Ruth and the Covenant Heir: Reading Ruth in Light of Isaac's Famine and Sojourn

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The Book of Ruth has a foreboding beginning: "And it came about, in the days that the judges judged, that there was a famine in the land, and a man journeyed from Bethlehem, in Judah, to live for a time in the fields of Moab—he, and his wife, and his two sons" (1:1).[2] In this opening sentence, the reader is introduced to the geographical and historical setting, four of the characters, and the situation that launches the events narrated in the next four chapters.

But these opening words set the stage in another way: they connect the story of Ruth to the patriarchal narratives, giving clues to the reader about the significance of the events to follow. The initial verbal parallel comes with the words "that [lit. and] there was a famine in the land" (וַיְהִי רָעָב בָּאָרֶץ) (Ruth 1:1), which exactly replicates the announcement of the famine that sent Abram to Egypt (Gen 12:10) and Isaac to Gerar (Gen 26:1), where, like Elimelech's family, they "lived for a time" (גור) (Gen 12:10; 26:3; Ruth 1:1).[3] In this article, I argue that this and other allusions in Ruth to the patriarchal narratives invite the reader to understand the story as a covenant election narrative; in particular, the Lord's election of Isaac as covenant heir prefigures the Lord's election of David, whose birth is the ultimate goal of the events in Ruth.[4]

Scriptural Allusions in Ruth and the Significance of Isaac

Scholars and commentators have seen connections between the Book of Ruth and a host of other OT narratives based on parallels in wording, plot, and theme.[5] Especially notable are Abram's

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[2] All translations are my own. "The Lord" always represents the name יהוה "YHWH." (The Hebrew word אָדוֹן "lord, master" is not used in reference to God in the texts cited in this paper.)

[3] See especially Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 40, 85, and sources cited there. This essay takes up Hubbard's encouragement to read Ruth 1:1 as a "notice that the reader should watch for the development of [the] thematic continuity" between Ruth and the famine stories of Genesis 12:10 and 26:1 (85). Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky are notable, too, for their careful attention to patriarchal allusions and their relevance to the book's purpose. *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, JPS Tanakh Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), xxi–xxvi.

[4] I provide clarification about which covenant is in view and what it means to be a covenant heir, only after arguing in detail for the thematic and theological connections between the Ruth story and the Isaac narratives.

[5] An early source that takes account of the extensive allusions to other scriptures in Ruth is Edward Robertson, "The Plot of the Book of Ruth," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 32, no. 1 (1949), 18–43. Hubbard's list of patriarchal parallels, 40, is probably the most comprehensive of its kind.

departure from his native land and kin to settle in Canaan (Gen 12:1);[6] Abram's famine and sojourn in Egypt (Gen 12:10–20);[7] the separation of Lot, Ruth's ancestor, from Abram and the plot of Lot's daughters to maintain their father's line through a nighttime deception (Gen 13:11; 19:30–38);[8] Rebekah's betrothal to Isaac (Gen 24);[9] Isaac's famine and sojourn in Gerar (Gen 26);[10] Jacob's deception of his father to gain the blessing (Gen 27);[11] Tamar's plot to maintain her dead husband's line by deceiving her father-in-law Judah (Gen 38);[12] the *toledoth* ("generations") lists in Genesis;[13] Israel's exodus from Egypt to the land of Canaan;[14] the Book of Judges generally;[15] the violence inflicted on the Levite's concubine (Judg 19);[16] various episodes in the life of David;[17] the competent wife of Proverbs 31;[18] and the expulsion of foreign wives from Israel after Israel's return from exile (Ezra 9, 10; Neh 13:23–31).[19] This is not to mention the legal background to the Book of Ruth,

[6] Gabriel H. Cohn discusses Ruth in light of a variety of OT passages, including Abram's call. *Textual Tapestries: Explorations of the Five Megillot*, trans. David Strauss (New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2016). Phyllis Trible's comparisons between Ruth and Abram are more extensive, but some of her conclusions seem to grow out of a commitment to feminism rather than from the contours of the text. "Two Women in a Man's World: A Reading of the Book of Ruth," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 59, no. 3 (1976), 251–79.

[7] Hubbard, 85, cites Gillis Gerleman, *Ruth; Das Hohelied*, 2nd ed., Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament 18 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1981) as highlighting this parallel.

[8] Harold Fisch, "Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History," *Vetus Testamentum* 32, no. 4 (1982), 425–37; Jonathan Magonet, "Rabbinic Readings of Ruth," *European Judaism* 40, no. 2 (2007), 150–57.

[9] Irmtraud Fischer, "The Book of Ruth as Exegetical Literature," *European Judaism* 40, no. 2 (2007), 140–49, especially 142. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 1st ed. (New York: Basic, 1981). See especially Alter's chapter on the "Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention," 47–62.

[10] Hubbard, 85. See, too, Zipora (Zipi) Yavin, "Ruth, the Fifth Mother: A Study in the Scroll of Ruth (The Semantic Field as a Ground of Confrontation between Two Giants—The Judean Writer and the Ephraimite Writer)" [Hebrew], *Jewish Studies* 44 (2007), 167–213, especially 187.

[11] Edward Allen Jones III, "'Who Are You, My Daughter [מי את בתי]?': A Reassessment of Ruth and Naomi in Ruth 3," *CBQ* 76, no. 4 (2014), 653–64.

[12] Robertson; Fisch; Magonet.

[13] Fischer, 142.

[14] Peter J. Leithart, *A House for My Name: A Survey of the Old Testament* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2000), 119, 120. The Exodus themes in Ruth are developed at some length in Alastair Roberts and Andrew Wilson, *Echoes of Exodus: Tracing Themes of Redemption Through Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 83–86.

[15] Tod Linafelt, *Ruth*, vol. 1 of Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, *Ruth and Esther*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), xix. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 79.

[16] Edward F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 7 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 35, 36; David J. Shepherd, "Ruth in the Days of the Judges: Women, Foreignness and Violence," *Biblical Interpretation* 26, no. 4–5 (October 22, 2018), 528–43.

[17] Yitzhak Berger, "Ruth and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Case of 1 Samuel 25," *JBL* 128, no. 2 (2009), 253–72; Yitzhak Berger, "Ruth and the David—Bathsheba Story: Allusions and Contrasts," *JSOT* 33, no. 4 (2009), 433–52.

[18] Carlos Bovell, "Symmetry, Ruth and Canon," *JSOT* 28, no. 2 (2003), 175–91; Laura Quick, "The Book of Ruth and the Limits of Proverbial Wisdom," *JBL* 139, no. 1 (2020), 47–66.

[19] Basileioy M. Vellas, "The Book of Ruth and Its Purpose," *Theologia* (Athens) 25 (1954), 201–10; see especially 205–6, where Vellas argues against such a connection.

especially provision for gleaning (Lev 19:9, 10; Deut 24:19), redemption (Lev 25:23–34, 47–55), the prohibition against Moabite incorporation (Deut 23:3–6 [4–7]), and levirate marriage (Deut 25:5–10).[20]

Of all the proposed parallels between Ruth and other scriptural texts—and my list above is by no means exhaustive—the connections to the patriarchal stories should be given especially close attention, in part because the very first verse recalls the patriarchal famines, and in part because allusions to Genesis are pervasive from start to finish in Ruth. Although interpreters of Ruth have often focused on connections to Abraham, the following list of possible echoes to stories involving Isaac suggests that Isaac's life, too, provided important background in shaping the narrative of Ruth.

First, the story is introduced with the clause "and there was a famine in the land" (וַיְהִי רָעָב בָּאָרֶץ) (Ruth 1:1), which also introduces the famine that leads Abram to Egypt (Gen 12:10) and Isaac to Gerar (Gen 26:1). But while Abram "goes down" (ירד) to Egypt (Gen 12:10), Isaac and Elimelech simply "journey" (הלך) (Gen 26:1; Ruth 1:1) to the places they will "live for a time" (גור) (Gen 26:3; Ruth 1:1). Like Isaac, Elimelech has a wife and two sons at the time of his sojourn (Gen 25:24; 26:1; Ruth 1:1).[21] Upon her departure from Moab, Naomi has two Moabite daughters-in-law (Ruth 1:4, 6), and Rebekah's two Canaanite daughters-in-law are given special mention at the close of the story of Isaac's return from Gerar (Gen 26:34).[22] In speaking to her daughters-in-law, and later to the women of Jerusalem, Naomi complains of the Lord's "bitter" (מרר) dealings with her (Ruth 1:13, 20), much as Rebekah's spirit is said to be "bitter" (מֹרָה) on account of her foreign daughters-in-law (Gen 26:35).[23]

When Boaz enters his field in chapter 2, he exchanges greetings with his reapers, "the Lord be with you" (יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם) and "the Lord bless you" (יְבָרֶכְךָ יְהוָה) (Ruth 2:4), replicating a verbal pairing found nowhere else in Scripture except in the Gerar famine narrative, where the Lord promises, "I will be with you [וְאֶהְיֶה עִמְּךָ], and I will bless you [וַאֲבָרְכֶךָ]" (Gen 26:3; see too 26:24).[24] When Boaz gives Ruth permission to glean in his field, he tells her that he has "commanded" (צוה) his young men not to "touch" (נגע) her (Ruth 2:9), just as Abimelech "commanded" (צוה) the people of Gerar not to "touch" (נגע) Isaac or Rebekah (Gen 26:11). Other elements of the scene are reminiscent of Rebekah's

[20] Gary Edward Schnittjer, for example, focuses almost exclusively on legal background to Ruth, including the legal concerns listed above. *Old Testament Use of Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 578–90. See, too, the discussion of background legal texts in Jeremy Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 7D (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 14–16.

[21] The report of Isaac's move to Gerar makes no mention of either wife or children, in keeping with the common narrative practice in Genesis (see, e.g., Gen 12:10, which says that "Abram went down to Egypt," with no mention of his wife until he has reached the border of Egypt in the next verse). The parallel between Isaac's and Elimelech's families is also noted by Yavin, 187.

[22] After Ruth has insisted on returning with Naomi, the story continues, "and the two of them journeyed [on]" (וַתֵּלַכְנָה שְׁתֵּיהֶם) (Ruth 1:19), a possible (but certainly weak) echo of Isaac and Abraham's ascent of Mount Moriah: "and the two of them journeyed [on] together" (וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו) (Gen 22:8). Berger, "Ruth and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Case of 1 Samuel 25," 255, 256.

[23] If Mark S. Smith is correct that Ruth's affirmation of loyalty to Naomi takes the form of a covenant (Ruth 1:16, 17), then that finds a parallel to Isaac's covenant with Abimelech after his sojourn in Gerar (Gen 26:28–31). "'Your People Shall Be My People': Family and Covenant in Ruth 1:16–17," *CBQ* 69, no. 2 (2007), 242–58.

[24] The harvest setting of Ruth is prominent throughout, and it is perhaps significant that of the patriarchs, only Isaac ever engages in agriculture (Gen 26:12).

betrothal in Nahor; in particular, Boaz makes a point of offering Ruth water that the young men have "drawn" (שׁאב) (Ruth 2:9), recalling Rebekah's provision of water to Abraham's servant and animals, water that she, too, had "drawn" (שׁאב) (Gen 24:19, 20).[25] When Ruth returns home after gleaning, Naomi blesses Boaz, "May he be blessed by the Lord, who has not forsaken his loyalty [בָּרוּךְ הוּא לַיהוָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָזַב חַסְדּוֹ] with the living or the dead" (Ruth 2:20), partially replicating the words of Abraham's servant upon encountering Rebekah, "May the Lord . . . be blessed, who has not forsaken his loyalty [בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה ... אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָזַב חַסְדּוֹ] or his faithfulness with my master" (Gen 24:27).[26]

In Ruth 3, Boaz's "trembling" (חרד) (v. 8) followed by the question "who?" (מִי) (v. 9), and Naomi's somewhat mysterious question "Who are you, my daughter?" (מִי־אַתְּ בִּתִּי) (v. 16), all suggest a connection with Isaac's questioning of Jacob, "Who are you, my son?" (מִי אַתָּה בְּנִי) (Gen 27:18), and his later "trembling" (חרד) and asking another "who?" (מִי) question (27:32, 33). One also observes the importance played by Jacob's and Ruth's clothing (Gen 27:15; Ruth 3:3) and smell (Gen 27:27; Ruth 3:3).[27]

Taken one by one, many of these parallels could potentially be attributed to accidental verbal correspondence.[28] So on what basis can we say that these parallels are genuine allusions? Richard B. Hays, in his study of OT echoes in Paul's writings, offers various criteria for testing whether a suspected echo is in fact a real connection; four of those criteria can be applied to the present case.[29] First, Ruth's audience had the patriarchal stories available to them and ought to have known them in detail, so the original audience could have detected allusions to them. Second, some of the proposed allusions are to important and memorable episodes in Genesis, especially the famines and Rebekah's betrothal to Isaac.[30] Third, there is a high concentration of potential allusions to the Isaac narratives

[25] In his analysis of this scene in Ruth, Alter draws attention to the role played by the drawing of water, connecting it to the drawing of water in the betrothal scenes of Genesis (59). It may seem fanciful to detect an echo to Genesis 24 in the notice that the drinking water was "drawn," especially since most potable water in the levant would have been acquired by "drawing" (a point made by an editor). But if the fact was obvious to the first readers, why mention it at all, especially in a narrative style as spare as Ruth's? The Hebrew verb שׁאב "draw" occurs only nineteen times in the Bible, and eight of those mentions—the only ones in Genesis—are in Genesis 24. There are four additional instances of the word prior to Ruth in its current canonical position (Deut 29:11; Josh 9:21, 23, 27), all of which are used in a formulaic way to designate the work done by a servant. Given how unusual it is in OT narrative to mention that water has been drawn (cf. the water offered in Gen 18:4; 21:14; 43:24), the mention in these two narratives merits attention.

[26] See comments in Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 43. The RSV and its subsequent revisions (ESV, NRSV, NRSVUE) obscure the similarity of Ruth 2:20 to Genesis 24:27 by making "his kindness" the subject of "has not forsaken" in Ruth 2:20, rather than translating "who has not forsaken his kindness." Both renderings are grammatically possible, but every other major English version chooses the latter rendering, which reflects the underlying parallels in the Hebrew.

[27] Jones, 658–61, notes the verbal similarities but not the role played by clothes and smells.

[28] For example, the basic structure of the famine announcement in Ruth 1:1 is seen throughout ancient Near Eastern languages, and it is possible, though not likely, that the author of Ruth is simply using that standard expression without intending a connection to Genesis. See Michael C. Lyons, "Famine: Textual Evidence from Late Bronze–Early Iron Age Eastern Mediterranean Cultures" (PhD diss., Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, 2018), 165n75.

[29] *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 1st ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 29–32.

[30] This criterion is especially subjective and, taken by itself, it might give little support to many of the echoes suggested in the preceding text. But there is no reason to think that an author might not allude to a less familiar text in Scripture; the point of the criterion is only that such an allusion is less likely to be detected by readers, so an author may be somewhat less likely to make it.

in Ruth, increasing the likelihood that any one of them is genuine.[31] Fourth, there is a high degree of what Hays calls "thematic coherence" between the Isaac stories and the story of Ruth.[32]

The final point is especially critical, and another way of saying it is that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. If we familiarize ourselves with the Isaac stories—the particularities of the wording, the movement of the plot, the interrelations of the themes—and then bring that familiarity with us to the Book of Ruth, does it enrich our reading? Does it reinforce what we could have known independently of the Isaac stories, while also helping us notice things we might otherwise have missed? If so, there is good reason to think that the connections are genuine, that the author of Ruth really did have the Isaac stories in mind while writing.[33]

How, then, can the stories of Isaac enrich our reading of Ruth? That is the question that the rest of this article answers. In short, I argue that Isaac is a figure whose significance lies especially in his election as heir to the covenant that the Lord made with his father Abraham. Although Isaac was not himself the "father" of the Israelites, his son would be, making his own election and protection major concerns in the patriarchal narratives, which tell the story of the Lord's commitment to his covenant with Abraham and the subsequent birth of the nation. Elimelech is of less account even than Isaac, but the author of Ruth, by connecting Elimelech's story with Isaac's, invites the reader to see that the elect covenant line passes through Elimelech's family and on to King David.[34] I focus attention on connections to the Isaac narratives, and Isaac's famine in particular, not because these are the only allusions in Ruth to other Scripture, but rather because previous interpreters have tended to note these connections only in passing, if they notice them at all, while giving more attention to other inner-biblical allusions in Ruth. Here I redress that balance.

The structure of the rest of this article is as follows. I first examine the patriarchal famines in their original context, observing how they contribute to the narrative arc of Genesis and noting the central themes. Next, I evaluate of the Book of Ruth itself, in which key elements of the patriarchal famine stories—offspring and land, divine presence and blessing, covenant and loyalty—are repeated in Ruth with meaningful variation. My analysis culminates in the claim that the Book of Ruth is the story of the Lord's election of the covenant heir, David, and his loyalty to David's line during the time of

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[31] Relevant here is Jeffery M. Leonard's argument that "[t]he accumulation of shared language suggests a stronger connection than does a single shared term or phrase." "Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions: Psalm 78 as a Test Case," *JBL* 127, no. 2 (2008): 253. The large number of verbal parallels between Ruth and the Isaac stories, some of them phrases (see Leonard, 252), makes it unlikely that they are all accidents.

[32] Ibid., 30.

[33] By "genuine" I do not necessarily mean "intentional." It is quite possible that because the author of Ruth was intimately familiar with the patriarchal narratives, some of the echoes were not part of the (human) author's conscious craftsmanship. Hence, like Hays (29), I will not carefully distinguish between "allusion" (which is intended by the author) and "echo" (which may not be intended), contenting myself with the more modest claim that the Book of Ruth strongly suggests the influence of the Isaac stories: in thematic and plot development, and often in the actual wording.

[34] My conclusion is in full agreement with that of Oswald Loretz: "The poet, then, relates the intervention of God to create an heir. In this account of the early history of the royal Davidic house, the poet indicates specifically the fact of divine election." "The Theme of the Ruth Story," *CBQ* 22, no. 4 (October 1960), 398. Loretz makes his argument without reference to the allusions in Ruth to patriarchal narratives; in this article I argue that the echoes of the Isaac story in Ruth confirm the conclusion that Loretz has reached on other grounds.

Elimelech, Naomi, and Ruth. I conclude with a reflection on the kind of scriptural reading exemplified here, reading that is sensitive to the web of connections that unify the biblical narratives.

The Patriarchal Famine Narratives

Genesis is a book of covenants: God's covenant with Noah and his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not to mention various non-divine covenants. And it is a book of famines: one in the life of Abraham, another in the time of Isaac, and a third that changes the fortunes of Jacob and his sons, especially Joseph. To understand Genesis, a reader must understand the role of famines in the narrative, and how those famines relate to the covenant. In the following subsections, the famines of Abraham and Isaac will be considered in relation to the covenant promises. The first of these famines establishes a pattern that will be repeated, with some variation, in the second.[35] Those famines, and especially the second, then shape our understanding of the famine in Ruth. The narrative (and historical) relationship between famine and covenant is this: the famine and forced sojourn threaten the fulfillment of the covenant promises, and the deliverance and blessing function as a confirmation of those promises in the face of the worst possible odds.

Abram

The first famine in Genesis comes halfway through chapter 12. In the first half of the chapter, the Lord has called Abram out of Haran and promised to make him a great nation, make his name great, and bless (ברך) him so that he himself will be a blessing (בְּרָכָה) (vv. 1–3).[36] When Abram arrives in the land of Canaan, the Lord appears to him and makes the promise of offspring and land explicit: "to your offspring [זֶרַע] I will give this land [אֶרֶץ]" (v. 7).

It is right on the heels of God's promise to Abram—first of nationhood, a great name, and blessing, then of offspring and the land—that trouble comes: "and there was a famine in the land [וַיְהִי רָעָב בָּאָרֶץ]" (Gen 12:10). In the ancient world, famine was one of the worst disasters that could strike.[37] Although the property Abram brought along from Haran might provide some insurance against starvation (v. 5), a long famine could impoverish even a rich family (45:11), and a longer famine could

[35] Duane A. Garrett compares the three episodes in which Abraham and Isaac pass off their wives as their sisters and suggests the following repeated cycle of events: Migration, Deception, Abduction, Deliverance, Confrontation, Conclusion. *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2000), 129, 130. My interest here is in the two famine stories and their role in the covenant narrative, so I highlight different components of the story, but my analysis basically agrees with Garrett's that "the dominant concern" of these sojourn stories is "the survival of the race in the face of a . . . threat" (131).

[36] The promise of a great name ties the story of Abram with the story of Babylon (Gen 11): the proud are abased ("we will make for ourselves a name" [11:4]), and the humble are lifted up ("I will make your name great" [12:2]). This link having been established in Genesis 12, the promise of a great name is not restated directly in subsequent repetitions of the Abrahamic promises in Genesis, though it is no doubt implied in the promise to make Abraham and his descendants into a great nation (e.g., 46:3). In the discussion to follow, I will focus on the repeated promises of offspring, land, and blessing; the promise of a name will be taken up again at the end of this article.

[37] "Along with pestilence and warfare, famine is one of the classical triad of catastrophes." Peter H. W. Lau and Gregory Goswell, *Unceasing Kindness: A Biblical Theology of Ruth*, NSBT 41 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2016), 71.

kill (45:7). In this case, the famine was severe enough to drive Abram and his dependents out of Canaan into Egypt (12:10).

This departure from Canaan presents the first challenge to the Lord's promises to Abram: he is no longer in the land that was promised to him and his (yet-to-be-born) offspring. Given the possibility that any children born and raised in Egypt might stay there, the threat is significant. As Abram and Sarai prepare to enter Egypt, Abram becomes aware of a more immediate threat: he might be killed, and Sarai would become the wife of an Egyptian, definitively cutting off the possibility of offspring who could become a great nation in the land of Canaan. Abram's plan to counter this threat leads to Pharaoh's nearly adding Sarai to his harem. This, too, is a threat to the promise: if Pharaoh should take Sarai as his wife, she would be defiled and could no longer return to Abram and bear him a child. Finally, Abram's calling to be a blessing to all the families of the earth is called into question when God brings plagues on Pharaoh's household on Abram's account.[38]

Nevertheless, through God's intervention, Pharaoh sends Sarai back to Abram and expels them from Egypt, along with considerable wealth that Abram acquired while Sarai was in Pharaoh's household (Gen 12:16, 20; 13:2). Abram's sojourn in Egypt and his eventual departure demonstrate God's faithfulness to the promises given at the beginning of chapter 12: Abram is still alive, his wife has been given back to him with her honor intact, he is returning to the land of promise, and he takes with him great wealth.

This narrative sequence of promise, famine, blessing, and deliverance serves two functions in the nascent patriarchal narratives. First, it establishes God's commitment to fulfilling his promises in the face of obstacles; by juxtaposing the famine with God's promise, God's loyalty to that promise is put on display.[39] Second, it establishes Abram as a historical archetype of the nation that descends from him. Abram is the first to receive the promises that guarantee Israel's founding, the promises that Israel itself will inherit; thus, Abram's experience of God's faithfulness to those promises establishes a pattern that will be repeated with variation and elaboration in the lives of his immediate descendants and in the history of Israel, a repetition that confirms the election of Abram's descendants.

Isaac

Between Abram's famine and the famine experienced by Isaac in Genesis 26, the Lord repeats his promises to Abram (renamed "Abraham" in 17:5) several times, and along the way the promises develop in a handful of ways:[40] in particular, the Lord incorporates those promises into a solemn covenant (ch. 15); he marks the covenant with the sign of circumcision (17:1–14); and he specifies the

[38] On the other hand, Pharaoh very nearly dishonors—unwittingly—Abram's family, making Pharaoh liable to God's curse (Gen 12:3), which is also an integral part of the blessing promise.

[39] Similarly, Lau and Goswell observe that "[t]he common thread [of the sojourn narratives in Gen 12, 20, and 26] is a threat to the covenant" (72), but apart from noting that Elimelech should not have left the covenant land, they do not trace this thread through Ruth.

[40] Here I skip over the repetition of the land and offspring promise after Lot and Abram divide (Gen 13:14–17), as well as the reconfirmation of promises after Abraham's offering of Isaac on the mountain at Moriah, where God repeats the promise of numerous offspring and says again that the nations will be blessed on account of Abraham's offspring (22:15–18).

heir of the covenant, Isaac, a son as yet unborn, a son whose conception is, in fact, impossible (17:17–19). But it is even more impossible for God to break his promise, and the impossible son is born (21:1–3). Between Genesis 21 (Isaac's birth) and Genesis 26 (Isaac's famine), Isaac is nearly sacrificed (ch. 22), his mother dies (ch. 23), he marries Rebekah (ch. 24), his father dies (25:1–11), and two sons are born to him and grow up (25:19–28). Nevertheless, at the end of Genesis 25, Isaac has still not yet received any direct word from the Lord about the promises.

Then chapter 26 opens with the words, "And there was a famine in the land, besides the previous famine which happened in the days of Abraham" (v. 1). As Abraham had done during that first famine, Isaac now leaves the place he is living, probably Beer-Lahai-Roi (25:11), to find relief; but unlike Abraham, Isaac does not leave the boundaries of Canaan, instead going only as far as the Philistine town of Gerar. It is there that the Lord appears and speaks to him directly for the first time. The Lord begins by telling him not to go to Egypt, and then instructs him to "dwell [שׁכן] in the land which I say to you" (26:2). Until the Lord gives further direction, however, Isaac is to "live temporarily [גור] in this land" (26:3), the region of Gerar.

It is in connection to the command to sojourn in Gerar during the famine that the Lord explicitly extends the Abrahamic Covenant promises to Isaac: "Live temporarily in this land, and I will be with you, and I will bless you" (Gen 26:3). This promised blessing is unpacked in terms of the promises previously given to Abraham:[41] offspring as numerous as the stars, who, along with Isaac, will inherit "all these lands" and bring blessing to all the nations (26:3, 4).

God's promises to Isaac are well timed, because a famine that would drive Isaac among the Philistines and make him contemplate leaving for Egypt must be severe. Once Isaac receives the promise and instructions from God to sojourn in Gerar, he faces threats like those faced by his father Abraham during the earlier famine: in addition to the threat to life and property due to the famine itself, there is the very real possibility that Isaac could be killed and Rebekah taken as wife by one of the men of Gerar (26:7, 10). If this should happen, the family of promise would lose its Abrahamic integrity; even if Jacob and Esau survived, they may be incorporated into Philistia.[42] And there is the further risk that Isaac himself might assimilate to the Philistines by settling permanently in their land, taking Philistine daughters-in-law, and worshiping the Philistine gods.

Isaac's plan for self-protection is to use his father's strategy of claiming that his wife is his sister. Providentially, Abimelech discovers the ruse—early in Isaac's sojourn, it seems—and knowing now that Rebekah is Isaac's wife, he guarantees their safety, threatening death to anyone who touches Isaac or his wife (26:11). Under the king's protection, and clearly under the Lord's, Isaac sows grain in Gerar and reaps one hundredfold (26:12). This is the first time that a patriarch works a field. Though neither Isaac nor his descendants take up agriculture as a permanent living prior to the conquest period (46:34), Isaac's farming in Gerar suggests a new relationship to the land of Canaan, a preview of the

[41] Specifically, the promise to bless Isaac is followed by the blessings themselves, introduced by כִּי "for," suggesting that the clause "to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands" answers the question, "How will this blessing be known?"

[42] The marriages of Isaac and Jacob to non-Canaanite brides depended, at least partially, on the intervention of their parents (Gen 24:1–9; 27:46–28:5).

settled existence that his offspring will one day enjoy there. In addition, his harvest is extraordinary, especially for a time of famine. By the time Isaac leaves Gerar, he has become quite wealthy, owing to God's blessing (26:12, 13).

Isaac leaves Gerar with his family intact, his religion undefiled, his identity uncompromised, and his wealth greater than when he came. He has also managed to stay within the territory of Canaan for the famine's duration. The famine and the forced sojourn, far from hurting Isaac and his family, have been the occasion both for their enrichment and for the Lord to establish the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant with Isaac directly. The promises of the covenant are given to Isaac as the famine begins, and the Lord makes good on those promises in the face of serious threats. It is by means of the famine and sojourn that God acts to publicly demonstrate Isaac's election as heir to the covenant. Isaac's election as covenant heir is demonstrated not just by the events of the famine and sojourn considered in themselves, but also by the way in which those events are depicted as a reenactment of Abraham's sojourn in Egypt, an event that provided initial confirmation of his own election by God. Isaac's experiences strongly resemble his father's, with variation appropriate to separate historical events.

One difference, however, should be noted, a difference related to the details of the Lord's oath to Isaac. God gives Isaac a promise that he never gave Abraham, nor had he given to anyone else up to this point in Genesis: "I will be with you" (Gen 26:3). Furthermore, God's promised presence with Isaac is directly tied to the promised blessing—"I will be with you, and I will bless you" (v. 3)—suggesting that the blessing depends crucially on God's presence with Isaac.[43] This pairing of God's presence and blessing bookends Isaac's sojourn in Gerar. After Isaac has left the valley of Gerar and settled in Beersheba, the Lord appears to him again and says, "I am the God of Abraham your father. Do not fear, for I am with you, and I will bless you" (v. 24), followed by a shortened version of the promises: the Lord will multiply his offspring.[44] The explicit pairing of God's presence and blessing shows up in Ruth, as well, where the two are again connected to the gift of offspring.

Ruth and Isaac: The Connection Explored

In the first section, I introduced the verbal connections between Ruth and the Isaac narratives, arguing that those parallels should be understood as instructions to the reader to think back to those earlier stories and read Ruth in their light. In particular, the Book of Ruth has strong echoes of the

[43] The narrator never states directly that the Lord was with Abraham (although Abimelech observes to Abraham, "God is with you in all that you are doing" [Gen 21:22]). The narrator does, however, say that God (not the Lord) "was with" Ishmael (v. 20), but there is no promise to Ishmael of God's presence, and the notice that God was with Ishmael is not directly connected to blessing.

[44] This time there is no mention of the land, perhaps because Isaac is once again "home" in Beersheba in the Negeb, where Abraham seems to have settled after himself leaving Gerar (Gen 21:14, 31–33; 22:19), and where Isaac likely grew up. Prior to his marriage to Rebekah, Isaac lived for a time in Beer-lahai-roi (24:62), and after Abraham's death Isaac returned there to live (25:11). However, Beer-lahai-roi was most likely to the southwest in the direction of Egypt (see 16:7, 14), on the way to Shur. It is associated with Hagar's flight from Sarai, a flight which probably would have taken Hagar toward her homeland of Egypt. Isaac's ultimate rejection of Beer-lahai-roi in favor of Beersheba suggests a recentering of the patriarchal family in the land of promise.

Isaac famine narrative, a narrative intimately tied up with Isaac's status as heir to the covenant, as I argued in the previous section. In the following subsections, the thematic concerns introduced in the previous section will be used as a framework for understanding Ruth. Those themes are the threat to *offspring* and *land*; the connection between *God's presence* and *blessing*; and the *loyalty* of the Lord and his people to the *covenant*. The way that these patriarchal themes—especially prominent in the famine stories—give shape to Ruth supports the view that a central concern of the story of Ruth is the Lord's election of an heir to the covenant promises and the Lord's faithfulness to those promises.

Offspring and Land: Threatened and Restored

As we have already seen, the introduction of Ruth bears a striking resemblance to the story of Isaac in Gerar: a famine in the land, a man sojourning among foreigners with his wife and two sons, then a return back to the land. But the differences are just as striking, differences related especially to land and offspring. Whereas the Lord appeared to Isaac in Gerar and gave him the patriarchal promises of offspring who would possess the land of Canaan (Gen 26:2–5), there is no word from the Lord for Elimelech or his family, no promises of either land or offspring. Furthermore, although Elimelech is like Isaac in leaving behind his previous home and land, he is unlike Isaac in that he has abandoned the promised land.[45] Even more ominously, Elimelech dies in Moab (Ruth 1:3), leaving his family vulnerable to the threats of poverty, hunger, and assimilation; Isaac, though he feared that he would die in Gerar (Gen 26:7), nevertheless survived his sojourn.

After his death, Elimelech's sons take the next step to assimilation, doing the thing that both Abraham and Isaac feared for their own sons: marrying foreign wives, and Moabite wives at that (Gen 24:2–4; 26:34, 35; 28:1; Ruth 1:4; cf. Deut 23:3, 4). If such matches produce sons, it seems unlikely that these heirs of Elimelech will worship the Lord or return to Judah to settle on Elimelech's ancestral land.[46] But Mahlon and Chilion do not have sons; like their father, they die in Moab, thus wiping out any chance that Elimelech could have heirs who would carry on his name and live on the land that had belonged to him in Judah. And with Elimelech dead and Naomi too old to remarry, there is now no hope even of substitute sons (Ruth 1:12, 13).[47] In contrast, both of Isaac's sons survived the sojourn, and at the end of Genesis 26, although one son has married Canaanites, the son marked from the womb for greatness remains unmarried.

[45] Lau and Goswell, 73–79.

[46] We should recall Abraham's insistence that his servant not take Isaac out of the land of Canaan to marry (24:6). Abraham no doubt feared that neither Isaac nor Isaac's sons would ever come back to the land of promise. Nahum M. Sarna remarks that such a "desert[ion of] the land" for the sake of marriage would be tantamount to "renouncing God's promises." *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society: 1989), 163. Recall, too, that it was only with great difficulty that Jacob managed to bring his family—a family founded outside the boundaries of Canaan—back to the land of promise (Gen 31).

[47] Robertson is thus correct that "[i]t is essential to the story [of Ruth] . . . that the family should be plunged into dire distress—the direr the better" (209).

In Genesis 26, Isaac's famine and sojourn had raised two questions: Is Isaac really the chosen heir to the covenant promises?[48] If so, will God be faithful to those promises? By the end of the chapter, the answer to both questions is clear: yes. The parallels between the Book of Ruth and the Genesis famine stories suggest that the same questions should be asked of Elimelech's famine and sojourn: Is Elimelech in any sense an heir to the patriarchal covenant promises? If so, will God be faithful to those promises? At the end of chapter 1, it appears that the answer to one or the other of those questions must be no. Nearly everything Abraham and Isaac feared for themselves and their families has happened to Elimelech and his own family: Elimelech is dead; his sons have married foreign brides and then died sonless; his widow is impoverished and returns to Judah incapable of maintaining her husband's ancestral land. It thus appears to be the case that Elimelech has no claim on the patriarchal promises; as an Israelite he is part of the promised offspring, but he is not a personal and direct heir to the promise of multiplied offspring living in the promised land. His own family can go extinct without threatening God's faithfulness.

But if we conclude that the patriarchal promises have no direct bearing on Elimelech's personal story, why would echoes of the Isaac narratives, and especially Genesis 26, be so prominent in Ruth? Asking this question sets the reader up to understand the significance of what happens after chapter 1, in Ruth 2–4. The rest of Ruth recounts the unexpected, providential reversal of chapter 1's tragedies: through the loyal kindness of two people—Ruth, a Gentile convert, and Boaz, the family redeemer—Elimelech's land is secured, and a substitute son is born to live on that land and care for Elimelech's widow and daughter-in-law. This astonishing reversal should make the reader revisit his initial judgments: by the end of the book, it appears that the famine and sojourn are in fact serving the same function as in the patriarchal famine stories, proving God's faithfulness to the covenant promises in the face of humanly insurmountable difficulties. But if that is true, it raises again the question of Elimelech's relation to the patriarchal promises, a question I will take up when I return to the role of the covenant in Ruth. But first we will consider God's presence in Ruth in relation to blessing.

Presence and Blessing: Moving the Story Along

While the Lord's presence and blessing frame and pervade Isaac's sojourn in Gerar, the Lord seems strangely absent from most of Ruth's story: although the Lord's name "YHWH" (יהוה) appears eighteen times, "God" (אֱלֹהִים) three times,[49] and "Shaddai" (שַׁדַּי) twice, it is not the narrator but characters in the story who invoke God's name and attribute various actions to him. Not until the final scene of the story does the narrator himself say directly that the Lord has acted.[50] On the other hand, blessings play a major role in Ruth. Indeed, each major scene contains a blessing, for a total of

[48] Isaac's status as the covenant heir was already established in Genesis 17:19, but it is the nature of biblical narrative that what has been declared with certainty may still appear uncertain to characters in the story, and readers participate in that sense of uncertainty.

[49] אֱלֹהִים "god(s), God" actually occurs four times, but in Ruth 1:15 it refers to Moabite gods.

[50] For comparison, the Lord's name (יהוה) appears seven times in Genesis 26—a single chapter—and the narrator directly attributes five actions to him: he "appears" twice (vv. 2, 24), he "speaks" twice (vv. 2, 24) and he "blesses" once (v. 12). "God" (אֱלֹהִים) occurs once in Genesis 26, as well (v. 24).

seven separate blessing episodes. It may seem that in Ruth, unlike in Genesis 26, blessing depends not on the Lord's presence but instead on the goodwill of people.[51] Yet, as I argue in this section, one of the functions of the blessings in Ruth is to draw the reader's attention to God's presence, partially hidden from view until the very end.

In each of Ruth's five major scenes, at least one character blesses someone else.[52] All of these blessings take one of two basic forms: either a clause headed by a jussive verb expressing a wish or desire, with the Lord (יהוה) as the subject (1:8, 9; 2:4, 12; 4:11);[53] or a verbless (or copulative) clause with בָּרוּכָה/בָּרוּךְ (Qal passive participle of ברך "bless") as the predicate and the person blessed as the subject (2:19, 20; 3:10; 4:14). Although the second pattern necessarily contains the word ברך "bless," the first may or may not.[54] The blessings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Blessing Episodes in the Book of Ruth

Reference	Person Blessing	Person Blessed	Blessing
1:8, 9	Naomi	Orpah and Ruth	the Lord's loyal kindness (חֶסֶד); security in a new home with a new husband
2:4	Boaz/laborers	laborers/Boaz	the Lord's presence and blessing (ברך)
2:12	Boaz	Ruth	repayment and a full reward
2:19, 20	Naomi	Boaz	unspecified
3:10	Boaz	Ruth	unspecified
4:11, 12	villagers & elders	Ruth and Boaz	offspring (זֶרַע) for Ruth; a name for Boaz
4:14	women	the Lord (& Ruth's son)	a name for the offspring

Blessings play a critical role in structuring the plot. Not only do blessings appear in every scene, but several of the blessings specifically anticipate later events. The Lord's loyal kindness (חֶסֶד) that Naomi asks for Ruth in 1:8–9 arrives in the form of the loyal kindness shown by Boaz in later chapters (see especially 2:19–20 for Naomi's characterization of Boaz's actions in this way). The new home and

[51] Vellas, 204, 205.

[52] I divide Ruth as follows: Introduction: Moab (1:1–5); Scene 1: Return to Bethlehem (1:6–22); Scene 2: Home-Field-Home (2:1–23); Scene 3: Home-Threshing Floor-Home (3:1–18); Scene 4: City Gate (4:1–12); Scene 5: Birth (4:13–17); Conclusion: Genealogy (4:18–22). This outline is a fairly standard analysis based on physical settings and climactic action. My scenes 4 and 5 are often regarded as a single scene, as in Stephen Bertman's four-scene analysis. "Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth," *JBL* 84, no. 2 (June 1965), 165–68.

[53] Note that jussive verbs are often formally identical to the imperfect conjugation; for discussion, see Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, rev. ed., Subsidia Biblica 27 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006), §46.a, b; §114.g–l. Note, too, the following variations. The first half of the blessing exchange in Ruth 2:4, "The Lord be with you" (יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם) is a verbless clause but is clearly volitive in meaning (see ibid., §163.b). Ruth 4:12, a continuation of a blessing which begins in verse 11 with "may the Lord give" (יִתֵּן יְהוָה), has "your house" as the subject of the jussive verb "be" (וִיהִי בֵיתֵךְ). Similarly, the blessing in 4:14 begins with "blessed be" (following the second formula type discussed above) but continues with a second clause making "his name" the subject of the jussive verb "be called" (וְיִקָּרֵא שְׁמוֹ). For further discussion of the blessing in 4:14, see footnote 63.

[54] The archetypical blessing of Genesis 48:20, for example, does not have the word ברך "bless": "May God establish you like Ephraim and like Manasseh (יְשִׂמְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּאֶפְרַיִם וְכִמְנַשֶּׁה). The seven blessings identified in Table 1 are uncontroversial among interpreters; see, among others, Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, li, 11, 31, 43, 61, 62, 83–86, 88, 89.

husband, also part of the blessing in 1:8–9, are provided at the resolution in 4:13.[55] When Boaz blesses Ruth in 2:12, he considers her worthy of a full reward in part because she has come under the Lord's wings; when Ruth approaches Boaz in chapter 3, she asks him to spread his wings over her (3:9), and she receives her full reward in her marriage and the birth of a son (4:13). The offspring anticipated in the blessing of 4:11–12 is born in the very next verse.

In fact, the blessings distributed throughout Ruth serve the same plot function as the promises to Isaac at the start and end of his famine narrative. Recall that there are exactly seven blessing episodes in Ruth, which is likely no accident. The number *seven* (שֶׁבַע) and the verb *swear* (שׁבע) share the same consonants.[56] It is reasonable to suppose that the author of Ruth wishes to subtly reinforce the narrative connection between the sworn oath of Gerar and the blessings of Ruth by relating exactly seven blessing episodes. Thus, at the beginning of Isaac's sojourn, the Lord promises to "bless" (ברך) him, and that blessing is then spelled out in terms of offspring and land, the contents of God's "sworn oath" to Abraham (Gen 26:3, 4). God's protection of Isaac and his family in Gerar, Isaac's marvelous productivity as a farmer, and his safe return to Beersheba are all anticipated by that initial promise of blessing. Likewise, the blessings in the Book of Ruth reveal to the reader that the crucial events of the story are part of a design shaped by intention—God's intention—rather than chance, moving towards a good end.[57]

Not only do the blessings in Ruth give shape and direction within the story, but they also reach beyond the scope of the immediate narrative, anticipating events yet to come. In particular, the blessings of chapter 4 invoke the Lord to bestow on Boaz enduring fame in Bethlehem (vv. 11, 12) and to make Ruth and Boaz's offspring into a great house with national fame (vv. 11, 12, 14). These blessings foreshadow the story's continuation in 1 & 2 Samuel, as the Lord builds a house for Ruth and Boaz's descendant David, making him great in Israel.[58] Thus the blessings of Ruth work like the

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[55] Even if Naomi's blessing in 1:8–9 is ironic (as Linafelt suggests, 10) or insincere and aborted (as Schipper argues, 91, 103), it nevertheless has the form of a standard blessing, and it sets up an expectation for what will follow in the story. Similarly, Isaac did not intend to give Jacob the firstborn's blessing (Gen 27:23), but once given, it was irrevocable (27:33) and, under God's sovereignty, gave definitive shape to Jacob's future and that of his descendants.

[56] The similarity between *seven* and *swear* was not lost on the patriarchs: the name "Beersheba" (בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע) puns on these two words, "well of seven/swearing" (Gen 21:22–31), and the entire narrative works the pun out in detail.

[57] This conclusion is not contradicted by Ruth 2:3, which says that Ruth came upon Boaz's field by chance: וַיִּקֶר מִקְרֶהָ ("her happenstance happened"). Here the reader is invited to share in the perspective of Ruth, who is guided to this particular field neither by the advice of others nor by her own intention. Fredric W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, WBC 9 (Dallas: Word, 1996), 104–6. In the larger perspective of the narrative, the expression is ironic, inviting the reader to contrast his own more extensive knowledge of the situation with the character's less complete knowledge. Hubbard 141. Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky note that the verb קרה "to happen" is used for divine action in Genesis 24:12 and 27:20 (both in narratives connected to Isaac), whereas the related noun מִקְרֶה "happenstance" is used for chance in contrast to divine action in 1 Samuel 6:9 (in a speech given by Philistine priests and diviners) (30, 31). Schipper dismisses the relevance of the examples in Genesis because God is the explicit subject of the verb (117). If, however, I am correct that the story of Ruth invites the reader to be thinking of the Isaac narratives, the patriarchal background is much more relevant to understanding this expression than how "chance" is understood by Philistine priests.

[58] "How fully this blessing [in Ruth 4:11] was fulfilled is evident from the family genealogy, leading to David." Loretz, 394. It is not necessary to my argument that Ruth was originally situated in the Hebrew canon between Judges and 1 Samuel, as it is in the Septuagint, though such an argument is made by Campbell, 33–36, and extended with some force by Linafelt, xvii–xxv. Fischer is surely right that "[t]he book evidently wants to fill the gap between the Book of Judges

promises of blessing in the story of Isaac's sojourn, which, at the beginning and end of the narrative, look forward to the events that will unfold throughout the rest of Genesis and beyond, especially the numerical growth of Isaac's offspring.

Yet another function of the blessings in Ruth is to look backward to previous biblical narratives, integrating Ruth into a chain of historical events, especially the patriarchal histories.[59] The blessing of 4:11–12, with its references to Rachel and Leah, to Tamar and Perez, is often discussed in this regard, and there is no need to repeat that discussion here. Interpreters have also observed how Naomi's blessing of Boaz in 2:20 echoes Abraham's servant's blessing of the Lord after meeting Rebekah (Gen 24:27);[60] the significance of that connection is discussed in the next subsection, where the matter of loyal kindness (חֶסֶד) is taken up.

Of particular interest here is the exchange between Boaz and his laborers, "the Lord be with you . . . the Lord bless you" (Ruth 2:4). There is good reason to think that in this exchange the reader is meant to recall the same pairing of the Lord's presence and blessing in relation to Isaac in Gerar; this is especially the case given the fact that the close pairing of the Lord's presence and blessing, in that order, is found nowhere else in Scripture. This echo of the Isaac story occurs at a key juncture in the story: Naomi has earlier blessed Ruth in the hope that the Lord will show her his loyal kindness, giving her security in the home of a new husband (1:8, 9), but up to this point in the narrative, nothing hopeful has happened in that regard. Now, at the start of chapter 2, Ruth is about to encounter the Lord's loyal kindness in the person of Naomi's redeemer, who will turn out to be Ruth's new husband. It is here that the Lord's presence and blessing are invoked as greetings, almost as though the theme song of the Gerar episode is cued in the background as the reader watches Naomi's blessing of Ruth begin its slow fulfillment. This echo, at this point in the story, puts the reader on notice that all the blessings spoken in the story, from the first to the last chapter, depend crucially upon the Lord's presence with those so blessed, just as Isaac's protection and prosperity in Gerar were evidence that the Lord was with him and was blessing him.[61]

This complex pattern of relations between blessing and fulfillment, and between blessing and history, culminates in Ruth 4:13, the climax of the narrative, where Ruth receives the hoped-for husband and the hoped-for son. The marriage of Ruth and birth of a son are the events to which the blessings—in fact, the entire narrative—have been moving, and it is at this point that the narrator

and the Book of Samuel" (141), regardless of its placement in various canonical orderings (which may have depended on time of composition, length, thematic concerns, liturgical usage, or any number of other reasons now lost to us).

[59] Observe, too, that only Israelites speak blessings in the Book of Ruth, but the recipients of these blessings are both Israelites and Gentiles. This is the pattern suggested by the Lord's first promise to Abram, "you will be a blessing . . . and in you all the clans of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:2, 3): Abraham and his descendants are a spring of blessing that flows out to the nations.

[60] Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 43.

[61] Campbell, 93, discusses Boaz's greeting in relation to the similar greeting found in Psalm 129:8 and the grammar of Judges 6:12 but does not notice the connection between presence and blessing or the allusion to Isaac in Gerar. Hubbard, 144, observes that Boaz's greeting "affirmed the presence of Yahweh in this scene," though without detecting an echo of Genesis 26:3 or directly connecting the Lord's presence with his blessing.

throws off his reticence and directly attributes action to the Lord: "the Lord gave her conception."[62] Read in light of the exchange of blessings in 2:4, this assertion confirms the Lord's work in all the circumstances leading up to and following the conception, but it also picks out the conception of a son as the high point of the narrative. These climactic events are followed by the climactic blessing, this one directed as praise to the Lord and focused on the future greatness of the newborn son: "may his name be called [Niphal jussive of קרא 'call'] in Israel" (4:14).[63] The fulfillment of the previous blessings, mediated by the Lord's (mostly hidden) presence, makes it certain that this blessing, too, will be realized, and the notice that the son was David's grandfather (4:17), followed by a genealogy leading to David (4:18–22), leaves the reader in no doubt.

Covenant and Loyal Kindness: The Patriarchal Narrative Continued

The preceding themes—seed and land, divine presence and blessing—are bound together in the patriarchal stories by the covenant, specifically the Lord's covenant with Abraham. It might seem odd, then, that the word *covenant* (בְּרִית) never occurs in the Book of Ruth. Is it perhaps the case that God's promises and blessing and presence are operating in Ruth outside the realm of covenant? Has the covenant receded in importance or even become inoperative at this stage in redemptive history? There are two reasons that these questions can be answered with a definite no.

First, as I have argued up to this point, the author of Ruth intends that the story be read in light of the patriarchal stories, especially the story of Isaac in Gerar, which it resembles in several ways. If we compare Ruth to the Isaac story, we notice that the word *covenant* (בְּרִית) never occurs in Genesis 26, either. But does this mean that Isaac is not party to the covenant, or that the covenant is no longer important? Certainly not. The wording of 26:3, "mak[ing] firm the oath I swore to Abraham," evokes the covenant, and the promises of chapter 26 are the promises associated with the covenant that God had said he would confirm with Isaac (Gen 17:6–8, 19, 21). It is not just Genesis 26 where the covenant is not mentioned by name: after chapter 17, the word *covenant* (בְּרִית) is never again used in Genesis in reference to God's promises to the patriarchs, even though the continuation of the covenant and its

[62] "It is of the utmost importance to note that in iv 13, where the unravelling of the story takes place, Yahweh is mentioned for the first and only time in a direct way as the subject of a verb." W. S. Prinsloo, "The Theology of the Book of Ruth," *Vetus Testamentum* 30, no. 3 (1980), 339. "[In this last chapter], YHWH himself emerges from his hidden place in the narrative. It is, indeed, his part in the closing scene that ties the whole story together." Bovell, 188. We should also observe that Sarah's conception of Isaac (Gen 21:1, 2), Rebekah's of Jacob and Esau (25:21), Leah's of Reuben and Issachar (29:31, 32; 30:17, 18), and Rachel's of Joseph (30:23, 23) are all attributed to the Lord's intervention, though of no one else in the OT is it said so directly that the Lord "gave her conception." Thanks to Layton Talbert for drawing my attention to Genesis 25:21 in particular.

[63] The blessing of Ruth 4:14 is in fact a dual blessing: "blessed be the Lord" (בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה) is followed by a jussive verb whose subject is "his name" (וְיִקָּרֵא שְׁמוֹ), referring most likely to Naomi's grandson, the offspring (see arguments in Schipper, 179). The closest grammatical parallel in the OT is Noah's blessing of Shem in Genesis 9:26, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem, and may Canaan be a slave to him" (בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי שֵׁם וִיהִי כְנַעַן עֶבֶד לָמוֹ). In both cases, "blessed be the Lord" is followed by a jussive verb with a subject containing a suffixed 3ms pronoun whose antecedent is not the Lord but someone blessed by the Lord. It might be significant that both blessings involve שֵׁם "Shem/name." Furthermore, just as the blessing of Ruth 4:14 is concerned ultimately with God's election of David, so too Genesis 9:26 is, according to Gordon J. Wenham, "the first intimation that the line of God's election blessing is going through Shem." *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 202.

promises is one of the primary concerns of chapters 18–50. (The reference in Exodus 2:24 to God's "covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob" clears away any doubt about the recipients of the covenant.) But once the covenant is established, its promises specified, and its sign commanded, there is no longer any need to use the word "covenant" in the Genesis narrative: simply mentioning the sign or the promises is enough to evoke the covenant itself. So then in Ruth, the centrality of land, offspring, blessing, and God's presence, the things promised in the covenant, is meant to bring the covenant itself to the reader's mind, and all the more so because the story of Ruth begins with allusions to the patriarchal famine stories.

A second reason to think that the covenant is lurking behind the scenes in Ruth is the role played by loyal kindness (חֶסֶד) in Ruth. Although the meaning of the term חֶסֶד is not restricted to *covenant* loyalty, it is nevertheless a term which frequently occurs in contexts in which covenants are under discussion or in the background.[64] The term is used three times in Ruth, twice in relation to Ruth, and once in relation to Boaz. In Ruth 1, Naomi blesses her daughters-in-law with the prayer that the Lord will act in loyal kindness (חֶסֶד) toward them, just as they acted toward their husbands and toward Naomi (1:8). This request for the Lord's loyal kindness to Ruth and Orpah is remarkable: nowhere else in the historical books (with a single possible exception) is the Lord's loyal kindness associated directly with a Gentile.[65] Although Orpah passes out of the story, the rest of the narrative can be read as the unfolding of this wish that the Lord act in loyal kindness toward Ruth, the kind of loyalty that the Lord elsewhere shows only to members of his covenant.[66]

In chapter 2 there is an even clearer connection between loyal kindness and the covenant. When Boaz has shown kindness to Ruth, Naomi blesses him (Ruth 2:20), exclaiming that he—and perhaps the Lord[67]—has not forsaken loyal kindness with the living or the dead. As already noted, this blessing is an adaptation of the blessing with which Abraham's servant blesses the Lord upon the success of his mission to find Isaac a wife (Gen 24:27). The servant invokes the Lord's loyal kindness and faithfulness specifically in relation to the Lord's covenant with Abraham, because the success of the covenant promises depends on the covenant heir's finding an appropriate bride who could be mother to the next covenant heir. It is no coincidence that in the Ruth story, Naomi's blessing, which recalls

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[64] See David A. Baer and Robert P. Gordon, "חסד," *NIDOTTE*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:211–18.

[65] That one (possible) exception is 2 Samuel 15:20, where David blesses Ittai the Gittite with "loyal kindness and faithfulness" (חֶסֶד וֶאֱמֶת) in a situation that strongly resembles the present context, in which a Gentile has left his own land and people and attached himself to an Israelite. The MT of 2 Samuel 15:20 lacks an explicit reference to the Lord as the one showing loyal kindness, but the LXX suggests a text in which the Lord is the subject. For discussion see Hubbard, 108n18. Lau and Goswell, 33, observe that "[e]ven without textual repair . . . the reference must be to *divine* kindness" (emphasis original).

[66] Later, in Ruth 3, Boaz praises two acts of loyal kindness on Ruth's part: her journey to Judah with Naomi and her determination to abandon better marriage prospects so as to marry a kinsman of her dead husband and thus secure his property and offspring (3:10). This instance of חֶסֶד will not be discussed here.

[67] Basil A. Rebera's arguments that Boaz is Naomi's intended referent are, in my view, unassailable. "Yahweh or Boaz? Ruth 2.20 Reconsidered," *The Bible Translator* 36, no. 3 (1985), 317–27. Nevertheless, the allusion to Genesis 24:27 suggests that the author wishes the reader to contemplate the grammatical ambiguity and think of the Lord's loyal kindness in addition to or behind Boaz's.

the successful mission to find a bride for Isaac, comes just before the betrothal scene of Ruth and Boaz. This juxtaposition suggests that the narrator—though not necessarily Naomi—intends to connect the loyal kindness in Naomi's blessing to the patriarchal seed promise to which the Lord was loyal when he provided Isaac with a wife.[68]

If it is true, though, that the Book of Ruth is concerned with God's loyalty to the Abrahamic Covenant, it is not obvious how Elimelech and his family relate to that covenant (an issue first raised at the end of the discussion of offspring and land). Although every Israelite participated in the promises guaranteed in the Abrahamic Covenant by virtue of being part of a community formed by that covenant—a great nation living in the land of promise—the Abrahamic Covenant did not guarantee that every particular Israelite would have offspring that would live in the land.[69] Thus, it was possible that Elimelech's family line could go extinct without threatening the covenant in any way.

However, I suggest that there are two ways in which the narrator intends to tie Elimelech's family with the Abrahamic promises. First, the near extinction of Elimelech's family line and its providential rescue is the story of Israel itself during the time of the Judges.[70] The timeframe of the story—the days that the Judges judged (Ruth 1:1)—taken together with the meaning of Elimelech's name—"my God is king"—suggests that Elimelech was a representative of the nation in its apostasy, near destruction, and redemption. If that is true, then the story is, at least in part, about the Lord's faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant in relation to the entire nation of Israel. The Lord's restoration of Elimelech's land and family is a sign that the Lord will also preserve the nation of Israel in spite of its present unfaithfulness.[71]

But Elimelech is not presented in Ruth merely as a representative or proxy for the nation. I suggest that the Ruth story shows that the Lord's loyal kindness rested on Elimelech and his offspring in direct relation to the Abrahamic Covenant, just as the Lord showed himself loyal to Isaac, the first heir born into the Abrahamic Covenant. This claim will be explored in the next section.

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[68] Robert D. Bell observes that the Lord's חֶסֶד is on display in chapter 4 as well, even though the term itself is not used. *The Theological Messages of the Old Testament Books* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2010), 128. Linafelt, 11, observes that חֶסֶד "is a key word in the book Ruth not by frequency of occurrence but by its occurrence in particularly crucial passages."

[69] For expositional purposes, I gloss over the role played by the Mosaic Covenant in administering the Abrahamic promises in relation to the Israelite nation and the individuals comprising that nation. For discussion of the relation between the promise covenants and the administrative covenants, see Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985).

[70] So Fee and Stuart, 79. Taking a slightly different (but perhaps reinforcing) perspective, Leithart argues that "Naomi is a picture of Israel" (119).

[71] Fisch, 432, sees in the structure of Ruth the pattern of "exile and restoration so basic to the whole body of the Old Testament narrative."

Synthesis: Ruth's Offspring as Elect Covenant Heir

A proper understanding of Ruth must account not only for the introduction, which links the story to the patriarchal famine stories and focuses on the threat to the covenant promises, but also for the epilogue, which comprises a patriarch-like genealogy tracing the line of Perez through the son of Boaz to King David.[72] The heading of the genealogy in Ruth 4:18–22, "these are the generations," follows the pattern of the genealogies in Genesis, genealogies that propel the redemptive-historical narrative of Genesis forward from Adam to elect Abraham, then on to Isaac, Jacob, and his sons. Like the genealogies in Genesis, the genealogy in Ruth is identifying the line of the elect, the heir to God's covenant.

Who is that heir? King David himself. The first readers of Ruth, who lived during or after the time of David, would have known that David, like the patriarchs, was the recipient of a covenant with the Lord.[73] But the Davidic Covenant is not strictly speaking a brand-new covenant: it is a regal amplification of the Abrahamic Covenant.[74] The Lord promises to make David's name great (2 Sam 7:9), just as he originally promised to Abraham (Gen 12:2).[75] Just as Abraham's descendants are promised the land of Canaan (Gen 12:7), the nation under David is promised a place where they will be planted (2 Sam 7:10). And just as the Abrahamic promises are connected with offspring (Gen 12:7), so too the Lord's promise to David concerns his offspring (2 Sam 7:12–15). All of these—a name, a place, offspring—are major concerns of the patriarchal narratives, and as we have seen, of Ruth, as well. The covenant with David also makes explicit mention of the Lord's presence with David (2 Sam 7:9; cf. Gen 26:3, 24)[76] and the Lord's loyal kindness (2 Sam 7:15), both of which were also prominent

[72] The *toledoth* formula which introduces the genealogy in Ruth 4:18 ("(and) these are the generations of" [(ו)אלה תולדות]) occurs ten times in Genesis (2:4; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2), where it serves as a key structural element for moving from the primeval history, through the patriarchs, on to the sons of Israel; it then occurs once in Numbers 3:1, and once again in 1 Chronicles 1:29. None of these genealogies goes further than the sons of Aaron, so chronologically, the genealogy in Ruth bridges the gap between Judah and David, signaling that Ruth should be read as a continuation of the covenant story that leaves off at the end of Genesis. Irmtraud Fischer writes, "[W]ith the genealogy of Perez, the Book of Ruth continues the Genesis narrative from Gen 38 without a break" (142). See, too, Harold Fisch, who remarks, "There are delicate but insistent signs throughout the book [of Ruth] pointing to a continuing covenant history beginning with the patriarchs and culminating with the royal house of David whose name forms the last word of the text" (435).

[73] Note that my argument here is similar, but not identical, to the claim in Gerleman, *Ruth*, referenced by Roland E. Murphey: "Gerleman is correct in seeing a parallel between Ruth and the patriarchal narratives; both have the same theological direction—leading into the primary saving institutions of Israel: the covenant with Israel at Sinai, and the covenant with David." *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, FOTL 13 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 87.

[74] McComiskey writes, "The covenant with David did not abrogate the Abrahamic covenant; it refined it and served as a gracious reaffirmation of the promise" (142). For discussion of the relationship between the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants, see especially 21–30.

[75] Significantly, it is "in Isaac" that Abraham's "offspring will be named [Niphal קרא]" (Gen. 21:12), as noted by Lortetz, 395n14. In that connection, observe the blessing in Ruth 4:14, which wishes for Naomi's grandson, "may his name be called [also Niphal of קרא] in Israel."

[76] In fact, as Jeremy Farmer has pointed out to me, the presence of the Lord is a crucial component of the Davidic Covenant, inasmuch as the occasion for the covenant is David's desire to build the temple, God's dwelling place with his people.

elements in the Ruth story.[77] And in David's response to the Lord, he characterizes all that God has promised him as God's "blessing" on his house (2 Sam 7:29). Thus, David is the kingly heir to God's covenant with Abraham, and his status as the elect son demonstrates that his father and grandfather and great-grandfathers, all the way back to Perez, were part of the line of elect heirs, as well.

So what role does the Book of Ruth play in relation to David and the covenant? The characters in the story itself—the historical Elimelech and Naomi and Ruth and Boaz—could not have known that they were playing a part in a series of events that would culminate in the birth of an heir to the Lord's promises to Abraham. Ruth is a retrospective story, written from the perspective of people who already know that David is the elect covenant heir, and it shows how the Lord preserved the line of elect heirs during a period of national and personal crisis on par with the crises that Abraham and Isaac themselves faced, crises that threatened the very continuation of the elect covenant family. The story of Ruth demonstrates the Lord's faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant even when the heirs to that covenant did not realize their personal role in transmitting it to the following generations.

By placing his story alongside the Isaac famine narrative, the narrator invites the reader to affirm the Lord's astonishing preservation of the covenant seed, almost literally bringing life from death. Just as the famine stories in Genesis confirm the Lord's election of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so too this story of a family line dying and rising again in another Judean famine is meant to confirm the Lord's election of that family to receive his covenant promises. The choice of Isaac, in particular, as the background for the story of Ruth is especially fitting: Isaac is remarkable for his passivity and general lack of action, but his son was Israel, his grandsons the tribal heads. No Isaac, no Israel.[78] So too with Elimelech's family, whose greatness lies ultimately in God's election and providential preservation for the sake of Israel's future king, David.

Conclusion

The approach to reading Ruth offered in this article may raise the question: How could so many readers have missed multiple echoes of the Isaac narratives, echoes that I have claimed to be a crucial component of Ruth's interpretation? Part of the answer lies in an observation by Richard Hays, remarking on the reason that so many allusions to the OT in the letters of Paul have been overlooked in the history of the church: "Gentile Christian readers at a very early date lost Paul's sense of urgency about relating the gospel to God's dealings with Israel and, slightly later, began reading Paul's letters

[77] Katharine Doob Sakenfeld notes that "although the term 'loyalty' [חֶסֶד] is used in the history with reference to the Davidic tradition, the word 'covenant' is restricted to occasions in which we find reference to whole people and the law, not just reference to the royal line." *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology 16 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 63. Thus, if Ruth is meant to evoke the Davidic Covenant, as I claim it does, one expects the word *loyal kindness* (חֶסֶד), but it would actually be surprising to find the word *covenant* (בְּרִית) in the book. See also Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 17 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 143.

[78] Alter observes that Isaac and Rebekah are "the first man and wife born into the covenant God has made with Abraham and his seed," and so they "provide certain paradigmatic traits for the future historical destiny of Israel." Alter goes on to say, "The alignment of Ruth's story with the Pentateuchal betrothal type-scene becomes an intimation of her portentous future as progenitrix of the divinely chosen house of David" (60).

within the interpretive matrix of the New Testament canon."[79] The same can be said for Gentile Christian readers of the OT: perhaps we have been too quick to look for the NT relevance of OT stories, losing the urgency felt by the authors of those OT narratives to relate their histories to even earlier narratives in Scripture. In his essay on the web of connections between Ruth and other OT narratives, Peter Leithart speaks of "internal typologies *within* the Old Testament" (emphasis mine) and continues: "By refusing to 'jump to Jesus' and by treating the elaborately woven texture of the Old Testament with serious delight, Christians curb the habit of skimming the surface" of the OT.[80] While Leithart speaks of "serious delight," Hays speaks of the "satisfaction" that a reader experiences when an echo of Scripture in Paul (and in our case, in Ruth) resonates for him.[81] This is, after all, what the author must have intended: not an ironclad proof that he was alluding to this or that earlier Scripture, but the poignancy felt by a reader who, like the author, has read and loved and learned by heart the earlier narratives.

Such a reader must not, of course, stay in the OT: in fact, he finds that the OT is a broad highway to Jesus, rather than a series of springboards. Such a reader does indeed look for the NT relevance of OT, but he finds that the care he has taken in the OT enriches rather than diminishes the New.

[79] Hays, 31.

[80] "When Gentile Meets Jew: A Christian Reading of Ruth & the Hebrew Scriptures," *Touchstone*, May 2009, 24.

[81] Ibid.