

In telling this story as he does, the narrator probably intends the reader to see here a comparison with Israel as a whole during the time of the judges (1:1). In a time of famine, the family of Elimelech seeks life away from Yahweh's promised land in the land of Moab, only to find death and emptiness. By returning home—to Bethlehem, the “house of bread” with its abundant harvest—the one whose name means “sweet” but calls herself “bitter” (1:20) starts on a journey from hope to fulfillment, to having a “son” who will serve as her ultimate kinsman-redeemer. And in so doing, she sets in motion events that will lead to Israel's receiving their foremost king. You can hardly miss the final blessing of Naomi by the women of Bethlehem in 4:14: “May he become famous throughout Israel!” Indeed! In this regard it is important that you also watch how both the town of Bethlehem in general and the three main characters in particular are portrayed as loyal to Yahweh and the covenant, and thus experience the covenant blessings (see esp. Deut 28:3–6) during “the days when the judges ruled” (1:1).

This comes out in a variety of ways: Ruth's determination to follow Yahweh because of her relationship with Naomi (1:16–18); the greetings of Boaz and the harvesters, reflecting God's presence and blessing (2:4); Boaz's welcoming of Ruth, who has chosen to take refuge under the wings of Yahweh (2:12); Boaz's own generosity and large heartedness (2:8–9, 14–18); and Naomi's “blessing” of Boaz (2:20). But this theme is especially evident in the way the narrator weaves into the story indications of their obedience to the covenant law—gleanings left for an alien; the kinsman-redeemer; inheritance through the covenant marriage-inheritance laws. The narrator assumes his readers will recognize all these covenantal factors. These are not people who need to be portrayed as consulting the law for guidance on what to do; rather they are simply demonstrating their covenant loyalty to Yahweh by the way they live and treat people.

The author seems concerned in the end to show that David's forebears were themselves faithful Yahwists in a time when much of Israel was not. Note finally how Ruth herself becomes an example of the blessing of Abraham working out in practice (Gen 12:3, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”). She is an alien from a hated foreign nation (Deut 23:3). Yet she chooses to follow Israel's God and thus becomes part of his people (Ruth 1:16–17); as such she herself loves Naomi (4:15) by showing Yahweh's kindness (2:11–12) to one who has experienced exile and bitterness (1:19–21). In turn she is blessed by Boaz as one who has chosen to come under Yahweh's care and blessing (2:12); and at the end Yahweh thus “enabled her to conceive” (4:13). Though a foreigner without the covenant history enjoyed by the other Israelites, she nonetheless shows covenant love and loyalty in a way that most Israelites did not at this time in history. She, a non-Israelite, is used as an example to Yahweh's own “firstborn” (see Exod 4:22). Thus she is one of four Gentile women included in Matthew's genealogy (Matt 1:5b; cf. vv. 3, 5a, 6), which in his Gospel anticipates the gospel as good news for “all nations” (Matt 28:19).

How to Read the Bible Book by Book (pp. 79-80). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.