

# Ruth 1:1-5: an exegetical and expositional proposal

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## Abstract

*The book of Ruth makes for many excellent expositional, narrative sermons. The theology is rich, the story is compelling, the themes are significant, and the cultural mores are fascinating. Therefore, much is gained from an intense study through Ruth. This journal article sets out to demonstrate exactly how rich and detailed this story is, as exemplified from the opening pericope of Ruth 1:1-5. Part of the exegetical task is to uncover many great morphological puns and ironic elements which are so eloquently placed within. There is also an inherent tension growing throughout the Old Testament between the dynasties of Saul and David that is partly played out in the setting of Ruth. This tension helps to express one of the primary purposes for the book of Ruth—a political advertisement for the house of David. This article will also demonstrate the necessary bridge that preachers must cross from exegesis to exposition through a suggested homiletical outline from the opening pericope.*

## 1. Introduction

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It can be difficult for expositors to bring applicable data out of foundational material such as the setting of a narrative. Ruth 1:1-5 is an example where the setting may be glossed over but not preached as its own pericope. This is rather unfortunate in such a highly theological narrative as Ruth. Its Messianic/Davidic significance as well as its soteriological undertones create an outstanding resource for sermons. And the love story alone makes for some good practical marital sermons. Yet this author believes that there is more going on in Ruth 1:1-5 than is indicated through the neglect of its use in many pulpits. This paper intends to employ a thorough exegesis of Ruth 1:1-5,

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highlight central themes found within the introductory paragraph, and propose a homiletical outline for an expositional sermon of this text.

## 2. Exegesis of Ruth 1:1-5

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**Verse 1: And it happened in the days when the ones judging judged, there was a famine in the land; and a man went from Bethlehem of Judah to sojourn in the fields of Moab—he and his wife and his two sons.**

This story starts with a typical narrative introductory word וַיְהִי (*vayehiy*, ‘and it was’).<sup>2</sup> Usually this expression is modified by a temporal phrase or clause as is the case here in verse one (BDB 1996:224).<sup>3</sup> It is very much like the equivalent to the fairytale expression, ‘Once upon a time’. However, here in Ruth it is explaining something historically factual not mythological. Even further, the phrase וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים (*vayehi bimê*, ‘and it was in the days’) is used often to indicate a specific time period that is well known to the readers (cf. Gen. 14:1, 26:1, Judg. 15:1, 2 Sam. 21:1, 2 Chr. 26:5, Esth. 1:1, Isa. 7:1, and Jer. 1:3.). The time period is unmistakably during the period of the judges. In fact, the writer of Ruth<sup>4</sup> emphasized this point by using an unusual grammatical structure and word repetition. The phrase וְשֹׁפְטֵי הַשָּׁפָטִים (*shefōt haššōfīm*) conveys little doubt as to when the setting of the story occurs—‘And it was in the days of the judging of the judges’. The infinitive construct שֹׁפֵט is acting as a genitive (GKC 2006:347) or an ‘infinitive construct after a word in the construct state’ (Williams 2007:82). The substantival participle וְשֹׁפְטֵי הַשָּׁפָטִים ends the construct chain. A more functional translation would be, ‘And it happened in the days when the judges judged’ or even ‘when the judges ruled’. This puts the story of Ruth somewhere in the timeline after the conquest of Canaan and during the time period of the judges.

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<sup>2</sup> See Gen. 6:1, 11:1, 22:1, 38:1, Lev. 9:1, Num. 7:1, 11:1, Josh. 1:1, Judg. 1:1, 1 Sam. 1:1, and 2 Sam. 1:1 for some obvious examples.

<sup>3</sup> It is translated ‘come to pass’ in BDB, which explains how it is ‘followed by [a] substantive (subject) clause almost always modifying (usually temporally) a clause or phrase’ (cf. I. 2.). This fits the opening phrase of Ruth 1:1 exactly, where וַיְהִי is followed by a temporal clause ‘in the days when the judges judged’.

<sup>4</sup> Likely it was Samuel based on style and the content of David’s lineage not continuing to Solomon in Ruth 4:17-22 (cf. Geisler 1977:101-102). The authorship of Samuel would lend itself to the political theme interpretation of Ruth. Samuel, who spent all of 1 Samuel detailing why Saul should not be king and David should be, would take advantage of a historical situation like that found in Ruth. This would also place the time of writing of Ruth between the anointing and crowning of David.

It is uncertain exactly where Ruth falls into the timeline of the book of Judges. Based on the genealogy of Boaz,<sup>5</sup> his inference of being up in age in Ruth,<sup>6</sup> as well as the sojourning in Moab, it may be ascertained to fall somewhere around or after the time of Israel's oppression under King Eglon of Moab in Judges 3:7-30. Certainly, however, many scholars point to later places in the time when the judges judged in Israel.<sup>7</sup> Thus it is likely impossible to conclusively determine exactly where Ruth falls into during the book of Judges.<sup>8</sup>

The fact of a famine in the land would also be reminiscent of Israel's cyclical pattern of sin and punishment. Though there is not a famine mentioned in the book of Judges, it is typical to expect a result of foreign invasion and besiegement to induce famine. This is certainly taught in Deuteronomy 28:49-57, especially in verses 49 and 51-52.<sup>9</sup>

The LORD will bring a nation against you from afar. ... Moreover, it shall eat the offspring of your herd and the produce of your ground until you are destroyed, who also leaves you no grain, new wine, or oil, nor the increase of your herd or the young of your flock until they have caused you to perish. It shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls in which you trusted come down throughout your land, and it shall besiege you in all your towns throughout

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<sup>5</sup> Boaz was the son of Salmon and the prostitute Rahab. This would set Boaz's birth somewhere after the conquest of Canaan and early into the Judges period.

<sup>6</sup> cf. Ruth 3:10. The inference that Boaz is up in age can be made by the fact that Boaz sets himself apart from both the poor and rich 'young men' (הַבְּחֹרִים, *habbāḥūrīm*).

<sup>7</sup> Keil and Delitzsch (2006) and Loken (2008:99) suggest the famine took place during the time of Judges 6, the Midianite oppression, and Gideon's deliverance. Gill (2009) points out: 'Josephus places it in the government of Eli, but that is too late for Boaz, the grandfather of Jesse, the father of David, to live. Some Jewish writers, as Jarchi, say it was in the times of Ibzan, who they say is the same with Boaz, but without proof, and which times are too late also for this history. The Jewish chronology comes nearer the truth, which carries it up as high as the times of Eglon, king of Moab, when Ehud was judge; and with which Dr. Lightfoot pretty much agrees, who puts this history between the third and fourth chapters of Judges, and so must belong to the times of Ehud or Shamgar. Junius refers it to the times of Deborah and Barak; and others, on account of the famine, think it began in the times the Midianites oppressed Israel, and carried off the fruits of the earth, which caused it, when Gideon was raised up to be their judge; Altling places it in the time of Jephthah; such is the uncertainty about the time referred to.'

<sup>8</sup> Keil and Delitzsch (2006) note on Ruth 1:1 argues that 'by the definite statement, "*in the days when judges judged,*" [the story of Ruth] is assigned to the period of the judges generally.' This makes for the argument that the writer did not intend for the time of Ruth within the stories of the book of Judges to be determined.

<sup>9</sup> Judges 6:4 might imply a famine, but it is not explicit. However, it does provide a good example of what was taught in Deut. 28:49-57.

your land which the LORD your God has given you (Deut. 28:49, 51-52).

And so the inference can be made that sin has entered the land of Israel, and God was indirectly punishing them through a famine conceivably caused by an invading nation. As will be brought out later, Elimelech the patriarch of this family was likely a righteous man though not perfect. If such is the case, a practical truth to be gained is that sin's punishment affects the entire nation even if there remains a remnant of righteous people.

The narrator introduced the readers to the first character with the ambiguously anarthrous *ישׁ* (*ish*, 'man'). Though 'man' is without an article, the understanding is an implied definiteness. It could be translated 'a certain man'. This man is said to have left Bethlehem to go into Moab.

So much has played into the idea of Ruth taking place during the time of the Judges. It explains plainly why famine would enter the land and perhaps even why Elimelech might choose to depart towards Moab. As far as the geographical setting is concerned, it must not be seen as coincidental that Bethlehem was a major focal point in a book that outlines the lineage of David. It also must not be seen as coincidental that Bethlehem appears two other times in the book of Judges, likely to push a pro-David emphasis and perhaps even more convey a negative light on the dynasty of Saul. One might even say that the book of Ruth is a literary political advertisement.

In the Bethlehem trilogy, as it is often called (Kaiser 1998:197)<sup>10</sup> since Ruth is tied to Judges (perhaps as an appendix) and 'Bethlehem ... is prominent in all three stories' (Loken 2008:96), the two mentioning's in Judges portray Bethlehem in a very negative light. In Judges 17-18, a story is told of a young Levite living in Bethlehem who became a private priest for an Ephraimite named Micah. This priesthood and religious practice centred around idolatry (Judg. 18:17, 20, 30). Afterwards, this young Levite, later named Jonathan the grandson of Moses (Judg. 18:30), became the hired priest for the tribe of Dan and continued his idolatrous practice. All this wickedness came from a sojourning Levite found in Bethlehem.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kaiser (1998:197) attributes to the origination of the title 'Bethlehem Trilogy' to Merrill (1987:178). However, Merrill (1985:131) mentioned 'a so-called Bethlehem trilogy' two years earlier. This indicates that Merrill picked up the title from somewhere else and popularized it.

<sup>11</sup> There is some disagreement as to whether this Levite was 'of the family of Judah' in the sense that his father was a Levite but mother a Judean or that he was part of the Levites living in Judah. Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown (2009) and Clark (2009) espoused the first view,

The second story paints a picture of Bethlehem as less grotesque while the tribe of Benjamin (and the city of Gibeah) as being utterly revolting. The story begins in Judges 19:1 with another Levite. This one however was from Ephraim and decided to take a concubine from Bethlehem to be his wife. In other words, not only was Bethlehem full of wicked Levites but also wicked women. The concubine, however, fled from the Levite back to her home in Bethlehem. The Levite pursued her and sought to return to Ephraim. On their return, they stopped in Gibeah of Benjamin. During the evening of their stay, the men of the city sought to sodomize the Levite but settled for cruelly raping and eventually murdering the concubine.<sup>12</sup>

This story bears close semblance of the two angels and the wicked Sodomites found in Genesis 19. Such reminiscence would evoke an emotional reaction from the readers to make a correlation between Sodom and Gibeah. Gage went so far as to say, 'The close tracking between the two accounts [suggest] that the author of Judges intended his hearer to identify the sin of Gibeah with that of Sodom. Judges 19:22c–23 is virtually the verbatim equivalent of Genesis 19:5b–7. Perhaps the most arresting similarity, however, is that between Lot's offer of his virgin daughters to the Sodomites that they may 'do whatever is good in your eyes' (Gen. 19:8), and the Ephraimite's offer of his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine to the Gibeahites that they may 'do whatever is good in your eyes' (Judg. 19:24)' (Gage 1989:371).

The terrible tragedy aroused all of Israel to rise up against Gibeah. This brought about a civil war between the tribe of Benjamin against the remaining tribes of Israel. The result of this war nearly brought about the annihilation of Benjamin. The few survivors of Benjamin were allowed to take wives from the virgins of Jabesh-Gilead as well as Shiloh near Bethel. Merrill noted, 'This reference to Jabesh-Gilead is not without purpose in the historical scheme of things. The city was no doubt the ancestral home of Saul since it is obvious that his forebears as Benjamites originated from either Shiloh or Jabesh-Gilead in light of the narrative under consideration. That the latter is more likely correct may be seen in the unusual interest Saul had in Jabesh-Gilead ... This second Judges narrative thus reflects badly on Benjamin and by implication on the Saulide ancestry and dynasty. The pro-David sentiment is crystal clear' (Merrill 1985:132).<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Saul being linked ancestrally to Jabesh-

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whereas Keil and Delitzsch (2006) as well as Rabbi Kimchi (according to Gill 2009) held to the second.

<sup>12</sup> This event made Gibeah look far worse than Bethlehem.

<sup>13</sup> Merrill brings out a very insightful possibility in this article (cf. 133) concerning Rachel, Benjamin, and Bethlehem. 'Does this incident [in Genesis 35:16-19] in which Benjamin is the occasion of the death of the patronymic's favourite wife at Bethlehem anticipate in some way

Gilead as well as having Gibeah twice named his home (1 Sam. 10:26, 15:34) and the city being called on four occasions ‘Gibeah of Saul’ (1 Sam. 11:4, 15:34, 2 Sam. 21:6, Isa. 10:29); a very negative light is cast on Saul, his lineage as a Benjamite, and his homeland of Gibeah of Benjamin.

The Bethlehem trilogy marks a highpoint in the lineage of David as well as the city of David in the book of Ruth. Where the kingly line of Saul was portrayed as evil and wicked based on its past associations and dealings, the Davidic line was portrayed by virtuous members of Judah like Elimelech and Naomi as well as the two significant figures of Boaz and Ruth. Also, Bethlehem the city of David was pictured as a rough town which bred wicked people (for example, an idolatrous Levite priest for Micah and Dan as well as the concubine). But in the book of Ruth, Bethlehem is seen to be filled with faithful worshippers of יהוה—from Boaz and Ruth all the way down to the servants of Boaz (2:4) and the elders of the city (4:12).

To make this political advertisement really take flight, it is interesting to note that Rachel, the mother of Benjamin (the tribal patriarch bearing his name) died in Bethlehem while giving birth to Benjamin (Gen. 35:16-19). It is also no coincidence that there is much significance in the tribe of Judah and its role in the royal scheme of things (Gen. 49:10). The witnesses to Ruth’s redemption in chapter 4 invoked Judah in their blessing to Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 4:12). This is highly significant to the pro-Davidic theme in light of the fact that the royal sceptre and ruling staff was predicted to never pass from Judah *not* Benjamin. Even more significant, though perhaps strange to twenty-first century western mindset, is that the Messiah would come from Judah the son of Leah rather than Benjamin or Joseph the favourite sons of Jacob from his favourite wife Rachel. Likely part of this is because Leah, in her effort to gain favour with Jacob through bearing children, finally gave up seeking to please Jacob through childbirth and just praised God instead for the birth of Judah (Gen. 29:31-35).

In other words, there has been a steady tension building between Rachel and Leah, Benjamin and Judah, Gibeah (the supposed birthplace and home of Saul) and Bethlehem, Saul and David. That tension climaxes in 1 Samuel where the book clearly lays out why Saul was not fit to be king, and argues why David was. Ultimately, the Davidic line was set up; God made a covenant with David concerning his seed, his throne, and his kingdom; and this plays out in the book of Matthew with the presentation of Jesus as the Davidic

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the Saul-David controversy in which the Benjamite again proves antagonistic to one who has Bethlehem associations?’

Messiah whose genealogy is traced back to Abraham, Jacob, Judah, Boaz, and David.<sup>14</sup> Matthew presents very convincingly that Jesus is the rightful Davidic King of Israel. Though Israel rejected him, Jesus promises them that he will return when Israel acknowledges Jesus as Messiah and proclaim, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (Matt. 23:39). This piece of Jewish political literature named 'Ruth' could not be more appropriate for the Davidic and larger Christological plan in God's eternal administration of the world.<sup>15</sup>

Coming back to Ruth, the first action verb used in this book speaks of a certain man yet unnamed who went (וַיֵּלֶךְ *vayy<sup>e</sup>lek*) from one place to another (1:1). There is poetic irony here emphasizing the truth that the man was going from a place where he belonged to a place that was completely wrong for him. In other words, Elimelech was journeying to a place where he was not meant to be. In reference to the Bethlehem trilogy, Grant said, 'In the first two narratives [concerning Bethlehem in Judges], everyone suffered and everyone lost. By now the idea is fixed in the reader's mind that departure from Bethlehem will probably lead to trouble. This is exactly what one finds in the Ruth narrative' (Grant 1991:426).

The irony is found in the phrase וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֶחֶם יְהוּדָה לָגוּר בְּשָׂדֵי מוֹאָב (*vayy<sup>e</sup>lek ish mibêt lehem y<sup>e</sup>hūdāh lagūr bisdê mô'āb*, 'A man went from Bethlehem of Judah to sojourn in the fields of Moab'). There are a couple of interesting things to highlight. First is the meaning of the word 'fields' (שָׂדֵי, *sāday*). The word primarily refers to a 'cultivated field' which is 'yielding food' (BDB, 961). Next is the irony that is found in the meaning of Bethlehem (בֵּית לֶחֶם, *bêt lehem*) or literally 'house of bread'. Elimelech is said to leave the *house* of bread in Judah to sojourn or 'dwell as a new-comer' (BDB, 157) in the cultivated *fields* of Moab. Further, Elimelech actually left the house of bread of praise (Judah) and dwelt in the fields of Moab, a place of no praise. The infinitive construct 'to sojourn' (לָגוּר, *lāgūr*) is stating purpose (cf. Williams 2007:83; Gesenius 2006:348).<sup>16</sup> It is answering the question why or for what purpose was Elimelech leaving Bethlehem. If the famine was too severe to remain in the land, then it would be the purpose of Elimelech to take his family and travel to a place where survival was possible. Another option for the infinitive is one of result. However this would imply that Elimelech ended up in Moab without prior intentions, an unlikely possibility.

<sup>14</sup> The royal genealogy of Jesus sets the foundation for the theme of Matthew as presenting Jesus as the King of Israel. cf. Matthew 1:1-2 and 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> Concerning Ruth having a political agenda, see Gage (1989:370).

<sup>16</sup> Gesenius remarked of this use of the infinitive construct that 'infinitives with ל serve to express the most varied ideas of purpose or aim' (italics mine). In this case, it seems best that the aim of Elimelech was to go to the fields of Moab more than just the purpose.

This raises the issue of Elimelech's choice to leave Bethlehem as the right choice. With the irony of leaving the house of bread of Judah (praise) and entering a cultivated field in Moab (no praise), this is definitely a case of going from the place that was intended to a place out of the ordinary. For all intents and purposes, this situation was extremely wrong. Elimelech and family entered a place where they did not belong. Such a move would require that the famine was bad enough that it was assumed survival was only achieved by leaving their home and moving to a foreign land. Another possibility that raises a moral issue was whether Elimelech simply lacked faith that God would provide for his family if he were to remain in the *Promised Land*. Even still, this scenario of leaving the Promised Land for survival is very backwards to the Jewish expectation of redemption and deliverance into the land which was promised to their fathers. The people who formerly lived in temporary dwelling places such as tents finally came into their Promised Land to inhabit and dwell in stationary structure such as houses. Ironically, Elimelech was leaving the Promised Land and the house of bread, Bethlehem of Judah, to live outside again in tents in the fields of Moab. He and his family were essentially regressing back to the days of Israel's wilderness wanderings. This builds a strong case for understanding a move to Moab as sinful and outside of God's perfect will.

**Verse 2: And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife was Naomi, and the name of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilyon, Ephrathites from Bethlehem of Judah. And they came to the field of Moab, and they remained there.**

In verse 2, the narrator reveals the name of the sojourner to be Elimelech (אֱלִמֶלֶךְ, *elimelek*) meaning 'my God is king'. The grammatical construction places 'Elimelech' as the predicate nominative. The subject 'the name' is connected with a simple conjunctive *waw*. Considering the time period in which this story occurs, the name bears great significance. The period when the 'judges judged' was often described as a time when 'there was no king in Israel' (Judg. 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25). As a result of this lack of righteous royal leadership mediated through a human, 'Everyone did what was right in his own eyes' (Judg. 17:6; 21:25). It is of significance that the book of Judges ends with this formula to generally characterize this time period. And yet we find a man who through proclamation of his name does in fact have a king—God! Thus it might be implied that Elimelech was a righteous man because he declared by virtue of his name (*nomen est omen*) and reputation that he was striving to be loyal to the theocratic institution that Israel agreed upon through



the Mosaic Covenant (Judg. 8:23, 1 Sam. 8:7; 13:12). Yet even the righteous saint can sin, doubt, and waver.

Naomi's name (נְאוֹמִי, *nāōmī*) is the next to be revealed in verse 2. It is formulated in a similar grammatical structure to that of Elimelech's name. However, Naomi was mentioned in relationship to Elimelech as 'his wife' (אִשְׁתּוֹ, *istō*). Literally, her name means 'my delight'. Likely it indicates that she is a delight to her husband, Elimelech, by virtue of the way she is introduced as 'his wife'. For a woman like Naomi to follow her husband, leave her family and home, and sojourn in the fields of Moab would definitely imply that she was pleasing to Elimelech as a submitted wife.

However, her name might indicate that God was her delight.<sup>17</sup> Ruth 1:20 explains how Naomi wanted her name to be changed to *Mara* or 'bitterness' (מָרָא, *mārā*). Based on her opinion of God, that she felt God had dealt with her bitterly in Moab, her original name 'Naomi' may indicate a similar opinion of God as 'my delight' prior to leaving Bethlehem. In other words, God was her delight, but later God dealt with her bitterly. In either case, whether 'Naomi' indicates that she was pleasing to Elimelech or that God was pleasing to her, the name is an honorable one and a 'genuine Hebrew name' (Keil and Delitzsch 2006).

After the naming of the two sons, Mahlon and Chilyon,<sup>18</sup> mention was made of their location for added emphasis. This bears out the idea even more that the writer of Ruth had a political motive behind it. The two sons were said to be 'Ephrathites' (אֶפְרַתִּים, *efrāṭīm*), a title quickly associated with Bethlehem<sup>19</sup> and also bearing great Messianic significance by its mere mention (cf. Mic. 5:2). Again this plays on the tension between the tribes of Judah versus Benjamin and David versus Saul (cf. Gen. 35:19).

Verse 2 ends with a depressing statement, 'And they came to the field of Moab, and they remained there.' The emphasis of these past tense narrative *waw*-consecutive imperfects not only displays the logical sequence of events but underscores the grim reality that this family of Bethlehem of Judah

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<sup>17</sup> Should this be the case, it would also build an argument that Naomi was an OT saint, and likely Elimelech as well.

<sup>18</sup> Some might seek to find significance in the meaning of the names Chilyon and Mahlon to describe their deaths. Their names mean 'pining' and 'weak' respectively, according to Keil and Delitzsch (2006).

<sup>19</sup> The mention of Ephrathah left no doubt for the readers that this was the Bethlehem of Judah, the city of David (cf. 1 Sam. 17:12). This helped to distinguish the Bethlehem of Judah in Ephrathah (cf. Gen. 48:7; Ruth 4:11; Micah 5:2) from the Bethlehem in Zebulun (cf. Josh. 19:15). The author wanted little doubt as of which city was being honored in this story.

remained (וַיִּהְיֶה, *vayyihyū*) in the fields of Moab. Of the use of *hayah* (הָיָה), the writer likely intended to convey permanence and long continuation for the family in Moab.<sup>20</sup> Such a long stay or even an existence in Moab was a grave situation for any devout Jew at this time.

**Verse 3: And Elimelech the husband of Naomi died, and she was left over, she and her two sons.**

After remaining and essentially existing in Moab for an undetermined length of time, verse 3 reveals the shattering news of Elimelech's unexpected death. This time, however, Elimelech is portrayed in relation to Naomi as her husband (וַיְהִי לְנָוִי אִישׁ, *îš nāōmî*, 'the husband of Naomi').<sup>21</sup> Likely, this shift in perspective takes place to emphasize the importance of the person's role in the story. Elimelech started as the chief character, but in God's economy of things, he passed away and Naomi now becomes the chief character in this story.<sup>22</sup> Thus everything begins to be seen in relationship to her as is demonstrated in the phrases, 'And she was left over, she and her two sons' (Ruth 1:3), and 'And the woman [Naomi] was left over from her two children and from her husband' (Ruth 1:5).

What is also important to note is that the author did not concern the readers with the details of Elimelech's death. It was mentioned as a past tense narrative *waw*-consecutive imperfect (*wayyāmāt*, 'and he died') which displays God's providential plan in his grand scheme of salvation history. One of life's greatest and consequently most difficult lessons is learned from this short phrase in verse 3. Events take place in this life that cannot be understood nor the purpose comprehended. But in all things, God remains in sovereign control. He is working out his plan as was definitely the case in the book of Ruth—the plan of redemption through the Davidic Messiah Jesus Christ. The issue as to how or why Elimelech died is not even addressed to make reference of the truth of God's sovereignty in the good times and bad.

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<sup>20</sup> BDB (226) suggests 'abide, remain, [and] continue' for translation when the word is being used 'with a word of place or time'.

<sup>21</sup> Here the phrase, 'the husband of Naomi', is set in apposition to 'Elimelech'.

<sup>22</sup> Though the story does move to Ruth and Boaz as the prominent characters of the story, it does end with Naomi again being the chief character. Ruth and Boaz are last mentioned in the narrative section of Ruth in 4:13. Then in every following verse from 14-17, Naomi is the principal character and focus of attention.

**Verse 4: And they took for themselves wives of the Moabite women. The name of the first was Orpah, and the name of the second was Ruth. And they dwelled there about ten years.**

Verse 4 moves into an interesting situation which is likely a direct result of the death of Elimelech. The marriages of Orpah with Chilyon and Ruth with Mahlon (cf. 4:10) present another question of morality. Should these two Ephrathites have sought to marry Moabite women? If not, why not? Was the lack of male leadership a cause of these wedded unions? What can we learn about God's will in the case of Ruth the Moabitess marrying into this family?

Considering the salvific plan of God brought about in the Davidite Jesus of the lineage of Boaz and Ruth, it seems difficult to understand Mahlon's marriage to Ruth outside of God's will and thus immoral for a Hebrew to do.<sup>23</sup> Yet all fingers point against the idea of the two sons of Naomi marrying Moabite women. First of all, the Jews were cautioned against marrying foreigners for fear that they might be swayed away from the God of Israel (Deut. 7:1-4).<sup>24</sup> Secondly, intermarriage with the Gentile heathens would facilitate national ethnic impurity for what was referred to as 'the holy race' (Ezra 9:1-2). Lastly, Moab and Ammon were especially despised more than the other Gentile nations for their lack of compassion showed to the Jews of the Exodus (Deut. 23:3-4). Also considering the heritage of these two Gentile countries (cf. Gen. 19:36-38), a rejection by nations with such close familial ties to Abraham would prompt Jews to have an ethnic disdain for Moab and Ammon much in the same way that the Jews would later despise the Samaritans. This then would put a damper on any marital relations between Jews and Moabites. Therefore, if God's plan was for Ruth to be a part of the lineage of David and ultimately Jesus, does that justify Mahlon in his marriage to a Moabitess? Such a conclusion is very doubtful. Perhaps this is a good example of God allowing his permissive will to accomplish his ultimate goal, although it seems difficult to see Ruth not as part of God's perfect plan.

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<sup>23</sup> The parentage and birth of Solomon would be another similar situation in the Davidic lineage regarding God's permissive will.

<sup>24</sup> Deut. 7:1-4 is a prohibition of marriage for the Gentile Canaan Inhabitants. This was given before the Canaan conquest in order to ensure that all Gentile inhabitants in the land of Canaan would be removed. If marriage was allowed, then there would be a remnant of Canaanites left amongst the people. Thus Deut. 7:1-4 can only be used as a warning against later Jew/Gentile marriage. It was not prohibited, but it was discouraged due primarily to spiritual influences.

**Verse 5: And they both died also, Mahlon and Chilyon, and the woman was left over from her two children and from her husband.**

After a ten year existence in the fields of Moab (1:4), another great tragic event took place in the life of Naomi. Interestingly enough, Chilyon and Mahlon's death is described in the same amount of brevity as was given to Elimelech.<sup>25</sup> The cause of their deaths is not explained likely because it is not relevant to the purpose of the story of Ruth. However, if the lesson of God's providential yet unexplainable plan was not understood with Elimelech from verse 3, it is certainly being reinforced in verse 5. The deaths of the two sons convey the theme of God's sovereign purpose accomplishing what he will have it to accomplish, even through secondary causes such as human mortality. From the famine in the land of Israel, to the unexpected death of Elimelech, to the untimely deaths of Chilyon and Mahlon, God has been bringing Naomi and eventually Ruth exactly to a place that will definitively fulfil his ultimate purpose in the lineage of David and eventually Jesus Christ. And so verse 5 ends with Naomi surviving her late husband and sons.

God's providence is a perpetual albeit subtle theme that is weaved all throughout the book of Ruth (cf. Horst 1983). Later in 2:3, Ruth providentially finds herself in a portion of a field belonging to Boaz. This is not a coincidence. In fact, the verse says that 'her chance chanced *her*' or 'her fate fated *her*' (וַיִּיָּקֶר מִקְרָאָהּ, *vayyiqer miqreāh*; BDB, 899-900).<sup>26</sup> It could be functionally translated, 'God's providence placed her on the portion of the field belonging to Boaz.' It was not just that Ruth happened to come across this portion of land by mere happenstance. It was 'her chance', 'her fate', or 'her fortune' which is implying God's providential guidance of the situation.

Later in Ruth 3:8, God's providence is subtly emphasized yet again. For no reason that is mentioned, Boaz trembled in the middle of the night to find Ruth at his feet. This initiated the redemption process between Ruth and Boaz. Had he not awoken, the entire process would have changed and possibly the outcome. One must wonder what caused Boaz to tremble and turn himself in his sleep.<sup>27</sup> This is doubly true considering the fact that he had been working

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<sup>25</sup> It is worth mentioning that in both situations when death has occurred, the writer had previously mentioned a sin on the part of the deceased just before the incident of death occurred. In the case of Elimelech's death in verse 3, he took his family from Bethlehem to Moab in verse 2. In the case of the sons' death in verse 5, they both took Moabite women in verse 4. While it is not directly stated that their death was a direct consequence of some moral failure on the part of these three men, the teaching is still clear—sin has consequences.

<sup>26</sup> It could even be translated, 'her fortune encountered *her*'.

<sup>27</sup> Notice the Niphal stem use to describe how Boaz awoke—'And the man trembled [Qal] ... and he turned himself [Niphal]'. The Niphal is likely being used reflexively where Boaz is

all day and night (3:2) making him extremely exhausted. He had also eaten and drank until literally 'his heart was good' (3:7). In other words, this man should by all rights slept very soundly. He had worked all day, he had eaten a great meal, and his mind was free from anxiety. What on earth could rouse a man from such a glorious slumber? Likely it was God, who working this situation out to providentially fulfil his plan. Nothing else in the passage indicates otherwise.

The last bit of providence taught in Ruth is found in 4:13. This is less subtle but the point is still enforced. After the redemption process was completed, and Boaz took Ruth as his wife, 'he entered her'. This is a clear statement that the marriage was consummated and the newly-wed couple had engaged in physical relations. The result of this union was that Ruth conceived a child through the physical relationship with Boaz. But 4:13 explains that it was God who 'gave to her conception' (וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה לָהּ הַרְיוֹן, *vayyiten YHWH lāh hērāyôn*). Verse 13 does not indicate the time period from marriage to conception, but it is presented immediately through the successive *waw*-consecutive verbs. This stands in stark contrast to the 10 years of marriage and infertility between Mahlon and Ruth (Horst 1983:27).

This posits the idea that it was God's intention all along that Boaz and Ruth would cohabit to reproduce a child of providential significance. In this case, that child would be the grandfather of the beloved king of Israel! Not only does having God as the cause of conception in the ancestral lineage of David build a strong case for the pro-Davidic political agenda behind the book of Ruth, but it also speaks loudly to the fact that God will bring about his ultimate plan since he is sovereignly in control of everything. And this theme of sovereignty and providence began back in Ruth 1:3 and 5 with the unexplained deaths of Elimelech, Chilyon, and Mahlon.

### **3. Expository outline from Ruth 1:1-5**

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Certainly, all Scripture is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. But to be honest, most men who 'preach the Word' will have a difficult time finding relevant and applicable information in introductory sections like that found in Ruth 1:1-5. But the reality is that (a) God intended for this passage of Scripture to affect the lives of believers and (b) there is relevant information in this section that bears great significance to

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acting upon himself. However, considering the rest of the story, the result brought about beneficial results for Boaz making the Niph'al use very similar to a Middle Niph'al (cf. Williams 2007:57-58).

the lives of believers. The most important aspect of an expositional sermon is to make the proposition of the sermon match the theme that arises out of the text. This will be demonstrated in Ruth 1:1-5.

It has already been shown above that two major themes in this passage have been setting the stage for the rest of the book of Ruth. The first theme is that God punishes sin. Sin is a detestable thing to God and contradicts his moral character. Considering God's most notable attribute that he proclaims for himself, *his holiness* demands justice. God cannot and will not allow sin to go unpunished (cf. Prov. 11:21). The second theme in the setting of Ruth is God providentially fulfilling his plan for redemption. By allowing unexplainable events to take place in the life of Naomi, God brought about an outcome between Ruth and Boaz that had an impact that would stretch into eternity. And so we have a beautiful picture of man's plight and God's remedy. Man is a sinner, and he deserves punishment. But God is gracious, and he sovereignly provides redemption to undeserving sinners (cf. Tit. 2:11). With man, there is sin. With sin, there is judgment. But with God, there is grace. And so a homiletical proposition for Ruth 1:1-5 could be, 'Man's sin demands punishment, but God's sovereignty provides redemption'.

To begin with, a sermon from Ruth 1:1-5 would be best if broken into three main points. The first point is 'sin's punishment'. It must be shown how Ruth 1:1-5 emphasizes the sin of man and the resulting punishment. The second point is 'God's providence'. It must be explained how Ruth 1:1-5 emphasizes the providential plan of God and ultimately to bring about redemption to sinners. The third point is 'Christ's provision'. It must describe how the above two points are to converge with the grand theme of God's salvation history culminating in Christ, the son of David and Boaz, upon the cross.

Presenting Ruth 1:1-5 will likely be most effective if each main point is mentioned after it is explained. Beginning with point one, sin's punishment, the setting of Ruth brings out some very interesting truths of sin and consequence that can be explained and applied. The fact that this story takes place in the time when the judges judged (1:1) is significant to sin and punishment. After all, the time period of the judges is so cyclical that the theme of judgment following sin is unmistakable. Utilizing passages like Judges 17:6 and 21:25, which explain that the people did right in their own eyes and the result of such behaviour brought national punishment, illustrates this point well. To demonstrate further the idea of sin and punishment, one would only have to pick out the introductory verses to a particular story in Judges which explains Israel's sin and the result of that sin. For example, Judges 3:7 reveals Israel's sin against God through idol worship. Verse 8

explains the punishment upon Israel was an 8 year servitude to the nation of Mesopotamia. A few verses later, in Judges 3:12, Israel again sinned against God. The result of this was a besiegement of Moab and Ammon upon Israel and an 18 year servitude to Moab. Making use of these many passages found in Judges will drive home the point being brought out in Ruth 1:1 of the time when the judges judged.

Also, the fact that there was a famine in the land during the time of the story of Ruth indicates the presence and punishment of sin. Though no sin is specifically cited in Ruth, it is implied based on God's promise to Israel at the Mosaic Covenant. Using Deuteronomy 28:49-57, especially verses 49 and 51-52, a convincing case can be made that Israel had fallen into sin, and God was punishing them through famine in the land.

Then there are the tragic deaths of Elimelech and later his sons Chilyon and Mahlon. A fascinating sequence of events in 1:1-5 is the situations that took place just before their deaths. In verse 2, Elimelech took his family from Bethlehem to Moab because of the famine. In verse 3, Elimelech died. In verse 4, the two sons took two Moabite women for wives. In verse 5, they died. While the passage in Ruth does not state that the deaths of these men are due to their unrighteous acts, the theme of sin and punishment is nevertheless part and parcel to this story. It is clearly illustrated in the actions and subsequent deaths of Elimelech, Chilyon, and Mahlon.

Therefore, in just the setting of Ruth, there is enough scriptural data to explain and illustrate that man is a sinner, and the result of that sin is punishment. It is here that the first point of the sermon outline can be revealed—Ruth 1:1-5 emphasizes sin's punishment.

After transitioning from sin to providence, the same method of explaining the emphasis in Ruth 1:1-5 and then later revealing the point of God's providence would be best. By going through the theme of God's sovereignty in the death of Elimelech, the preacher can begin revealing the idea that events take place in life that leave the question of how or why unanswered. Elimelech's death account in verse 3 was only given four words of explanation in the Hebrew, two of which were simply explaining Elimelech as Naomi's husband. What a powerful way to promote the idea that things happen in life that cannot be understood, but God has a plan and purpose that he will accomplish. Even in tragedy, the truth remains, 'We know that all things work together for good God causes to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose' (Romans 8:28, NKJV).

Continuing the explanation of God's providence, Ruth 1:5 reveals the death of the two sons, Chilyon and Mahlon. In case the audience was not listening to the truths mentioned about the death of Elimelech, there should be no reason for them to miss the point re-emphasized by the deaths of these two men. Once again it is seen that God has a plan which he is going to work out. That plan is infinitely better than anything conceivable in finite human minds. Thus saints can take comfort in that fact despite any tragedy that might take place in their life.

To add to the emphasis of God's providence and sovereignty, the preacher can go through the rest of the story in Ruth and bring out the three other places where God's sovereignty is highlighted by way of illustration. This begins with an explanation of Ruth 2:3 and the statement how '[Ruth's] fate fated *her* on the portion of the field belonging to Boaz'. Next is Ruth 3:8 and Boaz's unexpected trembling and turning in his deep sleep.<sup>28</sup> Last comes Ruth 4:13 and the conception of Obed caused specifically by God himself. All of these events, beginning with the death of Elimelech and ending with the conception of Obed, point to a single truth—God's providence.

Finally, the two main points above must be connected to bring out the climax of the sermon and final point—Christ's provision. Though man is by nature a sinner and deserves punishment, God is gracious, loving, and providentially bringing about his sovereign plan of redemption. This ultimately culminates in the cross of Jesus. The messianic and christological themes of Ruth should be brought out at this point. From the Bethlehem trilogy to the tensions found between Saul and David, Gibeah and Bethlehem, Benjamin and Judah, and all the way back to Rachel and Leah, a great theological point can be made for the culmination of salvation history with Jesus on the cross. The Bible is constantly sowing a christological tapestry of Jesus as the genealogical heir to David, Obed, Boaz, Judah, and Abraham. The larger scope of the book of Ruth points to the great theme of the kinsman redeemer and Jesus Christ as that redeemer. And so the message reaches its pinnacle in presenting the message of the gospel and proposing the proposition, 'Man's sin demands punishment, but God's sovereignty provides redemption'.

#### **4. Conclusion**

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Though oft ignored and scarcely considered, the short pericope of Ruth 1:1-5 contains great theological and sermonic value. There is much to be gained

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<sup>28</sup> Literally, 'And it happened in the middle of the night, the man trembled and turned himself. And behold, *there was* a woman lying at his feet.'



from a thorough exegetical study of this narrative setting. There is even more to be gained by preaching this passage expositionally emphasizing sin's punishment, God's providence, and Christ's provision.

The book of Ruth makes for excellent narrative, expositional sermons. The theology is rich, the story is compelling, the themes are significant, and the cultural mores are fascinating. Therefore, much is gained from an intense study through Ruth. This journal article sets out to demonstrate exactly how rich and detailed this story is, as exemplified from the opening pericope of Ruth 1:1-5. This article will also demonstrate the necessary bridge that preachers must cross between exegesis and exposition.

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