, 14 (see

²² Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 152.

²³ Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 153; cf. Campbell, *Ruth*, 121; Joüon, *Ruth*, 69; Sasson, *Ruth*, 69–70; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 203.

²⁴ According to some commentators and lexicons it may refer to the pubic region in Ex 4:25; Is 6:2; 7:20, though in none of those passages is the context one of sexual intimacy. It is used in idioms for relieving oneself in Judg 3:24; 1 Sam 24:4 (ET 24:3); and the Qere in 2 Ki 18:27 (|| Is 36:12).

the last textual note on 3:8), which makes it implausible that its meaning here is euphemistic.

Naomi's instruction to Ruth cannot mean "uncover yourself at his feet,"²⁵ for that would require a Niphal verb.

וְשָׁכְבָתִי—The Qere is וְשָׁכְבָתִי, the normal form, while the Kethib is וְשָׁכְבָתִי, an archaic form of the Qal second feminine singular perfect of שָׁכַב with *waw* consecutive.²⁶ It continues the imperatival series: "and lie down." Like the preceding Piel of גָּלָה, this verb too can have sexual overtones in other contexts (see the commentary).

וְהוּא יִגִּיד לְךָ אֶת אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשִׂין—The pronoun הוּא is grammatically unnecessary with the third masculine singular verb (יִגִּיד, Hiphil imperfect of נָגַד), so it emphasizes the shift from Ruth's activity to that of Boaz: "*He himself* will tell you what you should do." תַּעֲשִׂין, the Qal imperfect second feminine singular of עָשָׂה, has a final paragogic *nun* (see the last textual note on 2:8). The imperfect has the modal nuance of obligation, "should do" (see Joüon, § 113 m; Waltke-O'Connor, § 31.4g, including example 16).

3:5 וְהָאָמֶר אֵלֶיהָ—Naomi spoke to Ruth in 3:1–4. The following context will clarify that this clause, literally, "And she said to her ...," means that Ruth is now speaking to Naomi.

כָּל אֲשֶׁר-תֹּאמַרִי ... אֶעֱשֶׂה—The first part of the clause ("all that you say ...") is the direct object of the verb at the end of the verse, אֶעֱשֶׂה ("I will do"). Here and in 3:11 אֵת is not used in the כָּל אֲשֶׁר- phrase that precedes and is the direct object of a form of עָשָׂה. It is used in 3:16, where the phrase forming the direct object (... כָּל-אֲשֶׁר) follows the verb, there the Hiphil of נָגַד (Joüon, § 125 i).

Since Naomi has already spoken, it is unusual for Ruth to use the imperfect תֹּאמַרִי, "all that you say/will say," instead of a perfect. Yet Boaz will use the identical imperfect when he assures Ruth, "All that you say [תֹּאמַרִי], I will do for you!" (3:11), as he responds to Ruth's (completed) words and actions. See a similar promise with an imperfect (of צָוָה) in 2 Sam 9:11. The imperfect can be used for past actions whose effect continues (GKC, § 107 h).²⁷ Another explanation is that the imperfect is used formulaically here. In some passages, a person uses an imperfect in a formula of obedience that he speaks before he receives the commands he is to obey (e.g., "All that you will say to me, I shall do" [Num 22:17]; similar are Gen 41:55; Deut 17:11; 2 Ki 10:5). The imperfect here may reflect such formulaic language even though Ruth has already received the commands from Naomi.

According to the Kethib the verse ends with תֹּאמַרִי אֶעֱשֶׂה. But the inserted vowels indicate that the Qere is אֵלֶי אֶעֱשֶׂה תֹּאמַרִי ("that you say *to me* I will do"), and אֵלֶי appears in many manuscripts, but is not represented in the LXX. Likewise in 3:17

²⁵ Van Wolde, "Texts in Dialogue with Texts," 19–20, argues for that understanding.

²⁶ Joüon, § 42 f; GKC, § 44 h; Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth*, 11.

²⁷ See Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth, das Hohe Lied, die Klagelieder*, 52–53; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 198, n. 12; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 154.

אֲלֵי is absent from the Kethib but indicated for the Qere. In both verses it makes for a smoother reading, but is not necessary.

3:6 וַתֵּרֶד הָגֶרֶן—The verb is Qal third feminine singular imperfect of יָרַד with *waw* consecutive, with a consequential meaning: “So she went down to the threshing floor.” After the verb of motion, the noun הָגֶרֶן is an accusative of place. The verb יָרַד indicates that the threshing floor was located somewhat lower than the city. If it were as high on the hill as the city, the wind might be too strong for winnowing, perhaps blowing some kernels away with the chaff (cf. 1 Ki 22:10; Jer 15:7).²⁸

וַתַּעַשׂ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-צִוְתָהּ חֲמוּלָה:—The Qal third feminine singular imperfect of עָשָׂה with *waw* consecutive has a sequential meaning: “And (then) she did ...” כְּכֹל is, literally, “according to all.” A few manuscripts omit the preposition כִּי, and it is not reflected in the Syriac and Vulgate. However, the combination כְּכֹל is common in OT passages where someone does (עָשָׂה) what was commanded (the verb צִוָּה).^a צִוְתָהּ is the Piel third feminine singular perfect of צִוָּה with a third feminine singular suffix that lacks the usual *mappiq* (־ָ). In this context the meaning of צִוְתָהּ is pluperfect: “she had commanded her.”²⁹

(a) E.g., Gen 6:22; 7:5; Ex 29:35; 31:11; 39:32



Commentary

Ruth 3 is the turning point in the book because Naomi conceives of a plan that can resolve the dilemma of the two impoverished widows. If Boaz would marry Ruth and act as “redeemer” (3:9), he would obligate himself to support both the widow he marries and the widow of the man whose property he redeems (4:3). Moreover, through the marriage the LORD could provide an heir who would give the family new and continuing life. The LORD will bless the plan with a far greater outcome than Naomi envisions here: from the union of Boaz and Ruth, the family line will lead to King David (4:17–22) and eventuate in David’s greater Son, Jesus, “the Christ” (Mt 1:1, 5, 16), “who is God over all, blessed forever” (Rom 9:5).

Ruth 3 parallels Ruth 2 since, in each chapter, scenes with Ruth and Naomi enclose the main scene with Ruth and Boaz. In chapter 2, the main scene is 2:3–17, enclosed by 2:2 and 2:18–22, and in chapter 3, the main scene is 3:7–15, enclosed by 3:1–6 and 3:16–18. The narrator, by reusing key (or related) words from earlier chapters, indicates that chapter 3 at least begins to resolve the problems of chapters 1 and 2, and that Boaz is the key in settling matters.³⁰ Those key words include “security, rest” (בְּנוֹחָה) in 1:9 and “security, resting place” (בְּנוֹחַ) in 3:1; “acquaintance” (Qere מוֹדַע) or “relative” (Kethib מוֹדָע) in 2:1 and “relative” (מִדְּעָה) in 3:2; “wing” (כַּנְיָ) in 2:12 and 3:9; “faithfulness” (חֲסִדָּה),

²⁸ Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 3:71–72.

²⁹ On Hebrew pluperfects, see Waltke-O’Connor, § 30.5.2b; GKC, § 106 f. On the loss of *mappiq* in the suffix on צִוְתָהּ, see GKC, § 91 e (see also § 58 g); Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth*, 18. On the penultimate accent of צִוְתָהּ, see GKC, § 59 g.

³⁰ Campbell, *Ruth*, 130; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 196.

hesed) in 1:8; 2:20; 3:10; “an honorable gentleman” (אִישׁ נָכוֹר חָיִל) in 2:1 and “an honorable woman” (אִשָּׁתָּה חָיִל) in 3:11; and “empty” versus “full.”³¹ Other key terms that are concentrated in chapter 3 (but were largely or entirely absent from chapters 1–2) serve to bind this chapter together with repetition and interrelationship: גֶּר, “threshing floor” (in Ruth only in 3:2, 3, 6, 14); שָׁכַב, “lie down” (in Ruth only in 3:4 [three times], 7 [twice], 8, 13, 14); and גָּאֵל, “redeem” (seven of its twenty-two occurrences in Ruth are in this chapter: 3:9, 12 [twice], 13 [four times]; this includes the participle גֹּאֵל, “redeemer”).³²

Ruth 3 divides neatly into two sections. First, Naomi divulges the plan to Ruth, who pledges to carry it out (3:1–6). Then 3:7–18 narrates Ruth’s implementation of the plan and the result. In addition, the entire chapter also has a chiastic structure:

- A Naomi’s plan (3:1–4)
- B Ruth obeys Naomi (3:5–6)
- C First Boaz lies down, then Ruth (3:7–8)
 - D Ruth requests that Boaz be the redeemer (3:9)
 - E Boaz praises Ruth and promises to fulfill her request (3:10–11)
 - D’ Boaz agrees to redeem, but another one is closer (3:12–13)
- C’ They both remain lying there until early morning (3:14)
- B’ Ruth brings the grain to Naomi and reports to her (3:15–17)
- A’ Naomi’s final counsel to Ruth (3:18)³³

“Should I Not Seek for You Security?” (3:1–2)

Interestingly enough, Ruth is not mentioned by name in this act (chapter 3) until she identifies herself to Boaz (3:9). Nevertheless, the context clearly indicates that in 3:1–4 Naomi speaks to Ruth, who replies in 3:5 and then acts in 3:6. In 3:1 the narrator further identifies “Naomi” as Ruth’s “mother-in-law,” perhaps to indicate that the spotlight now turns to Naomi as the one who unfolds a plan for Ruth.

As mother-in-law to a foreigner, Naomi had no compelling duty to try to arrange a marriage for Ruth, who was only her daughter-in-law and a Moabitess. Nevertheless, Naomi practically assumed the role of Ruth’s mother as she spelled out a plan for her, again addressing Ruth as “my daughter” (3:1), as she had in 2:2, 22. In this context, that familial term is meant more literally than when Naomi called Ruth and Orpah “my daughters” in 1:11–13, where her emphasis was that they should obey her, especially because of her age se-

³¹ “Empty” (רֵיקָם) is in 1:21 and 3:17, but it is negated in 3:17 (“You shall not come empty-handed”), and so there it is a synonym of “full.” Various Hebrew words that deal with fullness include מִלֵּאָה, “full,” in 1:21; יִשְׁלֵם, “fulfill,” and שְׂלֵמָה, “full,” in 2:12; שָׂבַע, “be full,” in 2:14; and שִׂבְעָה, “fullness,” in 2:18. The theme of “empty” versus “full” involves both family (dead versus living) and food (famine versus satiety). See the commentary on 1:1, 6, 21; 2:12, 14, 17–18, 21, 23; 3:7, 17; 4:11–16.

³² For other key words in Ruth, see “Patriarchal Parallels” and “Storytelling” in “The Motifs” in the introduction, and “Faith” in “The Theology” in the introduction. See also Dommershausen, “Leitwortstil in der Ruthrolle”; Gow, *The Book of Ruth*, 63; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 147.

³³ See Gow, *The Book of Ruth*, 63–64. On the structure of 3:1–5, see Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 146.

niority, which also made it impossible for her to bear sons who could become their husbands.

Here Naomi assumes the role of Ruth's mother in order to be her matchmaker.³⁴ Naomi is free to seek an Israelite husband for Ruth since Ruth has been welcomed into Israel by Boaz, a relative of Naomi's deceased husband (2:1) who treated Ruth as if she were a member of his clan (2:12, 14–16, 21). That Naomi's plan might include marriage for Ruth is indicated by מְנוּחָה (*manoah*, "security, rest," 3:1), which recalls the cognate term and synonym מְנוּחָה (*menuḥah*, 1:9), which Naomi used for a husband's home when she first discussed her concern for the remarriage of her daughters-in-law.³⁵

Naomi's opening question, "Should I not seek for you security?" does not seek an answer, but is really an emphatic declaration with the implication of obligation, "I *should* seek for you security," for Naomi assumes the maternal duty to better Ruth's circumstances. Likewise, the following idiom, "so that it will be good for you," in this context refers to marital happiness, children, and security. Although Naomi does not explicitly say that she is seeking a husband for Ruth, the narrator's art has made this obvious enough to the hearer and reader.

That Naomi here began to answer her own prayer (1:9) shows how divine and human actions coincide: God acts through his believers as his instruments. That they appear to seize the initiative to take advantage of their opportunities (*carpe diem*) is really God acting through them in *his* opportunities (this is a major theme in Ecclesiastes, especially 3:1–14).³⁶

Winnowing (Ruth 3:2) was the climax of the harvest process. For after the ears of grain were reaped and gathered, the kernels were freed from their husks and stalks by threshing, as large amounts were trampled by animals, who might pull a threshing sledge.³⁷ Then, large wooden forks were used to lift away the straw, before the kernels were separated from the husks by winnowing, namely, tossing them into the air with a shovel, letting the wind blow away the chaff, or by sifting with a sieve. The west wind usually blew strongly in the after-



³⁴ After Ruth's conversion to faith in the LORD and her pledge of undying devotion to Naomi (1:16–17), the roles of the widowed mother-in-law and her widowed daughter-in-law might even be compared to that of a father acting on behalf of his son, as when Abraham procured a wife for his son Isaac (Genesis 24). See Berquist, "Role Dedifferentiation in the Book of Ruth," 31; Saxegaard, "More Than Seven Sons," 265. Lot's daughters and Tamar, who were childless widows like Ruth, took the initiative to obtain progeny, and all succeeded with significant descendants: Moab, Ben-ammi (father of the Ammonites), Boaz, and David (Genesis 19; 38; Saxegaard, "More Than Seven Sons," 266–67).

³⁵ According to de Waard and Nida (*A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Ruth*, 46), the theme of chapters 3 and 4 is "a husband and a home for Ruth." See Berquist, "Role Dedifferentiation in the Book of Ruth," 31.

³⁶ Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 81; Wilch, *Time and Event*, 121–28; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 197, n. 2, 199. See "Providence" and "Human Agency" in "The Theology" in the introduction.

³⁷ For "threshing sledge," see מְנוּחָה in 2 Sam 24:22; Is 41:15; 1 Chr 21:23; and מְנוּחָה in Is 28:27; 41:15; Amos 1:3; Job 41:22 (ET 41:30); see also Richardson, *IDB* 4:636.

noon, but the evening was better for winnowing because the wind was not so strong as to blow the kernels away with the chaff (see Jer 4:11–12). The kernels were collected as grain while the straw became fodder and the chaff fuel.³⁸

In the Ruth story, the time is early June, around Shavuoth or Pentecost, after the harvests of barley and wheat, which together lasted about seven weeks.³⁹ Even though the harvests were completed (2:23), some barley still had to be winnowed (see the textual notes on 3:2). That Boaz ended his day of work with a satisfying supper need not refer to feasting after the entire harvest had been winnowed, but merely to partaking of the day's main meal.⁴⁰ The season of harvest and fruitfulness is a natural time for courtship (the plan in chapter 3), marriage (4:10), and the conception of children (4:13).⁴¹

The setting for Ruth 3 revolves around “the threshing floor” (3:2). A wealthy landowner would have his own private threshing floor.⁴² Those farmers who were less well-off would bring their grain to the village's common threshing floor for threshing, winnowing, and sieving. The common threshing floor was a public place that could be used for important social activities,⁴³ although the more important transactions that involved witnesses were conducted at the town gate (see Ruth 4:1–2).

Naomi's plan is based on two premises. First, Boaz is a close relative who has proven his clan faithfulness through his overflowing generosity to Ruth (chapter 2). Second, this night presents a golden opportunity for Ruth to approach him secretly. Boaz likely took advantage of the propitious early evening breeze for winnowing the barley. Then after dark he would eat and drink (3:3) before going to sleep (3:4, 7). To guard the grain from thieves (cf. 1 Sam 23:1), Boaz himself evidently would take the night watch on this night, as Naomi had ascertained in advance, perhaps through town gossip. (On other nights he may have delegated this duty to his foreman [cf. Ruth 2:5–6].)

However, this plan also entailed a danger. In the fertility religion and culture of the native Canaanites and of Israel's neighbors, the threshing floor on

³⁸ See Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 1^{II}:511, 551–52; 3:126–29; de Waard and Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Ruth*, 48; Sasson, *Ruth*, 65; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 200–201; Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel*, 64–66; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 149–50.

³⁹ See the last textual note on 2:21 and the commentary on 2:21–23.

⁴⁰ See Hubbard, *Ruth*, 198, n. 10. The Gezer Calendar (tenth century B.C.) states that the month with the barley harvest was followed by a month with another harvest, presumably of wheat (the main harvest of grain). According to an older translation of that calendar, that second (wheat) harvest was followed by “feasting” (ANET, 320). However, others interpret the term to refer to “measuring” the wheat (Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, 1:2 [see also pp. 3–4]; O. Borowski, “Agriculture,” *ABD* 1:97).

⁴¹ The wheat harvest was also the time when Samson took a slaughtered kid to celebrate with his wife (Judg 15:1), and it could have been the time of the festival at Shiloh (Judg 21:19–21; Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 1^{II}:416, 441, 633), although that festival and the season when Solomon courted his bride (Song 2:10–13) probably were earlier in springtime, after Passover (Mitchell, *The Song of Songs*, 726–29).

⁴² See 2 Sam 6:6; 24:16; 2 Chr 3:1; Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 233.

⁴³ Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 231–33.

festive occasions was a site for sexual licentiousness, and pagan influence led to such immorality in Israel too (Hos 9:1).⁴⁴ The danger, then, is that Ruth and Boaz might fall into the sin of intercourse before marriage. This danger is suggested not only because the encounter would take place at “the threshing floor” (3:2–3, 6, 14) in secret at night, but also because other Hebrew vocabulary in 3:3–4 can, depending on the context, have sexual connotations (see the commentary below). The dramatic tension created by this danger at the start of chapter 3 is not resolved until after Boaz and Ruth have passed the night chastely (3:7–14) and they part (3:15–16).

“Note the Place Where He Lies Down” (3:3–4)

Ruth was to prepare and dress herself—at first glance, as if for a betrothal, which would include bathing, anointing with perfumed olive oil, and wearing one’s most festive dress and jewelry (Ezek 16:8–10; Esth 2:12; see also Song 1:10–12; 4:9–11).⁴⁵ However, the “cloak” (3:3) Ruth was to wear was an ordinary outer covering, not a fancy dress, and there is no mention of jewelry. But for the widow Ruth to lay aside her mourning attire and wear normal clothing signaled that her period of mourning was over and she was returning to normal life (see Gen 38:14, 19; 2 Sam 12:20; 14:2), which may include marriage.⁴⁶ Likewise, for her to bathe and freshen her skin with fragrant olive oil indicated that she was no longer in mourning and was available for marriage.⁴⁷ Her symbolic message was not to entice Boaz to adultery, but to help him understand that she was making a marriage proposal (see the commentary below on 3:9).

In the culture of that time and place, young single women (that is, young teenagers) could more or less freely converse with men of their town. However, it was unheard of for a woman to approach a man and propose marriage directly, for that would make her appear as immoral as a prostitute. Marriages were properly and almost always arranged: the bride’s parents and brothers negotiated the marriage on her behalf, either with the groom’s parents or with the groom himself.⁴⁸



⁴⁴ See Robertson, “The Plot of the Book of Ruth,” 216; Morris, *Ruth*, 285; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 199–201.

⁴⁵ In Song 4:10, Solomon’s bride wears fragrant oils, whereas in Song 1:3, Solomon the bridegroom is scented with oil, and according to Ps 45:8 (ET 45:7), God himself anoints the messianic Bridegroom with oil. Oil and aromatics represented the anointing of the Holy Spirit, by whose power Jesus was conceived of the Virgin Mary (Mt 1:18, 20; Lk 1:35), and who descended upon Christ at his Baptism (Mt 3:16; see also Mt 4:1; 12:18; and the outpouring of the Spirit upon those baptized into Christ in Mt 28:19; Jn 3:5–8; Acts 2:38–39). Compare the anointings, spices, and ointments for Christ in Mk 14:3; 16:1; Lk 7:36–50; Jn 12:3. See Mitchell, *The Song of Songs*, 584–88, 834–35, 862–68.

⁴⁶ Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 151–52; 684.

⁴⁷ See Mt 6:17, where Jesus commands his fasting disciples to anoint themselves with oil and wash their faces to mask their period of penitence from others. Anointing is a sign of acceptance and rejoicing in, for example, Pss 23:5; 92:11 (ET 92:10); Lk 7:46.

⁴⁸ Mitchell, *The Song of Songs*, 117–20; de Vaux, *Social Institutions*, 29–30. See the marriage negotiations and arrangements in, for example, Genesis 24; 28–29; 34; Deut 7:3–4.

Considering the cool night air, Ruth also wore a large outer wrap or shawl (3:15). As she went down to the threshing floor (3:3, 6), which evidently was on a somewhat lower elevation, she must carefully take note of Boaz, but must not let herself be noticed or “known to the man” (3:3). When Boaz had seen her in chapter 2, probably she still had been wearing her drab mourning attire, so now he would not recognize her in her ordinary clothing and shawl unless she identified herself to him (as she will do, but not until 3:9). Naomi refers to him as “the man” (3:3; also 3:18), as does the narrator (3:8; also 3:16), and Ruth is called the “woman” (3:8, 11, 14), heightening the sexual tension in this man-woman scene.⁴⁹ Naomi anticipated that after Boaz finished his work he would be “eating and drinking” (3:3), but she did not mean that Boaz might get drunk and lapse into immorality (as if to allude to Lot and his daughters [Gen 19:32–35]), but only that he would be in good spirits, for, unless one was too poor, wine would be expected at a full meal, especially after the harvest season.⁵⁰

Not every detail of Naomi’s instructions was included by the narrator in 3:1–4. Some details of her guidance are only revealed by what Ruth did during the actual encounter. The proposal Ruth speaks in 3:9 must have been prescribed for her by Naomi, even though it was not recorded in 3:1–4. At this time Naomi also must have told Ruth to tell Boaz that she (Naomi) was ready to transfer the right to redeem the property of her deceased husband, Elimelech, even though the narrative of the encounter (3:7–15) omits Ruth passing on that information, which Boaz divulges in 4:3 (he must have learned it from Ruth). The narrator’s style often reserves informing the audience of some facts and reveals them only later during a major conversation (see “Storytelling” in “The Motifs” in the introduction).

Boaz would soon drop off to sleep after his satisfying meal (3:3), and Naomi told Ruth to approach and draw back the corner of Boaz’s mantle to expose his feet, then lie down herself (3:4). While not explained here, in light of 3:7–8 it is evident that Ruth was to take care not to awaken Boaz suddenly, which might cause a commotion, arouse others lying nearby, and so make public Ruth and the plan. Instead, she was to let the cool air on his exposed feet gradually and calmly arouse him from sleep. Then he could inquire about her intentions (as he will do in 3:9) and decide the course of action for them both, as Naomi anticipates here: “He himself will tell you what you should do” (3:4).

By telling Ruth to “uncover the place of his [Boaz’s] feet” (3:4), Naomi used—and the narrator included—a Hebrew verb that in other contexts can describe sexual immorality (see the textual notes). Indeed, a number of Hebrew terms in 3:2–4 can, depending on the context, pertain to or be associated with sexual intimacy: “threshing floor,” “tonight,” “know,” “eat,” “drink,” “ap-

⁴⁹ See also the end of the commentary on 3:1–2.

⁵⁰ Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 4:389; Humbert, “Art et leçon de l’histoire de Ruth,” 274; Hertzberg, *Die Bücher Josua, Richter, Ruth*, 274; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 202, including n. 27.

proach,” and “lie down.”⁵¹ The question may thus arise for us, the story’s audience, whether Naomi wanted Ruth to entice Boaz to sexual activity.⁵²

However, Ruth’s actions, including her lying next to him, together with her attire and anointing, should rather be interpreted (as they were by Boaz) in the context of what she had to say (3:9) as an implied request for marriage. The obvious objective of Naomi was marriage for Ruth (3:1; cf. 1:9, 11–13), and so she would not have counseled Ruth to engage in behavior that Boaz might interpret as a seductive wish for intercourse. It is evident that Naomi and Ruth trusted Boaz as a pious, “honorable gentleman” (2:1) who would not misinterpret Ruth’s motive nor succumb to an opportunity for immorality (see below on 3:7–10). Nevertheless, considering his good spirits and the secrecy of the situation, besides the possibility of being discovered together by a third party, the plan involved a great deal of risk.⁵³

“All That You Say to Me, I Will Do!” (3:5–6)

Ruth demonstrated again her full devotion to Naomi, carrying out with unquestioning obedience the instructions of her plan completely. Like Esther (“if I perish, I perish,” Esth 4:16), she went ahead with the plan, despite the dangers involved.⁵⁴ Ruth here reminds us also of the matriarch Sarai, who obediently acquiesced to Abram’s plan to identify her as his sister rather than wife, because the heathen Egyptians would kill the husband in order to obtain a beautiful wife, but should negotiate with a brother for his sister, which could give Abram the opportunity to save them both (Gen 12:11–13; see also Gen 20:11–13; 24:29–60).⁵⁵ When Sarai recognized that it was God’s will for her to agree to Abram’s plan (later confirmed by them being delivered from harm

⁵¹ For “threshing floor,” see the commentary above on Ruth 3:2, which cites Hos 9:1. See, for example, “know” (יָדַע) in Gen 4:1, 17, 25; “give to drink” (Hiphil of שָׁקַע, while Ruth 3:3 has the Qal of שָׁתָה), “tonight” (הַלַּיְלָה), “approach” (בֹּא), and “lie down” (שָׁכַב) in Gen 19:32–35; “approach” (בֹּא), “lie down” (שָׁכַב), and “tonight” (הַלַּיְלָה) in Gen 30:15–16; “eat” (אָכַל) and “drink” (שָׁתָה) in Ex 32:6; “eat” (אָכַל), “drink” (שָׁתָה), and “lie down” (שָׁכַב) in 2 Sam 11:11. In addition, Van Wolde, “Texts in Dialogue with Texts,” 22, proposes that עֲרֵמָה (*‘aremah*), “grain heap,” in 3:7 might allude to עָרוֹם (*‘arom*), “naked,” which does not occur in Ruth.

⁵² Murray Gow observes an interesting correspondence between this passage in Ruth and the parable delivered by the prophet Nathan (2 Sam 12:1–4) after David’s adultery with Bathsheba: the words for “eat,” “drink,” “lie,” and “daughter” all occur in both passages, and “acquire” (קָנָה), which can convey the intent to marry (Ruth 4:5, 10), occurs in 2 Sam 12:3 and in Ruth 4:4–5, 8–10. “Eat,” “drink,” and “lie down” occur together in 2 Sam 11:11, where Uriah responds to David’s suggestions regarding Bathsheba. Gow sees בַּת (*bath*, “daughter”) in 2 Sam 12:3 as hinting at the name of Bathsheba, and the other terminology (“eat,” “drink,” and “lie,” 2 Sam 12:1–4) as pointing to David’s adultery with her. Gow also suggests that Nathan may have been the author of Ruth (*The Book of Ruth*, 67, n. 9; 176; see “Wisdom Source” in “The Story” in the introduction).

⁵³ See Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 394; Tribble, “Two Women in a Man’s World,” 266; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 203–5; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 155; Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 686–87.

⁵⁴ Hubbard, *Ruth*, 205–6; Gow, *The Book of Ruth*, 125; Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 688.

⁵⁵ For the view that Abram’s “lie” was not a sin, see Luther, AE 2:291–303 (WA 42.470–78); Wilch (“Abram in Egypt,” 15–17).

and keeping many gifts [Gen 12:16, 20]), she may have said to him in effect what the Virgin Mary replied to the archangel Gabriel: “Be it done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38).⁵⁶

As both a man and a woman were involved and culpable in the first sin (Gen 3:6–19), so it was appropriate that not only a man but also a woman would parent God’s redeemed people of the old covenant (Gen 12:2, 5; 18:10). While a woman was the first to sin and did so by disobeying God’s Word (Gen 3:6; 1 Tim 2:14), God’s design was for the Savior to be born from a woman (Gen 3:15; cf. 1 Tim 2:15),⁵⁷ from a virgin, untouched by a man, who received God’s Word in faith and entrusted herself completely to his will (Is 7:14; 9:5 [ET 9:6]; Lk 1:27, 34, 38). God’s plan of salvation placed Mary at risk of being charged with adultery (Mt 1:18–20) and would bring her untold grief (Lk 2:35; Jn 19:25–27).⁵⁸

Though Sarah’s faith was mixed with doubt and laughter (Gen 18:9–15), she, like Mary, received the power to conceive according to God’s promise (Heb 11:11). The matriarch was willing to take the risk and bear the ridicule of bearing a child in her old age (Gen 21:1–2, 6–7).⁵⁹

Likewise Ruth, the future matriarch (Ruth 4:17–22), responded in faith when she was confronted with Naomi’s risky plan for her. Ruth did not retract her oath of fidelity to Naomi and her confession of faith in the LORD (1:16–17). If Ruth were discovered in a compromising situation at night with Boaz (“an honorable gentleman” [2:1], probably already married with children), she would be totally disgraced and her life ruined. If she had refused to cooperate with Naomi, she could have had the prospect of marriage to a younger man, possibly more to her liking, perhaps even a wealthy man (3:10–11). But Ruth, who had come to trust in the LORD (1:17; 2:12), agreed to carry out Naomi’s plan because it meant not just marriage for herself, but more importantly, the redemption of her mother-in-law’s doomed family (3:9, 13; 4:9–10, 14).

This would fulfill God’s will for the continuation of an Israelite family, from which the Redeemer would come for the whole world (Rom 9:4–5).⁶⁰ The LORD would give conception to Ruth (Ruth 4:13) as he had to Sarah (Gen 21:1–2) and would to Mary (Mt 1:18, 20). Ruth the Moabitess would receive the honor of becoming an ancestress of Israel’s royal family, the dynasty of David (Ruth 4:17–22), which, in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4), would culminate in “the Son of David,” “the Christ” (Mt 1:1, 5, 17).



⁵⁶ See Just, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 62, 71.

⁵⁷ See Leupold, *Genesis*, 152, 165.

⁵⁸ See Lenski, *St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 41–48; Lenski, *St. Luke’s Gospel*, 69, 154–55; Just, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 68–71, 123–24; Lenski, *St. John’s Gospel*, 1294–99.

⁵⁹ See Roehrs, *Concordia Self-Study Commentary*, OT 34. Leupold renders Gen 21:6 as “God hath prepared laughter for me; all that hear of it will laugh with me” (*Genesis*, 596–97; see Keil, *The First Book of Moses*, 243).

⁶⁰ See “Redemption” in “The Motifs” in the introduction.