

TO THE READER

IS RUTH IN FACT a Late Biblical book? Although this is the consensus of biblical scholars, there are some vocal dissenters. These tend to take at face value the assertion of the opening verse that we are reading a story that goes back to the period of the Judges—an assertion that led, as perhaps the author of Ruth intended, to the placement of the book between Judges and Samuel in the Septuagint and consequently in the Christian canonical order of the Bible. Some of the dissenters evoke the pure classical style of Ruth that in many ways sounds like the Hebrew of the early first millennium BCE.

But style is actually the clearest evidence of the lateness of Ruth. The writer took pains to create a narrative prose redolent of the early centuries of Israelite history, but it is very difficult to execute such a project of archaizing without occasional telltale slips, as one can see in the Hebrew of the frame story of Job. Here, there are at least a dozen terms that reflect distinctive Late Biblical usage—as, for example, the verbs used for taking a wife (1:7), for wait or hope (1:13), and for removing a sandal (4:7), and another ten idiomatic collocations occur that never appear in earlier biblical texts.

The other strong sign of Ruth's composition in the period after the return from Babylonian exile in the fifth century BCE is its genre. The book is still another manifestation of the veritable explosion of new narrative genres that characterizes the Late Biblical period. For all the polemic thrust of this text (to which we will turn momentarily), it is basically an idyll, quite unlike any of the narratives written during the First Temple period. The setting is bucolic—Bethlehem is a small town, scarcely a city, and the action of the two central chapters takes place outside the town, in the fields and on the threshing floor. Harvesting

and agriculture are a palpable presence in the story. Unlike the narratives from Genesis to Kings, where even pastoral settings are riven with tensions and often punctuated by violence, the world of Ruth is a placid bucolic world, where landowner and workers greet each other decorously with blessings in the name of the LORD, and where traditional practices such as the levirate marriage and leaving unpicked ears of grain for the poor are punctiliously observed. The idyllic nature of the book is especially evident in its characters. In the earlier biblical narratives, character is repeatedly seen to be fraught with inner conflict and moral ambiguity. Even such presumably exemplary figures in the national history as Jacob, Joseph, David, and Solomon exhibit serious weaknesses, sometimes behaving in the most morally questionable ways. In Ruth, by contrast, there are no bad people. Orpah, who turns back to Moab, leaving Naomi, is devoted to her mother-in-law and is merely following Naomi's exhortation. She is a good person, only less good than Ruth. The unnamed kinsman of the last chapter is also not a bad person, merely less exemplary than Boaz in his unwillingness to take on a Moabite wife with all that might entail. In sum, this idyllic narrative is one of the few truly successful stories in any literature that concentrates almost exclusively on good people.

Ruth's Moabite origins have led many interpreters—convincingly, in my view—to see this story as a quiet polemic against the opposition of Ezra and Nehemiah to intermarriage with the surrounding peoples when the Judeans returned to their land in the fifth century BCE. The author may have picked up a hint from 1 Samuel 23:4, where David, said here to be Ruth's great-grandson, is reputed to have placed his parents under the protection of the king of Moab to keep them safe from Saul. Readers should note that for biblical Israel, Moab is an extreme negative case of a foreign people. A perennial enemy, its origins, according to the story of Lot's daughter in Genesis 19, are in an act of incest. The Torah actually bans any sort of intercourse, social, cultic, or sexual, with the Moabites. Against this background of hostility, Moab in this story provides refuge for the family of Elimelech fleeing from famine (like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), and the two Moabite daughters-in-law are faithful, loving women, with Ruth's moral nobility altogether exemplary. It is this that Boaz is aware of from the outset, and he is in no way put off by Ruth's identity as a Moabite, unlike the kinsman who declines to perform the

levirate obligation. Ruth is a perfectly virtuous Moabite—*'eshet hayil*, a "worthy woman"—who becomes the progenitrix of the royal line of the Judean kingdom. It is hard not to see in the boldly iconoclastic invention of this plot an argument against the exclusionary policy on foreign wives propagated by Ezra and Nehemiah. This would also make the fifth century BCE, at the moment when intermarriage was an urgent issue, a plausible time for the composition of the book.

It is remarkable that a story in all likelihood framed for a polemic purpose should be so beguiling. Charm is not a characteristic that one normally associates with biblical narrative, but this idyll is charming from beginning to end, understandably making it one of the most perennially popular biblical books. If the writer set out to make Ruth the Moabite a thoroughly good person in order to implement his argument for openness to exogamy, he also had a rare gift for making good characters convincing, manifested from the very beginning in Naomi's solicitous speech to her daughters-in-law and then in Ruth's unforgettable pledge of devotion to her. This author was finely aware of the conventions of earlier biblical narrative as he was sensitive to the prose style of his predecessors, but he subtly adapted those conventions to his own artistic and thematic ends. He clearly is familiar with the betrothal type-scene that plays an important role in Genesis and early Exodus, but in his canny version, it is a young woman, not a young man, who encounters her future spouse near a well in a foreign land, and the foreign land, paradoxically, is Judah, which she will then make her homeland, "coming back" with Naomi to a place where she has never been.

Another recurrent device of classical biblical narratives is the use of the first piece of dialogue assigned to a character to define the distinctive nature of the character. That procedure is splendidly realized in Ruth's first speech, addressed to Naomi, in Chapter 1. The lyric suasive force of her speech should be noticed, for it is the first signal instance of one of the appealing features of the prose of the Book of Ruth. Earlier biblical narrative often introduces brief poetic insets into the prose—formal poems, sometimes just a line or two in length, that mark a portentous juncture of the story, a blessing or a prayer or an elegy (the valedictory words of Rebekah's family to her as she leaves to become Isaac's bride, Jacob's cadenced cry of dismay when he believes Joseph has been torn apart by a wild beast). In Ruth, on the other hand, the dialogue repeat-

edly glides into parallel structures that have a strong rhythmic quality and sound rather like verse but do not entirely scan as formal poetry. Naomi's relatively long speech to her daughters-in-law abounds in loose parallel structures and emphatic repetitions, culminating in one parallelism that actually scans as verse in the Hebrew: "would you wait for them till they grew up? / For them would you be deprived of husbands?" Ruth's beautifully cadenced response is still closer to poetry: "For wherever you go, I will go / and wherever you lodge, I will lodge. / Your people is my people, / and your god is my god."

These gestures toward poetry continue to mark the speech of the characters down to the words of blessing of the townswomen near the end of the last chapter. The balance, the rhythmic poise, the stately symmetries of the language are an apt manifestation of the harmonious world of the Book of Ruth: the characters express a kind of moral confidence ultimately stemming from a sense of the rightness of the traditional values of loyalty, love, and charity and of the sustaining force of providence even in the face of adversity. All this taken together, consummated with the most finely managed artistry, makes the Book of Ruth one of literature's most touching stories with a happy ending.

CHAPTER I

And it happened in the days when the judges ruled that there was a famine in the land, and a man went from Bethlehem to sojourn in the plains of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. And the man's name was Elimelech, and his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites from Bethlehem of Judah.

1. *when the judges ruled.* The "judges" (*shoftim*) are tribal chieftains, as in the Book of Judges. This initial notice led the Septuagint, and the Christian canon afterward, to place the Book of Ruth in the Former Prophets, after Judges.

2. *And the man's name.* All the names appear to have symbolic meaning, though perhaps that is not entirely certain. Elimelech means "my God is king." Naomi, as she herself points out in 1:20, suggests "sweet" or "pleasant." Unlike these two names, which have some sort of general currency, the two sons' names, Mahlon and Chilion, mean "sickness" and "destruction" and so are manifestly schematic names pointing to the fate of their bearers and would not have been used in reality.

Bethlehem of Judah. "Bethlehem" signifies "house of bread," a meaning that will be fully activated in the grain harvest during which the main action takes place. Because it is a generic name for any town in a region where grain is cultivated, the writer stipulates "of Judah" to distinguish it from at least one other Bethlehem.

3 And they came to the plains of Moab and they were there. And Elimelech,
 4 Naomi's husband, died, and she, together with her two sons, was left. And
 they took for themselves Moabite wives. The name of one was Orpah and
 5 the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelled there some ten years. And
 the two of them, Mahlon and Chilion, died as well, and the woman was
 6 left of her two children and of her husband. And she rose, she and her
 daughters-in-law, and turned back from the plains of Moab, for she had
 heard in the plains of Moab that the LORD had singled out His people to
 7 give them bread. And she went out from the place where she had been,
 with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to go back to the
 8 land of Judah. And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law: "Go back,
 each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD do kindness with you
 9 as you have done with the dead and with me. May the LORD grant that
 you find a settled place, each of you in the house of her husband." And

4. *Orpah*. Orpah points to the word for "nape," another name dictated by plot function, because in the end she necessarily turns her back on Naomi to head back to Moab. Elsewhere, turning the nape is a sign of flight; here it merely focuses on Naomi's vision of Orpah as she turns around, after all a devoted daughter-in-law only following her mother-in-law's exhortation.

Ruth. There is some uncertainty about the meaning of this name. It might be a defective spelling of *re'ut*, "friendship," or it might derive from the verbal stem *r-w-h*, which suggests "well-watered" or "fertile." It is also possible that the name has no thematic meaning.

dwelled. First they came merely to "sojourn." Now they "dwell" in Moab for a decade, threatening to become expatriates.

6. *turned back*. The whole story turns on four thematic key words—three are verbs, *lashuv*, "to go back or return," *lalekhet*, "to go," *lidboq*, "to cling." These verbs, as we shall see, will acquire complicated and even paradoxical meanings. The fourth term is a noun, *hesed*, "kindness" (but also implying something like "faithfulness" or "loyalty"). The word first appears in verse 8.

bread. This Hebrew term, *lehem*, is probably a synecdoche for "food" as it often is elsewhere, though there is special emphasis on bread because of the barley harvest in the fields around Bethlehem.

9. *a settled place*. The literal meaning of the Hebrew word is "rest." In combination with *nahalah*, "inheritance," the word *menuhah* implies "settling down somewhere in comfort and security."

she kissed them, and they raised their voice and wept. And they said to
 10 her, "But with you we will go back to your people." And Naomi said, "Go
 11 back, my daughters, why should you go with me? Do I still have sons in
 my womb who could be husbands to you? Go back, my daughters, go, for
 12 I am too old to have a husband. Even had I thought 'I have hope. This
 very night I shall have a husband and bear sons,' would you wait for them
 13 till they grew up? For them would you be deprived of husbands? No, my
 daughters, for it is far more bitter for me than for you because the LORD's
 hand has come out against me." And they raised their voice and wept once
 14 more, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And
 15 she said "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people. Go back

11. *Do I still have sons in my womb who could be husbands to you?* Naomi here refers explicitly to the practice of *yibum*, levirate marriage: when a husband dies, leaving no male offspring, one of his brothers is obliged to marry the widow and beget children with her, serving as a kind of proxy for his deceased brother. The obligation of levirate marriage is at issue in the story of Tamar in Genesis 38. It is worth noting that she becomes the progenitrix of the line that will lead to David, like Ruth, who is only three generations removed from David. In Chapter 4 here the practice of *yibum* is extended beyond brothers-in-law to kinsmen, which differs from Genesis.

13. *would you wait for them till they grew up? For them would you be deprived of husbands?* These clauses are the first manifestation of a pronounced tendency in Ruth to cast dialogue in cadenced parallel statements that are loose approximations of parallelistic poetry. This approximation will become tighter in Ruth's first speech.

bitter. In verse 20, Naomi will explicitly say this is the antonym to her name.

the LORD's hand has come out against me. The wording suggests something close to an attack.

14. *Orpah kissed her mother-in-law*. In context, the obvious implication is that this is a farewell kiss as she turns her "nape," *oref*, to Naomi and heads home. She is a good woman but less resolute than Ruth.

15. *Go back*. This is the plain meaning of this verb, for Moab is Ruth's place of origin; then, paradoxically, she will be said to "go back" to Judah, a land where she has never been.

16 after your sister-in-law." And Ruth said, "Do not entreat me to forsake you, to turn back from you. For wherever you go, I will go. And wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people is my people, and your god is my god.
 17 Wherever you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. So may the LORD do to me or even more, for only death will part you and me." And she saw that she was insisting on going with her, and she ceased speaking to her.
 19 And the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem, and it happened as they came to Bethlehem that the whole town was astir over them, and
 20 the women said, "Is this Naomi?" And she said, "Do not call me Naomi.

16. *lodge*. The verb *lan* means "to spend the night while traveling or wandering," so Ruth scarcely envisages a comfortable and stable lot in following Naomi.

Your people is my people, and your god is my god. There was no real process of conversion in the ancient Near East. If a person considered residence in a different country, he or she would in the natural course of things embrace the worship of the local god or gods. One should therefore not imagine that Ruth has become a theological monotheist, only that she is recognizing that if she follows Naomi to her people in Judah, she will also adopt the god of the country.

17. *Wherever you die, I will die, and there will I be buried*. Ruth's moving speech, with its fine resonance of parallel clauses, appropriately ends on the note of death: she will always remain with Naomi in the trajectory of a whole life until death. The procedure of biblical narrative of defining a character by his or her initial speech is vividly deployed here, showing Ruth as the perfect embodiment of loyalty and love for her mother-in-law.

19. *the whole town*. This is a perfect illustration of the fact that biblical 'ir usually means "town," not "city." Bethlehem, far from being a walled city, is a modest agricultural town with small cultivated fields on its outskirts.

was astir. It would have been a notable event in this small town that Naomi, having entirely disappeared for ten years, should suddenly reappear, with a young woman in tow. This would have triggered gossip and speculation among the townswomen. The women focus on Naomi, not paying attention to the young woman with her.

the women. The Hebrew merely says "they," but the plural verb is conjugated in the feminine. It is noteworthy that throughout the first chapter women alone have been active characters, the men briefly introduced only to die. This is surely a point of departure from the patriarchal norm of classical Hebrew narrative, where there are some strong female characters but the men predominate.

Call me Mara, for Shaddai has dealt great bitterness to me. I went out full,
 and empty did the LORD bring me back. Why should you call me Naomi
 when the LORD has borne witness against me and Shaddai has done me
 harm?" And Naomi came back, and her daughter-in-law with her who was
 coming back from the plains of Moab. And they had come to Bethlehem
 at the beginning of the barley harvest.

20. *Mara* This name would mean "bitter," the antithesis of the sweetness suggested by the name Naomi.

21. *the LORD has borne witness against me and Shaddai has done me harm*. These two parallel clauses are entirely scannable as poetry, with three accented syllables in each half of the line in Hebrew. Because of the poetic requirement of synonymous substitution, Naomi, after invoking the standard term, "the LORD" (YHWH) in the first verse, uses a poetic or archaic alternative in the second verse, "Shaddai" (in traditional translations, "the Almighty"). In fact, elsewhere "Shaddai" unattached to 'el, "God," appears only in poetry.

22. *Naomi came back, and her daughter-in-law with her who was coming back*. The paradox here is thematically pointed. Naomi is of course coming back to her homeland. Ruth is "coming back from the plains of Moab," which is her homeland, because she is united in purpose with Naomi and has in a sense already made the land of Judah, to which she comes for the first time, her new homeland. This paradox will be further enriched by the allusion in the next chapter to Abraham's migration from a land in the east to Canaan.

And they had come to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. This notation clearly sets the agricultural scene where all the subsequent action will unfold. The harvesting bears out the word Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had remembered his people to give them bread, and the fertility of the land also adumbrates Ruth's destined fertility.

CHAPTER 2

1 And Naomi had a kinsman through her husband, a man of worth from
2 the clan of Elimelech, and his name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite
said to Naomi, "Let me go, pray, to the field, and glean from among the
ears of grain after I find favor in his eyes." And she said to her, "Go, my

1. *a man of worth.* The original meaning of *gibor hayil* is "valiant warrior," but in the idyllic setting of the Book of Ruth, its meaning is extended to an entirely pacific sense—a landholder of substantial means. It is the same designation that is applied to the "worthy woman" of Proverbs 31:8, and later this feminine form of the epithet will be attached to Ruth.

his name was Boaz. Though the meaning of the name is not altogether transparent, and though it may not be meant to be symbolic, a tradition going back to Late Antiquity associates it with a Hebrew root signifying "strength."

2. *Ruth the Moabite.* She is explicitly identified as a Moabite to underscore the seeming contradiction of a foreign woman going out to take advantage of the Israelite law (Leviticus 19:9-10) enjoining agriculturalists to leave what the reapers failed to garner for the poor to pick up.

after I find favor in his eyes. Ruth exercises a kind of nervous reticence in regard to Naomi's prosperous relative, who has no doubt been pointed out to her by her mother-in-law, in not mentioning him by name. She realizes that she will be dependent on Boaz's goodwill and so says she will not glean until he has shown himself favorable toward her. In the event, she begins gleaning before that happens.

daughter." And she went and came and gleaned in the field behind the
3 reapers, and it chanced that she came upon the plot of Boaz, who was
from the clan of Elimelech. And look, Boaz was coming from Bethle-
4 hem, and he said to the reapers, "May the LORD be with you!" and they
said, "May the LORD bless you!" And Boaz said to his lad who was
5 stationed over the reapers, "Whose is this young woman?" And the lad
6 stationed over the reapers answered and said, "She is a young Moabite
woman who has come back with Naomi from the plain of Moab. And 7

3. *it chanced that she came upon the plot of Boaz.* This is hardly an accident because that is precisely where she intended to go. The peculiar formulation may be meant to suggest that there is a concordance between human initiative and God's providence.

4. *And look, Boaz was coming from Bethlehem.* His home would be in town and the cultivated fields he owns outside the town.

May the LORD be with you! The exchange of greetings here perfectly expresses the harmonious and traditional world of the Book of Ruth: master and workmen bless each other cordially in the name of the LORD.

5. *lad.* Though the Hebrew noun *na'ar* does designate a young man, it is very often extended, as here, to refer to anyone in a position of subservience. Boaz's overseer of the reapers is surely not a stripling and may well be a man of mature years.

Whose is this young woman? We now learn that the widow Ruth is young, appearing to Boaz as a *na'arah*, a nubile young woman. He of course does not know until his overseer tells him that she is a Moabite. The use of "whose" reflects his assumption that she must be under the authority of her father's house.

6. *has come back.* In the words of the overseer, Ruth's emigration from Moab is again assimilated to Naomi's coming back to Judah.

she said, 'Let me glean, pray, and gather from among the sheaves behind the reapers.' And she has come and stood since the morning
 8 till now. She has barely stayed in the house." And Boaz said to Ruth,
 "Have you not heard, my daughter—do not go to glean in another field,
 and also do not pass on from here, and so shall you cling to my young
 9 women. Your eyes be on the field in which they reap and go after them.
 Have I not charged the lads not to touch you? Should you be thirsty,
 you shall go to the pitchers and drink from what the lads draw from
 10 the well." And she fell on her face and bowed to the ground and said

7. *gather from among the sheaves.* She would not be picking up sheaves but rather ears of grain that had fallen from the sheaves.

she has come and stood since the morning till now. This is obviously testimony to Ruth's assiduousness at her task of gleaning.

She has barely stayed in the house. The Hebrew text, which reads literally, "This is her staying in the house a bit," seems garbled, and so the translation is no more than a guess.

8. *Have you not heard, my daughter.* This form of address appears to imply that Boaz is a mature man, perhaps a decade or two older than Ruth, who may be in her early twenties.

and so shall you cling to my young women. First Ruth clings to Naomi. Now, in this thematically fraught word, which will be repeated, she is enjoined to cling to Boaz's servant girls.

9. *Your eyes be on the field.* "Be" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

Have I not charged the lads not to touch you? A nubile young woman (and, probably, an attractive one) might well be subjected to sexual advances from these farmhands.

drink from what the lads draw from the well. "The well" is merely implied by the verb, which is used only for drawing water from a well. What we have here is a piquant reversal of the traditional betrothal type-scene: instead of a future bridegroom encountering a young woman, *na'arah*, at a well in a foreign land, there is a young woman, *na'arah*, in a land foreign to her but homeland to the others, for whom *ne'arim* will draw water.

to him, "Why should I find favor in your eyes to recognize me when I
 am a foreigner?" And Boaz answered and said, "It was indeed told me,
 11 all that you did for your mother-in-law after your husband's death, and
 that you left your mother and your father and the land of your birth to
 come to a people that you did not know in time past. May the LORD
 12 requite your actions and may your reward be complete from the LORD
 God of Israel under Whose wings you have come to shelter." And she
 13 said, "May I find favor in the eyes of my lord, for you have comforted
 me and have spoken to the heart of your servant when I could scarcely
 be like one of your slave girls." And Boaz said to her at mealtime,
 14 "Come here and eat of the bread and dip your crust in vinegar." And
 she sat alongside the reapers, and he bundled together roasted grain

10. *when I am a foreigner.* These words are fraught with poignancy and thematic point. As a foreigner, Ruth feels she has no right to expect favors from the Judahites. In fact, the plot will manifest how she "clings" to this new community and becomes an integral part of it.

11. *you left your mother and your father and the land of your birth.* These words are the most significant literary allusion in the book. They explicitly echo God's first words to Abraham in Genesis 12:11, "Go forth from your land and your birth place and your father's house." Now it is a woman, and a Moabite, who reenacts Abraham's long trek from the East to Canaan. She will become a founding mother of the nation as he was the founding father. Ruth's paradoxical journey outward from home that proves to be a "going back" to home has been aptly summarized by Herbert Marks: these "brief chapters outline the two principal archetypes of Western narrative, the Abrahamic myth of definitive rupture and the Odysseian myth of ultimate return, the journey home."

14. *mealtime.* The meal after the arrival of a stranger at a well in a foreign land is still another motif of the betrothal type-scene.

dip your crust in vinegar. This homey detail neatly catches the pastoral quality of the idyll.

15 for her, and she ate and was sated and left some over. And she rose to glean, and Boaz charged his lads, saying, "Among the sheaves, too, she
16 may glean, and you shall not harass her. And also she may certainly take her share from the loose ears of grain and glean, and you shall
17 not chide her." And she gleaned in the field till evening and beat out what she had gleaned, and it came to almost an *ephah* of barley. And
18 she carried it and came to the town, and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. And she took out and gave to her what she had left
19 over after being sated. And her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today and where did you work? May he who recognized you be blessed!" And she told her mother-in-law how she had worked with him, and she said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today

15. *Among the sheaves, too, she may glean.* Boaz makes a point of offering Ruth the opportunity to collect a generous abundance of grain, not just solitary ears left by the reapers in the standing barley.

16. *take her share.* The use of the verb *sh-l-l* here is unusual because it usually means "to take booty." The evident idea is that she will have a windfall of good takings, like someone who reaps booty after a victory.

17. *beat out what she had gleaned.* This would be to get rid of the chaff.

18. *what she had left over after being sated.* This refers to what she left over from the midday meal, as reported in verse 14. What she gives to Naomi here is not the garnered grain but prepared food. This story that began in hunger now manifests an abundance of food.

19. *recognized.* The sense of the verb is obviously to single out or show special attention, as in verse 10 above. But it is a key verb in the Joseph story, and there is an underlying sense in which Boaz "recognizes" Ruth as a true daughter of Naomi and a fit mate for himself.

is Boaz." And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed is he to the LORD, Who has not forsaken His kindness with the living and with the dead!" And Naomi said to her, "The man is related to us, he is of our redeeming kin." And Ruth the Moabite said, "Moreover, he said to me, 'To the lads who are mine shall you cling until they finish all the harvest that is mine.'" And Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It is good, my daughter, that you shall go out with his young women, and that they not trouble you in another field." And she clung to Boaz's young women to glean till the barley harvest and the wheat harvest were finished. And she stayed with her mother-in-law.

20. *Who has not forsaken His kindness with the living and with the dead!* All this echoes, with perfect thematic appropriateness, Orpah's and Ruth's exemplary behavior observed by Naomi in 1:8.

he is of our redeeming kin. "Redeemer" throughout the story signifies a legal, familial function. If a childless woman is widowed, a male kin can "redeem" her through marriage, assuring that through him her inheritance will not be lost and providing her offspring. Naomi is careful to say "of our redeeming kin," properly implying that there may be other candidates in the family, as proves the case in Chapter 4.

22. *trouble you.* The verb here has almost a sense of "interfere with," but that British usage is a little too explicitly sexual to adopt in the translation.

CHAPTER 3

1 And Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, shall I not
2 seek for you a settled place for you, that it be well for you? And now, is
3 not Boaz our kinsman with whose young women you were winnowing
4 barley at the threshing floor tonight? And you must bathe and anoint
yourself and put on your garments and go down to the threshing floor.
Do not let yourself be known to the man till he has finished eating and
drinking. And it will be, when he lies down, that you will know the
place where he lies down, and you shall come and uncover his feet and

1. *a settled place*. See the note on 1:10. In both instances, Naomi associates the Hebrew term *manoah* with the security and tranquillity of married life.

3. *you must bathe and anoint yourself and put on your garments*. These instructions initiate a chain of details in the nocturnal encounter between Ruth and Boaz that almost teasingly hint at an erotic experience, but such an experience is pointedly not consummated. Here Ruth is enjoined to wash her body and anoint it (perhaps with fragrant oils) and dress herself (perhaps finely).

Do not let yourself be known to the man. The verb "to know" is reiterated in the episode. In its active form, it can have a sexual meaning in biblical usage, so it plays a role in the erotic tease of the narrative.

till he has finished eating and drinking. In this, Naomi is calculating that Boaz will be in a good mood after eating and drinking, a calculation confirmed in verse 6, when these two verbs are followed by "he was of good cheer."

4. *uncover his feet*. Alternately, the Hebrew noun could mean "the place of his feet." In any case, it is an odd detail. Since the verb of uncovering is the one used in biblical prohibitions of uncovering the nakedness of someone—that is, engaging in sexual intercourse—the erotic tease of the narrative is again manifested. (But the proposal of some interpreters that "feet" is a euphemism for the penis is highly dubious.) Ruth lies down not alongside Boaz but at his feet,

lie down, and as for him, he shall tell you what you should do." And
she said to her, "Whatever you say to me I will do." And she went down
to the threshing floor and did all that her mother-in-law charged her.
And Boaz ate and drank, and he was of good cheer, and he came
lay down at the edge of the stack of barley. And she came stealthily and
uncovered his feet and lay down. And it happened at midnight that the
man trembled and twisted round, and, look, a woman was lying at his
feet. And he said, "Who are you?" And she said, "I am Ruth your servant.

an expression of her lower social status and of the subservient role of wives in relation to their husbands in biblical society. The uncovering may simply be an act to show that someone is present, and so when Boaz awakens in the middle of the night, perhaps what first startles him—though it is unreported—is his exposed feet, after which he realizes that a woman is present.

he shall tell you what you should do. Naomi certainly appears to leave open the possibility that Boaz will ask Ruth to have sex with him, though she is counting on the likelihood that he will instead virtuously devise a plan to do social and matrimonial justice to his kinswoman by marriage.

7. *she came stealthily*. The implication of the adverb is not a surreptitious act but an entrance on tiptoe, so as not to wake Boaz.

8. *trembled and twisted round*. Since only after this does he see that a woman is there on the threshing floor with him, one may infer that the momentary physical contortion is from suddenly awaking in the night, perhaps even from a nightmare.

9. *Who are you?* The question is brusque, unadorned by any polite form of address, as if to say: Woman, what are you doing here on my threshing floor in the middle of the night? He of course has met Ruth during the day, but in the dark of the night he does not immediately recognize her, especially after just having awakened.

10 May you spread your wing over your servant, for you are a redeeming kinsman." And he said, "Blessed are you to the LORD, my daughter. You have done better in your latest kindness than in the first, not going after
11 the young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not be afraid. Whatever you say I will do for you, for all my people's town knows
12 that you are a worthy woman. And now, though in fact I am redeeming

spread your wing. The Hebrew *kanaf* means both "wing" and "corner of a garment," and most translations render it in the latter sense because the reference is to a man. But Ruth is echoing Boaz's words in 2:12, "the LORD God of Israel under Whose wings you have come to shelter," and as a metaphor, a man can certainly extend a sheltering wing. Zakovitch observes, citing both Rashi and Ezekiel 15:8, that sheltering wings can be a symbol of marriage. In that case, Ruth delicately avoids explicit reference to marriage, instead using an image that also has the more general connotation of shelter.

a redeeming kinsman. Not "the" redeemer, because she knows there may be another candidate for the role.

10. *your latest kindness.* The immediate context suggests that the more salient meaning of *hesed* here is "act of loyalty."

the first. Though this might mean Ruth's loyalty to Naomi in Moab, the mention that follows of her not going after the young men makes it more likely that he is referring to her discretion during the day in keeping a distance from the young men.

whether poor or rich. Ruth stayed away from everyone in the group of gleaners, regardless of social standing.

11. *Whatever you say I will do for you.* These words pointedly echo Ruth's to Naomi in verse 5. Though she has placed herself in a posture of subservience to him, he now affirms that he is prepared to do whatever she bids him.

all my people's town. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "all my people's gate," but "gate" is a synecdoche for the town, because it is both the entrance to the town and the area where courts of justice were held when the town's elders convened.

a worthy woman. This feminine equivalent of the epithet earlier used for Boaz, "a man of worth," intimates that the two are perfectly suitable mates.

kin, there is also a redeeming kin closer than I. Spend the night here,
13 and it shall be in the morning, should he redeem you, he will do well to redeem, and if he does not want to redeem you, I myself will redeem
14 you, as the LORD lives. Lie here till morning." And she lay at his feet till morning and arose before a man could recognize his fellow man. And
15 he said, "Let it not be known that a woman came to the threshing floor." And he said, "Give me the shawl that you have and hold it out." And she
16 held it out, and he measured out six shares of barley and he set it on her, and she came into the town. And she came to her mother-in-law, and her mother-in-law said, "How is it with you, my daughter?" And she told

13. *Spend the night here.* There is both a practical and a symbolic reason for Boaz's urging Ruth to spend the night with him on the threshing floor. He is concerned that it might be dangerous for her to make her way back through the town in the dark of night—in the event, she will leave at the first crack of dawn, when just a bit of light shows but not enough to distinguish one face from another (verse 14). But the night spent together is also an adumbration of marital union, though here, in the most likely reading, still unconsummated. The verb used for "spend the night" is the same in Ruth's "wherever you lodge, I will lodge," though this "lodging" is one that cannot be together with Naomi.

he will do well to redeem. The redemption of the widowed kinswoman is his prerogative and his obligation, so if the relative chooses to do it, Boaz can only lend his assent and approval.

I myself. In the Hebrew, the otherwise unrequired first-person pronoun is added as a strong emphasis on the part of the speaker.

14. *Let it not be known that a woman came.* Boaz is, of course, concerned for Ruth's reputation.

15. *six shares of barley.* The Hebrew simply says "six barley," not specifying the unit of measure, but it would have to be relatively small for Ruth to carry it.

and he set it on her. Boaz evidently wraps up the measure of barley in the shawl and then places it either on Ruth's shoulder or on her head.

16. *How is it with you.* The Hebrew appears to say "who are you," but *mi*, usually "who," as in Boaz's words in verse 8, also sometimes means "what" or "how."

17 her all that the man had done for her. And she said, "These six shares
of barley he gave me, for he said, 'You should not come empty handed
18 to your mother-in-law.'" And she said, "Stay, my daughter, till you know
how the matter will fall out, for the man will not rest if he does not settle
the matter today."

17. *You should not come empty handed.* The Book of Ruth is all about the transition from emptiness to fullness—from famine to abundance, from bereavement and childlessness to marriage and children. Naomi has told the women of the town "I went out full, and empty did the LORD bring me back" (1:21), and now the same Hebrew word *reiqah* appears in Ruth's report of Boaz's speech to her. The fullness of the shawl bearing the barley is a hint of the fullness of offspring that Ruth will enjoy and bring to Naomi.

18. *Stay, my daughter.* This reiterated form of address is a token of Naomi's constant affection for Ruth.

the man will not rest. Now that the two women have taken this initiative, the responsibility for action lies with Boaz, and Naomi trusts his dependability, and his good faith.

CHAPTER 4

And Boaz had gone up to the gate, and he sat down there, and look, the
redeeming kin of whom Boaz spoke was passing by, and he said, "Turn
aside, sit down here, So and So." And he turned aside and sat down.
And he took ten men of the town elders and said, "Sit down here," and
they sat down. And he said to the redeeming kin, "Naomi, who came
back from the plain of Moab, sold the parcel of the field that was our
brother Elimelech's. And as for me, I thought, I shall alert you, saying,
'Acquire it in the presence of those seated here and in the presence of
my people's elders.' If you would redeem, redeem, and if you will not

1. *the gate.* The town gate, with some sort of square or plaza in front of it, is both the principal public place of the town and the site where courts of justice are held. Boaz exploits both these aspects of the gate, first taking a seat there in the expectation, which proves correct, that the redeemer-kin is likely to pass through this frequented space; then convening a quorum of the elders to serve as witnesses to the legal act that will be executed.

sit down here, So and So. The Hebrew *peloni 'almoni*, which appears twice elsewhere in the Bible, seems to derive from *pele'*, "mystery" (so Rashi proposes), and the root *'l-m*, suggesting "mute." The point of refusing this character a name is that by declining to exercise his obligation of redemption, he essentially withdraws from playing any role in the plot except to stand aside for Boaz. One notes that he immediately assents to Boaz's command to take a seat, as do the elders in the next verse—both testifying to Boaz's authority in the community.

3. *Naomi . . . sold the parcel of the field that was our brother Elimelech's.* Presumably, she was compelled to do this in her destitution. Zakovitch observes that since a widow does not inherit her husband, this would have to be after the death of Mahlon and Chilion, for a mother can inherit her sons.

redeem, tell me, that I may know that there is none except you to redeem
 5 and I am after you." And he said, "I will redeem." And Boaz said, "On
 6 the day you acquire the field from Naomi, you will also acquire Ruth
 the Moabite to raise up the name of the dead man on his estate." And

4. *if you will not redeem.* The received text shows "if he will not redeem," but many Hebrew manuscripts as well as the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and the Peshitta have the more coherent second-person singular.

there is none except you to redeem. Mr. So and So is the only known kin of Naomi besides Boaz, so his refusing to redeem will clear the way for Boaz.

I will redeem. At this point the kinsman imagines that the redemption solely involves acquiring the parcel of land so that it can be restored to the possession of Naomi's clan, to which he belongs. Since Naomi has been left without offspring, he thinks that by providing the purchase price, he will retain permanent possession of the parcel of land.

5. *On the day you acquire.* As Zakovitch notes, this idiom puts temporal pressure on the kinsman because it refers to this very day when they are sitting before the gate in the presence of the elders and the townspeople.

you will also acquire Ruth the Moabite to raise up the name of the dead man. This is the more challenging aspect of the obligation of redemption that until now Boaz has held in reserve—the duty of *yibum* or levirate marriage (see Deuteronomy 25:6). When a man dies without male offspring, his brother is obliged to marry the widow ("levirate" derives from the Latin *levir*, "brother-in-law") and, acting as a kind of proxy for the deceased, beget a child with the widow, who will thus continue the name of the dead brother. In this case, the kinsman is not actually the brother of Ruth's dead husband but his relative (perhaps, a first cousin), and the Hebrew word *'ah* means both "brother" and "kinsman." The received text here reads "from," *me'et*, "Ruth," but this is almost surely a scribal error for *'et*, the sign of a direct object in Hebrew. One should note that Boaz makes a point of identifying Ruth as a Moabite, calculating that this will trouble the kinsman, for the Moabites are not merely foreigners but traditional enemies with whom contact has been proscribed. The introduction of the levirate obligation also pointedly recalls the story of Tamar and the sons of Judah in Genesis 38. One son marries her and dies, leaving Tamar childless. The same fate befalls his brother after marrying her, leading Judah to withhold his third son from carrying out the levirate duty. Tamar, like Ruth, is a foreigner (in her case, a Canaanite), and when she contrives through deception to conceive twins by Judah, Perez and Zerah, she becomes the progenitrix of the line that will lead to Boaz, as we are reminded in the genealogical notice at the end of the book (verses 18–21).

the redeeming kin said, "I cannot redeem, lest I spoil my estate. You—
 redeem my obligation of redemption, for I cannot redeem." And thus 7
 it was in former times in Israel concerning redemption and concerning
 exchange to fulfill every condition: a man would remove his sandal and
 give it to his fellow man. And this was the practice in Israel. And the 8
 redeemer said, "You—acquire it," and he removed his sandal. And Boaz 9
 said to the elders and to all the people, "You are witnesses today that

6. *I cannot redeem, lest I spoil my estate.* He leaves unstated why this should be the case. Many commentators conclude that he does not want to contaminate his family by introducing a Moabite woman. The Midrash Ruth Rabba proposes that he fears he will suffer the fate of Mahlon and Chilion, who died after marrying Ruth and Orpah. In any case, if he begets a son with Ruth, the estate will stand in the name of her dead husband, not of the kinsman, as is indeed the aim of the levirate law.

7. *And thus it was in former times in Israel.* This formula (compare 1 Samuel 9:9) clearly indicates that the writer and his audience are removed in time from the era when the levirate obligation was practiced, and it is thus another reflection of the lateness of the book.

to fulfill every condition. The language here is explicitly legal.

a man would remove his sandal and give it to his fellow man. There is no certainty as to who gives the sandal to whom or what exactly it signifies. In the enunciation of the levirate law in Deuteronomy 25:9, it is the widow who removes the sandal from the brother-in-law who has refused to marry her, and she then spits in his face, so the removal of the sandal in Deuteronomy is clearly a sign of disgrace. (There the verb is *halats*; here, in the Late Biblical usage, it is *shalaf*, a term that in earlier Hebrew refers only to "the unsheathing of a sword.") In our text, there is no indication of disgrace. The removal of the sandal seems to be a legal ritual for the transfer of an obligation, or of property—perhaps from the kinsmen to Boaz. The seeming confusion here about the details of the *yibum* ritual may reflect the writer's distance from the time when it was practiced.

8. *You—acquire.* By emphatically designating Boaz with the second-person pronoun before the verb in the imperative, the kinsman relinquishes all rights of redemption to Boaz.

I have acquired all that was Elimelech's and all that was Chilion's and
 10 Mahlon's from the hand of Naomi. And also Ruth the Moabite, wife of
 Mahlon, I have acquired for myself as wife, to raise up the name of the
 dead on his estate, that the name of the dead be not be cut off from his
 11 brothers and from the gate of his place. You are witnesses today." And all
 the people who were in the gate and the elders said, "We are witnesses.
 May the LORD make the woman coming into your house like Rachel and
 like Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel. And do worthy things
 12 in Ephrathah and proclaim a name in Bethlehem. And may your house
 be like the house of Perez to whom Tamar gave birth by Judah, from

9. *I have acquired all that was Elimelech's.* Since Naomi has sold her late husband's land, Boaz is declaring that he is about to pay whatever sum is required for buying back the property.

Chilion's . . . Mahlon's. Zakovitch shrewdly observes the way the difference in the meaning of the two names plays out in the story. "Chilion" implies utter destruction, and with no offspring, this son's name will be lost. "Mahlon" suggests a lesser condition of illness, and his name will be revived through Ruth.

10. *Ruth the Moabite.* If this national epithet put off the kinsman, Boaz on his part unambiguously affirms his readiness to marry the foreign woman.

from the gate of his place. This combination of terms is unusual but is dictated by the fact that they are assembled in the square in front of the gate.

11. *like Rachel and like Leah.* Their blessing transforms Ruth into a kind of adopted matriarch.

do worthy things in Ephrathah and proclaim a name in Bethlehem. In a benedictory flourish, their speech glides into formal verse, though it is unusual that the standard designation, "Bethlehem," appears in the second half of the line, and the less common synonym, "Ephrathah," in the first half. The phrase "do worthy things" incorporates the same term, *hayil*, that occurs in the designation of Ruth as a "worthy woman."

12. *Perez to whom Tamar gave birth by Judah.* The underlying allusion to the story of Judah and Tamar is now made explicit.

the seed that this young woman will give you." And Boaz took Ruth the
 13 Moabite, and she became his wife, and he came to bed with her and the
 LORD granted her conception and she bore a son. And the women said to
 14 Naomi, "Blessed is the LORD, Who has not deprived you of a redeemer
 today, and let his name be proclaimed in Israel. And may he be a restorer
 15 of life for you and a support for your old age, as your daughter-in-law,
 whom you love, has borne him, who has been better to you than seven
 sons." And Naomi took the child and placed him in her lap and became
 16 a nurse for him. And the neighbor women called a name for him, saying,
 17 "A son is born to Naomi," and they called his name Obed—he was the
 father of Jesse father of David.

13. *The LORD granted her conception.* The phrase does not ordinarily occur in reports of conjugal union and conception. It is probably dictated by the fact that Ruth had remained childless in her years of marriage to Mahlon.

14. *And the women said.* The story began with three women (and three dead men), then with the unflagging loyalty and love between two women. When Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, they were greeted by a bevy of astonished, and gossiping, women. Now the women become a chorus to celebrate the birth of Naomi's grandchild.

16. *And Naomi took the child and placed him in her lap and became a nurse for him.* To cuddle the child and become a caregiver for him is, of course, a natural expression of a grandmother's love, but it also strongly suggests how the child has become a vivid replacement for the two sons Naomi has lost. It is by no means necessary to see this act, as some interpreters have done, as a formal ceremony of adoption, and it would be both odd and unnerving for a grandmother to adopt her grandchild while his mother was alive.

17. *the neighbor women.* This designation, as Zakovitch, with his characteristic sensitivity to nuances of word choice, observes, points to a closeness to Naomi in this group that does not characterize the more general chorus of townswomen.

and they called his name Obed. Only here is the name given to a child by neither father nor mother but by neighbor women. It is probably a reflection of the importance of the community of women in the story. The name Obed, which occurs elsewhere, means "worshipper" and is probably a shortened form of Obadiah, "worshipper, or servant, of the LORD."

- 18,19 And this is the lineage of Perez. Perez begat Hezron. And Hezron begat
20 Ram and Ram begat Aminadab. And Aminadab begat Nahshon, and
21 Nahshon begat Salmah. And Salmah begat Boaz, and Boaz begat Obed.
22 And Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David.
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18. *And this is the lineage of Perez.* In careful emulation of the Book of Genesis, the writer weaves together narration with genealogy to pointed thematic purpose. Here he aligns the son Ruth bears both back to Judah's son, Perez, and forward to the founder of the divinely authorized dynasty, David. As with some other genealogical lists, there are exactly ten generations from Perez to David. Ruth the Moabite, who "comes back" to the region of Judah and, in the words of her vow to her mother-in-law, takes Naomi's God as her own, at the end becomes the great-grandmother of David king of Israel.

THE BOOK OF ESTHER