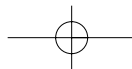
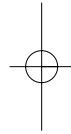
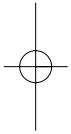


FROM FAMINE
TO
FULLNESS



THE G O S P E L A C C O R D I N G T O
THE O L D T E S T A M E N T



A series of studies on the lives
of Old Testament characters, written for
laypeople and pastors, and designed to
encourage Christ-centered reading, teaching,
and preaching of the Old Testament

TREMPER LONGMAN III
J. ALAN GROVES

Series Editors

FROM FAMINE
TO
FULLNESS

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
RUTH

DEAN R. ULRICH

R&R

P U B L I S H I N G

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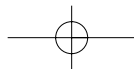
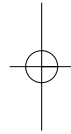
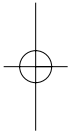
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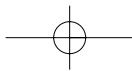
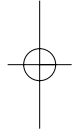
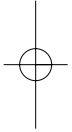
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To Arthur and Karen Schwab

with gratitude



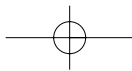
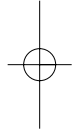
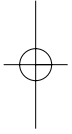


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FOREWORD



*The New Testament is in the Old concealed;
the Old Testament is in the New revealed.*

—Augustine

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

“In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them

what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:22–27)

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn't understand. But Moses, the prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending of which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged an ending. In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; his coming was declared *in advance* in the Old Testament, not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah but by means of the stories of all of the events, characters, and circumstances in the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded his plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.

AIMS OF THIS SERIES

The Gospel According to the Old Testament Series is committed to the proposition that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a unified revelation of God, and that its thematic unity is found in Christ. The individual books of the Old Testament exhibit diverse genres, styles, and individual theologies, but tying them all together is the constant foreshadowing of, and pointing forward to, Christ. Believing in the fundamentally Christocentric nature of the Old Testament, as well as the New Testa-

ment, we offer this series of studies in the Old Testament with the following aims:

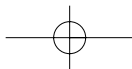
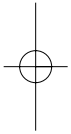
- to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament
- to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament
- to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament

To this end, the volumes in this series are written for pastors and laypeople, not scholars.

While such a series could take a number of different shapes, we have decided, in most cases, to focus individual volumes on Old Testament figures—people—rather than books or themes. Some books, of course, will receive major attention in connection with their authors or main characters (e.g., Daniel or Isaiah). Also, certain themes will be emphasized in connection with particular figures.

It is our hope and prayer that this series will revive interest in and study of the Old Testament as readers recognize that the Old Testament points forward to Jesus Christ.

TREMPER LONGMAN III
J. ALAN GROVES



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



At one level of reading, the book of Ruth demonstrates how people of faith help one another and so promote the advancement of God's kingdom in their midst. This book on Ruth attests to the investment and sacrifice that several dear saints have made on my behalf. I wish to acknowledge and thank them now.

I begin with my wife, Dawn, who has supported my academic and pastoral callings throughout our marriage. She has modeled the faith and faithfulness of Ruth and so made our marriage a blessing to me as well as to others. She believed that I had something to say on the Old Testament, even when I was not so sure. I would be remiss if I did not thank our children, Cindy and Gordon, for continually reminding me that there is more to life than reading and writing theological scholarship. Their zest for activity has provided needed opportunities for me to clear my head when I was unsure of what to say next.

I thank my parents, Rich and Ann Ulrich, for raising me in a godly home and giving abundantly of their resources for my education. I also acknowledge my mother-in-law, Celia Errickson, for her support of my wife and me during the early years of our marriage as I moved through my doctoral program. I regret that neither my father nor my mother-in-law lived long enough to see the publication of this book.

I thank the editors of this series, Tremper Longman III and Alan Groves, for helping me complete this project. Their assistance actually began years ago when I had the

privilege of studying under them at Westminster Theological Seminary. Their mastery of the Old Testament, especially a redemptive-historical approach to it, has profoundly affected my teaching and preaching. In this regard, I fondly remember their former colleague and my professor, Raymond Dillard, who contributed the first volume to the Gospel According to the Old Testament Series. While this book was with the publisher, Alan Groves lost his bout with cancer on February 5, 2007. Especially by means of a blogsite, he and his wife, Libby, have appreciably offered an eloquent and transparent testimony to their trust in the God under whose wings they, like Ruth, have taken refuge.

My thanks also go to Jeremy Keiper and Jim Krizan of the Information Technology Department of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry. Jeremy and Jim helped me discover some of the formatting intricacies of Microsoft Word. They took me to screens that I had never before seen. Eric Anest of P&R picked up where Jeremy and Jim left off and transformed a manuscript into a book. I express my gratitude to him and others at P&R.

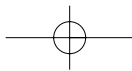
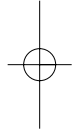
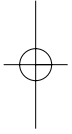
This book began as a series of sermons and adult education lessons at Christ Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Chippewa, Pennsylvania; Church of the Ascension (Episcopal) in Oakland, Pennsylvania; and Covenant Community Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Wexford, Pennsylvania. My thanks go to the members of those churches who graciously listened to my initial attempts to think through the message and application of Ruth.

Lastly, I take this opportunity to acknowledge the great benevolence of Arthur and Karen Schwab. Without their generosity, I may not have obtained the advanced education necessary to write this book or prepare seminarians to preach the Old Testament. I can never repay the debt of gratitude that is owed them, but dedicating this book to them is my latest attempt. Art and Karen, I thank you.

ABBREVIATIONS



AB	Anchor Bible
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	JSOT Supplement Series
NAC	New American Commentary
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>



P R E F A C E



It is fair to say that most readers of the Bible enjoy the book of Ruth. As I have preached and taught this book, people from a variety of backgrounds have been drawn to it. Their ears have perked up when they heard, “Please turn to the book of Ruth.” Why is this, though? Several possibilities come to mind.

Maybe people thrill to the love story of Ruth and Boaz. More than a few years ago, a popular song artist observed, “Some people want to fill the world with silly love songs.” He then asked, “Well, what’s wrong with that? I need to know ’cause here I go again.” As a race, we humans cannot seem to get our fill of songs and stories about love, and the book of Ruth in popular and scholarly estimation certainly takes its place among the best of love stories. In this book, true love triumphs over multiple forms of adversity and brings good to all who are touched by it. How many such songs and stories does the human race need? The sheer volume of those written would suggest that we cannot get enough love songs and stories. Moreover, we listen to and read the “oldies but goodies” again and again.

Readers of Ruth may also find hope and encouragement in the happy ending for Naomi. Who cannot, to some extent or another, identify with this older woman who has been battered by life’s relentless storms and bruised by its painful memories? Who has not wondered with Naomi where God is in the midst of deprivation and loss or even considered the unthinkable option that “the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me” (Ruth 1:21)? No one dispassionately

reads the book of Ruth to get a glimpse of how “the other side lives” or to make an academic study of human suffering. The book of Ruth tells everyone’s story, even your story, about the hardships of life. Though the book of Ruth is set in the ancient days of the judges, the hardships that its characters face transcend time and culture. In the midst of our own headaches and heartaches, we need stories such as Ruth that end well, for these help us look beyond our troubles and disappointments to a brighter future. The realized hope of others offers perspective for us, who in our own way can relate to the setbacks described in the opening verses of Ruth.

Yet another attraction to the book of Ruth is the positive traits of its characters, especially Ruth and Boaz. Readers of the book of Ruth cannot help but admire Ruth’s unquenchable loyalty to her mother-in-law or Boaz’s extraordinary compassion toward two destitute widows, one of whom was a foreigner. Loyalty and compassion—these are qualities that receive separate sections in William Bennett’s highly regarded *The Book of Virtues*. Adults value these qualities in themselves, and parents try to inculcate them in their children. Bennett’s book even contains a paraphrase of the book of Ruth, though it is placed in the section devoted to the virtue of friendship. By way of introduction to this paraphrase, Bennett says, “Ruth’s words to Naomi [in Ruth 1:16–17] are one of the greatest statements of friendship and loyalty in all of literature.”¹ Yes they are, and Ruth and Boaz certainly stand out as exemplars of certain moral virtues.

From a literary point of view, then, the book of Ruth ranks as a good story. It surely warms the heart in more than one way and challenges its readers with ideals that are universally esteemed. It is understandable that readers of Ruth would enjoy this literary masterpiece and repeatedly turn to it for inspiration.

Some readers, though, may question the subtitle of my book. Indeed, as the title suggests, the book of Ruth moves

from famine at the beginning to fullness in the form of the provision of food in the middle and the birth of an heir at the end. But can I appropriately refer to the gospel according to the book of Ruth? Perhaps this subtitle claims too much by inferring that the book of Ruth is more than a human-interest story that instructs its readers to be morally virtuous like Ruth and Boaz. Where is the gospel—the good news of salvation from sin—in this quaint and heart-warming Old Testament story? Where is the Savior, Jesus Christ, in a short story that never mentions his name? Surely, one cannot seriously read such a nostalgic tale as part of the grand, sweeping story of God’s plan of redemption that reaches its climax in the incarnation of his Son.

For the last century or so, biblical scholars have been inclined to agree that the book of Ruth has little, if anything, to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is so because of two stages in the history of interpreting Ruth. The first stage is suggested by Ronald Hals in his *The Theology of the Book of Ruth* that appeared in 1969.² Until that time, scholars as a rule doubted that the book of Ruth was a work of theology, that is, a book that taught about God’s saving activity. Instead, they considered the book of Ruth a charming and idyllic tale about humans who persevered against great odds in a bleak time and survived. By contrast, Hals argued that the book of Ruth utilizes a narrative form to teach about the doctrine of God’s providence. In the years since 1969, an increasing number of scholars have questioned whether the book of Ruth is such a charming story after all. Feminist scholars particularly notice the seemingly hopeless predicament of Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth and inveigh against the inequity, oppression, and destitution that result, in their estimation, from patriarchy. Boaz, then, is not considered heroic; rather, he is part of the ongoing problem of women’s economic dependence on male provision. Nevertheless, feminist readers maintain that the book of Ruth, despite its traces

of androcentrism, illustrates how women who take initiative for their own well-being can bring about favorable changes of fortune and secure their place in society without male patronage.³ For different reasons, then, the pre-1969 and post-1969 stages of interpreting Ruth have downplayed, even ignored, recognition of the gospel message of this biblical book.

My reading of Ruth, however, presupposes that the book of Ruth, whatever it might say about humans who persevere or women who take initiative, has a theological message rooted in God's oversight of the movement of redemptive history that climaxes in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In Luke 24, no less an interpreter of the Old Testament than Jesus told his disciples (and us) that the authors of the Old Testament wrote about him:

He [Jesus] said to them [the two men on the road to Emmaus], "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

He [Jesus] said to them [the eleven disciples], "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." (Luke 24:44)

Evangelical scholars routinely understand Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms to refer to the tripartite division of the Old Testament canon into the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. In other words, Jesus said that the whole Old Testament, of which Ruth is a part, bears witness to him

as the Savior who suffers for the salvation of his people. Hence, the book of Ruth as part of the Old Testament canon is rightly read as a contribution to the unfolding plan of God to redeem his fallen creation from sin and its deleterious effects. The struggle to survive and the bias against women may be two of those regrettable effects, but it is the gospel of Jesus Christ that takes care of the sin problem in the human heart and brings about the transformation of character, conduct, and consequences.

This redemptive-historical approach to interpreting the book of Ruth inevitably affects one's study of the major characters, especially Ruth and Boaz. The human characters are, of course, involved in the story, but they are not what the book is foremost about. They do not appear for their own sake; hence, the book of Ruth is not a biography. God—not Naomi, Ruth, or Boaz—is the main character, and he works through the human characters to advance his sovereign and redemptive purpose.⁴ While it is true that God is concerned about moral and virtuous conduct, which Ruth and Boaz exhibit, such conduct is not possible apart from a relationship with God that he sovereignly and graciously establishes through covenant. For this reason, the message of the book of Ruth is not simply "Be like Ruth and Boaz." Fallen humans cannot be like Ruth and Boaz unless they are in relationship with the God of Ruth and Boaz. Such a relationship was proleptically possible for Ruth and Boaz under the old covenant, for the old covenant anticipated the new covenant in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ makes relationship with God possible, and such faith transforms one's character and conduct so that believers respond to the situations of their lives with a desire and intention to do God's will for God's glory.⁵

Ruth and Boaz were certainly people of faith and as such models of good conduct. As evidenced by the moral imperatives throughout the Bible and by Paul's reference to events in the books of Exodus and Numbers that provided

examples for the Corinthians (1 Cor. 10:1–11), God does want his people to lead upright lives that conform to his revealed moral standards. Still, the modern believer does not aspire to be like Ruth and Boaz for the sake of being moral and virtuous. Morality and virtue are not the “chief end of man,” to borrow language from the Westminster Shorter Catechism. They are the result of God’s grace through Jesus Christ and part of the good work that God has foreordained for his people to do for the advancement of Christ’s kingdom and the glory of God. If God’s grace is the prerequisite for being like Ruth and Boaz, then our obedient response to God’s grace in the situations of life, that is, being like Ruth and Boaz, brings glory to God. This is our chief end.

Ultimately, then, the book of Ruth is a profound account of God’s providence in the lives of otherwise ordinary people who observed God’s covenant in rather mundane circumstances. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, what God does through the faithfulness of Ruth and Boaz is nothing short of stunning. Because the God of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz is also our God, we similarly can expect him to perform great and mighty deeds that advance his glorious purpose of reconciling all things to his eternal plan.

I

IT WAS NOT THE BEST OF TIMES



Charles Dickens began *A Tale of Two Cities* with the well-known words: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” The book of Ruth opens with a reference to the days when the judges ruled. With that recollection of the people and events described in the book of Judges, the author of Ruth informed his or her audience that the historical, social, and religious context for what follows was not the best of times. In fact, the dark days of the judges were closer to the worst of times in Old Testament history. Elimelech and his wife Naomi, whom the reader meets in the opening verses, lived during a time of apostasy, injustice, and tumult.

This chapter aims to set the book of Ruth in its larger context, both historically and religiously. Familiarity with the days of the judges will increase our appreciation for the godliness of Ruth and Boaz and, more importantly, for the gracious and providential activity of God in the lives of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. Before discussing the period of the judges, let us briefly review Old Testament history to this point. We shall start with Abraham.

FROM ABRAHAM TO THE JUDGES

For our purpose, we can say that Abraham lived about 2000 B.C. God made a covenant with him and directed him to relocate from Ur to Canaan by way of Haran. Although God promised to bless the nations through the descendants of Abraham, Abraham and his descendants seemed, more often than not, to be at odds with their neighbors or at least at their mercy. As it had Abraham (Gen. 12:10), famine drove Abraham's grandson, Jacob, and his family to Egypt for food. While in Egypt, Jacob's descendants multiplied and experienced oppression because of the perceived threat that their increasing number posed to the pharaoh. If the biblical chronology (cf. Ex. 12:40; Deut. 1:3; 1 Kings 6:1) is taken at face value, Jacob went to Egypt about 1876 B.C.; the exodus occurred about 1446 B.C.; and the conquest began about 1406 B.C.¹ Joshua and Caleb were the only members of the exodus generation to live through the wilderness years and participate in the possession of the Promised Land. All other members of the exodus generation died in the wilderness because of their unbelief—in particular, their fearful and disobedient response to the report of the spies (Num. 13). As seen in Numbers 26–36, the children of the exodus generation received a fresh start and an open future. The book of Joshua reports that they did not shrink back from the promises and commands of God but followed the lead of Joshua, the Lord's appointed successor to Moses. After the major campaigns of the conquest, Joshua, Caleb, and the children of the exodus generation reached the end of their earthly lives. The judges period commenced with the grandchildren of the exodus generation.

At the time of the exodus, Egypt and Hatti (in eastern Turkey) vied for control of Canaan, especially its trade routes and seaports. By the middle of the thirteenth century, Egypt and Hatti had grown weary of war, and they

sealed a peace agreement through a royal marriage. The Egyptian pharaoh, Rameses II, married the daughter of the Hittite king, Hattusilis. Canaan reverted to Egyptian oversight, but the dust did not remain settled for long. The migration of the Philistines to Canaan from points west at the end of the thirteenth century put an end to the Hittite kingdom and once again turned Canaan into a political football until the reign of David about 1000 B.C. Israel then reached the zenith of its political stability, power, and influence during the years of David and Solomon—even becoming a major force in the ancient Near East. The observation to be made now is that the events of the book of Ruth took place at a time in ancient Near Eastern history when no nation was the undisputed superpower of the day. The instability among the tribes during the judges period mirrored the flux and turbulence among other peoples.

The book of Joshua records the Israelite conquest of Canaan in which the army of Israel served as God’s penal agent to mete out punishment for the immorality of the Canaanites. The Pentateuch anticipates this penal role that the descendants of Abraham would play:

In the fourth generation your [Abraham’s] descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure. (Gen. 15:16)

You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. . . . Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. (Lev. 18:3, 24–25)

You [Moses] and Aaron are to number by their divisions all the men in Israel twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army. (Num. 1:3)

When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you—and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them and show them no mercy. (Deut. 7:1–2)

After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, “The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.” No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people. (Deut. 9:4–6)

Taking all these passages together, readers may conclude that the wars in Joshua cannot be assigned an imperialistic motive on the part of a group of escapees in search of living space. Yahweh used the Israelites to punish the Canaanites, even as he later used other nations to punish Israel and Judah. Deuteronomy 9 is up front about the real-

ity that the Israelites were not morally superior to the Canaanites. God was using one group of sinful people to accomplish his purpose for another group of sinful people. Ultimately what Israel did as a holy army against the Canaanites promoted its role as a kingdom of priests among the rest of the nations.

Joshua 1-12 describes the three decisive strikes against the central, southern, and northern Canaanites. Two verses recall the penal purpose of Israel's aggression. The first has to do with the Gibeonite ruse:

They [the Gibeonites] answered Joshua, "Your servants were clearly told how the LORD your God had commanded his servant Moses to give you the whole land and to wipe out all its inhabitants from before you. So we feared for our lives because of you, and that is why we did this." (Josh. 9:24)

The second serves as a summary of the three strikes:

For it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD had commanded Moses. (Josh. 11:20)

After these campaigns, it was evident that Israel was in the land to stay. Yahweh had kept his promise and given his people what seemed to be, from a human point of view, an unlikely victory against superior forces.

Joshua 13, however, indicates that the fighting had not yet ended, for each tribe had to mop up its patrimony by eliminating Canaanite enclaves that survived the initial strikes. Judges 1 makes the same point. It might be helpful to think of Joshua in terms of D-day and V-day of World War II. If D-day constituted the decisive strike (in Europe)

and V-day marked the end of the fighting (whether in Europe or the Pacific), then Joshua 12 looks back at D-day, and Joshua 13–Judges 1 anticipates V-day.

The same analogy holds true for God’s people who live between the two comings of Jesus Christ. If the cross and resurrection of Jesus represent the decisive strike against sin, death, and Satan, the second coming corresponds to V-day. At that time, God’s holy war against all that opposes his plan to exalt his Son will end in triumph. In the words of Paul, “every knee [will] bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10–11). Between the two comings of Jesus, believers experience what is often called the tension between the already and the not yet. Jesus’ followers can look back and see that D-day, the decisive strike, has already occurred and now guarantees thorough defeat of the enemy. Nevertheless, the time after the first coming and before the second coming involves ongoing warfare with the spiritual forces of darkness and their terrestrial supporters. V-day has not yet arrived, and so the potential for setbacks and defeats still exists. All too often, God’s people succumb to temptation and score a victory for the enemies of God. Still, the decisive strike at the first coming of Jesus guarantees ultimate victory at the second, and Jesus’ followers fight the good fight with assurance that God who has begun a good work at the first coming of Jesus will bring it to completion at the second.

THE BOOK OF JUDGES ON THE DAYS OF THE JUDGES

As seen in Judges, though, V-day never came for the children or grandchildren of the exodus generation. The book of Judges divides into three sections, and each section describes the fight against the enemies of God. All

three sections present the failure of God's people at that time to secure a final and definitive victory over the enemy. It should be noted that the books of Samuel present David as the one who finished the conquest, but even this observation, as will be seen later, requires some nuancing.

The first section of Judges (1:1–3:6) summarizes the period of the judges, making the observation that the generation after Joshua (i.e., the grandchildren of the exodus generation and following) did not keep faith with their covenant God. Due to lapses in faith and obedience, they failed to finish the conquest and allowed the Canaanite pockets of resistance to remain and regroup. For the tribes, living among the Canaanites soon led to worshipping with them—the concern of Deuteronomy 20:17–18:

Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God.

What began as complacency and tolerance became apostasy. In his study of Judges, Dale Ralph Davis used the expression “generation degeneration,” which certainly captures the point that this first section of Judges is trying to make.²

The second section, Judges 3:7–16:31, shows how things went from bad to worse, especially among the leaders. While the thirteen judges who are mentioned in the book of Judges probably overlapped one another to some extent, the order of their appearance in Judges seems to have intentional movement. The judges, as they are “brought on stage” in the book, become less admirable and effective. Othniel, the first judge described, represents the ideal about whom nothing negative is said. In the power

of God's Spirit, Othniel delivered God's people from the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim of Aram Naharaim. The play on words goes beyond assonance to the meanings of the names. The king's name means "dark and doubly wicked," and Mr. Dark and Doubly Wicked comes from the land of two rivers.³ The point is that the first judge, like his father-in-law Caleb, relied on God to overcome a formidable adversary.

Gideon, the fifth judge described, was a mixed bag of virtue and vice. The mighty warrior who won a stunning victory with only three hundred troops also hesitated to heed God's command and made an unauthorized ephod that became an idolatrous snare. Gideon embodied the religious schizophrenia of the people whom he delivered from the Midianites. As for Samson, the thirteenth judge, not much good can be said about him. The judge who wanted to live with the Philistines also died with them, seeking not the advancement of God's plan for his people but only revenge for the loss of his eyes. Especially at his death, Samson may have checked the Philistine hegemony over Israel and so been used of God to preserve Israel as a sociopolitical entity, but the book of Judges never indicates that Samson promoted faithfulness to the covenant. While Deborah, the fourth judge described, is arguably the most honorable person in the book, her role as judge is troubling. Why were the men so weak-willed, and what would happen when there was no Deborah, only a Delilah? Deborah was not so much a picture of the way things ought to be as she was a testimony to the way things were, and in the days of the judges, things were definitely not the way they were supposed to be. Rather, the tribes of Israel succumbed more and more to Canaanite culture and religion.

The third section, Judges 17–21, describes the eventual disintegration of Israelite society. Moral chaos prevailed among the people who were supposed to model a redeemed society to the rest of the world. These chapters put much

of the blame on the Levites, who neither obeyed God's commands to them as religious leaders nor taught God's law to the laity among the tribes. Because of the resulting ignorance and disregard of the law, many people were hurt, and what happened to women is more than most modern readers can stomach. If a society can be judged by how it treats its women and children, then Israelite society during the days of the judges had lost all sense of decency, justice, commitment, and protection. In short, it had forgotten how to love.

Even so, the book of Judges does more than describe a people that are sick unto death. It also hints at better days to come. Throughout the third section (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), a refrain repeatedly puts forth monarchy as the solution to moral chaos: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." Because the writer of Judges believed that anarchy prevails in the absence of a king, the book of Judges, especially chapters 17–21, prepares the reader for kingship. But not just any king will suffice, for a subtle debate about the right king runs below the surface. The contestants are Saul and David, and the writer of Judges indirectly threw his or her support behind David. This is seen in several ways.

First, David's tribe, Judah, receives priority at two places toward the beginning and end of the book. In Judges 1:2 Yahweh commanded Judah to lead the other tribes in the mop-up operation against the remaining Canaanites, and then in 20:18 Yahweh again ordered Judah to take the lead in the civil war over the unseemly incident that ended in the death of a Levite's concubine. In both cases Saul's tribe, Benjamin, was said by the writer of Judges to bear responsibility for a failure to do God's will. In Judges 1:21 the Benjamites were unable to finish the conquest against the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem.⁴ In chapters 19–20 the men of Gibeah in Benjamin wanted to have homosexual relations with a Levite and instead raped his concubine

to the point of death. When confronted with this sin in their midst, the rest of the men of Benjamin refused to redress the wrong by either punishing the men of Gibeah themselves or handing the men of Gibeah over to the other tribes. Given the degree of lawlessness in Benjamin, who would want a king from there?

Second, the account of Abimelech in Judges 9 reminds its readers of two less than flattering facts about Saul's reign. The first of these is found in Judges 9:23, which reports that Yahweh sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem. The reason had to do with Abimelech's earlier elimination of his seventy brothers who all had Gideon as their father. Judges 9:24 indicates that both Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem had a hand in the killings. It is profitable to know that Abimelech's name means "My father is king." While Gideon outwardly and piously refused an invitation to become king (Judg. 8:23), he nevertheless acted as a king by amassing wealth and wives—both of which were proscribed by the deuteronomic regulations for kingship (Deut. 17:17). The point is that neither Gideon nor Abimelech was the right kind of king for whom the author of Judges was looking. Of course, Yahweh later sent an evil spirit to trouble Saul who similarly had demonstrated that he was not the right man to lead God's people in faithfulness to God's covenant (1 Sam. 16:14). The second comparison between Abimelech and Saul concerns their deaths. According to Judges 9:54 and 1 Samuel 31:4, both Abimelech and Saul sustained wounds in battle and ordered their armor-bearers to finish them with their own swords. So far as the writer of Judges was concerned, Abimelech and Saul were royal pretenders who met an expected demise.

Third, Jephthah made a rash vow in the context of battle against Ammon (Judg. 11:30–31). If God gave him victory, he would sacrifice whatever met him at the door of his house when he returned. That vow cost Jephthah's

daughter her life, for she was the first to greet him. Saul similarly made a foolish vow that nearly resulted in the death of his son Jonathan (1 Sam. 14:24). Saul irrationally forbade his troops to eat before triumphing in battle against the Philistines. Meanwhile, Jonathan almost single-handedly defeated the Philistines and was unaware of his father's oath. Exhausted from his efforts, Jonathan innocently ate some wild honey and would have been put to death by Saul if the troops had not intervened on his behalf.

Fourth, Judges 19 reports that the Levite and his concubine stayed in two places and received opposite treatment. They lodged first in Bethlehem, David's hometown, and received not one but four nights of generous room and board. They lodged second in Gibeah, Saul's hometown, where no one offered them anything until an old farmer came home from the field. But then the other men of Gibeah interrupted the old farmer's kindness by demanding to sodomize his male guest. Eventually, they raped and killed his female guest. The original readers would not miss the political implications: the king from Bethlehem (David) would treat them better than would the king from Gibeah (Saul).

Fifth, Judges 19:29 reports the Levite's gruesome cutting of his concubine's lifeless body into twelve parts that were then distributed among the tribes. He did this to draw attention to the Benjamites' disregard of moral decency. Similarly, Saul cut two oxen into pieces and sent them throughout Israel to alert the tribes to Ammonite cruelty among the residents of Jabesh Gilead (1 Sam. 11:7). The Ammonites had invaded Jabesh Gilead, and the terms of surrender required the men of Jabesh Gilead to gouge out their right eyes.

The books of Judges and 1 Samuel have a number of parallels between the judges period and Saul's reign. Because the original readers of Judges were familiar with Saul's reign, they would have recognized these parallels

and understood that Judges as a whole is a polemic against Saul and an apology for David. Marc Zvi Brettler says that the “allusions” to Saul in Judges “all function in the same way—they make Saul look bad.”⁵ The right king to quell the covenantal waywardness of the judges period was not Saul or his son Ish-Bosheth. Instead, the right king was David. The books of Samuel contend that Saul was the people’s choice, a king according to their heart, whereas David was God’s choice, a king according to God’s heart. Through David and his descendants, God would redeem his people and fulfill his promises to Abraham.

What does all this have to do with the book of Ruth? Set in the period of the judges, the book of Ruth ends with the royal line of David and so names the king for which Judges is looking. In the midst of religious, moral, and societal collapse, God had not forgotten or withdrawn his redemptive plan. In all the apostasy and degeneracy, God was at work in the least likely circumstances and people to accomplish his purpose. Ruth gives hope when all hope seems lost.

Twenty-first-century readers should be able to identify with the period of the judges. Our contemporary thinkers and analysts say that we live in a postmodern age, but how similar are our times to the days of the judges when everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes? Postmodernism rejects the notion of absolute truth, universal norms, and ultimate coherence. In fact, it fears these because they allegedly represent a desire for power over others.⁶ Perhaps with good reason, postmodernists distrust and reject the modernist affirmation of truth and morality. They have seen how the heirs of the Enlightenment program have used so-called natural law and self-evident truths to coerce and oppress. It nearly goes without saying, then, that postmodernism’s aversion to absolute truth rules out any belief that humans are part of a metanarrative, a grand and sweeping story of God’s creation and redemption. The exis-

tence of a transcendent and divine Playwright undermines the postmodern commitment to individually or communally defined meaning and morality. In short, postmodernism is about the autonomous self. Postmodernism affirms that there are as many stories as there are people or, better, communities of people. No story has a privileged place above the others; otherwise, there would be an objective and authoritative voice to which all other voices would have to submit.

But is the postmodern solution—everyone or every community doing what is right in his, her, or its eyes—feasible? Judges describes the oppressive and inhumane results of the autonomous self. In fact, unabashed and unbridled selfishness becomes every bit as horrifically injurious to others as authoritarianism is feared to be. The truth is that the postmodern reveling in chaos leads inevitably to tyranny. So teaches the book of 1 Samuel, which follows Judges in the Hebrew Bible and Ruth in English Bibles. It explains how a people living in moral chaos asked for a king like what the other nations had—a specialist in warfare. The lesson from Samuel’s response to the request for a king (1 Sam. 8:10–18) is that moral chaos usually leads to tyranny because the latter is preferable to the former. Humans cannot live true to their autonomous yearnings. They may crave an unfettered lifestyle, but they soon willingly trade it for imposed order so as to escape the self-threatening consequences that follow from everyone else’s lack of restraint. Both Judges and the books of Samuel suggest a different route to take. The answer to moral chaos is the right kind of king, God’s choice.

Before the Israelites requested a king as described in 1 Samuel 8, Moses had anticipated that Israel would have a king after entering the land of Canaan. Deuteronomy 17:14–20 gives the regulations for kingship:

When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us," be sure to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your own brothers. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite. The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.

God's people would need authority to hold them accountable to the revelation that they had received from Moses and would yet receive through prophets. The regulations for kingship in Deuteronomy 17 distinguished Israel's monarchs from their ancient Near Eastern counterparts. The former were supposed to promote and preserve adherence to God's revealed will in contrast to the latter, who enjoyed privileges at the expense of their subjects. In fact, a king of Israel upon being crowned was instructed to copy the law, presumably so that it might be fresh in his mind and readily accessible to him when a decision affecting God's

people needed to be rendered. Though an Israelite king had authority over God's people, he was held to the same standard as they. Together, king and subjects would ideally model a God-fearing, Torah-keeping community to the surrounding Near Eastern peoples.

Judges may favor David as a covenantally minded king, but the books of Samuel nuance Judges. The books of Samuel are framed by Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2 and David's song in 2 Samuel 22. Hannah's prayer repeats Judges' longing for the right kind of king, and David's song contains some of the same themes that were introduced by Hannah—for example, God as a rock, deliverance from enemies, protection of the faithful, humbling of the proud, victory for the anointed one. To some extent, the books of Samuel agree with Judges that David, not Saul, was the king of God's choice, but the books of Samuel also present a flawed David who did not fully answer Hannah's prayer. David may have been the Lord's anointed, but he was not the good shepherd who always cares for the sheep. One needs only to remember Uriah the husband of Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11). In fact, the books of Samuel end on a less than satisfying note as the royal shepherd, David, decided that the sheep would suffer for his sin of counting the troops (2 Sam. 24).⁷ David and David's line may have been God's choice, but the books of Samuel look for a Davidic descendant who would be greater than David, even a Good Shepherd who would lay down his life for the sins of the sheep (cf. Zech. 11–13).

JUDGES AND THE GRACE OF GOD

By way of conclusion, the book of Judges ends on a pessimistic note. The whole book presents a people rotting at the core. From a covenantal perspective nothing is the way it is supposed to be—what Cornelius Plantinga calls

a loss of *shalom*, the Hebrew word for “peace” or “wholeness.”⁸ What is amazing at the end of Judges is that there is still an entity called Israel. Deuteronomy 28 promised blessing for obedience and curse for disobedience. Judges details the spiraling disobedience that would warrant the enactment of the curses and eventual severance of the covenantal relationship. For all the sin and judgment in Judges, however, grace also abounds. How often God intervened on Israel’s behalf in spite of what it deserved. The tribes were determined to destroy themselves, but God would not allow it.⁹ When Judges is read in view of the rest of the Bible, grace trumps justice but not at the denial of justice. God satisfied his own justice through the sacrificial system that pointed to the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world.

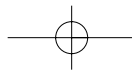
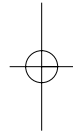
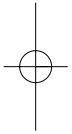
But why did God show grace? God had a mission for his people to be a kingdom of priests or a channel of redemptive blessing to the world. Any success in that mission had less to do with the human participants and virtually everything to do with a covenant-keeping God. God would accomplish his redemptive purpose. Neither the gates of hell nor God’s own people could stop him. At the end of Judges, God’s promises remain in effect, but they are thrust into the future when there is a king in Israel. The books of Samuel and Kings, however, demonstrate that kingship brought its own infelicities and atrocities. The reader, then, must look for one who is greater than David and David’s descendants, even Jesus Christ. How much brighter, though, God’s grace in Christ shines against the blackness of the judges.

Ruth shows us that God’s work was not entirely future. In arguably the worst of times, God was still active to advance his plan of redemption. A godly remnant remained faithful in these bleak times, and God worked through them

to do more than they could have ever imagined. As we will see, that message applies to us as well.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. The book of Judges describes a time when Israel experienced what Amos 8:11 calls a famine of hearing the Word of God. Have you lived near or worked with people who have little or no knowledge of the Bible? How were they different from those who do have such knowledge?
2. The West's social commentators and analysts say that we now live in a postmodern age. What distinguishes postmodernism from modernism? How are they, at bottom, similar?
3. If postmodernism resembles the moral chaos in the book of Judges, how might postmodernism be more favorable than modernism for spreading the gospel message? How might it be more challenging for evangelism?
4. Postmodernism abhors and fears absolute authority, yet Christians worship Jesus as the King of kings and Lord of lords. How does Jesus' kingship differ qualitatively from the political and intellectual tyranny that postmodernists, perhaps with good reason, wish to escape?



2

DEVASTATING GRIEF



Given that the book of Ruth is set in the stormy period of the judges, the events of the book occur in the context of spiritual unfaithfulness. As a nation, Israel had sunk into moral debasement and hit rock bottom. We come now to the book of Ruth itself to discover how one family was affected and, more importantly, how God acted to accomplish his purpose through this family during what seemed to be a hopeless era.

Ruth 1:1–5 describes the specific circumstances to which this family, especially the mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law, responded:

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After

they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

As the remainder of Ruth 1 indicates, the same set of circumstances evoked two different responses. This chapter will concentrate on Naomi's. The next chapter will consider Ruth's.

As we look at Ruth 1, I am unaware of my readers' situations and concerns. I do not know what your view of God is or what your expectations of him are in the events of your life. As humans living in a fallen world, none of us is immune to life's hardships and disappointments. We live in a Judges kind of world that tests the sincerity and motives of faith. Ruth 1 addresses God's people who may be feeling battered by life. Perhaps you can identify with Naomi in her suffering and bitterness—even her anger at God.

FROM BAD TO WORSE

Besides the reference to the judges, Ruth 1:1 also says that there was a famine in Israel. Every growing season, people who live in an agrarian economy face the threat of drought, deluge, blight, plague, and the like. When there are no supermarkets, a lean harvest can devastate a community. We know from the book of Judges that people were suffering from violence and anarchy. The opening verse of Ruth informs us that they also had another urgent concern: hunger. With an economy of words, Ruth 1:1 conveys a context of tremendous suffering for all Israel, and there will be more suffering in a particular family before this chapter ends. The barren land that brought on the famine anticipates the barren wombs of Orpah and Ruth as well as Naomi's feelings of barrenness from all the loss that she suffered.¹

While the more ordinary cause of the famine (and this would not fall outside God's providence) may have been the Midianite incursions of Judges 6:1–6 or even the variable rainfall with which agriculturists must continually contend, the famine may ultimately have been a form of God's judgment against the covenantal unfaithfulness that characterized so much of the judges period. Deuteronomy 28:15–52 lists food shortage as one of the curses for covenantal disobedience. The Jewish Targum (an expansive translation of the Old Testament into Aramaic) understood this famine as one of ten used by God to “reprove the inhabitants of the world.”²

It may be that the author of Ruth expected us to make a connection between the days of the judges and the deuteronomic curse of food shortage. Even so, the book of Ruth does not explicitly link the famine with punishment. Yet if one comes to Ruth by way of Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges, it is hard not to view the famine as both judgment for covenantal disobedience and a wake-up call to repentance. The canonical placement of the book of Ruth, however, has varied throughout the centuries. English translations of the Bible, following the order of the books in the Septuagint or Greek translation of the Old Testament, place Ruth after Judges and before the books of Samuel. The Hebrew Bible, however, has a different location for Ruth. The Hebrew Bible divides the books of the Christian Old Testament into three sections: the Law, Prophets, and Writings. The Law contains the five books of the Pentateuch, and the Prophets include the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings along with the three major and the twelve minor prophets. The rest of the books, including Ruth, appear in the Writings. Though Ruth's position within the Writings has been somewhat fluid, the latest scholarly edition of the Hebrew Bible places Ruth between Proverbs and Song of Songs. If this location does not as evidently reflect the influence of Deuteronomy on

the book of Ruth, perhaps coming to Ruth by way of Proverbs suggests an association of the woman Ruth with the noble wife of Proverbs 31. Both Ruth and the woman in Proverbs 31 are said to be of noble character. I will suggest later that the writer of Ruth did not want us to focus on the famine as a curse but as an opportunity to practice loving-kindness—a rich Old Testament concept that encompasses compassion, faithfulness, and loyalty.

Unlike previous generations of Old Testament specialists, recent scholarship has tended to invest less effort into isolating the hypothetical stages of the text's composition and more effort into appreciating the literary artistry of the text's final form. Whatever their sources might have been, the biblical writers told engaging stories and crafted poetry with consummate skill. As we shall see, the book of Ruth is no exception. It is a literary masterpiece that humors, intrigues, and exhilarates the reader from start to finish. For example, the opening verses feature several instances of irony.

First, Elimelech and Naomi are said to live in Bethlehem where there was a famine. In Hebrew *Bethlehem* means “house of bread.” Ruth 1:1 is saying that the house of bread could not provide for its inhabitants. The irony reminds people of the Judges period and readers of Ruth that the true source of daily bread goes beyond per capita income, the gross national product, or the S&P 500—as seemingly necessary as these might be. Ultimately, God himself provides for our needs (Ps. 136:25; Matt. 6:32), and Paul says that we should do everything, even eating, to God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31). In other words, we should recognize with James 1:17 that every good gift comes from above. During the days of the judges, almost nothing, it seems, was done for God's glory or out of trust in his providence. For this reason, God was not covenantally obligated to send agricultural bounty, and so Israel's breadbasket was empty.

Second, additional irony may be found in Elimelech's name, which means “My God is king.” The author of Ruth

made no comment about Elimelech's faith, but Elimelech chose to leave the Promised Land. It is possible that the meaning of Elimelech's name never had any significance for him or that life's challenges had progressively eroded his confidence in Israel's divine King. Then again, Elimelech may have been a godly man who, as the patriarchs before him, journeyed outside Canaan not to turn his back on his King but to find food in the short run for his wife and children.³ He may have gone to Moab in faith that this King would powerfully and graciously watch over him even outside the Promised Land. God had previously done the same for Abraham and Jacob. Or did Elimelech no longer (or not ever) think that Israel's God could care for his needs? Was he now putting his trust in the god of Moab? The text tantalizes but does not answer the questions that it raises.

According to Mira Morgenstern, Elimelech's decision to move to Moab evidenced a selfish concern for his own welfare. One evil (Elimelech's selfishness) then led to another (the marriages of Elimelech's sons to Moabite women), which was compounded by Moab's earlier connection to Sodom through Lot (Gen. 19). Because Sodom "carries multiple connotations of a culture of inhospitality and moral indifference that degenerates into social oppression," Elimelech betrayed his own "moral indifference and acquiescence to sin" by relocating to a place associated with Sodom.⁴ Morgenstern may be accurate in her analysis of Elimelech's motive. Nevertheless, whatever the state of Elimelech's relationship with Yahweh, the meaning of his name ironically stood out in the period of the judges when there was no human king in Israel, and just about everyone (Elimelech possibly included) ignored the commands of the divine King.

Third, Elimelech moved his family to Moab. Moab does not have the best reputation in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 23:3-6 forbade Moabites to worship in God's house or Israelites to befriend them:

No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation. For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to pronounce a curse on you. However, the LORD your God would not listen to Balaam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loves you. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live.

History lay behind the prohibition. In Numbers 22, Balak, king of Moab, had hired Balaam to curse the tribes while they were making their way from Egypt to Canaan. Balak, who had heard about Israel's recent defeats of kings Sihon and Og, feared the Israelites and sought any means to gain an advantage over them. To Balak's dismay, his hired diviner, Balaam, uttered favorable oracles for Israel. It seems, though, that Balak's money was well spent for Balaam apparently had a hand in instigating the sordid scene in Numbers 25 (cf. Num. 31:16). Deuteronomy 23:4 summarizes the whole episode by saying that Moab did not offer bread to the Israelites. In other words, it did not show hospitality. Elimelech, then, ironically left the house of bread for Moab that offered no bread. We cannot help but wonder about the wisdom of this decision. Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos issues a stronger evaluation: "The very idea of going to Moab for refuge and provisions would be ludicrous."⁵

It is hard to know about Naomi's role in all of this. We do not know if she approved of the move to Moab or of her sons' marriages to Moabite women. Israelites were not supposed to marry Gentiles, and Moab was not the place where good Israelites put down roots or went in search of what they were lacking. Maybe Naomi went with her husband

reluctantly. Maybe she was in favor of the move and the marriages. The text does not say. It is silent about why her husband and sons died and why the sons had no children. Could the barrenness of Orpah and Ruth and the deaths of Elimelech, Mahlon, and Kilion have been forms of judgment (Deut. 23:3–6; 28:15–19)? The Jewish Targum thought so, for it considered Mahlon and Kilion’s marriages transgressions of the decree of God.⁶ Regardless of how we answer these questions that the text raises, Naomi was obviously and understandably devastated on several fronts. She grieved the loss of her husband and children. She had no male protector or provider in a male-dominated world. She was an alien in Moab. Do not miss the desperation of these circumstances with which the book of Ruth confronts its readers at the beginning.

You may be able to relate at some level to these grievous events. You live in an age that is not much different from the time of the judges. First, what is postmodernism but the renunciation of God’s truth, God’s standards, and God’s story? Postmodernism is not really “post-anything.” It is Genesis 3 and the book of Judges all over again. Like the characters in the book of Ruth, we live in dark days and troubled times. When people do what is right in their own eyes, some of the oppression that postmodernism appreciably fears from the authoritarianism of modernism results anyways. Second, decisions of other people unavoidably affect you, sometimes adversely. To update the old adage, no one is an island unto himself or herself. We, like Naomi, live with the choices made by a parent, spouse, child, sibling, friend, employer, politician, or criminal. Third, you may feel alone, helpless, anxious, or alienated because of the death of a loved one, the estrangement of a relationship, or the vicissitudes of life. Maybe you feel pounded by pain or, perhaps worse, numbed by pain—either physical or emotional. You may wonder what went wrong or where is God. It is not unusual for God’s people

to have dark nights of the soul or even dark months and years of the soul. Nowhere does Scripture promise instant relief, much less immunity, from trouble and sorrow. We live in a world that labors under a curse, and the vestiges of the sinful nature still plague us. In Job 5:7, one of Job's friends observes that humans are born to trouble. Here at the beginning of Ruth is trouble times ten.

ONE WOMAN'S RESPONSE TO TRAGEDY

How the text quickly sets the stage in just five verses is instructive. The author did not want us to focus on how Naomi got in this mess. In other words, we should not try to figure out who is most to blame. It is enough for us to know that life in Moab did not turn out as expected. Instead, the author wanted us to pay attention to what happened next. In particular, how did Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah respond to this situation? The clue is not so much their actions as their words. In Hebrew narrative characters are developed more by dialogue than by description.

Naomi's response was to affirm God's sovereignty but not his goodness. While it is true that she prayed Yahweh's kindness (*hesed*) upon Orpah and Ruth, such a prayer may have been more formulaic and polite in contexts of departure (e.g., "Goodbye and Godspeed").⁷ Naomi was certainly communicating her inability to help her daughters-in-law. So far as she could tell, there was nothing more that she could do to secure their present or future. Did she think that levirate marriage with Boaz or the nearer kinsman was too far-fetched because Orpah and Ruth were Moabite women? The text does not answer this question. What the text explicitly conveys is that Naomi felt unable to repay the kindness of her daughters-in-law and so bade Yahweh's favor upon them. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn suggest that Naomi's polite and seemingly car-

ing words “mask her true intention which is to get rid of Orpah and Ruth,” who are “an albatross around her neck.”⁸ Whatever insight there is to this instance of “reading between the lines,” Naomi surely wished them well, for she expressed her hope that Ruth and Orpah would find rest (i.e., provision, protection, and progeny) with another husband. Even so, Naomi was far from convinced that Yahweh is kind. While she acknowledged Ruth and Orpah’s kindness to her (Ruth 1:8–9), she said nothing of Yahweh’s kindness to her.⁹ Several reasons account for her denial of divine goodness.

First, in verse 13 Naomi concluded that her present circumstances betrayed Yahweh’s adversarial stance toward her: “It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD’s hand has gone out against me!” Naomi apparently thought that God had no grievance against Orpah and Ruth per se. Rather, they were being unavoidably and adversely affected by the outpouring of God’s disfavor on their mother-in-law. Orpah and Ruth should distance themselves from Naomi lest they continue to experience the disfavor of God because of their association with this spiritual pariah.

Second, in verse 15 Naomi urged Ruth to do as Orpah and return to her gods: “‘Look,’ said Naomi, ‘your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.’” This piece of maternal advice does not fit well with the earlier blessing in Yahweh’s name. Naomi may have thought that Orpah and Ruth’s nationality excluded them from Yahweh’s interest. They would conceivably fare better under the care of the Moabite deity, Chemosh. Such reasoning on Naomi’s part may seem strange, but people in the ancient Near East tended to have a localized view of a god’s efficacy in the lives of his or her devotees. Although the Israelites confessed the universality of Yahweh’s reach and the exclusivity of his influence, Naomi’s theology had apparently become eclectic in Moab. Perhaps,

because of the theologically aberrant climate of the judges period, Naomi's theology never was too well formulated or constrained by revelation.

Third, in verses 20–21 Naomi used two names for God to draw certain conclusions about his providential activity in her life:

“Don't call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted [or witnessed against] me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

Using the more general name Almighty (Shaddai), which emphasizes the superior power of God over humans, Naomi claimed that God had made her life bitter and, to translate literally, had done evil to her. Naomi believed that God as Almighty exercised unrivaled control over her life. To her way of thinking, however, that control was not necessarily tempered by an inclination toward kindness. Using the covenantal name LORD (Yahweh), which emphasizes the responsibility of relationship, Naomi alleged that God had brought her back to Bethlehem empty and had witnessed against her—a possible association of Naomi's misfortune with the curses of Deuteronomy 28. Naomi apparently believed that God as Yahweh had administered retribution for her family's unfaithfulness to the covenantal stipulations.¹⁰ Or possibly she shared the viewpoint of Job's friends and many moderns that suffering is, more generally and less covenantally, the consequence of wrongdoing.

It is evident that Naomi's circumstances influenced her to develop a hardened understanding of divine sovereignty. Reg Grant observes: “[Naomi] looked at her situation and said in effect, ‘This bitterness is the only reality I know or that can be known. This is “truth,” and by it I will rede-

fine my concept of God.’”¹¹ For Naomi, her circumstances indicated that God is great but not good. He may be able to do with her as he pleases (and who can argue?), but his pleasure lacks empathy and kindness. With such distorted (i.e., circumstance-dependent) theology and a crushed spirit, she never prayed. Instead, she despaired, resigning herself to the inevitable machinations of a cruel deity.

The text, however, has not told us that God was angry with Naomi. She was therefore mistaken to measure God’s goodness by her level of happiness or her immediate circumstances. What is more, she appeared to remember the past too selectively and/or nostalgically. While the title of this book is *From Famine to Fullness*, Naomi would have, at this point, entitled her autobiography *From Fullness to Famine*. She seemed to have forgotten that conditions in Bethlehem ten years ago (or more) had driven Elimelech to abandon his homeland. While it is true that Naomi had lost a husband and two sons, saying that she left Bethlehem full ignores the reason why she left at all. Life had treated her harshly in Bethlehem, just as it more recently had battered her in Moab.

We often do this, do we not? We judge God’s love and faithfulness by how many of our desires have been met.¹² When our desires do not materialize, our words are telling. Angry, accusing words reveal the idols of our hearts—so do selfish prayers couched in pious and deferential language. Too often, it is not God’s will that we want, but our will made possible by God. Had not Naomi made God the servant of her agenda? Do we not do the same?

To be sure, Naomi’s grief and predicament were real, and we cannot read Ruth 1 without having our hearts go out to this woman. The compressed account gives the impression that her world had come crashing down rather suddenly. Even if as many as ten years separated her sons’ deaths from her husband’s death, Naomi had experienced an inordinate amount of death, disappointment, and grief

in that time. Moreover, her losses were never relieved by the births of grandchildren. Given the pathos of her situation, can we make concessions about her words in Ruth 1? Were her grief and predicament so devastating that Naomi distraughtly and almost unconsciously uttered statements that she did not mean and would not otherwise have said in less challenging circumstances? This approach, however pastorally sensitive its motive might be, seems unlikely because Hebrew narrative typically develops characters through dialogue. The reader discovers what is in the heart of the character by what he or she reportedly says.

Even if the author of Ruth preserved words that are more emotionally charged than rationally measured, Naomi cannot be excused from sinning with her tongue. God's people should exercise self-control in any circumstance and seek to honor him at all times and in all places. If self-control is part of the fruit of the Spirit, the Bible does not put limits on it so that God's people may blaspheme during the grimmest and most shattering moments. Instead, the Bible teaches that "no temptation has seized you except what is common to man" (1 Cor. 10:13). This observation, however, does not proceed from a Stoic philosopher who had a take-life-as-it-comes, grin-and-bear-it, or keep-a-stiff-upper-lip outlook. It comes from Paul, who could list his own dreadful instances of suffering (2 Cor. 11:23–28). Paul's ministry and letters reveal a Christian who would not let go of a God who foreordains whatever comes to pass—for the glory of his Son and the good of his people. Paul believed that God would not test his people beyond what they could bear and maintained in the midst of an unidentified source of personal affliction that perseverance in godliness was possible:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to

torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:7–10)

Here was no armchair theologian, but a faithful servant who theologized in the rigors of the temptations that beset every believer. His words indicated that his theology controlled his response to the challenging vicissitudes of life.

Similarly, Job comes to mind. No one would minimize his loss, even when compared to Naomi’s.¹³ His servants died in a raid by the Chaldeans who stole his property. His children died from what we would call a natural disaster. His health failed to the point that he suffered unrelieved pain. The biblical writer observed, first, that “Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing” (Job 1:22) and, second, that he “did not sin in what he said” (Job 2:10). That Job later repented for demanding to speak with God as an equal does not detract from the tenacity of his faith in a time of unparalleled loss, grief, and confusion. He never followed his wife’s advice to curse God and die. Rather, his speech continually manifested an unshakable commitment to the God who sovereignly governed his circumstances—both favorable and unfavorable.

In Ruth 1 Naomi was struggling to transcend her circumstances and trust God in them. In the face of so much calamity, Naomi made seemingly logical decisions. What is more, she imposed her logic on Orpah and Ruth. Yet her logic betrayed self-absorption that was blind to what God was doing. She was ruled by her circumstances instead of the Lord of her circumstances. Consequently, she did not

view her situation as an opportunity to minister. How could a daughter of Abraham with a clear conscience have instructed her Moabite daughters-in-law to return to their gods? André LaCocque tries to soften the bluntness of Naomi's reasoning by claiming that "Naomi recommends a return not to the deities of Moab, but to a socially established security."¹⁴ To be sure, social security had been a part of Naomi's counsel all along, but Naomi disturbingly linked security with idolatry. By sending Orpah and Ruth back to their gods, Naomi broke the first commandment and denied its practical application to a specific case. Because the one true God was allegedly not sufficient to grant security to all who trust in him, regardless of national and social background, Orpah and Ruth had to resort to other gods. Naomi further denied the Abrahamic covenant, which views the Israelites as the channel of redemptive blessing to everyone else. Naomi responded naturally and logically with a human-centered strategy. Her response was not informed by Israel's theology, which had its source in the self-revealing God of the patriarchs, Moses, and Joshua. How often to this point in God's relationship with his people had he performed a mighty deed that turned around an ostensibly hopeless situation? Naomi forgot her theology, or maybe she, living in the days of the judges, never knew it.

Now the question is whether you view the situations of your life as part of God's plan. This text challenges you to believe that God is active in your life even when it hurts. In fact, the whole book teaches about God's providence in our lives. He is not only in control but also up to something good, namely, the accomplishment of his redemptive plan and the perfection of his people. The challenge of walking by faith is to see the situations of your life as opportunities to glorify Jesus Christ. Too often, though, we think that the situations of our lives are about what we want. What is your view of God, then,

when your desires are not met? Do you still consider him faithful and caring, or has he failed to render obligatory services?

God does not enter into relationship with us to give everything that we think we want. He draws us to himself that we might find security, contentment, peace, and joy in him. To get us to that point, he sometimes uses difficult times to show us our dependence. He may use the consequences of our sin or of somebody else's sin. He may use hardship that is traceable to nobody's sin. He brings us to a point of weakness to demonstrate his greatness and goodness. Weaned from carnal affections, we delight in what is dear to God's heart, entrust ourselves to his care, and let him work in our circumstances for his glory.

Naomi had not learned to do that yet, at least not completely. Neither have we. Entrusting ourselves to God and seeing what he does take a lifetime. In that lifetime God makes changes in us that prepare us for an eternity with him. Eternity puts our present circumstances into proper perspective. Paul, in the context of describing his troubles in 2 Corinthians 4:17, went so far as to use the words "light" and "momentary": "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us and eternal glory that far outweighs them all." He was on board with what God was up to in his life. God has not chosen to mature his people immediately, and he does not reconcile all things to his eternal plan in the blink of an eye. Still, whatever trials and joys come our way serve his good purpose for our lives and ultimately his kingdom. Though Paul, like us, could not fully know what God was up to in the events of his life, he was willing to be faithful in whatever challenges confronted him day by day. Paul looked beyond the present difficulty and anticipated the good that God would accomplish—what he calls eternal glory.