Nathan Daily

GRACE IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

Ruth 1:16–17

One Main Thing

The story of Naomi's reversal from emptiness to fullness in the book of Ruth offers readers an opportunity to consider how divine guidance and human initiative may work in tandem to provide renewal and hope, through the grace of God, to those in need.

Introduction

The book of Ruth is a short story of a family's care, kindness, and fidelity toward one another in the midst of overwhelming circumstances. The story appears in four scenes. After introducing the problem in the first scene, a different character enacts a plan in three subsequent scenes. The book of Ruth is structured as follows:

I. Famine, Death, and Return (1:1–22)
II. Ruth's Plan: Ruth Gleans in Boaz's Field (2:1–23)

III. Naomi's Plan: Ruth Meets Boaz at the Threshing Floor (3:1–18)
IV. Boaz's Plan: Boaz Marries Ruth (4:1–22)

The book tells of a woman from Judah, Naomi, who returns to Bethlehem from Moab after experiencing the death of her husband and two sons. After Naomi's daughter-in-law, Ruth, refuses to leave her side, the two widows begin a struggle for survival by searching for food and, eventually, concocting a dangerous plan whereby Ruth proposes marriage to Boaz, a relative of Naomi's late husband. Once Boaz determines that a closer relative is not willing to marry Ruth, Boaz and Ruth are married and give birth to a son who ultimately becomes the grandfather of David. The entirety of the story presents the gracious actions of individuals as reflections of key attributes of God known from God's past actions on behalf of Israel.

Going Deeper

Investigation into the portrayal of grace in the book of Ruth can begin by considering one of the book's prominent themes: emptiness to fullness.[1]

[1] See D. F. Rauber, "Literary Values in the Bible: The Book of Ruth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1970): 27–37. On the interpretation of Ruth see, Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth*, Esther, WBC 9 (Dallas: Word, 1996); Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster, 1997); Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); K. Lawson Younger, *Judges/Ruth*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002); Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, Int (Louisville: John Knox, 1999).

The beginning of the story presents Naomi's life as becoming increasingly characterized by emptiness. Naomi and her family are forced to leave their home because, ironically, there is a famine in Bethlehem (lit. "house of bread"). In spite of the family's attempt to escape starvation, Naomi's life spirals into crisis as her husband and two sons die in Moab. The narrator's language highlights the increasing emptiness in Naomi's life with each experience of death: "she was left with her two sons" (1:3), "the woman was left without her two sons and without her husband" (1:5). In the span of a few short verses, Naomi looses her status as wife and mother, now only known as the woman (1:5), and is left alone with two daughters-in-law in a world where the security of a woman primarily lies with a husband and male descendants.[2] After experiencing loss on multiple levels and now in a position without hope (1:12), Naomi returns to her homeland and explicitly states her situation in terms of emptiness and fullness:

"Do not call me Naomi [lit. "pleasant"]," she replied. "Call me Mara [lit. "bitter"]," for Shaddai has made my lot very bitter. I went away full, and YHWH has brought me back empty. How can you call me Naomi, when YHWH has dealt harshly with me, when Shaddai has brought misfortune upon me!" (Ruth 1:20–21)

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[2] Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1883), 87.

Even though Naomi was, in fact, in threat of starving from famine in Bethlehem, she depicts this time of her life as full and pleasant in comparison to the empty and bitter life she now faces without her husband and sons.

After the stark depiction of Naomi's loss, the action in three subsequent scenes[3] presents Naomi's steady reversal from emptiness to fullness. By repeatedly using a single Hebrew root word (*g'l*, often translated "redeem" or "kinsman"),[4] the author stresses the concept of "redemption" as being crucial for reaching the resolution to Naomi's crisis. In the Hebrew Bible, a redeemer is a close relative who takes responsibility for various acts including the repurchase of property.[5] When a family member is forced to sell land because of financial difficulty, the redeemer can purchase the land so that it will remain with the family. More generally, a redeemer is one who delivers another from any type of danger.[6] In the Book of Ruth, this root refers to both the person who redeems as well as the act of redemption. It is Naomi's recognition of Boaz as a redeemer from whom she can expect assistance[7] for herself and Ruth that provides Naomi's first acknowledgment of hope that her situation can change (2:20). Beyond food Naomi does not appear to know the extent of what

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[3] Ruth 2:1–23; 3:1–18; 4:1–17.

[4] The root *g'l* is found 23 times in the book of Ruth. See, 2:20; 3:9, 12 (2x), 13 (4x); 4:1, 3, 4 (5x), 6 (5x), 7, 8, 14.

[5] Lev 25:25–34, 47–55; Num 35:9–28; Jer 32:6–15.

[6] Bush, 137. See, Gen 48:16; Ps 72:14; 107:2; Lam 3:53–58.

[7] Nielsen, 63–64.

this redeemer will provide; however, by the end of the story Boaz wants to redeem the land of Elimelech and, in addition, marry Ruth (4:4–5, 10). Ultimately, Naomi's life exhibits an unexpected fullness achieved through a child born to Ruth and Boaz. The child is characterized as a "redeemer" who will renew Naomi's life and sustain her in her old age (4:14–15). The word translated "renew" or "return" (4:15) most clearly highlights Naomi's reversal from emptiness to fullness.[8] Previously, upon her return to Bethlehem, Naomi used this word at the depth of her despair exclaiming: "YHWH returned me empty" (1:21). With the birth of Ruth's child as her redeemer, Naomi is no longer empty but has been returned to life.

Application

Attention to the theme of emptiness to fullness in the book of Ruth provides an opportunity to consider how acts of favor or grace are central to Naomi's unexpected reversal. Two examples suggest how God's people might reflect upon the portrayal of grace in the ancient story of Naomi in order to enact God's grace in contemporary contexts in hope that the lives of ourselves and others can move from emptiness to fullness.

1. Grace, manifest through fidelity and redemption and born out of a trust in God's ability to act,

[8] Sakenfeld, 82. "Return" (Heb. *šwv*) is a keyword throughout the book (1:6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 21, 22; 2:6; 4:3, 15).

appears in the book of Ruth within an interplay between divine guidance and human initiative. The book does not contain miracles or direct speech from God and primarily focuses on the interaction between members of a single family; however, the book is not devoid of theology. Two direct statement of God's activity bracket the beginning and ending of the story. God brings an end to the famine (1:6) and, thereby, provides initial possibility for movement toward Naomi's redemption. Also, God allows Ruth to conceive and bear a child (4:13). Therefore, the two factors that led to Naomi's emptiness (famine and childlessness) are overcome by the only two actions of God.[9]

The interaction between human characters, rather than the action of God, dominates the story. Central to understanding the nature of the grace exhibited by the characters are their numerous displays of *hesed*.[10] This Hebrew word is translated as "fidelity," "kindness," "loyalty," "loving kindness," or "steadfast love" and is often characterized by a care that exceeds expectations by taking "action to rescue [another] from a situation of desperate need."[11] Throughout the story the main characters express fidelity toward

[9] Nielsen, 30.
[10] Ruth 1:8; 2:20; 3:10.
[11] Sakenfeld, 11–12.

one another. Naomi concocts a dangerous plan for the sole purpose of finding a home for Ruth (3:1–5). Ruth is recognized for the *hesed* she shows as she leaves all she knows to follow Naomi to a foreign country (1:8, 16–17), as she works hard gleaning to provide for Naomi (2:7, 17), and as she chooses to marry Boaz in order to provide help to Naomi rather than choosing a husband for her own interests (3:10).[12] Before he knows he is a redeemer for Naomi, Boaz shows concern and makes special allowances for Ruth as she gleans in his field (2:8–20). After realizing his role as a redeemer, Boaz goes beyond what others are willing to do in order to care for Ruth and Naomi as well as provide for the name of Elimelech (4:1–10).

Even when God is not present in the narrative as the characters strategize to maneuver themselves toward a more hopeful future, the repeated references to God in the book's dialogue indicate they trust God is capable of acting on their behalf.[13] Often taking the form of prayer,[14] this dialogue commends the kindness or actions of another and states a belief that God will provide blessing. These prayers are ultimately

[12] Nielsen, 76.

[13] The dialogue of the characters mentions God at 1:8, 9, 13, 16, 17, 20, 21; 2:4, 12, 20; 3:10, 13; 4:11, 12, 14.

[14] Cf. Ruth 1:8; 2:12, 20; 3:10.

fulfilled during the story. A striking example is Boaz's prayer for Ruth as she gleans in the field: "May YHWH reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from YHWH, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge" (2:12). The prayer is surprisingly fulfilled when Ruth unexpectedly proposes marriage to Boaz[15] at the threshing floor: "I am your handmaid Ruth. Spread your robe [lit. wing] over your handmaid, for you are a redeeming kinsman." The prayer is fulfilled as Boaz takes action and agrees to Ruth's request. Whereas God will provide for Ruth (4:13), the wordplay highlights that this will only happen when Boaz, who offered the prayer, spreads his "wing" and marries Ruth, thereby, providing the impetus for the fulfillment of his own prayer.[16]

Readers are presented with a fascinating interaction between human initiative and divine guidance that occurs as humans must act to change their plight from emptiness to fullness, while at the same time acknowledging their trust that God will provide blessing. God's two sole actions (1:6; 4:13) underscore the fact that only God can solve the crisis of the story.[17] At the same time, the characters' dialogue reflects

[15] Cf. Ezek 16:8.
[16] Bush, 55; Rauber, 32.
[17] W. S. Prinsloo, "The Theology of the Book of Ruth," *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (1980): 330–341.

an expectation that God will reward human *hesed* ("fidelity") by showing divine *hesed*.[18] The emphasis on human initiative confronts and causes the reader to consider emulation of these characters that live a life characterized by fidelity and kindness.[19] This fidelity is epitomized in Ruth's famous words that not only state her unending loyalty but also provide a pattern for readers who are considering the theological implications of the text: "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (1:16–17).

2. When the book of Ruth is read in concert with the story of God, the grace performed by the characters in the story appears as an exhibition of God's attributes, known from and previously experienced through God's own actions. In the Christian Bible, the book of Ruth follows the story of the increasingly downward spiral of leadership within Israel in the book of Judges, which culminates with rape, war, and anarchy (Judg 19–21). Ruth presents an ordinary family, living during the same time period, that acts out of kindness and interest toward others and, thereby, provides a sharp contrast to the self-interest that typifies

[18] Ruth 1:8; 3:10; cf. 2:12. See, Nielsen, 31.
[19] Bush, 42–47, 52–55

the end of the book of Judges (Judg 21:25). As Judges ends with the claim that only a king can remedy the situation, Ruth offers a story of the origin of the Davidic monarchy that will be the focus of the narration in the book of Samuel. The placement of Ruth between these two books encourages readers to approach Ruth within the context of a broad storyline of God's interaction with and actions on behalf of the people of Israel.

As mentioned earlier, God acts only twice in the book of Ruth (1:6; 4:13); however, when placed in the broader storyline of Israel and her God, the reader will notice the two key terms "redeemer/redemption" and "fidelity" (*hesed*) are often words used to describe the character and actions of the God of Israel. The term *ḥesed* is used throughout the Hebrew Bible as a defining feature of God's character.[20] God shows *hesed* to many[21] and will do so forever.[22] As a redeemer, God delivers those who are weak or in need from trouble.[23] God's role as redeemer is emphasized at key points within

[20] Exod 34:6-7; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2.
[21] Exod 20:6; Deut 5:10; 7:9.
[22] 1 Chron 16:34; 2 Chron 7:3; Ezra 3:11; Ps 100:5; 106:1; Jer 33:11.
[23] Prov 23:10–11; Job 19:25; Jer 50:34; Ps 106:10; Hos 13:14; Ps 107:2–3.

the story of Israel as God redeems Israel from Egypt[24] and exile,[25] thereby, providing hope for future redemption.[26] Since these actions describe humans rather than God in Ruth, when the book placed within the story of God's action toward Israel, the reader sees that the redemption and fidelity that often characterize the deity, at times, also must be demonstrated by humans who work to exude the attributes and actions of God in their own lives so that kindness and redemption may be available to those in need.

Conclusion

The book of Ruth is a short story of the kindness, fidelity, and trust of a family living in the midst of chaos; yet, the book is also a challenge to consider the impact a family may have if it knows the story of God, trusts in that God, and chooses God's own attributes as models for emulation. Through this choice to practice fidelity and offer redemption in order to reflect God's grace toward those in need, the people of God are able to more clearly live their hope, the hope to experience fidelity and redemption from their God.

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[24] Exod 6:6; 15:13.
[25] Isa 44:22; 48:17; Jer 31:11; Mic 4:10
[26] Isa 59:20; 60:16.

Discussion

1. Describe the theme of emptiness to fullness in the book of Ruth.
2. Who is the main character in the book of Ruth? Who are the other characters? Describe the actions and motivations of each character in the book.
3. As the characters in the book of Ruth speak, they consistently state various attributes of God and express expectation that God will act. How do you imagine they are able to speak this way? What might help us speak this way? How do we develop trust in God's promises like the characters of the book of Ruth?
4. How do divine guidance and human activity work together as the conflict in the book of Ruth is resolved?
5. How does the book of Ruth help us understand the concepts of fidelity and redemption? How might we express fidelity and redemption in our context?
6. How does the book of Ruth help us understand and tell the story of God? What does this short book have to say about who God is and what God is doing in the world?
7. The book of Ruth portrays the care and love of a family during the very normal turns of life. How do these simple actions impact the immediate and the future? How might exhibiting kindness in the mundane moments of life have a lasting

impact? Can you think of any examples?

8. How can we as the people of God both individually and collectively exhibit characteristics of God in our community? What characteristics do we exhibit now? What characteristics do we need to work on?