

relative, had responsibility towards Ruth and the family property which Naomi was forced to sell out of poverty.

So Ruth's behavior in chapter three was not some indiscreet escapade, but rather her legally proper initiative to tell Boaz that she was willing for him to take on his responsibilities as kinsman-redeemer (3:9). Naomi knew that after the harvest party, Boaz, along with his servants, would be spending the night at the threshing floor to guard the winnowed grain (Jud. 6:11). Naomi's plan was just a sensible, logical (and also romantic) way for Ruth to communicate her wishes to Boaz.

Boaz's Behavior

The honorable behavior of Boaz in response to Ruth's devotion, as well as his noble actions towards Naomi, the other close relative in chapter four, point out his character, and remind us again of our own Kinsman-Redeemer, the Lord Jesus. As the wealthy Boaz willingly bought back the lost property and married Ruth, the poor Gentile foreigner, so Christ in His love has recovered all our "lost property" and taken us poor "foreigners" to be His bride (Eph. 2:12-13; 5:31-32). There were three prerequisites necessary for the kins-

man-redeemer: he had to be a close relative, who was wealthy and willing.

As our Kinsman-Redeemer, the Lord Jesus fulfills all three prerequisites perfectly.

Is He a close relative? Hebrews 2:5-16 makes clear that the eternal Son of God took on humanity precisely so that He would become our Kinsman in order to redeem us.

Is He a wealthy close relative? First Peter 1:18-19 emphasizes that Jesus Christ alone had the means to pay the infinite price of redemption – a perfect, sinless life.

Is He a willing close relative? Mark 10:45 tells us that the Son of Man gave His life as a sacrifice in order to redeem us.

What is our response?

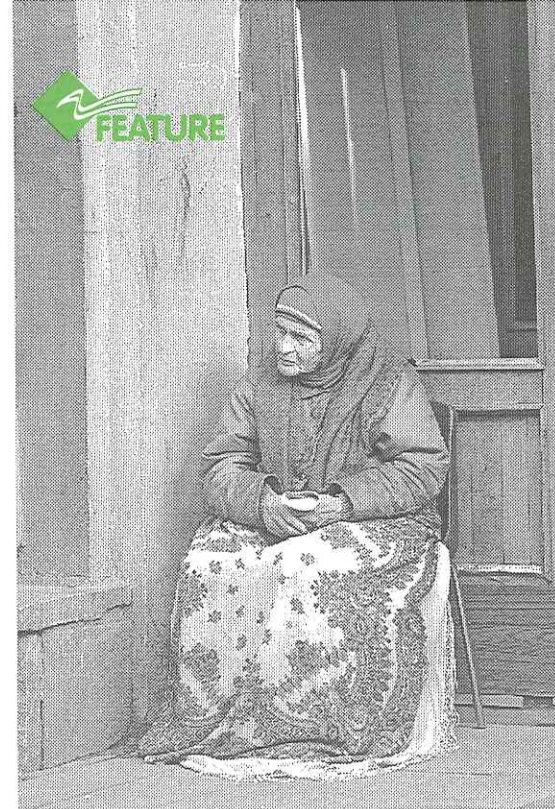
God's Grace

Like all Cinderella stories, the Book of Ruth has a happy ending. The rags-to-riches aspect is emphasized at the end of chapter four where we learn that Ruth was the great-grandmother of King David. And when we realize that this poor woman from Moab is thus brought into the Messianic line (Mt. 1:5), we are further amazed at the riches of God's grace – grace that is still available to take sinners from rags to riches. *G7*

THE BOOK OF RUTH

The Story Of Naomi

by Tom Keiser



*And the women said to Naomi,
"Blessed be Jehovah who hath not left thee this day
without one that has the right of redemption."*

Ruth 4:14

Ruth is an inspired story, one of the historical books of the Old Testament. When reading stories it is helpful to be aware of the features normally found in them. The beginning usually provides some background information so the reader can understand the context of what is going to happen. Next, the author builds the plot, which is usually centered

on a goal to be achieved or problem to be solved. Then the plot complications make the story more interesting. The climax comes next, in which the goal is achieved or the problem solved. Then follows the resolution which includes the results and implications of that resolution. In the process of telling the story, the author uses techniques to create interest, heighten emo-

tion, and color the story while drawing attention to the main character and the plot. Let's consider some of these features in the Book of Ruth, focusing on the way the unknown author identifies the main character and presents the point he is trying to convey to the reader.

The Main Character

The Book of Ruth follows this typical story structure, and awareness of this helps us understand what the book is really about. Most approaches to this book deal with character studies of Ruth or Boaz, or consider their relationship – all of which are important. However, recognizing the book's story structure reveals that it is more about Naomi, as evidenced by the author's drawing attention to her through common literary techniques.

The way the story opens leads the reader to expect the main character to be Elimelech. Starting a story, in the male-dominated Near Eastern culture, by introducing a man who took action to care for his wife and children, focuses the reader's attention on him. But then, to the reader's surprise, he dies in the third verse of the first chapter. This is like a viewer today watching the beginning of a

movie in which all the action is centered on a character played by a famous actor, only to have that character die a few minutes into the movie. This would cause the viewer to think, "What's going on? I thought the story was about him!" This is the effect of beginning the Book of Ruth by focusing on Elimelech – and then seeing him die.

The wording of the story at this point is crucial to understanding the twist being introduced by the author. Whereas Naomi was simply Elimelech's "wife" in verse one, upon his death in verse three, Elimelech is presented as "Naomi's husband." That is, the author switches the reference point from Elimelech to Naomi. The center of attention is not the husband/father, as would be expected. It is rather on the wife/mother. This change of reference point is reinforced by the change in description of the two sons. Initially they are presented as Elimelech's "two sons," but then are seen as "her two sons." All of a sudden, everything is changed – from the story's expected main character, Elimelech, to the actual main character, Naomi. By this "bait and switch" technique, the author very effectively introduces Naomi as the central figure, while simultaneously heightening the reader's interest.

In that culture, a woman without husband or sons to provide for her, was in dire straits.

The Problem

The problem faced by Naomi is introduced when Elimelech and her two sons die, leaving her alone. To the ancient Near East reader, the implications of this situation are very clear, although they are easily lost on today's reader. In that culture, a woman, especially an aging woman, without husband or sons to provide for her, was in dire straits. With no one to supply the basics of food, clothing and shelter, her survival was in jeopardy.

The problem facing Naomi, although implied by her situation, is reinforced by the author as he uses phraseology which emphasizes her plight. A literal interpretation of the Hebrew reveals the author's emphasis: "And Elimelech died, the husband of Naomi. And she was left – she and her two sons ... And they died – even the two of them. And she was left, the woman, from her two children and her husband." By the very way the author introduces the story and its characters, it appears that Naomi is the main character and her problem is

life-threatening abandonment.

The end of the Book of Ruth reinforces that Naomi is the main character and that the problem involves her survival. Upon resolution of the plot, the birth of a redeemer, the author focuses the reader's attention on Naomi. The city women said, "blessed be Jehovah who hath not left thee (Naomi) without one who has the right of redemption ... He shall be to thee a restorer of thy life, and a nourisher of thine old age" (Ruth 4:14-15 NT). Then, for additional reinforcement, the author quotes the neighbors further: "There is a son born to Naomi" (Ruth 4:17). All of the closing comments center on Naomi and the issue of her security. By the way the author begins and ends the story, it appears that it is about Naomi and her need for deliverance.¹

The Plot

Once the main character and problem are introduced, the plot thickens. Naomi, left alone and with her survival at stake, heard that the Lord had visited His

people in her former home, and provided them with food. As she returns, the author presents her own personal plight as a contrast to that of the people of Bethlehem Judah. In Judah, the "house of bread" had no bread, but the Lord rescued them by meeting their need. This situation raises the obvious question: Since the Lord has shown favor to His people by providing for them in the midst of their life-threatening situation, will He do the same for Naomi?

The Theme

In addition to the matter of Naomi's plight, the author presents a very interesting feature which at first doesn't seem to fit the storyline: What does Ruth have to do with this situation? Although the reader is very impressed with Ruth's kindness toward Naomi, she is in no position to care for her, as she is a widow as well. So what does this have to do with the story? The author introduces the theme of the book through this question. Emphasizing its importance, the author presents Ruth in direct contrast to Orpah. Naomi's encouraging Ruth and Orpah to return to Moab was actually very natural and proper. It was not in the best interests of these young women to follow

her, since she could provide them with nothing. To avoid the situation she was in, their only hope was to return to their parents and get married again, thus obtaining a means of support and security. Orpah did the sensible thing by returning. But her action highlights Ruth's character, as she did the totally unexpected thing. Out of concern for Naomi, she devoted herself to her mother-in-law for life, regardless of the impact on her personally. Thus, the author introduces a positive character through her trait of devotion.

Throughout the story, the characters of Ruth and Boaz continue to develop this theme of devotion. Boaz praises Ruth's concern for Naomi, which she demonstrated by forsaking her home and family to follow Naomi to a strange land. Then, when Ruth offers herself in marriage to Boaz, he states that her second act of devotion was even greater than the first. The first act of devotion was leaving Moab; the second was giving up her freedom to become Boaz's wife in order to provide for Naomi.²

Boaz also is presented as one who goes beyond normal expectations to show favor and devotion to others. As a kinsman, Boaz was not obligated to enter into marriage with the widow of

a relative in order to raise up descendants for him. This was a brother's responsibility, not that of a kinsman.³ However, in true family devotion, he goes beyond the legal requirements and cultural expectations, to show favor to Ruth and Naomi.

The Point

Although there are several themes and sub-themes woven through the Book of Ruth, I believe the main point of the story is presented by the primary character and her plight. Naomi was in a situation which endangered her health, safety and security. Yet, through the intervention of the Lord through His people, her needs were met.

It is very important to notice the historical context of this story – the days of the judges, which were characterized by a downward spiral of sin and idolatry on the part of Israel. This story addresses the fact that, even during such a time, the Lord could be counted on to care for His own. Even though He might not visibly enter the scene through the spectacular working of miracles – as in the Exodus from Egypt, or the parting of the Jordan – He is still present and can still be counted on. Through Naomi's story, Israel was reminded that, even in dark

times, the Lord often works quietly behind the scenes, guiding circumstances and motivating His people to show love and compassion to others.

Just as this message was an encouragement for Israel, so it should be an encouragement for His people today. Regardless of how badly the Church has failed, no matter how dark and trying the situation may be, the Lord is still working, motivating His people to provide for others in their need. Thus He cares for His own, and graciously allows His people to participate in that care. *GT*

END NOTES

1. "Rest" in the sense of "security" is a theme throughout the book (1:9; 3:1,9-10; 4:5,10).
2. It is often assumed that the marriage between Ruth and Boaz should be seen in the context of a love story. However, that is not the way in which the author presents the story. Ruth offers herself in marriage for the purpose of providing a kinsman-redeemer for Naomi. This is why Boaz says what he does about her second act of devotion. In addition, based upon the Hebrew terms used, and their particular nuances, Ruth was actually, by virtue of her offer, voluntarily changing her situation from that of a free woman to, in terms of law, a servant-wife. Thus her devotion was truly extraordinary.
3. Leviticus 25 gives the responsibilities of a kinsman-redeemer as buying back property, buying back a relative from slavery, and avenging the blood of a relative. In addition, Numbers 5:8 implies the notion of securing resolution. However, levirate marriage responsibilities are given only to brothers (Dt. 25:5-10).