

# 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 (see **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.<sup>6</sup>