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*"vita vestra abscondita est cum Christo in Deo"*

Colossians 3:3

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**THE END IN THE BEGINNING:  
A BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL CATECHISM FOR YOUNG AND OLD**

**Ruth**

James T. Dennison, Jr.

What is the next (8<sup>th</sup>) book of the OT?

Ruth<sup>1</sup>

What kind of book is Ruth?

A lovely, artistic, romantic, biblical-theological novella (little ‘novel’)

What do you mean by a ‘novel’? Are you implying the book is fiction?

Certainly not. It is divine revelation of historic fact but in beautiful story-book style. That is, the facts of the drama/story are related/recorded in booklet fashion—a genuine Biblical love story with a happy ending. Delightful!

How does the novella unfold?

In four scenes (or perhaps acts), comparable to the four chapters of the work. Ruth comes to Israel at Bethlehem (chap 1); Ruth comes to glean in Boaz’s fields (chap 2); Ruth comes to Boaz’s threshing floor (chap 3); Ruth comes to be redeemed by Boaz at Bethlehem’s gate (chap 4).

What else is noteworthy about this beautiful book of God’s revelatory and redemptive plan?

The balance and symmetry of the narrative record of events: early chapters anticipate final chapters while concluding chapters glance back to initial chapters. The reader’s eye is moving forward and backward as well as backward and forward in wonderfully (divinely inspired) story-telling or narrative fashion. Our author is a master craftsman.

The fourfold scene/act outline above seems a bit superficial.

I admit that, but it allows us to take the next step in reflecting on the twofold profundity of the book. First, there is the theological profundity of the book—the concluding genealogy (4:18-22) is proleptic/prospective of the Lord of history—indeed, the Lord of redemptive-history, directing, ordering, joining, breaking events according to his sovereign will and good pleasure. The book reveals deep theological significance even though God appears to be off stage in the drama. Second, there is the profundity of deep human relationships—especially Ruth and Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. There is a rich vein of human interaction and human transformation in these four chapters. The human characters move between antipodal poles—death and life. Famine threatens life with death; migration to life results

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the author’s audio series on the entire book: <http://nwts.edu/audio/JTD/Ruth.htm> . Articles here <http://kerux.com/doc/2201A1.asp>. and here <http://kerux.com/doc/2501A1.asp>.

in death. Reverse migration exchanges death for life, but life will ebb to death and no future-life if new life does not spring forth. Our characters move inexorably between life and death (protological and eschatological motifs).

## Chapter 1

How does Act I (chapter 1) open?

With death (“famine” in the land)

What is the first narrative subunit of chapter 1?

Verses 1-7 comprise the narrative introduction with scene (land of Israel), setting (Bethlehem-Judah), era (days of the Judges—hook pattern to the previous book of the Bible), *dramatis personae* (Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, Chilion). Notice how this unit compresses a great deal of time into a small scope (more than ten years, v. 4). In addition to this time warp, there is a scene shift—Bethlehem to Moab. But this initial shift in locations will be reversed by the end of the introductory unit when one of our protagonists will relocate from Moab to Bethlehem (v. 7). Recognition of this reverse location paradigm is not mere neat narrative symmetry. A reversal—return to the place of beginning—is mimetic (a mirror) of the entire narrative drama of the book. What is reversed logistically foreshadows personal, yeah, redemptive, reversals existentially.

But is there more in this introductory unit?

Yes, emptiness turns to fullness only to be reversed. Thus, narrative location reversals highlight narrative personal reversals. Empty in Bethlehem (ironically, no bread in “the house of bread”) turns to fullness in Moab, only to be tragically reversed—fullness in Moab turns to emptiness destined to be carried back to Bethlehem. The remarkable interplay between impersonal scene shift and personal characterization is plainly interwoven.

What of the structure in vv. 1-7?

It underscores the reversal motif:

Famine (v. 1) is reversed by bread (v. 6)

Sojourner in Moab (v. 1) is reversed by a return from Moab (v. 6)

Unmarried (v. 2) is reversed by marriage (v. 4)

Progeny (vv. 1-2) is reversed by no progeny (v. 5)

Life (v. 2) is reversed by death (vv. 3, 5)

The reverse tragedy (turn-about irony) is featured especially in Naomi:

Wife to widow

Mother to no mother

## Full to empty

Is there an inclusio bracketing this unit?

Yes, notice the “land” (v. 1) and the “land” (v. 7). In addition, observe “Judah” (v. 1) and “Judah” (v. 7). These are symmetrical frames which enclose the introduction to the book. Now notice an antipodal frame: he went to “sojourn” in the land of Moab (v. 1); they went to “return” to the land of Judah (v. 7). Thus, out of the land, back in to the land.

All these factors argue for a vv. 1-7 initial structural unit. What other factors supports this conclusion?

Verse 8 inaugurates a new dramatic element—dialogue. Beginning in v. 8, the characters speak. Silence in vv. 1-7; conversation in vv. 8-22.

Observe as well the doubling pattern that concludes vv. 1-7: the verb “return” (vv. 6, 7); “daughters-in-law” (vv. 6, 7); “land of Moab” balanced by “place where she was”.

What else is significant about vv. 8-22?

Women take over the narrative. There are no male characters in vv. 8-22. Naomi and her two daughters-in-law are the central characters. Elimelech is dead, not a continuing character. Mahlon and Chilion are dead, not continuing characters. But the females (Naomi, Orpah, Ruth) are continuing characters. It is the lives of these women which will unfold the rest of the story. The prominence here of female heroines gives the lie to exclusive patriarchy in the OT. Male dominance is not the pattern of redemptive-history. Females stand on an equal footing in God’s providential and redemptive actions. Female subordination is not female eradication from the history of redemption.

What do you notice in vv. 8 and 9?

Parallel elements in which Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to their mother’s “house” (v. 8) and wishes for each to find rest in the “house” of a husband (v. 9). There is also a parallel “may the Lord” (v. 8 and 9) in which the Hebrew grammar is kal/qal imperfect plus YHWH (“Lord”). This pattern suggests that *hesed* (v. 8—“kindness”, “favor”, even “grace”) stands alongside *noach* (v. 9—“rest”). The divine favor of God’s “rest” is more than remarriage; it is Naomi’s benediction to her daughter-in-law. The doubling of YHWH on Naomi’s lips is a doubling of her wish that these girls find YHWH’s favor and rest. Thus, the confession of Ruth (vv. 16-17) arises from the benediction of Naomi. Emptiness and bitterness aside, Naomi has communicated enough of YHWH’s kindness and favor to Ruth that the Moabitess lays hold of it and possesses it.

What dominates vv. 10-12?

A back and forth banter about “return”. This is a reverse paradigm, but a reverse paradigm with a twist. There is a prospect of newness for the Gentile widows—a return to YHWH’s land is a return to the foundations for the Hebrew widow. But for the Gentile women, the foundations lie behind them in the land of Moab. Return to the land outside God’s rest? or venture anew (brand new) into the unknown land which Naomi declares is YHWH’s land. The transition of reversal here is radical—it is a break with the past and a sojourn into the newness of the future. Ruth’s protological confession has eschatological results.

How is this reverse process poignantly underscored?

Observe the dialogic exchange and its tenderness and affection. Naomi kissed them (v. 9); Orpah kisses Naomi (v. 14). This is not phony; it is genuine—hence doubly narrated. Reinforced with “they lifted up their voices and wept” (v. 9, 14), we are touched with the affection which both Orpah and Ruth have for Naomi. But Ruth clings (v. 14); Ruth will not stop kissing/clinging/holding on to her beloved mother-in-law.

What is the difference between Orpah and Ruth here?

Orpah’s farewell kiss compared with Ruth’s no farewell kiss. Orpah is content with human tenderness and affection, but the ties of Moab—the native ties—the natural ties—the pagan ties are stronger than kisses and tears and laments. Orpah returns to the land which is marked by the death of her husband, the death of her brother-in-law, the death of her father-in-law. Orpah turns back to the former ways of the former days—the days of a living death. But Ruth does not turn back. She holds on to the living link with her past. And that steadfast embrace—embrace of life—that embrace is an unspoken narrative of her spoken confession in vv. 16-17. “Do not tell me to go back! Your God shall be my God.”

What new relationship has Ruth experienced?

She belongs to Naomi’s house in the new experience of a marriage, a husband, an enlarged family circle, but she has especially come into a new relationship with Naomi’s God. Naomi confesses that the Lord is her God; she belongs to him. Ruth wants that relationship. I want to belong to your God; I want him to belong to me. I cannot turn back to the land of the memory of death. I must go on with you to the land of life—new life, *hesed* life—life rest. Ruth tells Naomi, tells us that she longs to belong to the Lord—that he will be her God and she will be one of his people. **NB:** God already magnificently at work behind the scenes grafting a Gentile into the branch of Israel.

Is there a structural bracket around this unit, vv. 8-22?

Yes, the *leitwörter* (“key word”) *shûv* (“return”): v. 8, “go, return”; v. 22, “so Naomi returned.” The dramatic change of directions at the center of this unit (dialogue exchange, vv. 16-17) is bracketed by a macro-change in direction. From Moab to Judah—change in direction, new life in front. From Moab to Moab—no change in direction, old life as usual. No confession from Orpah; poignant confession from Ruth.

What about the subunit that closes chapter 1?

The central dialogue section (vv. 8-18) is concluded with the arrival section (vv. 19-22). This is a self-contained subunit which is demarcated by “they came to Bethlehem” (v. 19, 22). The contrast at arrival is remarked by the villagers (“the women said,” v. 19)—“Is this Naomi?” She is clearly marked by her adversity and the ensuing dialogue enforces this (vv. 20-21). But the parallel arrival description (v. 22) is more auspicious—“at the beginning of barley harvest.” This is another proleptic comment—a remark which anticipates the future, confirming the rumor heard by Naomi in Moab (v. 6) that God had given bread to Judah in the “house of bread” (Beth-lehem).

What is the structure of this final section (vv. 19-22)?

The center is Naomi's speech which has a clear chiasmic form.

A. Shaddai ("the Almighty"), v. 20

B. YHWH ("the Lord"), v. 21

B'. YHWH ("the Lord"), v. 21

A'. Shaddai ("the Almighty"), v. 21

The mirror reflection of God's names is a hint of the providential reverse in Naomi's fortunes: Mara mirrored in Naomi; bitter in sweet; empty in full.

Naomi and Ruth are drawn into the circle of the Lord God Shaddai—God the Mighty Lord of the beginnings and endings of his people.

## Chapter 2

How is it apparent that chapter two is a new literary/narrative unit?

A new character appears in the drama—Boaz. He appears for the first time and becomes the focus of the chapter.

How does his name unite the chapter?

He is introduced (vv. 1-3); he arrives on the scene (vv. 4-7); he cares for Ruth (vv. 8-13); he gives food to Ruth (v. 14); he drops sheaves for Ruth (vv. 15-17); he is the subject of Ruth's happy report to Naomi (vv. 18-23).

What else do you observe about this chapter which features Boaz?

His name brackets the beginning and the ending of the section like an inclusio (vv. 1, 23)

How is he characterized?

He is "of the family of Elimelech" (v. 1), a connection important to the *go'el* ("kinsman redeemer") function so crucial to the narrative, but also because of the narrative reversal which his relationship represents. Elimelech is dead; Boaz is alive—an obvious but powerful reverse motif. The death of Elimelech in contrast with the life of his kinsman powerfully reinforces the life motif (not death) which emerges in Ruth and Naomi's return to Bethlehem. Boaz is also characterized as a "man of great wealth".

But he disappears from the story as soon as he is introduced?

Yes, Ruth appears in his fields (vv. 2-3) as if to come alongside him

And then?

Boaz reappears (v. 4) to become very solicitous of Ruth

What can be deduced from this pattern?

The delay in action or dialogue from Boaz is related to narrative suspense and expectation. He is described, disappears, then reappears conversing with our heroine. When we begin to learn about him, we are eager to discover how he fits into the drama. We are not disappointed—the book unfolds his character and role wonderfully.

But what of Ruth?

She arrives in Boaz’s fields “by chance” (v. 3). No dumb luck here, YHWH Adonai has been shaping Ruth’s future since she clung to her Hebrew mother-in-law in confession of his name. The silent and hidden character in this drama is the sovereign Lord of providence who works all things for the good of his people.

What is the next subunit?

The dialogic section (vv. 5-16) which is delimited/bracketed by Boaz’s address to his “servants” (v. 5, 15). Inside (vv. 8-14) is the back and forth dialogue between Boaz and Ruth: he said to her (v. 8); she said to him (v. 10); he said to her (v. 11); she said to him (v. 13); he said to her (v. 14).

What is the center point of this exchange and what is its significance?

It is Boaz’s perception that a reverse change has occurred in Ruth and to Ruth (vv. 11-12). She is shadowed by the wings of the Lord; he (Boaz) will reflect that shadow and cover her path with kindness. If Boaz is blessed of the Lord (v. 4), he will show the Lord’s blessing to the stranger and sojourner—surely an OT motif with a rich redemptive-history from Abraham to Israel out of Egypt. This Moabitess has turned from death (v. 11) and journeyed to life under the wings of the Lord God of Israel. Boaz’s remarks are a rich confirmation of the confession of Ruth in chapter one. He has learned of her embrace of a new life, new family, new nation, new God and he will do all to sustain her in that newness. For Boaz confesses that Ruth belongs to the refuge of the Lord. God has sheltered her, God has covered her, God has brought her to his fields.

What about the law of the gleaners?

Boaz conforms to the statutes of Lev 19:9-10 and 23:22 when he specifies that Ruth be protected and permitted to harvest what is left by the reapers. Here we find Boaz identified with the *hesed* YHWH (“the kindness/favor of the Lord”). Possessing it, he dispenses it.

### Chapter 3

How does chapter three begin?

With a hook pattern: 2:23—“she lived with her mother-in-law”; 3:1—“Naomi her mother-in-law. In fact, the *leitwörter* for this chapter is “mother-in-law” (also vv. 6, 16, 17).

What else is significant about the term “mother-in-law”?

It marks the shift in scene through the narrative in the chapter. Verse 1, the scene is Naomi’s living quarters; v. 6, the scene is the threshing floor to which Ruth’s mother-in-law has



directed her (v. 3); v. 16, the return to Naomi's living quarters and the report to her mother-in-law of the events at the threshing floor. Three scene shift units: 1-5, 6-13, 14-18.

Does anything else demarcate these three units?

Yes, time. Verses 1-5 are set in the evening at Naomi's home; vv. 6-13 at midnight at the threshing floor (especially vv. 8ff.); vv. 14-18 in the morning, again at Naomi's home. The literary markers (scene shift and time) reinforce one another.

What is special about the central panel of the three (vv. 6-16)?

It is bracketed by the "mother-in-law" *leitwörter* (v. 6 framed with v. 16). Also, notice that the narrative motion is reversed (there is that omnipresent reverse motif once more): Ruth "went down" to the threshing floor (v. 6); Ruth "came to" Naomi (v. 16). In addition, the central panel featuring dialogue between Boaz and Ruth is flanked by two panels featuring dialogue between Naomi and Ruth (vv. 1-5, 16-18). These paradigms are regular, symmetrical, parallel. In fact, they are identical diachronically to chapter two: Ruth/Naomi, Ruth/Boaz, Ruth/ Naomi.

What is the focal issue of the central panel (vv. 6-13)?

Identity—"who are you?" asks Boaz (v. 9); "I am Ruth." "And," she continues, "you are *go'el*." And Boaz replies, "I am *go'el*" (v. 12). This is the climactic moment in the plot of this brilliant, inspired lovely book. All hinges upon this moment of acknowledgment. Ruth's appeal for the *go'el* is an appeal for Boaz. She is asking that her identity be reciprocated in the identity of her *go'el*—her kinsman redeemer.

But here there is an element of suspense.

Yes. Will Boaz identify with her as she has identified with him? In fact, the element of suspense inaugurates this chapter, not only because chapter two ends with the question—what will happen next? But Naomi proposes a by-no-means certain forcing of Boaz's hand. So that we are left wondering after verse 5 of chapter 3—what will happen next? This remarkable retardation pattern is masterfully employed by our narrator. He could have cut to the chase by having Naomi say, "Go down to the threshing floor." Period! But Naomi's instructions in vv. 1-4 are deliberate, carefully ordered, intended to effect the outcome of these women dangling in uncertain futures. And so we have an elaborate address of Naomi to Ruth in a "leave nothing to chance" scenario.

### Digression

I must pause at this point to reflect upon the night scene at the threshing floor. This scene has provided a field day for commentators to suggest all manner of sexual innuendo. Such comments display more of the fantasizing of the commentators than the narrative in the text. We come to this delicate matter with the delicacy and beauty of the book itself. No, it will not commend itself to the modern mind satiated with film, picture, digital images of men and women in various states of sexual compromise. As our story stands, it will not appeal to Hollywood, nor to the mass movie-going audiences of America who demand sexual titillation and exploitation in PG-13 and R rated

movies. Or with pornographic web sites, top 40 music lyrics and a host of other means by which our generation has displayed its obsession with sex even as our generation has become less and less sexually satisfied. The publication of the private, the exploitation of the intimate, cheapens all. Public and private, open and intimate society becomes more and more tawdry, less and less attached; and that rising detachment makes the intimate, the sexual, more and more animal. We even hear/read these explanations from leading avatars of our over-obsessed sexually explicit culture—sex is an animal function, no more nor less than rutting or breeding or heat. So the overt sexualization of the scene at the threshing floor in Bethlehem in Ruth 3 is an attempt to remake the scene in the modern sexploitation image. Ruth and Boaz must have been like us, so we will create this scene on the threshing floor in our own obscene and salacious image.

Now you may feel that I overreact. But even a cursory glance at the modern commentaries, monographs and journal articles on this chapter will prove me right. Thus, I alert you to the contemporary prostitution of the Boaz Ruth encounter at the threshing floor. But I must also emphatically deny any such innuendo and lasciviousness in the text itself. This story drips with beauty, propriety, love and loveliness. It is the very antithesis of Hollywood's, TV's, Playboy's, Cosmopolitan's, etc. notion of 'love'. For these mass marketers of perversity, 'love' is a three-letter word. It is not lasting, life-long intimacy; it is not adolescent chastity; it is not precious, sweet treasures kept in reserve until marriage. But it is for Ruth and Boaz. He has urged her not to glean in the fields other than his own, lest she be exposed to potential molestation (NB: Naomi's echo and expansion of Boaz's comments in 2:22 with 2:8). He has even instructed his servants not to "insult" her (2:15), a word suggesting potential exploitation of a vulnerable single woman. Boaz's entire demeanor has been the protection and preservation of the integrity and dignity of Ruth. Would he violate her sexual integrity? God forbid!! He is not that kind of man; he is not a Hollywood movie star. Nor is there any suggestion in the narrative of the night on the threshing floor in chapter three which indicates any untoward behavior, any inappropriate conduct, any violation of the reservation of sexual congress until marriage.

Ruth lies down at Boaz's feet; she folds back the cloak-like covering that warms his feet. He awakes, startled in the middle of the night. She asks him to extend his cloak-covering to her as she lies at his feet; he does, instructing her to lie down once more at his feet until morning. Such is the chastity and integrity of both Ruth and Boaz. And such is the covering mirror motif here reflective of the divine covering motif in chapter 2. Boaz covers her with his cloak as God himself covers her with his wings. The divine drama draws them deeper into the divine relationship. Divine/human drama, divine/human interface via divine redemptive-historical initiative.

Let us now return to a dominant motif of this lovely book which I discussed at the beginning of this article. What was it?

Life and death/death and life are major themes in this drama

Where does it begin?

The deaths of husbands turns the faces of two widows to the land of bread and life. But the bitterness of that sojourn is not soon relinquished—“Shaddai has dealt bitterly with me” (1:20). Ruth herself appears to be content with the inexorable wages of sorrow, namely death (1:17).

When does it change?

The barley harvest is the inauguration of a concrete and objective new life—a life beyond the death which overshadows them from the past, the death which hovers over them in the present. The shadow of death begins to yield to the refuge of new life—“May he be blessed of the Lord who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living” (2:20). The transition embraced by Ruth (death to life) now begins to evidence itself even to Naomi (she emphasizes life not death). We are witnesses to a progression of divine kindness (*hesed*, 2:20) granting life, sustaining life, enriching life in the land of the living. Hence we must continue to trace this life-for-the-dead motif beyond Ruth’s initial apprehension and reception of it in chapter one.

What patterns are present?

Patterns of reversal and contrast. The emerging patterns of reversal (reverse providence, reverse fortune, reverse perception of YHWH) are paralleled by evident contrasts—contrasts between Ruth’s first and second encounter with Boaz. Chapter 2 is in the fields; chapter 3 is at the threshing floor. Chapter 2 is public; chapter 3 is private. Chapter 2 is by day; chapter 3 is by night. Chapter 2 is by chance; chapter 3 is by choice. Chapter 2 is Boaz active; chapter 3 is Boaz passive. Chapter 2 is Ruth passive; chapter 3 is Ruth active.

Why is chapter 3 the romantic chapter?

There is the pursuit of a husband here and Boaz does not object to being pursued. I do not fault Ruth or her mother-in-law here. There is a place for the indication of a singular choice—Ruth is content with the recommendation of Boaz. But, it may be noted, she does not fight it either. She is pleased to set her cap on Boaz. Nor does Boaz balk; he is complimented by Ruth’s action and whole-heartedly declares his willingness to redeem her unto himself as his wife should the way be clear. We have here, therefore, two hearts open to one another. Lovely, tender romance.

But there is a problem.

Yes, there is a cloud on the horizon; there is even a mist which keeps Boaz and Ruth apart. “There is a *go’el* closer than I,” says Boaz (3:12).

Who is this?

The mysterious third party who creates the infamous romantic triangle—only there is no romantic interest in this unnamed closer relative (as we learn from chapter 4). There is the slightest hint of deeper affection in Boaz for Ruth here—as if he is declaring his feelings as he explains the relationship which holds his feelings in temporary abeyance. Yet what more can he do? We have characterized Boaz as a man of deep integrity and honor. That is a gift from God who has touched Boaz’s heart with new life too.

What is the central feature of this poignant scene on the threshing floor?

It is the reprise of the “covering”. Ruth asks Boaz to spread his “covering” over her (3:9); it is precisely the *leitwörter* designed to galvanize Boaz’s mind and heart. He had blessed her with the wish that the Lord might make her full, under whose “covering” she was hovering (2:12). Notice how the characters dissolve into the “covering of the Lord”. Ruth is shadowed by the Lord’s “covering”; Ruth asks for Boaz’s “covering”—that is, the “covering” he possesses. She is acknowledging his confession—recognizing that he too is covered under the wings of the Almighty. And now she asks the one covered by the Lord’s wings, the one who has already blessed her with the realization that she is covered by the Lord’s wings—now Ruth asks Boaz to receive her as a wing-covered lover of the Lord. And he does! In other words, Ruth asks Boaz to regard her as an Israelite hidden under the shadow of the wings of the Almighty.

Elaborate on the mutuality aspect of this phase of the drama.

There is not only mutuality of expectant providence here on the threshing floor; there is not only mutuality of feelings on the threshing floor; there is mutuality of confidence, mutuality of possession, mutuality of belonging to the One whose wings—whose all-sufficient wings—cover them both. “Spread your wings over me”—your Lord God granted covering which you acknowledge I have; spread yours over me so that both of us, both of us wing-covered servants of the Lord may find rest and joy and life in Him and in one another.

Will our wing-covered hero and heroine cover one another with the love of the marriage bed?

Boaz protests—not yet. There is one closer and so Boaz—blessed Boaz—waits while he reassures Ruth that she must mirror him—she too must wait. The mirror appears in v. 13. It is the chiasmic reflection of the triangle—of him, of you, of me. Night stands over against morning; he stands over against me; you is mirrored in him and in me. Who will redeem you? Who will rightfully possess you? You . . . you . . . you . . . Ruth. Boaz centers upon Ruth—she is his delight. But he must await the proper time and honor the proper commandments of the Lord: “lie down”; “lie down” til we see what the Lord, the living Lord, shall do.

What further act of consideration is evident here?

“Give me the cloak . . . and hold it” (v. 15). More abundance he measures out to her. More kindness and solicitous help he pours out upon her. Ruth went her way, but she went her way full. Boaz has made her full. Her Lord, Boaz’s Lord has made her full. He does not send her away empty. That would be a reversal of her status as a mere widowed Moabitess. He sends her back full declaring her status as under the shadow of God’s wings. Beautiful! Beautiful!

## Chapter 4

What inaugurates this chapter?

A scene shift (“now Boaz went up to the gate,” 4:1) marks the next to last scene in our lovely drama. From the threshing floor and the house of Naomi and Ruth, the camera resumes with Boaz’s approach to the gates of Bethlehem. This drama began in Bethlehem

(1:1); this drama resumed in Bethlehem when Ruth and Naomi returned there (1:19). This drama has deepened in the fields of Boaz outside of Bethlehem (chap 2). This drama has climaxed at a threshing floor of Bethlehem (chap 3). Now, to the gate—the city gate—where the elders of the city of Bethlehem gather for judgment. Judgment at the gate—at the entrance to Bethlehem, the final judgment in our drama.

What do you notice about the “gate”?

It brackets this scene. It unfolds the meeting of Boaz and the elders; it concludes with the townsfolk testifying to Boaz and the elders (v. 11). What happens at the gate will be legally binding on Boaz and Ruth. Reinforcing this inclusio-like unit is the conjunction of “gate” with “elders” at the beginning and end of the unit (vv. 1-2 with v. 11).

Is there another element which demarcates this section?

Yes, we meet the fourth character in our drama. Naomi we know; Ruth we know; Boaz we know: all these we know by name. The fourth person we do not know—by name. He is known to us by his action, but he remains anonymous. Is his name forgotten because he failed in his duty—his responsibility to act the *go'el*—the kinsman redeemer in the levirate? Perhaps. Actually, we know this man with no name from the beginning of our drama. He is the shadowy *go'el* or close relative alluded to by Naomi from 2:20. Only there because of Naomi's limited knowledge (she has been absent from Bethlehem for a long time), the shadowy *go'el* figure is identified with Boaz. But Boaz is no shadowy figure. He is a boldly articulated and tenderly, yeah attentively presented near relative. And he knows (as Naomi does not know)—he knows he is not the mysterious *go'el*. “There is one closer than I” (3:12). No, we the readers meet the mysterious fourth character—the man with no name—at the “gate” of Bethlehem.

What else is new at this point in our narrative?

Not only a new character, but a new fact.

What do you mean?

Boaz tells us that Naomi has returned from the “land” of Moab (v. 3, which we know) and has a piece of “land” for sale. This latest surprise in a book already with several surprises (Ruth clings to Naomi; Ruth chances to glean in Boaz's field; Boaz is startled by Ruth at the threshing floor) is the most significant. Naomi has been a woman of property in Bethlehem, even while her daughter-in-law gleaned as a poor stranger and sojourner in the fields of Bethlehem. A female in Israel with land as an inheritance does not surprise us (recall the daughters of Zelophehad, Num 27, 36); but this widowed female, apparently poor and dependent, is revealed to be a landowner.

How does this revelation reprise the book's life/death motif?

At the gate of the city, Naomi is characterized in terms of her dead husband and her living possession (the field/land). Even at the gate of judgment, the issue is life for the survivor of the dead.

Notice the chiasm in v. 3 (according to the order and vocabulary of the Hebrew text)

A. Field (here in Bethlehem)

B. Elimelech

B'. Naomi

A'. Field (of Moab)

This structure sandwiches dead husband and living wife. It mirrors itself in fields of land (land of the living—Bethlehem; land of the dead—Moab).

Another chiasm is suggested in v. 5. Why?

The order and vocabulary of the Hebrew text reinforces the chiasm in v. 3.

How?

A. Buy (field in Bethlehem)

B. Naomi

B'. Ruth

A'. Buy (perform the levirate in Bethlehem)

This structure parallels that of v. 3 placing a chiasm at the inception of Boaz's dialogue with the unnamed *go'el* and a chiasm at the conclusion of his dialogue with the unnamed *go'el*. Notice once more the life-not-death motif in the v. 5 chiasm: Ruth redeemed with on-going life and seed/progeny for the family of her widowed mother-in-law. The name of Naomi does not die because of the life from the name of Ruth. Double chiasms with double life/death motifs involved. All this ultimately anchored in the eschatological Levirate Redeemer who is Life, not death; and the seed of the promise retrospective to the protological evangel of the "seed of the woman".

What other literary element is evident in the opening of this chapter?

Speech—especially speech by Boaz (vv. 3-5, 5, 9-10). Notice that the speeches of the anonymous *go'el* (vv. 4 and 6) are responses to Boaz. Even the speech of the elders and witnesses (vv. 11-12) are a response to Boaz. Speech answers speech throughout.

What becomes of the primary *go'el*?

He disappears from our story when he refuses his responsibility. The emphatic "not redeem" (v. 6; notice the doubling or parallel repetition of that phrase "I am not able" followed by the infinitive "to redeem") is an emphatic self-removal from the drama. Our anonymous kinsman redeemer takes his no-name and journeys to ignominy. I write "ignominy" because our "friend" (v. 1, NASB) was ready, willing and able to take the land which Naomi had for sale. Perhaps he was a real estate developer in Bethlehem and any new parcel put dollar signs in his eyes. In any event, he sees a potential profit and he bites. (Did Boaz lay this trap for him? Neat question!) But when he learns it will not be a pure cash money profit, i.e., he must take a woman in the bargain—another man's former wife—a foreign woman, he demurs. How quickly financial gain is tempered by . . . well, you see, this is getting very complicated and it will jeopardize my other financial ventures, my future inheritance, my selfish responsibilities. No—there is no way to redeem the anonymous kinsman redeemer. He is an opportunist and Boaz proves his character to be

the exact opposite of his own—at the gate! And so, death takes our anonymous *go'el*—no, not literally, but he dies out of the story—disappears from the names remembered in Israel. His own legacy (ironic that!)—his own legacy is to be remembered as the no-name who preferred land to the revealed will of God; a piece of property to the on-going life of the name of a family among the people of God.

What is the way of the unnamed *go'el*?

It is the way of Elimelech—removed from the story by the arena of death, the land where the living are forgotten.

What is the way of Boaz?

His is the way of the true *go'el*—the way of life. Full, satisfied life for Ruth; life for Naomi; even on-going life for the names of two dead men, Chilion and Mahlon.

What role does Boaz assume?

He becomes the mediator between the tragic past and the blessed future. He is the advocate through whom Ruth finds rest—through whom the name of the house of Naomi will live. This *go'el* anticipates the mid-point at which death and life intersect. He closes the dominance of the one, while he opens the exuberance of the other. What flows through Boaz's redemption will be recapitulated in the future history of redemption as it is actualized in this present phase of the history of redemption “in the days of the judges”.

What remains in this lovely novella?

In the end, it is new life which remains. The new life of a child named Obed, whose life generates another new life, Jesse; whose life generates yet another new life, David. And David begat Solomon, and Solomon Rehoboam . . . and to the son of David was born Jesus who is called the Christ. Here is eschatological new life. For this son of Boaz, son of Ruth is in fact Son of God. In him is life—eternal life—eschatological life—life, not death. He is *the go'el*—the eschatological redeemer—the once and for all kinsman redeemer who has purchased us as his very own inheritance. Has he not married us unto himself? Has he not wonderfully and passionately joined us to himself in the bonds of love and given us his inheritance—has he not given us heaven itself, an infinite and eternal inheritance?!

To whom does the book of Ruth drive you?

To Christ Jesus, Redeemer and Lord! For have you not read, have you not heard how Matthew 1 brings you and me to Christ by way of Ruth and Boaz's seed? And what Matthew does, Luke duplicates underscoring that Jesus is “son of Boaz” (3:32). If the book of Ruth does not drive you to Christ, are you dead? Have you not read, have you not heard how the line of life transcends the death of Elimelech, the death of Mahlon; how the line of life transcends the death which hovers over all frail human souls—even poor widows and strangers?

Characterize this life

It is life which hovers over Ruth and Boaz as God hovers over Ruth and Boaz. The shadow cast down upon—cast down over—Ruth and Boaz is the shadow of God's own dwelling place—his “land” of life and light and immortality. On his wings, on the wings of Shaddai,

on the wings of the Almighty, he gently, graciously, tenderly, affectionately bears them up. So he grants affection to Ruth and Boaz because he is a God of affection—ever affectionate to his own. And he grants tenderness to Ruth and Boaz because he is a God of tenderness—ever tender towards his own. And he grants grace (*hesed*) to Ruth and Boaz because he is a God of grace—ever gracious to his own. This beautiful love story is the beautiful story of the love of God—the love of God in Ruth and Boaz’s love—the mirror of his deep passion in their deep passion. And Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife and Boaz went in to her and the Lord gave her conception.

What concluding comment do you make?

The contrast of the beginning and the end of our story is remarkable. The drama of reversal which joins chapters one and four is the wonderfully blessed change in Naomi and Ruth because of their kinsman redeemer, Boaz. They stand in chapter one bereft, destitute, childless; they stand at the end of chapter four full, satisfied, holding children (a child). Boaz is the central redeemer kinsman. But hovering above Boaz and Ruth and Naomi (and you and me) are the wings of YHWH Shaddai.

What eschatological comment do you make?

The eschatological word in the Hebrew text of the book of Ruth is “David”. This protological David anticipates and reveals the eschatological David. With the David of Jerusalem, we are directed to the David of the “new Jerusalem”. He is the son of David, son of Ruth and Boaz, Son of God.



John Donne: **Holy Sonnets**

**XV.**

Wilt thou love God as he thee? Then digest,  
My soul, this wholesome meditation,  
How God the Spirit, by angels waited on  
In heaven, doth make His temple in thy breast.  
The Father having begot a Son most blest,  
And still begetting—for he ne'er begun—  
Hath deign'd to choose thee by adoption,  
Co-heir to His glory, and Sabbath' endless rest.  
And as a robb'd man, which by search doth find  
His stolen stuff sold, must lose or buy it again,  
The Sun of glory came down, and was slain,  
Us whom He made, and Satan stole, to unbind.  
'Twas much, that man was made like God before,  
But, that God should be made like man, much more.

**Moses' Judicial Laws Fulfilled in the Final Judgment—A Response to Theonomy from the book of Hebrews.<sup>1</sup>**

By Scott F. Sanborn

Perhaps the most unique distinctive of Theonomy is its view that the modern state is required to use the same penalties for crimes that God gave ancient Israel in the Old Testament.

Here we will argue that comparing Hebrews 12:18-29 (esp. v. 25), Heb. 2:2-3 and Heb. 10:28-29 with one another and with Heb. 9:13-14 indicates that *the judicial penalties of the old covenant, like the ceremonial laws, have passed away in light of their fulfillment in Christ.*

The penalties, like the sacrifices, have passed away in their older form because their essential reality is fulfilled in Christ and his administration of the new covenant.

To this end, we first observe the similarity between Heb. 12:18-29 and Heb. 9:13-14. The first of these passages deals with the penalties associated with Mt. Sinai and the second with animal sacrifices instituted by the law. The similarity between them indicates that the penalties of the old covenant have passed away in the same way that the animal sacrifices have passed away. This similarity is indicated by the similar constructions in which we find them. These are the “how much more” constructions in the New Testament used to describe displacement and replacement of the old by the new.

**Hebrews 12:18-29**

Hebrews 12:18-29 teaches that the final judgment of the new covenant and New Jerusalem (vv. 22-29) is far *greater* than the judicial penalties associated with Mount Sinai (vv. 18-21, 25b). In Hebrews, when that which is greater comes, it fulfills that which is lesser, and that which is lesser passes away. That is, it passes away in its lesser/previous form, but its essential reality abides in its fulfillment. Thus, we will see that comparing Heb. 12:18-29 with Heb. 9:13-14 indicates that Christ will fulfill the punishments of Sinai in the last judgment just as he fulfilled the animal sacrifices in his death and resurrection.

To consider this comparison, we first look at Hebrews 12:18-21. It tells us *we have not come to Sinai and its form of judgment.* Verse 20 lists one of these forms of punishment—stoning. Verse 25 contrasts this type of Old Testament penalty with the greater final judgment of the new covenant. “*For if* those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, *much less shall we escape* who turn away from him who warns from heaven.” This indicates, like verses 18-21, that these penalties have passed away to make room for their fulfillment in the final judgment.

The use of the construction “for if...much less...” underscores this point. It is practically parallel to the construction “for if...much more...” in Heb. 9:13-14—“*For if* the blood of goats and bulls . . . sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, *how much more* will the blood of Christ . . . cleanse your

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<sup>1</sup> The article is a reworking of a letter I sent to the editor of *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, originally published in Vol. 15, No. 8 (August/September 1994):23-24.

conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” Clearly, the writer of Hebrews used this construction in 9:13-14 to contrast the blood of the new covenant with the sacrifices of the old covenant, which have passed away.

As we have seen, the writer used the same construction in Heb. 12:25 to compare and contrast the final judgment on new covenant breakers (“much less shall we escape”) with the *penal codes of the old covenant* (“those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth”). This suggests that the old covenant penal sanctions have also passed away. That is, this similar construction (a comparison and contrast) indicates that the old covenant judicial penalties have passed away in the same manner that the old covenant sacrifices have passed away. In other words, these penalties have passed away in their old covenant form in order to make way for their new covenant fulfillment in the final judgment.

At first glance, one may wonder from Heb. 12:18-29 whether the writer is only dealing with the punishments surrounding Mount Sinai. Does he also mean to include the *standing penal codes of the Jewish theocracy and kingdom*?

### **Hebrews 2:2-3**

Hebrews 2:2-3 is instructive here. It uses the same kind of construction that we have seen in Heb. 9:13-14 and 12:25—“*For if* the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression received a just recompense, *how shall we escape* if we neglect so great a salvation?” Just as in 9:13-14 and 12:25, the writer is indicating that an element of the old covenant has passed away to make room for its fulfillment in the new covenant.

What is it that has passed away in Heb. 2:2-3? It is *all the standing judicial penalties of the old covenant*, not just the penalties imposed on those who transgressed at Mt. Sinai. Hebrews 2:2 indicates this by referring to the “just recompense” that was inflicted on *every* transgression and disobedience; that is, it refers to *all the penalties inflicted on lawbreakers in the old covenant*. The similarities between this passage and Heb. 9:13-14 and 12:25 indicate that the standing penal codes given through Moses—no less than the animal sacrifices—are unique *formal* aspects of the administration of the old covenant that have passed away. That is, they have passed away in their old covenant form to make way for their fulfillment in the new covenant’s final judgment.

### **Hebrews 10:28-29**

This conclusion is further strengthened by Hebrews 10:28-29, which also speaks of the standing penal codes of the old covenant. It states, “Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. *How much severer* punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God.” While this construction does not begin with “for if” like the others, the phrase “*how much severer*” is very similar to the “*how much more*” phrase in Heb. 9:13-14. In Heb. 9:13-14 the blessing of OT animal sacrifices is compared and contrasted to the blessing of Christ’s NT sacrifice. Similarly, in Heb. 10:28-29 the OT penal sanctions are compared and contrasted with the curse of Christ’s NT final judgment. In light of this, the penal codes of capital punishment under Moses have passed away in the same manner that the animal sacrifices have passed away. These penal codes have been replaced by Christ’s final judgment just as the animal sacrifices have been replaced by Christ’s final sacrifice.

We may miss this comparison if we fail to notice that the final judgment here noted is an administration of the *new covenant* just like Christ’s sacrifice. This is underscored by the fact that

those here described will be punished for trampling underfoot the blood of the new covenant (Heb. 10:29).

Thus we conclude, just as the animal sacrifices represent forms of sacrifice that have passed away because they are fulfilled in Christ's sacrifice, so the penal codes of Moses represent forms of punishment that have passed away because they are fulfilled in the final judgment. Both the sacrifices and penal codes passed away as lesser/previous forms of administration, but their essential reality abides in their fulfillment.

### Answering Objections

Let us consider two possible objections to this argument. First, someone might say—"if all the penal codes have passed away, then the death penalty for murder has passed away; but we find that penalty in Genesis 9:6 before the Mosaic covenant." In response, we would appeal to the point that all the penalties *uniquely* administered by the old covenant have passed away. Therefore, the death penalty for murder (Gen. 9:6), which was clearly instituted by a covenant with all humanity (Gen. 8:20-9:17)<sup>2</sup> and had universal significance, does not pass away. It remains in effect. Only certain relationships it later attained to in the broader Mosaic covenant have passed away—such as its relation to cleansing the holy land of defilement.

Second, one might object that we have "confused abrogate with fulfill". However, if this is the case, the same argument must be leveled against the replacement of OT animal sacrifices by Christ's final sacrifice. When Christ fulfilled those animal sacrifices, the former animal sacrifices that were offered year after year passed away.

A proponent of animal sacrifices might object—"this is to confuse abrogate with fulfill, for on your view the animal sacrifices have been *abolished*—so that no sacrifices occur year after year (not even Christ's)". (In this, they would be making an objection parallel to the Theonomic objection respecting the penalties.) To this we might respond, "in replacing the OT animal sacrifices, Christ did not abolish the *essential* grace previously administered in those sacrifices. Instead, he fulfilled that essential grace, providing the ground for it. Christ has only displaced the old *form* of sacrifice (*copy* and *shadow* of the heavenly things, Heb. 8:5) which looked ahead to his final sacrifice."

So also Christ, the administrator of the new covenant and its final judgment, has abrogated the former penal sanctions given by Moses under the old covenant. Christ did not abolish the *essential* judgment previously administered in those penal codes. Instead, he fulfills that *essential* judgment in himself as the final judge who will execute justice at the final judgment. He has only displaced the old *form* of judgment, which looked ahead to his execution of final judgment.

### Conclusion

There is still more in Hebrews that supports these conclusions. However, what we have seen so far should suffice to show that the author of Hebrews held that the standing penal codes of the old

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<sup>2</sup> Notice how Gen. 9:6 is enfolded within the inclusio "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 9:1, 7), placing it within a broader section (Gen. 9:1-7). This section is then enclosed between two other sections (Gen. 8:20-22 and 9:8-17). In the first, God gives his universal promise "never again [to] destroy every living thing" with a flood (Gen. 8:21); and in the second he makes the same universal covenant with "every living creature" (Gen. 9:10, 12), "all flesh" (Gen. 9:11, 15) or "every living creature of all flesh" (Gen. 9:15, 16). The rainbow (Gen. 9:12-17) is also a natural and universal sign, emphasizing the universal character of the covenant.

covenant were *unique forms* of administering that covenant just like the animal sacrifices. Both have passed away (as parts of that older formal administration) with the coming of Christ in the new covenant. Their essence is fulfilled and embodied in his final sacrifice for sin and his final execution of judgment at the last day. The older administration of animal sacrifices and Mosaic penal codes has been displaced because of its greater fulfillment in the new—in Christ Jesus. As a result, Hebrews indicates that God does not call modern governments and their ruling officials to turn to the judicial laws of the old covenant as the standard for present-day penal sanctions.

Even John Calvin did not believe that general equity required present-day states to execute adulterers and homosexuals (as we find in the penal sanctions of the old covenant). “For the Lord through the hand of Moses did not give that law to be proclaimed among all nations and to be enforced everywhere” (*Institutes*, 4.20.16). This spirit lay behind the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF, 19.4).