

OpenTheo

Ruth: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

February 17, 2022



Alastair Roberts

CONTENTS

00:00:00 - Chapter 1: Naomi Suffers Calamity

00:09:02 - Chapter 2: Ruth Meets Boaz

00:16:23 - Chapter 3: A Midnight Encounter on the Threshing Floor

00:25:36 - Chapter 4: Ruth and Boaz Marry

If you have enjoyed my videos and podcasts, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X330?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

The story of Ruth is an unusual one. It's set in the time of the judges, but it starkly contrasts with what we find in that book. There are no great battles or military heroes.

There's no real focus upon the political situation. And it seems as if the larger state of the nation has fallen away from view. In its place, we have a quiet story of faithfulness in an unexpected person, and in a person of seemingly little account.

But yet, when we look closer at this story, we see some great themes converging in it. And there are ways to read it against other stories that will prove illuminating, something that will become more apparent as we go through it. We could read it against the

backdrop of the story of the judges.

This is faithfulness in a dark time. It should also be read against the devastating events at the end of that book. It could be read against the backdrop of Deuteronomy.

Certain of the laws of Deuteronomy come into play here. The gleaning laws, the leveret commandments, and also the place of the Moabite in the congregation. And we see here that the law can serve a redemptive purpose.

It can bring wholeness in a situation where there was once brokenness. It can be read against the backdrop of Genesis. Broken threads within the story of Genesis are tied together by God many centuries later.

The story of Lot and Sodom is in the background here. Leaving a place of death, the loss of two sons-in-law, and two daughters who want to have offspring. Ruth, of course, is a descendant of one of those daughters of Lot.

There's also the story of Judah and Tamar. Once again, two sons dying at the beginning, and a widow who seeks a leveret marriage. And many of the same themes emerging there.

Boaz, of course, is a descendant of Judah. We might also notice the important ten-generation pattern that we find in Genesis. From the story of Cain and Abel to the story of Noah.

From the story of Noah to Abraham. From Abraham to Boaz and Ruth. The story of Cain and Abel is a story of a dead brother and another brother taking his place.

Seth taking the place of Abel. The story of Noah is the story of three brothers and one brother who is judged. Ham and his son Canaan.

The story of Abraham is a story of a dead brother too. And two other brothers stepping in to raise up seed for that dead brother. The fact that many similar themes occur ten generations later should not surprise us.

These old stories are playing out in the background of the story of Ruth. What may seem to us at first glance to be a story of an out-of-the-way place with a woman of little account is the story of some great themes of redemptive history coming to a new expression. Of course, we can also read the story of Ruth as part of the backdrop to 1 Samuel.

In Ruth, we take a crucial step towards the birth of David. The story starts with a famine and a man from Bethlehem who goes to sojourn in the land of Moab with his two sons, Malon and Chilion, and his wife Naomi. The story is introduced as the story of a man, but the man dies in the third verse.

A limlet, however, is an important part of the story. The women will be raising up seed for this dead man. This story is a story of resurrection.

It's reminiscent of Abram's sojourn in Egypt during the famine as well, but they are tarrying and settling there. And it's ironic that they go from Bethlehem. Bethlehem is the house of bread.

A limlet dies and Malon and Chilion take Moabite wives. They seem to be intermarrying and assimilating with the Moabites. In chapter 4 verse 10 we discover that Ruth married Malon, which presumably means that Orpah married Chilion.

Naomi is settling outside of the promised land among the Moabites, where they should not be. The language used for settling here is the same expression as we find in Genesis chapter 11 on two occasions. And as people migrated from the east they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there, in verse 2. And then in verse 31, Terah took Abram his son and Lath the son of Haran his grandson and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan.

But when they came to Haran they settled there. In both of these cases the expression is ominous. In Terah's case there is a settling short of the land.

Abram has to leave and move to Canaan. Reading that wider passage in Genesis chapter 11, verses 27 to 32, we can see more similarities. Now these are the generations of Terah.

Terah fathered Abraham, Nahor and Haran and Haran fathered Lath. Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. And Abram and Nahor took wives.

The name of Abram's wife was Sarai and the name of Nahor's wife Milca, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milca and Isca. Now Sarai was barren. She had no child.

Terah took Abram his son and Lath the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were 205 years and Terah died in Haran.

There's an older barren woman. There's dead men. There's the practice of leperate marriage as Nahor takes the daughter of his dead brother to raise up seed for him.

Eventually there's also the leaving of the father's house. The ten years that they spend in the land of Moab might also remind us of the ten years that Abram spent in Canaan in Genesis 16, verse 3, before he took Hagar. Malon and Kilion mean sickness and destruction and they're fitting names.

They die in the land of Moab. Naomi, ironically, means pleasantness which is an important detail to keep in mind as we read further. They receive news that the Lord has visited his people.

This is language associated with deliverance and salvation elsewhere. And now they're going to return to the land from the place of death. And the two daughters-in-law of Naomi accompany her, showing loyalty to her.

Naomi instructs each of them to return to her mother's house but they both stick with her. Her instruction to them to return to their mother's house and to their gods is a sort of inversion of the Abraham themes that are already bubbling away in the background of the text. The Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

Naomi seems to request that Orpah and Ruth do the opposite. They both insist on staying with her though. She then makes a stronger case.

She is barren. She's too old to remarry. And even if those things weren't the case, they would have to wait far too long for new sons to marry.

Orpah means back of the neck, which seems appropriate as she turns back at this point. Ruth, however, expresses the most extreme loyalty to her mother-in-law at this point, in keeping with the meaning of her name, Friend. She describes her bond with Naomi as akin to one of marriage.

This is an extreme act of loving-kindness on Ruth's part. She is giving up her country, her family and everything that she's known to stick with her mother-in-law. This is remarkable loving-kindness.

And Ruth's loving-kindness is a central theme of this story. It reflects the Lord's own loving-kindness and it will be the means by which life is brought to a dead situation. The most similar account of such loyalty that we find is in 2 Samuel 15, verses 19-22.

And David said to Ittai, David's great-grandmother Ruth shows considerable loyalty and loving-kindness to Naomi. In both cases we see a remarkable Gentile being knit into the people of God. Naomi returns and is recognised after her long absence.

However, she wishes to be called Naomi, pleasantness, no more. Now she wants to be called Mara, bitter, as she has suffered cruel providences from the Lord. They arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

There may be a sign here of new life. A question to consider, in what ways could Ruth's commitment to Naomi be seen as a conversion? Ruth chapter 2 is set at the beginning of the barley harvest and the text begins by introducing us to a relative of Elimelech, a member of the same clan or family. A man of some substance or mighty worth.

He's possibly a man of wealth or maybe a man of standing within the community. Later on we see that he is someone of great virtue. A related expression is used of Ruth in chapter 3 verse 11, which might suggest that character is particularly in view here.

This man is called Boaz and because of their similar character and virtue, Boaz and Ruth are clearly well suited for each other. As we see, they are both people who are characterised by great kindness. Ruth and Naomi do not seem to have a family to support them.

They have come back to Bethlehem, they don't seem to have property there anymore and there is no immediate family to take care of them. So Ruth asks for permission to glean. We're reminded that she is Ruth the Moabite at this point.

She is both a widow and a foreigner. In Leviticus chapter 23 verse 22 we read the instructions for gleaning. And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest.

You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner. I am the Lord your God. Ruth hopes to find favour in someone's sight.

Presumably she can go to different fields and ask for permission to glean there, with different field owners providing for different gleaners. We read that she happened to come across the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of a limalex clan. There's no explicit instructional planning, it seems to be by chance.

Like in Esther chapter 6, when the king reads the records of the kingdom when he can't sleep, and comes across the account of Mordecai's revelation of the conspiracy, it seems to be merely a chance occurrence. Providence is hidden and inscrutable, and God's hand is behind all of these events, as we will see. But as they occur, they seem to happen by chance.

Boaz blesses his reapers, and the reapers respond in kind. They seem to be people who fear the Lord. At this time in Israel's history, this could not be counted or presumed upon.

Back in the story of Genesis, when Abraham and Isaac were sojourners in foreign lands, they had to take care whether the people were God-fearing or not. If they were not God-fearing, they would act in exploitative ways, and abuse the people under their care. Boaz seems to be faithful in this regard, though.

Boaz asks concerning Ruth, and the foreman tells him who she is, and about her request to glean. She is the Moabite woman who has returned with Naomi. She doesn't belong to anyone, she's an outsider, and the foreman describes her as a diligent worker.

Boaz then speaks to Ruth, asking her to glean in his field only. He wants to provide for

her in a more committed way, and he addresses her as daughter. She is no longer treated as an outsider, but as one who has been provided for and cared for, by someone who is treating her as if she belonged.

Boaz tells Ruth that he has instructed his workers not to touch her. Some see this as an instruction not to assault her. While Ruth's vulnerability to assault may be seen in verse 22, here I think the meaning is probably that she not be pushed away, or denied access to the field and its gleanings in any way.

Boaz also gives her special privileges. He allows her to drink from the water that he has drawn for his workers. Ruth expresses her gratitude, and wonders why he has taken such notice of her, as she is just a stranger and a foreigner.

He has shown this kindness to her on account of her kindness to Naomi. The word of her behaviour to Naomi had obviously gotten around. And Boaz describes what Ruth has done, in a way that alludes to the call of Abraham, in Genesis chapter 12 verse 1. Now the Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

She has sought to come under the wings of the Lord. This is language of protection, but it's also language of marriage. In the next chapter she will ask Boaz to come to her.

He asks to spread his wings over her. And Boaz blesses her, going beyond the requirement of the law. He includes her in the meal for the reapers.

She eats until she is full. Naomi's emptiness in the preceding chapter contrasts with the fullness of Ruth here. Boaz also instructs the young men to allow her to glean among the sheaves, and to make things as easy for her as possible, purposefully pulling out barley from the bundles and dropping it for her to pick up.

Ruth ends up reaping an ephor of barley, and she brings back an ephor of barley and the remainder of her meal to Naomi. It's not entirely clear how much an ephor was, but they gathered an omer of manna in a day, which was a tenth of an ephor, so this might be enough for several days. Gathering like this over the period of the harvest would give Naomi and Ruth enough grain to live on for the rest of the year.

She tells Naomi in response to Naomi's request that the man who took notice of her was Boaz. And Naomi's response is interesting. May he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead.

At the end of the preceding chapter she spoke of her bitterness. She said to them, Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty.

Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has

brought calamity upon me? Now, however, she is speaking about being blessed by the Lord and the kindness of the Lord. What does Naomi mean that the kindness of the Lord has not forsaken the dead? The Lord is caring for the house of Malon and Elimelech through caring for Ruth and Naomi. He is showing his compassion for the widow, a common theme within the Pentateuch.

Boaz is a kinsman. He is one who could redeem and deliver them and provide for them. This is important knowledge for Naomi.

She now realises that there is one who could provide for them in some way and who is willing to do so to some degree. The kindness of Ruth and the kindness of Boaz are also signs of the Lord's grace to the widowed and bereaved Naomi. Naomi instructs Ruth to stick close to Boaz and his female workers.

Boaz had told Ruth to go along with his male workers, but Naomi suggests that it would be preferable for her to go with the female workers and not to go into any other field lest she be assaulted. Boaz will provide for and protect Ruth in his field. And she spends the entire period between the barley and the wheat harvest working in Boaz's field.

This is more or less the period between the Feast of Firstfruits and the Feast of Pentecost, those seven weeks. Boaz could probably have done more. He seems very eager to assist Ruth and Naomi, but the problem is that if he redeems Elimelech's land he has to take Naomi as his sole wife and she is past childbearing age and this would have the effect of destroying his own inheritance as he has no children of his own.

So Boaz seems to be doing what he can within the limits that he faces. Recognising this will help us to understand what comes next. As Christians reading the story we should also keep in mind throughout that this is not the last Redeemer that will arise from Bethlehem.

A question to consider. What lessons might we draw from this chapter about God's providence in our lives? In Ruth chapter 3 Naomi has a plan and instructs Ruth in what she should do. She informs Ruth that Boaz is a relative, someone who can play the part of a near kinsman, someone who could redeem the lost property and perhaps also raise up seed for the dead husband.

Boaz is currently winnowing on the threshing floor and Ruth is instructed to dress up, presenting herself as available for marriage. To this point she's probably been wearing work clothes or widow's garments and now she's going to dress as someone who is available for marriage. It wasn't typical for a woman to propose.

Ruth is here communicating that she is available and also how Boaz can act in a way that makes a difference in Naomi's situation. In Boaz's mind at this point he presumably thinks that to raise up seed for the dead Elimelech, the former husband of Naomi, he

would have to marry Naomi but Naomi is presumably past childbearing age at this point. Boaz can't redeem Naomi without jeopardising his own inheritance then and also there is a nearer kinsman.

Most of what he has been able to do he has done though by providing grain and making it easy for Ruth to glean. Ruth comes to Boaz secretly by night, it's important that she does this because he needs to be let in to Ruth and Naomi's plan which, if it were more widely known, might not be effective. Boaz eats and drinks and becomes merry and then he goes down to lie at the end of the heap of grain.

He's a man who's enjoying plenty, he has all that he needs to eat and drink and he has a great pile of grain that he owns. Ruth comes and uncovers his feet and lies down. This is a strange thing to do and it seems to be significant in various ways.

However, even before we speculate about some of the greater symbolic meanings it would wake him up when his feet got cold which seems to have happened at midnight and then he sees Ruth lying there. This strange incident might remind us of the story of Ruth's ancestress. Moab is born as the daughter of Lot uncovers him at night after he's drunk and lies with him.

And the firstborn said to the younger Our father is old and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine and we will lie with him that we may preserve offspring from our father. So they made their father drink wine that night and the firstborn went in and lay with her father he did not know when she lay down or when she arose.

The next day the firstborn said to the younger Behold, I lay last night with my father let us make him drink wine tonight also then you go in and lie with him that we may preserve offspring from our father. So they made their father drink wine that night also and the younger arose and lay with him and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. Thus both the daughters of Moab and Lot became pregnant by their father.

The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab he is the father of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son and called his name Ben-Ammi he is the father of the Ammonites to this day. In Genesis chapter 19 verses 31 to 38 There are similarities to observe between these stories.

On the surface of things Ruth seems to be behaving very much like her ancestress. Some readers might also see associations between this story and the Moabites that tempted Israel to sexual sin in the book of Numbers. Yet the similarities here invite us to juxtapose the two stories to see the differences between them to see that Ruth although she is behaving on the surface like her ancestress is doing something very different.

A further connection we can notice is with the law of the Levirate in Deuteronomy

chapter 25 That law is introduced by a strange symbolic commandment You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain. Boaz is being called to be a shepherd to play the role of the Leveret here and Ruth goes to meet him at the place where the ox and wood tread out the grain. She uncovers his feet and then lies at his feet as if she was the one that he was treading out.

She is, I believe, presenting him with a symbolic representation of the role that she is calling him to play. As the ox trod out the grain on the threshing floor so Boaz was to tread out the grain by raising up seed for the dead man through sexual relations with Ruth. There are sexual connotations in this story of course We've already seen some of those connotations in the story of Lot's daughters We can also see a similar story in the uncovering of Noah after he drinks of the vineyard.

The language of uncovering or covering feet can be euphemistic elsewhere in scripture In Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 57 in Isaiah chapter 7 verse 20 and Ezekiel chapter 16 verse 25 feet can seemingly refer to genitalia and the language of covering feet is used elsewhere to refer to the genitalia when people such as Eglon and Saul are supposedly relieving themselves and of course in terms of the symbolic commandment of the oxen treading out the grain the treading out of the oxen the feet of the oxen are symbolically associated with the sexual relations of the kinsmen redeemer Now it should be clear that Ruth does not actually have sexual relations with Boaz or do anything untoward here but she is symbolically performing something that has sexual connotations and bringing to mind a number of earlier events in which sexual relations or some other event of sexual import occurred The entire relationship between Ruth and Boaz to this point we should bear in mind has been associated with themes of harvest and with grain Ruth first comes to Boaz at the time of harvest and fertility Boaz himself here is lying at the end of the heap of grain and at the conclusion of the scene Boaz gives Ruth six heifers of barley The visual imagery here is that Boaz pours his seed into Ruth's cloak which she presumably carries in front of her in a manner similar to that of a woman with a child and this is all occurring at the time of harvest it is suggesting more seed and harvest to come A heap of grain brings to mind abundance and sustenance fertility and vitality In Song of Solomon 7.2 the waste of the Shulamite woman is compared to a heap of wheat set about with lilies All of this symbolism then and there is another thing to notice about the symbolism here In the preceding chapter Boaz had said to Ruth in verse 12 The Lord repay you for what you have done and a full reward be given you by the Lord the God of Israel under whose wings you have come to take refuge Here in order to uncover Boaz's feet Ruth lifts up the wings of his garment and invites him to spread his wings over her Boaz recognised in the preceding chapter that Ruth had come to take shelter under the Lord's wings and now he is going to take shelter and now Ruth invites him to take her under his wings and that as she comes under his wings she might more fully come under the wings of the Lord He had wished a blessing upon her there The Lord repay you for what you have done and a full reward be given you and now he blesses her recognising

that the kindness that she has done in this chapter is far exceeding the one that she did even in the preceding chapters In the preceding chapters she had accompanied Naomi back to the land of Israel and even more Ruth was a free woman she was free to marry whomever she wanted she could have married someone who was younger but she chose Boaz Why Boaz? Because Boaz was a man in the position to redeem Naomi Boaz recognises that what Ruth is doing here is not merely for her own sake rather it is for the sake of Naomi It is continuing and extending her bond of loyalty to Naomi Boaz describes her as a worthy woman He himself has been described as a woman earlier in the book They fit together very well Yet he points out that there is a nearer redeemer someone who is a closer relative who could perform the role of the redeemer instead of him Boaz however commits himself to get things moving to redeem her if the nearer kinsman would not However Boaz is privy to information that the other redeemer would not be namely that Ruth is so associated with her mother-in-law that she will raise up seed for her The nearer kinsman would presume that he would raise up seed But Boaz knows that he can marry Ruth in order to do so In Deuteronomy chapter 25 the law of the leveret comes at the beginning of the laws associated with the tenth commandment You shall not covet Performing the leveret was a sort of paradigm case of not coveting one's neighbour's possessions or their station in life It was a willingness to sacrifice your own interests in order to raise up your brother's name The kindness of Ruth is the fulfilment of the tenth commandment She is lovingly putting the interests of her mother-in-law above her own A question to consider Can you see any associations between the story of Judah and Tamar in chapter 38 of Genesis and the story of Ruth and Boaz in this chapter Ruth chapter 4 the final chapter of the book of Ruth begins with a shift in the action Boaz has seemingly wasted no time in the arrangements to redeem Ruth Boaz goes to the gate and sits down there The gate was the place where business would be conducted where the elders would sit and judicial decisions would be made While he sits there it seems that the redeemer is passing by by chance and he's called aside by Boaz On the surface of the text it would seem that this is not something or tribal or clan leaders and he gathers ten of them which would seem to be an official group He's taking charge of events He's been described earlier in chapter 2 as a man of substance and by his behaviour in this incident he would seem to be a leading figure within the community People listen to him and go along with his instructions He lays out the situation Naomi has returned from the country of Moab and she's selling a parcel of land Perhaps the point is to buy back the land land that has already been sold Perhaps the situation is that Naomi is selling the land because she's impoverished and the kinsman needs to buy it to save it from being lost to the family This might be a similar situation to Jeremiah chapter 32 verses 7 to 15 It's also not entirely certain whether it's the land that's being sold or just its yuzu fruit However, whichever of these situations it is the basic situation is that Naomi is impoverished and she needs someone to intervene The responsibility of the kinsman redeemer at this point was very much along the lines of Leviticus chapter 25 verse 35 If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner and he shall live with you The

nearer kinsman is prepared to redeem the field but Boaz raises a problem There are a number of ways to read this situation It seems to be that he presents a condition of the transaction Now how this exactly applies is not clear Maybe it's because Naomi will not allow the transaction to go ahead without the person redeeming the land also performing the role of leper at marriage Alternatively, perhaps it's something that's required in all such cases Another way to read the situation is that Boaz is saying that he will take Ruth as his wife at the same time as the nearer kinsman buys the field This would change the nearer kinsman's mind that if he allowed the field to pass into his line of the family it would return to a limlex line as soon as Ruth's child came of age To this point the discussions have been focused upon the field But yet that's not really what this is all about Boaz's end is to marry Ruth While Ruth and Naomi have been the focus of the story to this point we've not even heard about this field This is new information And while the nearer kinsman knows better it seems to me that we need to do justice to the secrecy that is emphasised in the preceding part of the story A secret plan has been hatched between Boaz, Ruth and Naomi The question in Chapter 3 was who would redeem Ruth and Naomi not the question of who the redeemer of the field would be And Boaz presents things in a way that is purposefully ambiguous something that's not captured in a number of the translations of this text What day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi and from Ruth the Moabites you have bought the wife of the dead to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance Now there's an ambiguity there The field is bought from the hand of Naomi and Ruth But who is the wife of the dead? Who is the dead? Is it Melon? It doesn't seem to be Melon Rather it seems to be a limeleck The husband of Naomi And if the man was also expected to perform the role of lever at marriage to the wife of the dead man he would ruin his inheritance The secret that Boaz, Ruth and Naomi know is that Ruth is prepared to raise up seed for Naomi Ruth will vicariously act for Naomi in order to raise up seed for a limeleck The Nerekinsman however knows none of this and so thinking that he will have to take Naomi and marry a barren widow and not be able to raise children of his own he decides to opt out of the arrangement The custom with the sandal is described here and also in Deuteronomy Chapter 25 that the wife of the dead where the law of the lever at marriage is found in verses 5-10 of that chapter If brothers dwell together and one of them dies and has no son the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger Her husband's brother shall go into her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her And the first son, whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother that his name may not be blotted out of Israel And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife then his brother's wife shall be his wife and she shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel He will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him And if he persists, saying I do not wish to take her then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face and she shall answer and say So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house in Israel the house of

him who had his sandal pulled off Callum Carmichael has suggested that this is a symbolic inversion of the sin of Onan in Genesis chapter 38 verses 7 to 10 But ere Judas firstborn was wicked in the sight of the Lord and the Lord put him to death Then Judas said to Onan Go into your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her and raise up offspring for your brother But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his so whenever he went into his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the seed on the ground so as not to give offspring to his brother And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord and he put him to death also Onan did not want to raise up offspring that wouldn't be his so he degraded his sister-in-law and wasted his seed on the ground The motive was greed He didn't want to create an heir to the firstborn son ahead of himself The removal of the sandal from the foot then corresponds to Onan's withdrawal from intercourse Elsewhere in scripture the foot is symbolically and poetically associated with the genitals The pulling off of the sandal is related to sexual withdrawal She then spits in his face and that corresponds with the degrading spilling of bodily fluids in Onan's action The person who failed to perform the duty of the leveret then receives a dishonorable name for his house However, here in Ruth the removal of the sandal is presented more as the settling of a transaction It is not presented as a shaming ritual as it is in the book of Deuteronomy At this point Boaz reveals his cards The elders at the gate are the witnesses that he has bought from the hand of Naomi all of Elimelech's property and also all the property of Kilion and Melon However, the real surprise is that he has acquired Ruth the Moabite the widow of Melon She is going to be the one by which the name of the dead will be raised up This was why secrecy was so important in the episode on the threshing floor The people and the elders at the gate declare a blessing upon Ruth and the house of Boaz expressing their desire that she be like Rachel and Leah raising up and building the house of Israel And very surprisingly they also mention the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah Boaz is of course a descendant of Perez But the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis chapter 38 is a strange one It is one that begins with the death of two sons and the gradual descent of a whole family into death In that story Tamar intervenes and the seed raised up through a highly irregular relationship with her father-in-law The parallels between Tamar and Judah and the incident of the preceding chapter on the threshing floor between Ruth and Boaz should not escape us Nor should the broader parallel Ruth, like Tamar is one who is going to raise up a house that has descended into death and is going to bring new life As Tamar took the initiative so Ruth takes the initiative Two stories from the book of Genesis join paths The story of the daughters of Lot and the story of Judah and Tamar Ruth is a descendant of the Moabites who were conceived in the irregular relationship between Lot and his daughters and Boaz is a descendant of Perez who was conceived in the similarly irregular relationship between Judah and Tamar Two broken histories are being healed here The book began with the story of a man a Limelech and his sons Malon and Kilion They die almost straight away By the end of the book the spotlight is almost completely upon Ruth and Naomi There's a focus upon Ruth in the blessing There's a focus upon Naomi in the way that the women speak to her in the way that Obed is

presented as her redeemer Ruth is praised as her daughter-in-law There is also a more general focus upon the women as the women name the child Obed is not prominently seen throughout much of the story but in small twists of chance and in the way that he has inspired certain people to particular actions we can see God's agency throughout In the faithful actions of a foreign woman a dead household has been raised up a new life has been brought a new life that will eventually lead to the birth of David Obed is presented as the son that is the redeemer of Naomi as Naomi's son Ruth, in her loyalty to Naomi has chosen for her in order to redeem the name of a limelight Naomi's dead husband By ending this story with an emphasis upon David and upon Perez we are being taught that in the heroism of Ruth and in characters like Tamar dead houses can be raised up that the house of David depends upon divine intervention and God's grace in preventing it from falling into death On a number of occasions we are taught about the divine providence that it was saved A question to consider as the curtain closes on the narrative of the book of Ruth the spotlight rests upon the character of Naomi We read the story of Ruth not inappropriately as the story of Ruth What things would come to greater focus if we read it as the story of Naomi?