

Ruth
(Excerpted from [Schoolmaster](#))
By David Pyles

The book of Ruth pertains to the era of the Judges and is therefore ancient even by Bible standards. The book began by describing a Jewish family of four who were driven from Israel to Moab on account of a severe drought. This family consisted of a husband, wife and two sons. The name of the wife was Naomi. While residing in Moab, the two sons each married Moabite women. Now the Moabites were Gentiles, being descendants of Lot, whom he conceived in a drunken act of incest. They were also worshippers of false gods. Consequently, it was considered a dishonorable thing for a Jew to marry of that race. One of these Moabite women was named Ruth. While in Moab, the husband of Naomi died, and the two sons died shortly thereafter, leaving the three women as destitute widows. As I will shortly relate, the remainder of the story will be about the deliverance of Naomi and Ruth through the benevolence of a great Jewish man named Boaz, who will also make Ruth his wife through a curious act of redemption. Ruth was elevated by these events from her loathed condition as a Moabite to one of the most honored women in the history of Israel. Because of the beauty of the story, Ruth is famous among both Jews and Christians, but, as is usually the case with the Old Testament, there is much more to the story than meets the eye. The book is an allegorical prophecy of astounding detail of how the Old Covenant would eventually be replaced by a new one under Christ.

Widowhood in this story was symbolic of a religious state that is destitute of the blessings of God. Such could be the case either because the religion was corrupt or because it was obsolete. On the other hand, the story portrays divinely blessed religion as being happily married and as living in the land of Israel. These same symbolic assignments were made elsewhere in the Bible. For example, Isaiah said:

For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth. And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name. Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God. Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzi-bah, and thy land Beulah: for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married. For as a young man marrieth a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee: and as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee. – Isa 62:1-4

As is well known, the word “*Beulah*” means to be married, and the marriage here described accompanied a happy and blessed state in the land of Israel. Hosea used the same symbolism when describing Israel in her future glorified state: “*And it shall be at that day, saith the Lord,*

that thou shalt call me Ishi; and shalt call me no more Baali,” (Hos 2:16). The word “*Ishi*” means a friend or husband. Even the New Covenant was described as being a widow while still in its unrevealed state (Isa 54), but it was described as being joyously married to God Himself thereafter. Finally, the Babylonian harlot boasted that she was no widow (Isa 47:8, Rev 18:7), fancying herself to be a religious prodigy and in favor with her gods, whereas she was in fact an abominable imbecile to the true God of heaven.

Naomi represented the honorable Old Covenant, but she fell into widowhood because the covenant she represented had been rendered obsolete by the emergence of a new and better way. After noting that Jeremiah had explicitly prophesied of a “*new covenant*,” Paul said, “*In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away,*” (Heb 8:13). Accordingly, Naomi had waxed old and was also fruitless in that she was no longer capable of bearing children. She had not become a widow because of any divine retribution against her. Rather, she had simply run her course and fulfilled her appointed time. However, this brought her to a sad condition, as was indicated by her own words:

And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me? – Ruth 1:20-21

Accordingly, the Old Covenant started full with the powerful and glorious deliverance of the Israelites from the land of Egypt, but it ended empty with the same Israelites being reduced to disobedience, dispersal and dismay. Almost all of the old prophets complained of her dismal condition near the end. But this was exactly the condition the Old Covenant was designed to produce. Its purpose was to leave every person empty by showing him to be lost in sin and in need of the mercy and grace of God. This fact was clearly stated in the New Testament with:

Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful. – Rom 7:12-13

Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. – Gal 3:21-22

For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. – Gal 2:19

While the Old Covenant was honorable, it produced many sons who were not. These were the Israelites who became unequally yoked to the corrupt religions of the world and formed illegitimate marriages between the true doctrine and practice of God and the false ideas and ways

of man, especially devil-inspired idolatry, polytheism, etc. Such Israelites were represented by Mahlon and Chilion, the sons of Naomi. Both married Moabite women, and while this was not prohibited by the law, it was still a questionable action given the corruption of Moabite religion. Because of this corruption, Israelites were required to put Moabite wives away in the days of Ezra (Ezra 9 & 10).

Mahlon and Chilion were indistinguishable except by name. Both had the same parents. Both were driven from the land of Israel. Both married Moabite women. Both had unflattering names, with Mahlon meaning “infirmity” and Chilion meaning “wasting.” Both died before their time. So both sons represented apostate Jewish religion, and likely little is to be gained by searching for a symbolic distinction between them. The real difference was in the women they married, as will shortly be explained.

With the deaths of these two sons, all three women were left as widows, meaning that all three represented states of rejected religion. Naomi was in rejection because of her obsolescence. The two daughters of Moab were rejected because of the corruption of Moabite religion. All were left in poverty, being separated from the visible blessings of God.

However, these three widows received word that conditions had improved back in Israel, and that “*the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread,*” (Ruth 1:6). The specific wording of this statement should capture the eye. Israel had changed for the better because of being *visited* by God, as would literally be the case when Jesus Christ was within its midst. Also, Israel had been visited in the form of freely given *bread*. Bread is one of the most frequently used symbols of Christ in all the Bible, starting with the bread given by Melchizedek to Abraham, then to the grain distributed by Joseph, then to the manna that fell in the wilderness, then to the showbread of the tabernacle, then to the meat offerings under the law, then to the barley cake in the story of Gideon, and finally to the unleavened bread of the Lord’s Supper. Bread in Israel meant Christ in Israel, and it is a pattern of scripture that Christ in Israel means that all nations shall flow unto it (Isa 2:2-3, 60:1-5, 66:17-20, Jer 3:17, Mic 4:1-2, Zech 8:20-23). Even so, both Jew and Gentile were prompted by the news of bread to embark upon a journey there. When they arrive, they will happen upon a very special man who had bread in great abundance, even as Christ had sufficient bread to famously feed the multitudes.

Before their departure for Israel, Naomi exhorted her two daughters-in-law that she had nothing left to offer them. She lamented that, because she was old and barren, she could not give birth to any more sons that they might marry. Of course, none would have expected these two mature women to wait for husbands who were not yet even born, but strange statements like this should alert the reader that higher meaning is intended. When the first covenant was young and viable, Gentiles could obtain religious acceptance with God by becoming proselytes to the Jewish religion, and in fact some of them did, but now that the covenant has waxed old, having run its intended course, it no longer represented a solution to Gentile widowhood.

Naomi therefore sought to persuade her daughters-in-law to remain in their own country and to seek husbands from their own kind. One daughter, named Orpah, conceded, opting not only to remain with her own people but also with their gods; however, the other daughter, named Ruth, gave a reply that would become famous to Jews and Christians:

Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. – Ruth 1:16-17

These events divulge special insight into the intended symbolism of the story. In particular, Orpah represents those Gentiles who would be introduced to the God of Israel but would persist in their allegiance to false gods and religions. Ruth represents those Gentiles who would turn from their errant ways to serve Jesus Christ and His church. Inasmuch as those Gentiles would make up the vast majority of the church over its history, Ruth is also a symbol of the church itself and of the New Covenant upon which it is based. Her deep and enduring love for Naomi produced a seemingly unlikely friendship. Naomi, the symbol of the Old Covenant, acquired an eternal friend in the New Covenant, as symbolized by Ruth. As with these two women of old, these two covenants live and die together. Now Bible novices and critics often perceive these covenants as being adversarial and contradictory, much like Jews and Moabites were typically seen as enemies, but deeper understanding will show these covenants to be eternal friends.

Naomi and Ruth then ventured into Israel to the town of Bethlehem, the very birthplace of Jesus Christ. Still being impoverished, Ruth resorted to gleaning to sustain them both. The law had commanded that harvesters be less than thorough in their gatherings, and to allow the poor to glean after them (Lev 19:9-10). Fortunately for the widows, it was the time of barley harvest, which marked the beginning of the general harvest season, making it an ideal circumstance to glean. Accordingly, the Gentiles were introduced to the church at a time when a lengthy spiritual harvest was beginning, and when, according to the words of Jesus Himself, the fields were “*white already to harvest*” (Jn 4:35) and when the harvest was “*plenteous*” (Mt 9:37).

Ruth happened upon the field of a man named Boaz, who was wealthy in grain, and though he was unknown to her, he was a near kinsmen to her deceased husband, and therefore in line to marry her by the provisions of Deuteronomy 25:5-10. These verses commanded that if a married man were to die childless, his brother, if not already married, was to take the deceased brother’s wife to himself, and that the first child born to this latter union was to be counted as the progeny of the deceased for purposes of inheritance. The living brother was left with the option of refusal, but was to endure contempt for so doing. As is commonly the case with constitutional law, the statute was sufficient to communicate general spirit and intent, but left details to be settled by lower legislatures and courts, whereupon it was resolved that if there were multiple brothers, then obligation befell them by order of age, and if no brothers, or no consenting brothers, then the obligation moved through lower layers of kinship.

While Ruth was gleaning, she caught the eye and admiration of Boaz, who told her to glean in no other field but his, and to avail herself of the food and drink provided for the Jewish harvesters, and that he would command the young men to show her respect. When the noon meal came, Boaz gave her a surplus of food that she might have some to carry home. Finally, he privately commanded his harvesters to deliberately drop "*handfuls of purpose*" (Ruth 2:16) to expedite her gleaning. Now all of this is remarkably reminiscent of the times that Jesus Christ fed bread to the multitudes by miraculously multiplying but a few loaves and then commanding His disciples to distribute. However, with either event, there was a spiritual meaning underlying the natural bread. After miraculously feeding the multitude, Jesus told them, "*Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead,*" (Jn 6:49). The same was true of the bread they ate that day, but it was symbolic of a spiritual bread whereof Christ said, "*This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die,*" (vs 50). The "*handfuls of purpose*" dropped by Boaz to Ruth suggest that, even before the Gentiles were united with the church, Christ was administering to them His spiritual bread, even though in portions for mere gleaners.

When Ruth returned home and Naomi saw the size of her gathering, she happily asked for an explanation of Ruth's success. Her joy was then escalated upon hearing of Ruth's encounter with Boaz and of the love he had shown her. Naomi informed Ruth that Boaz was a near kinsman. She exhorted Ruth to glean in no other field but his. Ruth faithfully followed this instruction and other counsel that Naomi would give her in forthcoming days. Naomi was privy to the prospects of matrimony even before Ruth, and gave Ruth instruction concerning the courtship and marriage customs of the Jews. The typology in this is powerful and touching. Naomi, being a type of the Old Covenant, was advantaged by the prescience of her prophets, who had foretold from antiquity of the marriage between Christ and His Gentile bride. Naomi then performed her highest and most honored role of being a *schoolmaster* to lead the young bride to Christ (Gal 3:24).

Naomi counseled Ruth to watch for a time when Boaz would sleep on the threshing floor where the harvested barley was being winnowed. She instructed Ruth to lie at his feet, then to obey his instructions when he awoke. Naomi's instructions were evidently in accordance with the customs of the times, and were a way for a widow to plead her right of redemption to a near kinsman. Upon his awakening, Ruth said to Boaz, "*I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman,*" (Ruth 3:9). While all these actions were likely in keeping with the traditions of the times, they are nonetheless strange to us, and rare to the Bible itself. As elsewhere noted in this book, when the Bible becomes strange, this is strong signal that search should be made for deeper meaning. The Bible was written to amuse the foolish and to amaze the wise. Now at a time when the wicked world will be threshed upon the threshing floor of God, and the wheat gathered to His garner, but the chaff burned with unquenchable fire (Lk 3:17), Christ will spread His skirt over His bride, thus clothing her in His own righteousness that she might be spared.

However, Boaz explained to Ruth that there was a legal technicality that complicated his taking her to wife. Though Boaz was a near kinsman, there was another even nearer than himself, and that marriage was not possible unless this nearest kinsman forfeited his legal claim to Ruth. Boaz announced his intent to meet with this kinsman to address the matter.

Before Ruth returned to her home, Boaz told her not to go to her mother-in-law empty, so he wrapped six measures of barley in Ruth's veil for her to carry. I think it likely that the symbolic meaning of Naomi somewhat evolves at this point, and rather than being a symbol of the Old Covenant itself, she becomes a symbol of those who would be adherents to that covenant even after the emergence of the church. That is, she becomes a representation of the Jews who have served the Old Covenant from New Testament times until today. The sending of barley to Naomi represents Christ's care and providence to such Jewish people, but the manner in which the barley was sent communicates important details.

As to the six measures, most Christians take a negative view of the number six on account of a dubious interpretation they make of Revelation 13:18 where the number 666 was declared to be the number of the satanic beast. The triplicated six in this number is taken as proof that six is symbolic of evil. What they do not consider is that this number results in three sixes only in our modern numeric system – a system that did not become of extensive use until around a thousand years after Christ. A triplicated six would not have resulted in the numeric systems commonly used in ancient times. For example, in Roman numerals, the number 666 would be DCLXVI, which obviously does not entail three sixes. It is possible that the Holy Spirit intended a triplicated six in anticipation of our present numeric system, but this idea is in need of more proof than is at hand. A better theory is obtained by considering where six is relative to seven. All agree that seven is used in scripture to denote completeness or perfection. Six would therefore suggest imperfection but with perfection in prospect. Accordingly, eight would suggest that one regime has been completed (in reaching seven) and another has just begun. Hence, eight is a number denoting new beginnings.

Numerous examples of these applications can be found in the Bible: Man was created on the sixth day of creation, and while he was then good, he was susceptible to death, but had a secured immortality in prospect. God ordained a week that had six days of labor, but in anticipation of a day of rest. There were six cities of refuge, and while they offered imperfect security, they were in anticipation of a seventh city, or the heavenly Jerusalem, where safety will be complete. Now to eight: Eight souls were on the ark, and from these the new world after the flood would be populated. Jewish boys were circumcised on the eighth day, because if the boy happened to be the promised Messiah, then an old era would then be ended and a new one begun.

Six measures of barley to Naomi would then suggest that she was in a state of imperfection but with perfection in prospect. Paul said of the Jews, "*For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge,*" (Rom 10:2). In another place he said, "*For the law*

made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God' (Heb 7:19), but of Christians he said:

Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought: But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory. – 1Cor 2:6-7

By this last statement, he did not mean that Christians are flawless; rather, he meant that the Christian system could clearly see the plan of God to its ultimate purpose and end. Judaism cannot do this; hence, *"blindness in part is happened to Israel"* (Rom 11:25), but true Israel has perfection in prospect because *"all Israel shall be saved,"* (Rom 11:26).

These six measures of barley were delivered to Naomi in a veil. The likely idea here was that Christ's care and providence for the Jews would be hidden from them and possibly from Gentiles too. Accordingly, the last question asked of Jesus before He ascended out of this world was, *"...wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?"* (Acts 1:6). His answer was, *"It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power,"* (Acts 1:7). Hence, God's purpose for the Jewish people is hidden in a veil, or at least with respect to the timing of it. Paul dedicated three chapters discussing God's plan for Israel in Romans 9-11, but concluded this profound narrative with: *"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"* (Rom 11:33). God's plan for Israel is incomprehensively complex, and His care for them has been obscured by their many persecutions and trials. Indeed, His care and plan are so well hidden that even Gentile Christians have hatched up foolish eschatological theories wherein the Jews have no real significance.

With regard to this veil, it is also to be considered that Paul described the Jewish people themselves as being blinded by a veil in:

Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech: And not as Moses, which put a vail over his face, that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is abolished: But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the vail shall be taken away. – 2Cor 3:12-16

Ruth's veil was likely a large outer garment that covered more than the face, but such garments could in fact be designed to cover the face, as was the case with Moses. Obviously, Ruth was unveiled (or with "open face") at that moment, which is how Paul described the church:

But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord. – 2Cor 3:18

Boaz met with the near kinsman as promised, and at first it appeared the kinsman would not forfeit his legal claim to the inheritance at issue, but when he heard that it would become incumbent upon him to marry Ruth, he abstained, complaining that such a marriage would mar his inheritance. The symbolism here is clear to any open mind: The near kinsman was in fact *too near* of kin. Naomi was a symbol of the Old Covenant and her near kinsman was a symbol of the moral law that was a part of that covenant. The moral law did not want Ruth because she would be a blemish on the perfect righteousness it demanded. Ruth was a Moabite, conceived in sin and shame. Even so, the elect of God were born in the sin of Adam, and therefore rejected by the law. So the near kinsman forfeited His claim to Ruth, and sold it to Boaz, who redeemed her to be His wife, even as Christ redeemed His church after she had been rejected by the law. Boaz described his own actions with the amazingly prescient words:

Moreover Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, have I purchased to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place: ye are witnesses this day. – Ruth 4:10

Accordingly, there are millions who lie in graves, having returned to the dust, but though in this ignominious state, they have a heavenly inheritance, being joint heirs with Christ Himself (Rom 8:16-17), who will raise their dead bodies to possess their inheritance.

There were ten witnesses to the transaction wherein Boaz redeemed the Gentile Ruth. It is likely no coincidence that, when the book of Acts documented the gospel being taught to the Gentiles, ten Jews were named as being their teachers. These were: Peter, John, Philip, Paul, Silas, Barnabas, John Mark, Luke, Apollos and Timotheus.

Finally, it is to be considered that this book has context in the era of the Judges and therefore in the ancient past. The book is so old that even the Old Covenant was new as of the time, yet the book foretold of how that covenant would be displaced by a new and living way. The book of Ruth was surely inspired by one who declares the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done (Isa 46:10).