

May 15th, 2013

Ruth and Work

Theology of Work Project

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Recommended Citation

Theology of Work Project and Block, Daniel I., "Ruth and Work" (2013). *Theology of Work Project*. 23.
https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/tow_project/23

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ADOPTED ON:

May 15, 2013

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Introduction to the Book of Ruth

The book of Ruth tells the extraordinary story of God’s faithfulness to Israel in the life and work of three ordinary people, Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. As they work through both economic hardship and prosperity, we see the hand of God at work most clearly in their productive agricultural labor, generous management of resources for the good of all, respectful treatment of co-workers, ingenuity in the face of necessity, and the conception and raising of children. Throughout everything God’s faithfulness to them creates opportunities for fruitful work, and their faithfulness to God brings the blessing of provision and security to each other and the people around them.

The events in the book of Ruth take place at the time of the festival of the barley harvest (Ruth 1:22; 2:17, 23; 3:2, 15, 17), when the connection between God’s blessing and human labor was celebrated. Two passages from the *Torah* give the background of the festival (emphasis added):

You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first *fruits of your labor*, of what you sow in the field. (Exodus 23:16)

You shall keep the festival of weeks for the Lord your God, contributing a freewill offering in proportion to the *blessing that you have received from the Lord* your God. Rejoice before the Lord your God—you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the *strangers, the orphans, and the widows* who are among you—at the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. *Remember that you were a slave in Egypt*, and diligently observe these statutes. (Deuteronomy 16:10-12.)

Together these passages establish a theological foundation for the events in the Book of Ruth.

1. God’s blessing is the source of human productivity (“blessing that you have received from the Lord”).
2. God bestows his blessing of productivity through human labor (“fruits of your labor”).
3. God calls people to provide opportunities to work productively (“remember that you were a slave in

Egypt,” an allusion to God’s liberation of his people from slavery in Egypt and his provision for them in the wilderness and the land of Canaan) for poor and vulnerable people (“the strangers, the orphans and the widows.”)

In sum, productivity of human labor is an extension of God’s work in the world, and God’s blessing on human labor is inextricably linked to God’s command to provide generously for those without the means to provide for themselves. These principles underlie the Book of Ruth. But the book is a narrative, not a theological treatise, and the story is compelling.

Tragedy strikes the family of Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1:1-22)

The story begins with a famine “in the days when the judges ruled” (Ruth 1:1). This was a time when the people of Israel had abandoned God’s ways and fallen into idolatry, horrific social conditions, and a disastrous civil war, as told in the chapters of Judges immediately preceding the Book of Ruth in Christian Bibles. (The books occur in different order in Hebrew Bibles.) As a whole the nation certainly had not been following the precepts of *Torah* with respect to work or anything else. The characters in the story—Naomi at least— recognized the loss of God’s blessing this brought (Ruth 1:13, 1:20-21). As a result, the socio-economic fabric of society was falling apart, and a famine gripped the land.

Responding to the famine, Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their two sons moved to Moab—a move of desperation given the long enmity between Israel and Moab—where they thought the prospects for productive work were greater. We do not know whether they were successful in finding work, but the sons both found wives in Moab. But within ten years, they experienced both social and economic tragedy—the death of all the men, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law without husbands (Ruth 1:3-5). The three widows then had to support themselves without the legal and economic rights accorded to men in their society. In short, they had no husbands, no clear title to land, and no resources with which to make a living. “Call me *Mara* [bitter], for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.” Naomi lamented (Ruth 1:20), reflecting the harshness of their situation.

Along with aliens and the fatherless, widows received a great deal of attention in the Law of Israel.^[1]

Because they had lost the protection and support of their husbands, they were easy targets for economic and social abuse and exploitation. Many resorted to prostitution simply to survive, a situation all too common for vulnerable women in our day as well. Naomi had not only become a widow, but was also an alien in Moab. Yet, if she returned to Bethlehem with her daughters-in-law, the younger women would be widows and aliens in Israel.^[2] Perhaps in response to the vulnerability they faced no matter where they might live, Naomi urged them to return to their maternal homes, and prayed that the God of Israel would grant each of them security within the household of a (Moabite) husband (Ruth 1:8-9). Yet one of the daughters-in-law, Ruth, could not bear to be separated from Naomi, no matter the hardship. Her words to Naomi sing the depth of her love and loyalty:

Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. (Ruth 1:16-17)

Life can be hard, and these women faced its worst.

God's blessing is the source of human productivity (Ruth 2:1-4)

Naomi and Ruth face agonizing hardship, but in God, hardship is not hopelessness. Although we encounter no obvious miraculous interventions in the Book of Ruth, the hand of God is by no means absent. On the contrary, God is at work at every moment, especially through the actions of faithful people in the book. Long ago God had promised Abraham, "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you" (Genesis 17:6). The Lord made good his promise by restoring Israel's agricultural productivity (Ruth 1:6), despite his people's unfaithfulness. When Naomi heard of it, she determined to return home to Bethlehem to try to find food. Ruth, true to her word, went with her, intending to find work to support both herself and Naomi. As the story unfolds, God's blessings pour out on the two of them—and ultimately on all humanity—through Ruth's work and its results.

God's faithfulness to us underlies all productivity

Overall, the Hebrew Scriptures portray God as the divine Worker, who provides a paradigm for human work. The Bible opens with a picture of God at work—speaking, creating, forming, building. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God not only appears as the subject of many "work" verbs, but people often refer to him metaphorically as "Worker." Throughout the Hebrew Bible God not only engages in many kinds of work himself,^[3] he also commands the people of Israel to work according to the divine pattern (Exodus 20:9-11). That is, God works directly, and God works through people.

The main characters in the book of Ruth acknowledged God as the foundation for their work by the way they bless each other and through their repeated declarations of faith.^[4] Some of these expressions are praise for actions God has already taken (he has not withheld his kindness Ruth 1:20; he provided a kinsman redeemer Ruth 4:14). Others are pleas for divine blessing (Ruth 2:4, 19; 3:10), or presence (Ruth 2:4), or kindness (Ruth 1:8). A third group involves more specific requests for divine action. May God grant rest (Ruth 1:9). May God make Ruth an equal of Rachel and Leah (Ruth 4:11-12). The blessing in Ruth 2:12 is particularly significant: "May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!" All of these blessings expressed the assurance that God is at work to provide for his people.

Ruth desired to receive God's blessing of productivity, whether from God himself (Ruth 2:12) or through a human being "in whose sight I might find favor" (Ruth 2:2). Despite being a Moabite, she was wiser than many in Israel when it came to recognizing the Lord's hand in her work.

For the action of the story, one of the most important blessings from God is that he had blessed Boaz with a productive farm (Ruth 2:3). Boaz was fully aware of God's role in his labor, as shown in his repeated invoking of the Lord's blessing (Ruth 2:4; 3:10).

God uses apparently chance events to empower people's work

One of the ways God fulfills his promise of fruitfulness is his mastery of the world's circumstances. The odd construction of "her chance chanced upon" (rendered, "as it happened" by the NRSV) in Ruth 2:3 is deliberate. In colloquial English, we would say, "As her luck would have it." But the statement is ironic. The narrator intentionally uses an expression that forces the reader to sit up and ask how it could be that Ruth "happened" to land in the field of a man who was not only gracious (Ruth 2:2) but also a kinsman (Ruth 2:1). As the story unfolds, we see that Ruth's arrival at Boaz' field was evidence of God's providential hand. The same can be said for the appearance of the next-of-kin just as Boaz sat down at the gate in Ruth 4:1-2.

What a dreary world it would be if we had to go to work every day expecting nothing except what we ourselves have the power to accomplish. We must depend on the work of others, the unexpected opportunity, the burst of creativity, the unforeseen blessing. Surely one of the most comforting blessings of following Christ is his promise that when we go to work, he goes to work alongside us and shoulders the load with us. "Take my yoke upon you...for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30). Ruth did not have the words of Jesus, but she lived in faith that under God's wings, she would find all that she needed (Ruth 2:12).

Human productivity is an outgrowth of our faithfulness to God

God's faithfulness to Israel was mirrored in Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi. Ruth had promised, "Where you go I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Ruth's promise was not a plea to stay on as a passive consumer in what remained of Elimelech's household, but a commitment to provide her mother-in-law as much as she was able. Although not an Israelite herself, she seems to have been living according to the Law of Israel, as embodied in the 5th Commandment, "Honor your mother and father." The restoration of productive work for her and her family began with her commitment to working in faithfulness to God's law.

God bestows his blessing of productivity through human labor (Ruth 2:5-7)

God's faithfulness underlies human productivity, but people have to do the actual work. This was God's intent from the beginning (Genesis 1:28, 2:5, 2:15). Ruth was eager to work hard to support herself and Naomi. "Let me go to the field," she implored, and when she was given a chance to work, her co-workers reported that "she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment" (Ruth 2:7). Her work was exceptionally productive. When she came home after her first day at work and beat out the barley from the stalks, her harvest yielded a full ephah of grain (Ruth 2:17). This amounted to approximately five gallons of barley. [5] Both God and Boaz commended (and rewarded) her for her faith and industry (Ruth 2:12, 17-23; 3:15-18).

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In greater or lesser degree, we are all vulnerable to circumstances that make it difficult or impossible to earn a living. Natural disaster, layoff, redundancy, prejudice, injury, illness, bankruptcy, unfair treatment, legal restrictions, language barriers, lack of relevant training or experience, age, sex, economic mismanagement by government or industry, geographic barriers, getting fired, the need to take care of family members, and a host of other factors can prevent us from working to support ourselves and the people who depend on us. Nonetheless, God expects us to work as fully as we are able (Exodus 20:9).

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Even if we cannot find a job that meets our needs, we need to work to the highest degree we can. Ruth did not have a steady job with regular hours and a paycheck. She was anxious about whether her station in life would be enough to find "favor" (Ruth 2:12) in the workplace, and she could not necessarily expect to earn enough to feed her family. She went to work anyway. Many of the conditions we face today in unemployment and underemployment are deeply discouraging. If the lack of high-skilled jobs leaves us only what seem like menial opportunities, if discrimination prevents us from getting the job we are qualified for, if circumstances prevent us from getting the education we need for a good job, if conditions make work seem hopeless, Ruth's example is that we are called to work nonetheless. Our work might not even earn any income at first, be it volunteering to help others, caring for family members, getting education or training, or caring for our homes.

The saving grace is that God is the power behind our work. We do not depend on our own ability or the circumstances around us to provide for our needs. Instead we work faithfully as we are able, knowing that God's faithfulness to his promise of fruitfulness is what gives us confidence that our work is worthwhile, even in the most adverse situations. We are seldom able to see in advance how God can

make use of our work to fulfill his promises, but God's power extends far beyond what we can see.

Receiving God's blessing of productivity means respecting co-workers (Ruth 2:8-16)

As Ruth 2:2 relates, Boaz was "a prominent rich man." Whatever connotations that might have today, in Boaz's case that meant he was one of the best bosses in the Bible. His leadership style began with respect. When he came out to the field where his men are working, he greeted them with a blessing ("The Lord be with you."), and they responded in kind ("The Lord bless you." Ruth 2:4). Boaz's workplace is remarkable at many levels. He owned and managed an enterprise that depended on a hired workforce. He controlled the work environment of others. In contrast to many work environments where supervisors and owners treat their workers with disdain and workers have no respect for their bosses, Boaz had fostered a relationship of trust and mutual respect.

Boaz put his respect for his workers into practice by providing them with water as they worked (Ruth 2:9), by eating with them, and most of all by sharing his food with the person regarded as the lowest among them (Ruth 2:14). Later we learn that at harvest time, Boaz the landowner winnowed with his harvesters and slept with them out in the field (Ruth 3:2-4, 14).

Boaz demonstrated a high view of every human being as an image of God (Genesis 1:27, Proverbs 14:31, 17:5) by the sensitive way he treated the alien woman in his workplace. When he spotted her among the workers, he asked gently, "To whom does this woman belong?" (Ruth 2:5), assuming she was attached/dependent upon some man—either as wife or daughter—perhaps some landowner in the area. When he heard that she was a Moabite woman who had returned from Moab with Naomi (Ruth 2:6), and heard of her plea for permission to glean behind his harvesters (Ruth 2:7), shockingly, the first words he said were, "Listen carefully my daughter." Sharing his food with a foreign woman (Ruth 2:14) was a more significant act that it might appear. Respectable landowning men were not accustomed to conversing with foreign women,^[6] as Ruth herself points out (Ruth 2:10). A man with more concern for social appearances and business opportunities, and less compassion for someone in need, might have sent a female Moabite intruder off his land at once. But Boaz was more than willing to stand up for the vulnerable worker in their midst, whatever the reaction of others might be.

Indeed with this account we may have encountered the world's earliest recorded anti-sexual harassment policy in the workplace. Perhaps he was aware that many farm owners and workers were abusive men^[7] and perhaps this is why he informed Ruth that he has told his men not to touch her (Ruth 2:9). Naomi's comment, "It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field" (Ruth 2:22), certainly shows that she feared for the safety of her daughter-in-law. The terms of Boaz's policy are clear:

1. The male workers were not to “bother” this woman. Normally the word, *naga*, means “to touch,” but here it functions more generally for “to strike, harass, take advantage of, mistreat.”^[8] Boaz recognizes that the implication of being touched is determined by how the person being touched perceives it.
2. Ruth was to have equal access to water (Ruth 2:9) and to the lunch table (Ruth 2:14). At meal time, Boaz invited Ruth to come sit with him and his workers and to dip her morsel of bread in his sauce (Ruth 2:14). Then he himself served her until she was more than satisfied. The choice of verb, *nagash*, “to come near, approach,” suggests that as a stranger Ruth had deliberately and appropriately (according to custom) kept her distance. Boaz’ sexual harassment policy is not simply restrictive—prohibiting certain actions— but it is positive in its intent, meaning that the response of the one in danger of harassment is the gauge of what others may do. Boaz looked to whether Ruth felt safe as the measure of whether he was offering the protection she needed. He demonstrated by example how he expected vulnerable female workers to be respected.
3. Boaz’ regular employees were not to reproach (Ruth 2:15) or rebuke (Ruth 2:16) her. Along with the word “bother” in 2:9, these expressions demonstrate that harassment comes in many forms: physical, emotional, and verbal abuse. In fact, with his effusive pronouncement of blessing upon Ruth (Ruth 2:12), Boaz represents a dramatically affirming model.
4. The regular employees were to make Ruth’s work environment as secure as possible and to go out of their way to assist her in achieving her work tasks (Ruth 2:15–16). In the workplace, prevention of harassment means not only creating a safe environment, but a productive one for those at risk. Barriers to productivity, advancement, and their attendant rewards must be eliminated. Boaz could have made Ruth safe by keeping her at a great distance from the male workers. But this would have denied her access to water and food, and may have caused loss of grain due to wind or animals before she could gather the sheaves. Boaz made sure that the safeguards he created enabled her to be fully productive.

Boaz’ workers seemed to catch his generous spirit. When their boss greeted them with a blessing, they blessed him in return (Ruth 2:4). When Boaz asked about the identity of the woman who had appeared at his field, the supervisor of the workforce acknowledged that Ruth is a Moabite, but exhibited a gracious tone (Ruth 2:6–7). The fact that Ruth brought an entire ephah of grain home to Naomi testifies to the workers’ positive response to Boaz’s charge to treat Ruth well. Not only had they obviously cut a lot of grain for her, but they had also accepted this Moabite woman as a co-worker for the duration of the harvest (Ruth 2:21–23).

The positive effects of Boaz’ leadership extended beyond the workplace. When Naomi saw the results of Ruth’s efforts, she blesses the employer who had given her work and praises God for his kindness and generosity (Ruth 2:20). Later, it becomes obvious that Boaz’s high reputation in the community is bringing social harmony and glory to God (Ruth 4:11–12). All leaders—indeed all workers—shape the culture in which they work. Although we may think that we are constrained by our culture to conform to unfair, meaningless, or unproductive ways of working, in reality the way we work profoundly influences others. Boaz, a man of means in the midst of a corrupt and faithless society (Ruth 1:1, where

“when the judges ruled” is a shorthand for a corrupt society) succeeds in creating an honest, successful business. The harvest supervisor shapes egalitarian practices in a society shot through with misogyny and racism (Judges 19-21). Ruth and Naomi create a loving family in the face of great loss and hardship. When we feel pressure to conform to a bad environment at work, the promise of God’s faithfulness can overcome all the doubts we take on board from the cultural and social dysfunction around us.

God calls people to provide opportunities for the poor to work productively (Ruth 2:17-23)

The most important way God overcomes the barriers to our fruitfulness is through the actions of other people. In the Book of Ruth, we see this both in God’s law in society and in his guidance of individuals.

God’s law calls people of means to provide economic opportunities for the poor (Ruth 2:17-23)

The action of the Book of Ruth centers around gleaning, which was one of the most important elements of the Law for the protection of poor and vulnerable people. The requirements are laid out in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Exodus (click on the links below to see more on each of the relevant passages.)

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:9-10, repeated in part in Leviticus 23:22) See "[Leviticus 19:9-10](#)" in [Leviticus and Work](#) at www.theologyofwork.org.

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this. (Deuteronomy 24:19-22)

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year

you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. ([Exodus 23:10-11](#)) See "[Exodus 22:21-27 & 23:10-11](#)" in *Exodus and Work* at www.theologyofwork.org.

The basis of the law is the intention that all people are to have access to the means of production necessary to support themselves and their families. In general, every family (except among the priestly tribe of Levites, who were supported by tithes and offerings) was to have a perpetual allotment of land that could never be alienated (Numbers 27:5-11, 36:5-1; Deuteronomy 19:14, 27:17; Leviticus 25). Thus everyone in Israel would have the means to grow food. But foreigners, widows, and orphans typically would not receive an inheritance of land, so they were vulnerable to poverty and abuse. The gleaning law gave them the opportunity to provide for themselves by harvesting the edges of the field, the grain and produce that were unripe or missed during the initial harvest, and whatever sprang up in the fields that lay fallow any given year. Access to gleaning was to be provided free of charge by every landowner.

These passages suggest three grounds for the gleaning laws. Generosity toward the poor (1) was a prerequisite to God blessing the work of peoples' hands (Deuteronomy 24:19); (2) was to be driven by the memory of Israel's experience under cruel and abusive slave-masters in Egypt (Deuteronomy 24:22a); and (3) is a matter of obedience to the will of God (Deuteronomy 24:22b). We see all three of these motivations in Boaz' actions: (1) he blessed Ruth, (2) remembered God's graciousness to Israel, and (3) commended her for placing herself in God's hands (Ruth 2:12). It is an open question how fully the land and harvest laws were enforced in ancient Israel, but Boaz kept them in exemplary fashion.

The gleaning laws provided a remarkable support network for poor and marginalized people, at least to the extent they were actually practiced. We have already seen that God's intention is for people to receive his fruitfulness by working. Gleaning did exactly this. It provided an opportunity for productive work for those who otherwise would have to depend on begging, slavery, prostitution or other forms of degradation. Gleaners maintained the skills, self-respect, physical conditioning and work habits that would make them productive in ordinary farming, should the opportunity of marriage, adoption, or return to their country of origin arise. Landowners provided opportunities but did not gain an opportunity for exploitation. There was no forced labor. The benefit was available locally everywhere in the nation without the need for a cumbersome and corruption-prone bureaucracy. It did, however, depend on the character formation of every landowner to fulfill the gleaning law, and we should not romanticize the circumstances poor people faced in ancient Israel.

In the case of Boaz, Ruth and Naomi, the gleaning laws worked as intended. If it weren't for the possibility of gleaning, Boaz would have faced two alternatives once he became aware of Ruth and Naomi's poverty. He could have let them starve, or he could have had ready-made food (bread) delivered

to their house. The former is unacceptable, but the latter, while it may have alleviated their hunger, would have made them ever more dependent on Boaz. Because of the opportunity of gleaning, however, Ruth not only could work for the harvest, but she would also be able to use the grain to make bread through her own labors. The process preserved her dignity, made use of her skills and abilities, freed her and Naomi from long-term dependency, and made them less vulnerable to exploitation.

In today's social, political, and theological debates about poverty and private and public responses to it, these aspects of gleaning are well worth keeping in mind and debating vigorously. Christians disagree with each other about questions such as individual vs. social responsibilities, private vs. public means, and income distribution. Careful reflection on the Book of Ruth is unlikely to resolve these disagreements, but perhaps it can highlight shared aims and common ground. Modern society may not be well-suited to gleaning in the literal, agricultural sense, but are there aspects that can be incorporated into ways societies care for poor and vulnerable people today? In particular, how can we provide opportunities for people to gain access to the means of productive work rather than being smothered by dependency or exploitation?

God leads individuals to provide economic opportunities for the poor and vulnerable (Ruth 2:17-23)

Boaz was inspired to go significantly beyond what the law required in providing for the poor and vulnerable. The gleaning laws merely required landowners to leave some produce in the fields for foreigners, orphans and widows to glean. This generally meant the poor and vulnerable had difficult, dangerous, uncomfortable work, such as harvesting grain at the weedy edges of fields or high up in olive trees. The produce they obtained this way was usually of inferior quality, such as grapes and olives that had fallen to the ground or had not fully ripened. But Boaz tells his workers to be actively generous. They were to remove first-quality grain from the stalks they had cut, and leave them lying on top of the stubble so Ruth would need merely to pick them up. Boaz's concern was not to minimally fulfill a regulation, but to genuinely provide for Ruth and her family.

Furthermore, he insisted that she glean in his fields (keeping what she harvested for herself and Naomi, of course) and attach herself to his workers. He not only gave her access to his fields, he effectively made her one of his hired hands, even to the point of making sure she received pro-rata share of the harvest (Ruth 2:16).

[Practical Ways You Can Help Those Dealing With Unemployment Or The Loss Of Income \(Click to listen\)](#)

In a world in which every nation, every society, has under- and un-employed people in need of opportunities for work, how can Christians emulate Boaz? How can we encourage people to apply their God-given skills and talents to creating goods and services that employ people productively? How can we shape the character formation of people who own and manage society's resources so that they eagerly and creatively provide opportunities for the poor and marginalized?

How, indeed, do these questions apply to us? Is each of us a person of means, even if we are not rich like Boaz? Do middle class people have the means and the responsibility to provide opportunities for poor people? How about poor people themselves? What might God be leading each of us to do to bring his blessing of fruitfulness to other workers and would-be workers?

God's blessing is redoubled when people work according to his ways (Ruth 3:1-4:18)

In the remarkable episode of Ruth gleaning in Boaz's field, we see a vivid demonstration of Boaz's compassion, generosity, and ethic tolerance. This raises the questions, Why was Boaz's heart so soft toward Ruth, and why would he create this environment where anyone, even an alien Moabite woman, would feel at home? According to Boaz's own testimony Ruth embodied nobility and faithfulness to the true God (Ruth 3:10-11). As a result, he wished her to "have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge" (Ruth 2:12). Born in Moab, she had nonetheless turned to the God of Israel for salvation (Ruth 1:16). Boaz recognized God's wings over her and was eager to be the instrument of God's blessing for her. By caring for a destitute foreigner, he honored the God of Israel. In the words of the Israelite proverb: "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him" (Proverbs 14:31; see also Proverbs 17:5). The apostle Paul expressed this theme centuries later, "Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith" (Galatians 6:10)

As the story progressed, Boaz began to see Ruth as more than an industrious worker and faithful daughter-in-law to Naomi. In time he spread the wings of his garment over Ruth (Ruth 3:9)—an apt metaphor for marriage, mirroring the love and commitment represented by the wings of God. There is a work-related aspect to this love story, for there is real estate involved. Naomi still has some claim to the land that belonged to her late husband, and according to Israelite Law, his next-of-kin had the right to acquire the land and keep it in the family by marrying Naomi. Boaz, whom Naomi has mentioned was a kinsman of her husband (Ruth 2:1), was actually second in line to this right. He informs the man who is next-of-kin of his right, but when the man learns that claiming the land means he must also bring the Moabite Ruth into his household, he repudiates the right (Ruth 4:1-6).

Boaz, in contrast, was pleased to be chosen by God to show favor to this woman, despite her being

considered racially, economically, and socially inferior (Ruth 4:1-12). He exercises his right to redeem the property, not by wedding the elderly Naomi in a marriage of convenience, but with Naomi's permission by marrying Ruth in a match of love and respect. By marrying this Moabite woman, he fulfills in his own way a bit of God's promise to Abraham that "by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing" (Genesis 22:18). He also gains yet more property, which we may assume he manages as productively and generously as the property he already owned, foreshadowing Christ's words that "to those who have, more will be given" (Mark 4:25). As we will soon learn, it is entirely apt that Boaz should serve as a forerunner to Jesus. Along the way, the events of the story reveal still more about how God is at work in the world for good.

God works through human ingenuity (Ruth 3:1-18)

In instigating the courtship between Boaz and Ruth, necessity once again leads Naomi to move beyond the bounds of convention. She sends Ruth to Boaz's threshing floor in the middle of the night to "uncover his feet and lie down" (Ruth 3:4). Regardless of the meaning of "feet" in Ruth 3:4, 7, 8, 14—which may be a sexual euphemism^[9]—the scheme Naomi concocts is suspicious from the standpoint of custom and morality, and it is fraught with danger. Ruth's preparations and the choice of location for the encounter suggest the actions of a prostitute. Under normal circumstances, if a self-respecting and morally noble man like Boaz, sleeping at the threshing floor, should wake up in the middle of the night and discover a woman beside him he would surely send her off, protesting that he had nothing to do with women like her. Ruth's request that Boaz marry her is similarly bold from the perspective of custom: a foreigner propositioning an Israelite; a woman propositioning a man; a young person propositioning an older person; a destitute field worker propositioning a rich landowner. But instead of taking offense at Ruth's forwardness, Boaz blessed her, praised her for her commitment to the well-being of her family, called her "my daughter," reassured her by telling her not to fear, promised to do whatever she asked, and pronounced her a noble woman (Ruth 3:10-13). This extraordinary reaction is best attributed to the inspiration of God filling his heart and his tongue when he awoke.

God works through legal processes (Ruth 4:1-12)

Boaz accepts Ruth's request to marry her if her next of kin relinquishes his right to do so. He wastes no time arranging for the legal resolution of the issue (Ruth 4:1-12). By now the reader knows that nothing in this book happens by chance, and when on the very next day the next-of-kin happens to pass by the gate where Boaz has sat down, this too is attributable to the hand of God. If Ruth had been present for the legal proceedings in the gate, her heart would have sunk as the man with first rights announces he would claim Elimelech's land. However, when Boaz reminded him that Ruth goes with

the land, and he consequently changed his mind, her hope would have risen. What accounted for his change of mind? He says that he has just remembered he has a contravening legal obligation. “I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance” (Ruth 4:6), but the excuse is garbled and feeble. Yet it is enough for Boaz, whose speech of acceptance of the verdict is a model of clarity and logic. The case could easily have gone the other way, but it appears that the outcome was guided by God from the beginning.

God works through the fruitfulness of childbearing (Ruth 4:13-18)

In Ruth 4:13, we encounter only the second instance in the book (in addition to Ruth 1:6) where an event is expressly attributed to the hand of God. “When they [*meaning Ruth and Boaz*] came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son.” While the Hebrew term for conception/pregnancy (*herayon*) occurs elsewhere only in Genesis 3:16 and Hosea 9:11, the particular idiom “to grant/give conception,” occurs only here. We should interpret this statement against the backdrop of Ruth’s apparently ten-year, childless marriage with Mahlon (Ruth 1:4). After Ruth’s faithfulness in coming to Israel with Naomi, after Boaz’ faithfulness in providing for Ruth to glean his fields, and his faithfulness in serving as her kinsman-redeemer, after the faithful prayer of the witnesses in the gate (Ruth 1:11-12), and apparently as soon as Ruth and Boaz consummated the marriage, God conceived in Ruth a child. All human effort, even sexual intercourse, depends on God for the achievement of intended or desired goals (Ruth 4:13-15; cf. 1:4).

The birth of any child is a gift from God, but there was a bigger story in the birth of Ruth and Boaz’ son, Obed. He would become the grandfather of David, Israel’s greatest king (Ruth 4:22), and ultimately the ancestor of Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 1:5, 16-17). In this way the foreigner Ruth became a blessing to Israel and to everyone who follows Jesus to this day.

Conclusions about the Book of Ruth

The book of Ruth presents a powerful story of God at work, directing events from all sides to take care of his people, and more importantly, to accomplish his purposes. Faithfulness—both God’s faithfulness to people and people’s faithfulness to God—is enacted through work and its resulting fruitfulness. The characters in the book work diligently, justly, generously, ingeniously, in accordance with God’s law and inspiration. They recognize the image of God in human beings, and they work together in harmony and compassion.

From the events in the book of Ruth, we can conclude that Christians today must recognize not only the dignity, but also the value of work. Work brings glory to God. It brings benefits to others. It serves the world in which we live. As Christians today we may be accustomed to recognizing God’s hand most

clearly in the work of pastors, missionaries and evangelists, but theirs is not the only legitimate work in the kingdom of God. The Book of Ruth reminds us that ordinary work such as agriculture is a faith-filled calling, whether it is performed by wealthy landowners or poverty-stricken foreigners. Feeding our families is holy work, and anyone who has the means to help others feed their families becomes a blessing from God. Every legitimate occupation is God's work. Through us God makes, designs, organizes, beautifies, helps, leads, cultivates, cares, heals, empowers, informs, decorates, teaches, and loves. We are the wings of God.

Our work honors God when we treat co-workers with honor and dignity, whether we have the power to shape others' working conditions or whether we put ourselves at risk by standing up for others. We live out our covenant with God when we work for the good of our fellow human beings—especially the socially and economically marginalized. We honor God when we seek others' interests and do everything in our power to humanize their work and advance their well being.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:19-22; 26:12-13; 27:19.
- [2] On the difficulties of being a Moabite in an Israelite world, see Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 627.
- [3] God creates (Genesis 1:1); builds (2 Samuel 7:27; 1 Sam. 2:35), makes (Genesis 2:4), forms (Genesis 2:7, 8, and fashions "works of his hands" (Psalms 8:6). He is depicted as a creator (Genesis 1-2; Job 10:3-12; Psalms 139:13-16), builder, architect (Proverbs 8:27-31), musician/composer (Deuteronomy 31:19), metalworker (Isaiah. 1:24-26), tailor (Job 29:14; Isaiah 40:22), potter (Isaiah 31:9), farmer (Hosea 10:11), shepherd (Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34), tentmaker/camper (Job 9:8), temple designer and builder (Exodus 25, 35; 1 Chronicles 28:11-19), and scribe/writer (Exodus 24:12; 31:18; 34:34:28; etc.).
- [4] Ruth 1:8-9; 2:4a; 2:4b; 2:12; 2:19 [without naming the Lord]; 2:20; 3:10; 4:11-12; 4:14a; 4:14b-15.
- [5] Jack B. Scott, "82 ," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke, electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 38.
- [6] Fredric W. Bush, vol. 9, *Ruth, Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 129.

- [7] Daniel I. Block, "Unspeakable Crimes: The Abuse of Women in the Book of Judges," *The Southern Baptist Theological Journal* 2 (1998): 46-55.
- [8] Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 659-60.
- [9] Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 683-88.