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The Themes in Ruth

The divine providence in **Ruth** resolves the three common human needs which hang menacingly above the story like a dark, foreboding sky: food, marriage, and children. Against that tragic background emerge several themes that the author interweaves to serve his purposes.

The first theme is YHVH's gracious rescue of Elimelech's family from extinction.

The story records how **famine** sent **Elimelech's** family into exile in **Mo'av**, and how death threatened **their** very existence. Graciously, however, **ADONAI** rescued the family in two stages. First, **He** preserved **Elimelech's** survivors from starvation through the determination of **Ruth** and the generosity of **Bo'az**. That ensured them of some relief but no long-term solution. Finally, however, **God** provided an heir for **Elimelech** and care for **Na'omi**, again through **Ruth** and **Bo'az**. *The LORD was in control all the way.*

Elimelech was not the only beneficiary of **God's** gracious providence. Within the fabric of that theme, the author carefully interwove threads of two others. The first concerned the reversal of **Naomi's** fortunes from emptiness to fullness. The word **return (shuwb)** in **1:6** signaled **her** destiny, initially tragic, but then headed for blessing. **Na'omi herself** clearly voiced this theme in **1:21** saying that **she** left **Beit-Lechem full, but YHVH has caused me to return (shuwb) empty**. While the mention of **Shavuot (1:22b)** hinted at the hope of fullness, its completed fulfillment took some time. **Ruth's** industriousness filled **her** stomach, but as for the problem of an heir, the reappearance of the word **empty**, this time on the lips of **Bo'az (3:17)**, signaled that the fullness of a **grandson** was just around the corner. Finally, in the climax of the story (**to see link click [Bc](#) - Epilogue: Na'omi's Satisfaction and Fullness**), **Na'omi has a [grandson] Obed (4:17a)**! At one time **she** thought **YHVH** was **her** enemy (**1:21**), but now **she praises Him (4:14b)**. The newborn **child** (Hebrew: *yeled*) had replaced **Na'omi's** lost **sons** (Hebrew: *yeled*).

The other thread traces the reversal of **Ruth's** fortunes. Surprisingly, the author also speaks of **Ruth's return (shuwb)** to the land of **Isra'el (1:7, 16, 22 and 2:6)**, even though **she** is a **Moabitess**. **Na'omi** first mentioned **Ruth returning** (albeit to **Mo'av**) to **find rest in the home of another husband (1:8-9)**, and then schemed (albeit through the providence of **YHVH**) to make the wish of finding **Ruth rest in the home of another**

husband (3:1-2) a reality. **Na'omi's** acts executed **God's** plans. But when **Ruth** proposed a marriage in **Bo'az's** role as **her kinsman-redeemer (3:9)**, **he** reminded her that another **kinsman** had a prior right to be **her go'el (3:12)**. Finally, after **Bo'az** had cleverly maneuvered the marriage (again through the providence of **YHVH**), **Ruth** got **her home and husband (4:13)**. **ADONAI** had supplied **her** lack of **a husband and a home**.

Ruth's return also sounded the story's other important minor theme, the acceptance of Gentiles into **Isra'el**. **Ruth's** dramatic, determined declaration to embrace both **YHVH** and **Isra'el (1:16-17)**, started **her** acceptance by **the Israelites (4:11)**. Subtly, gradually, the narrator pursued the point along two lines. On the one hand, he stressed **Ruth's** worthiness by reporting both **her** actions of devotion and courage (**2:2, 3:6-10**) and **her** high public esteem (**2:11, 3:11**). That **she found favor** in the eyes of **Bo'az (2:10, 13)**, implies that **she** also **found favor** in the eyes of **YHVH Himself**. That **she** enjoyed **refuge under the wings of the God of Isra'el (2:12)**, also hinted possible membership in the community of **Isra'el**. On the other hand, the narrator described her rise in status from **Moabite daughter-in-law (1:22)** to **servant (2:13)**, possible marriage partner (**3:9**), welcomed **woman (4:11)**, and finally **wife (4:13)**. The word play between **wings of refuge (kanap)** in **2:12** and **corner of your garment (kanap)**, may also imply a connection between **Ruth's** marriage to **Bo'az** and membership in the community of **Isra'el**. In any case, **Ruth's** marriage to **Bo'az** ended **her** two tragedies, the fact that **she** was a widow and a foreigner (**4:9-10**). The blessings at the gate (**4:11-12**) testified to **Ruth's** popular acceptance by **her** community as a full-fledged **Israelite**, thereby implying that others like **her** will also be welcomed.

The second theme is, the triumph of Elimelech's family gave Isra'el King David. The book's surprise ending gave the story a much larger perspective, and the genealogy confirmed it. The triumph of **Elimelech's** family over tragedy gave **Isra'el** King **David**, the Davidic Covenant and **the Messiah**. That outcome was not totally unexpected, however, for the storyteller hinted at it all along because the providence of **God** was at work. The fact that it was utterly impossible for **Na'omi** to have an heir left divine intervention as the only solution to **her** childlessness. But if that were to happen it implied that the child must be destined to be great. Though ambiguous on the surface, when **YHVH** lifted the drought (**1:6**), it seemed to point to divine intervention. **Ruth's** choice of **Bo'az's field** for gleaning was no accident, but the providence of **the LORD** to bring **them** both together. And the unexpected unnamed **kinsman-redeemer** with prior rights to **her**, again reminds us that only **God's** help could make the marriage possible.

Once **Bo'az** had the rights of marriage to **Ruth**, the author proceeds to the larger story. The

good wishes for the couple (**4:11-12**) and of **the women** for **the child (4:15b)** suggested it. Finally, with a short genealogy (**4:17b**), he revealed it: **YHVH's** preservation of **Elimelech's** family line resulted in King **David**. It is that event that the story's great destiny is aimed. **YHVH's** care for **Na'omi's** family reflected **His** care of all **Isra'el**.⁶