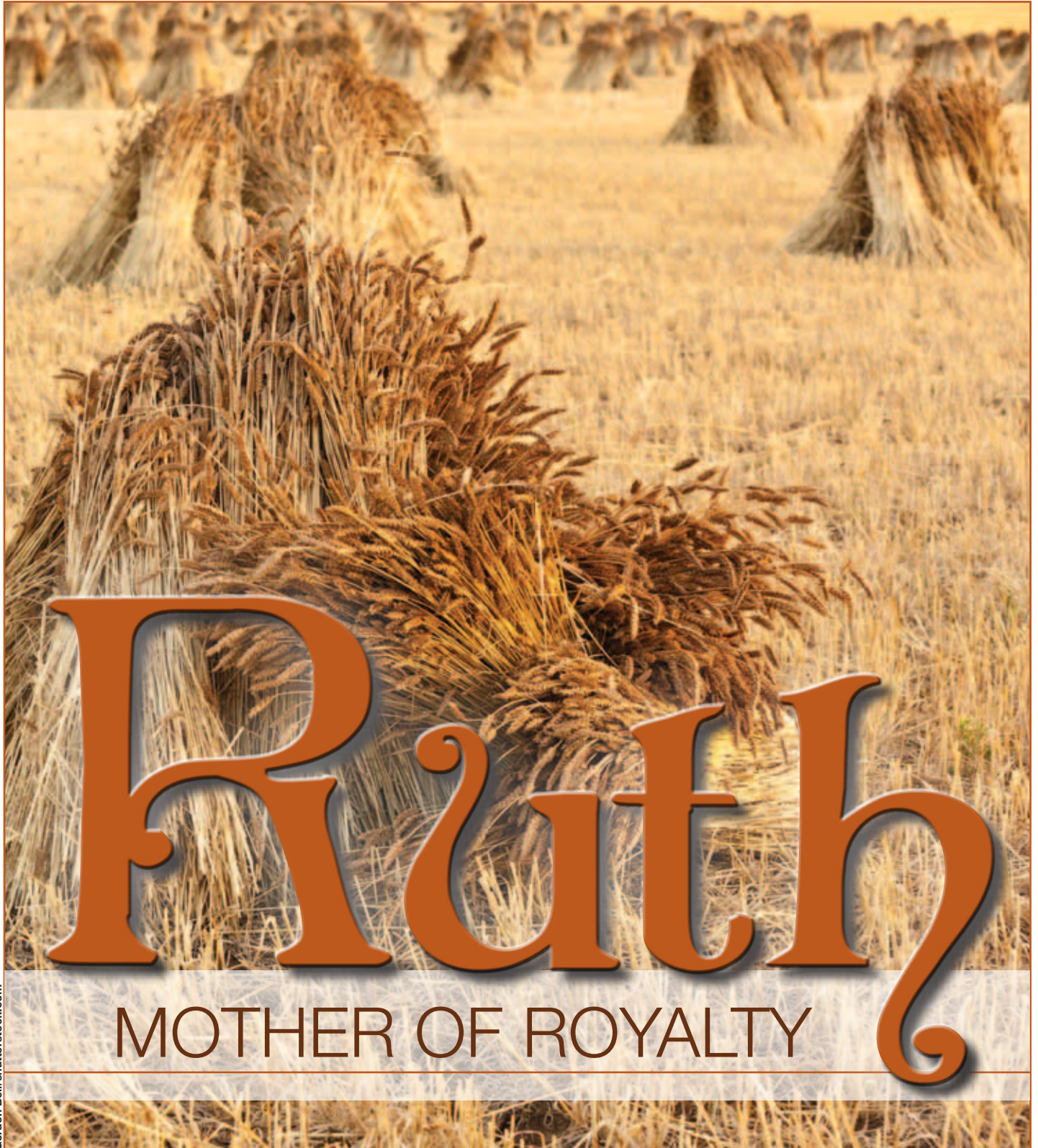


ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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Ruth

MOTHER OF ROYALTY



Ruth, one of the most beloved books in all of Scripture, stands out as the story of a remarkable Gentile woman whose love and loyalty elevate her to the esteemed position of “mother of royalty” in Israel’s Messianic lineage. Jewish history tells us it is the account of a young maiden, of questionable heritage herself, whose virtue and kindness compel her to cast her lot with her widowed mother-in-law, leave behind her own claim to royalty, and embrace a God whose people were the longtime enemies of the kingdom her father ruled.

It is at once a book of optimism, hope, alienation, and despair. Despite her circumstances, the lovely young Ruth is a model of noble behavior and life-changing faith. Together with Naomi, she has been a princess, a pauper, a pagan, and an outcast. But the journey that brought her *out* of Moab brought her *in* to Judea, and there she would find redemption.

A Story of Redemption

That is how the book of Ruth is often categorized: a story of redemption. Some would say it is an account focused on loyalty, and others call it a chronicle of faithfulness. Today, many Christians recognize themselves in the story as those who would leave behind the traditional teaching of Replacement Theology and cleave, as did Ruth, to the Jewish people.

But the Jewish sages teach that the real meaning of this incredible narrative rests on one word: *chesed* (kindness). The means to redemption is kindness, they say, and the book of Ruth is, in fact, a complex story of God's *chesed*, His tender love and covenant faithfulness lived out through very unlikely characters. The *Talmud* [rabbinic commentary on Jewish tradition and the Hebrew Scriptures] says, "This scroll [of Ruth] contains neither laws of purity nor impurity, neither what is permitted nor forbidden. Why was it written? To teach the reward of those who deal kindly with others."

The book of Ruth is an important one in Jewish tradition and liturgy. It is read every year on *Shavuot* [Feast of Weeks or Pentecost], the festival that celebrates the time when God gave the *Torah* [Gen.–Deut.] to Israel. Throughout the generations, the rabbis have asked why this book is read on that holiday and not some other one, and of course, there are many different answers.

Some say it is because the story takes place during the barley harvest as does *Shavuot*. Others say it is to remind us that *Torah* can only become part of man through suffering and affliction, or that the prophet Samuel recorded the story in order to preserve King David's genealogy. David, they say, was born and died on *Shavuot*. Other sages have written, however, that at the time *Torah* was given, Israel's forefathers had the status of converts and were required to undergo circumcision and immersion in order to receive it. It is proper to read the story of the convert Ruth, who became the mother of Israel's royalty, as if Israel were declaring to her: "We were all converts then."

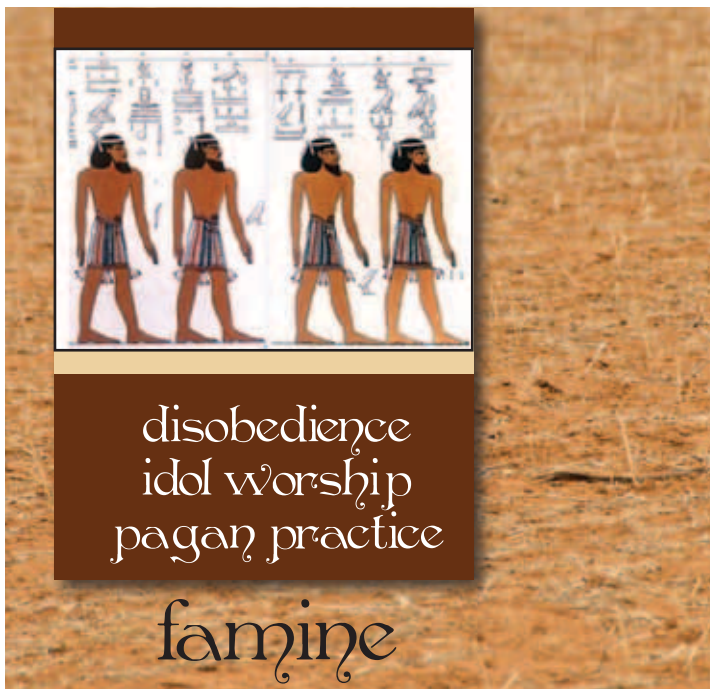
Regardless of the reason, Ruth's importance has caused the book to be the focus of attention by sages and historians, and a good deal of information is available to help us understand the story and its implications on a much deeper level. In this teaching letter, we're going to look in depth at how Jewish tradition views her remarkable story and its impact on history.



Photo by Becky Brimmer

chesed
kindness

The Context of Time and Place



The story takes place during the time of the judges of ancient Israel. Ruth 1:1 tells us that in the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem went to live in Moab with his wife and two sons. A much better understanding can be reached, however, by beginning our study with the last verse of the preceding book, Judges 22:25: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

In other words, the famine that plagued Israel wasn't just a physical one but a spiritual one as well. The Israelites had strayed far from God's ideal by failing to cleanse the land of its pagan gods and adopting the customs and morality of surrounding Canaanite tribes. Throughout the book of Judges, Israel vacillated between defeat and victory, poverty and plenty, war and peace, as they struggled to free themselves from the iron grip of disobedience, idol worship, and pagan practice that had tormented them since the days of the golden calf.

The rabbis also point out that famine is caused by drought, and drought in the biblical narrative is often the result of stubborn disobedience. Perhaps this period of extreme hardship comes at the hands of a loving God who withholds the rain in an attempt to draw the hearts of His wayward children.

Bethlehem



Bethlehem of Judea

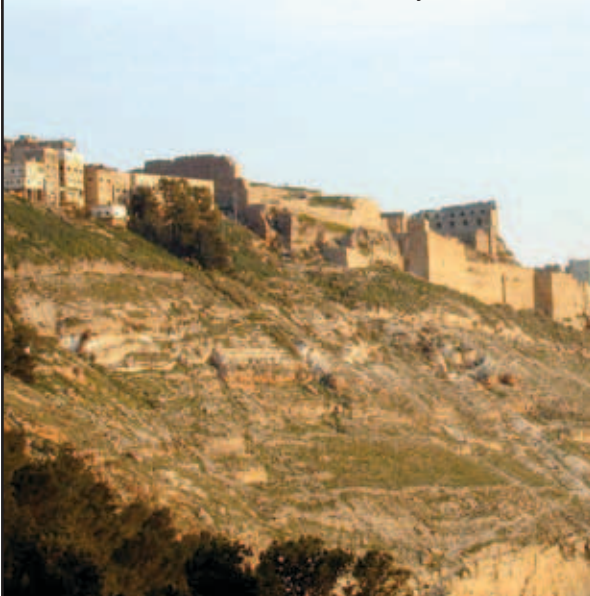
Meaning “house of bread” in Hebrew, Bethlehem was just that. It was literally the bread basket of the region, an agricultural area that provided grain for the multitudes in Judea. Tradition states that Bethlehem was founded by Perez, the son Tamar bore to Judah as recorded in Genesis 38. God’s blessing, it is said, rested on the community because of Judah’s willingness to admit his guilt when Tamar was about to be executed for unchastity. The elect of the tribe of Judah were said to reside there, King David was born and raised there, and Christians believe that Yeshua [Jesus] was also born there. So blessed was Bethlehem that the sages say anyone who entered hungry always left completely satisfied.

Although it was a relatively small community, it was a center of material and spiritual importance, and Jewish history teaches that Naomi’s husband Elimelech was the leading citizen of Bethlehem. He was a leader, authority, and prince of the tribe of Judah, a position that could have secured his place in history among the great men of Israel. His decision to abandon the people he was tasked to lead and protect, however, marked him for time immemorial as among those leaders chastised by the prophets for their selfishness and lack of faithfulness to God’s calling.



“house
of
bread”

The ancient walls of Kir in modern-day Jordan



Moab

Moab was the district extending the length of the eastern side of the Dead Sea. Although exact numbers are not known, it is thought to have been a heavily populated area, very fertile and prosperous as evidenced by the many cities and towns known to have existed there. As in other parts of the Middle East, having enough water was a constant issue, and Moab’s rivers and streams relied on winter rains for replenishing.

The people were actually close kin to the Israelites, having descended from Abraham’s nephew Lot (Gen. 19:36–37). Their religion, although polytheistic, was dominated by the pagan god Chemosh. This false deity is frequently mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures and, like his counterpart Molech in Ammon (north of Moab), he required human sacrifice for propitiation. Though the Moabites worshiped Baal and many lesser gods, it was on the altar of Chemosh that they sacrificed their children.

The Moabites were an agrarian people, but their history is rife with battles and military campaigns, many of them with their Israelite neighbors. Scripture tells us in the book of Numbers that their trouble with Israel began during the Exodus when Moses requested permission to pass through their territory peacefully. Not only did the Moabite king refuse, he made an alliance with the Midianites and called in the seer Balaam to curse the Israelites and bring an end to their attempts to enter the Promised Land.

It was because of this lack of hospitality, accompanied by the attempted curse, that God proclaimed Moabites unredeemable. They would forever remain outside, never to be allowed to become a part of the household of Israel. The rabbis point out that this prohibition applied only to male Moabites and prevented them from marrying a Jewish woman or a legitimate convert to Judaism.

Of Moab's 45 major cities mentioned in the Bible and other historical documents, it is thought that Kir was the most important and the seat of the government. It was here that the king would have lived and held court, where laws were passed and taxes collected, and where high priests reigned in pagan temples overseeing temple prostitutes, orgiastic worship, and child sacrifice. It was here that King Eglon and his royal family lived in opulence and grandeur and where, the sages say, his daughters grew up: two princesses named Ruth and Orpah.

Two Moabites and Two Israelites

Ruth—It is hard to imagine that a culture like that of Moab could have produced a woman of tenderness and mercy like Ruth. The *Talmud* teaches that Moabites were drunkards and misers who had no sense of gratitude. They were liars and ingrates, and kindness was certainly not a trait they were known for. Yet, Ruth would grow to embody all that was the antithesis of her family heritage: goodness, kindness, humility, gentleness, selflessness, and integrity.

The rabbis say the answer is simple. Abraham, father of the Jewish people, was unique among men in kindness and benevolence. As he journeyed from place to place, he spread mercy and generosity, influencing the world for good and teaching others to emulate such traits. Lot, his nephew, accompanied him everywhere and certainly would have been influenced by his uncle. Yet, even though Lot was the father of the Moabites, that seed never took root in Moab. It seemed to lie dormant for centuries. And during the period of the judges, that unique quality of kindness, mixed with humility and honesty, seemed to wane in Israel as well.

Ruth, we are told, was a descendant of Abraham and Lot, thus an inheritor of Abraham's teaching of loving kindness. That seed, planted generations before, at last burst forth in beauty and radiance in her. Her role, the sages say, was to restore Israel's heritage of humility, integrity, love, and covenant faithfulness as a grandmother to King David and his Messianic lineage.

goodness
kindness
humility
gentleness
selflessness
integrity



Orpah walks away from Naomi.

Orpah—Christian teaching pays little attention to Orpah, finding it sufficient to say that Ruth made the right choice and Orpah the wrong one. When she walked away from Naomi, she disappeared from the pages of history. However, Jewish tradition has much more to say. The following is from Torah.org:

...Orpah...fell and fell far. Naomi understood that bereft of her guidance, Orpah might slip. When Naomi initially sent her daughters-in-law back, she kissed them. As [the Talmud] points out, this kiss was not a mere expression of emotion, but constituted a ritual. Naomi breathed into Orpah something of her own spirit that would accompany her in her sojourn among the idols of Moab. When Orpah did ultimately leave, she gave that kiss back for she no longer wanted Naomi or her God. She was going back and it will be for her a new life. Yet, what she had learned in the house of these Judeans refused to be forgotten; you might say it pursued her; it did not let her sleep. We can only imagine what feelings of frustration, anger and self-loathing Orpah experienced when she returned to the environment in which she grew up but which now felt foreign, even disgusted and revolted her. Yet she could not go back; her choice was final and could not be undone.



Orpah and Ruth are drawn to Naomi.



Naomi was Ruth's teacher.



While some looked at Ruth and saw a Moabite and a stranger, Boaz was able to see an exceptional and beautiful human being, and his humility compelled him to honor and respect her.

The sages point out people who have made such a choice—to walk away from what they know is right and good—often experience a profound sense of failure, sometimes accompanied by self-loathing and defeat. Such a decision drives them to the depths of degradation to punish themselves for their own actions. Such was the case, they say, with Orpah. She became so wanton that even the Moabites would not accept her. She was driven from Moab and ended up in the land of the Philistines where she bore sons out of wedlock and eventually became the grandmother of Goliath.

Naomi—The book of Ruth paints many pictures for us but none so graphically as the portrait we are given of Naomi. Rabbi I. Z. Lipowitz says this:

A ray of loving kindness illuminates the path of these two daughters of Moab...The Book of Ruth does not disclose the nature of the inner life of this family. Yet the passionate devotion of the daughters-in-law to the mother of their departed husbands allows us to appraise the purity and warmth permeating the family life of these two aristocrats of Judah. Otherwise the strong ties binding the women to this family would be utterly incomprehensible...The strongest influence however, emanates from Naomi. She was refined in word and deed. Orpah and Ruth were drawn toward her like planets gravitating around the sun.

There are many issues that might have influenced this story to a very different ending. No one, including the rabbis, ever determines whether Naomi was complicit in Elimelech's decision to desert the people of Bethlehem and wait out the famine in Moab. The sages are decisive in their condemnation of him, but we are never given a hint as to how Naomi reacted to his decision. And to flee would have been one thing, but to Moab? That seemingly preposterous decision could have sparked a spousal mutiny, or at least created a very unhappy wife, but there is no indication that Naomi reacted negatively. Further, the bitterness and disappointment that could have been generated by her sons' decisions to take Moabite wives seems absent from Naomi.

Once her sons had made the decision to marry, Naomi had a further bitter pill to swallow. Moabite women were very different from the women of Israel. Even though many Jews had strayed from the biblical ideal, the social fabric of the Jewish people was in many ways inculcated with godly principles. Jewish women were modest in clothing and behavior; fornication and adultery were not common. Worship involved personal and community interaction with the God of the universe and in no way incorporated the abhorrent practices of temple prostitution or human sacrifice. Jewish women were keepers of the home yet permitted to own property and enjoyed rights of inheritance, while Moabite women knew no such privilege. In other words, the chasm that separated this woman of Israel from her new daughters-in-law couldn't have been wider.

Ten years later, we find the three of them together on the road to Judea. And it is Naomi who is attempting to convince these Moabite women to return to their homeland and their people. The rabbis say there are several reasons for Naomi's behavior. First of all, she was aware that finding husbands in Judea might be difficult for Ruth and Orpah. But she may also have recognized that the people of Judea might not be quick to accept two Moabite women. Would the average citizens of Bethlehem be able to see past the hated, foreign exterior to the strong, kind young women Naomi had come to love?

Naomi also knew that a personal commitment to her would not be enough to sustain Ruth and Orpah should they be greeted by rejection and intolerance. Surviving such adversity would require more than

personal considerations. Only a truly righteous desire to come under the wings of the Almighty One would sustain her daughters-in-law through whatever they might encounter in Judea. She clearly cares deeply for both women, putting aside her own personal pain at having lost the men in her life and now choosing to separate from those dearest to her for their own good. As much as Ruth is a demonstration of *chesed*, so is Naomi.

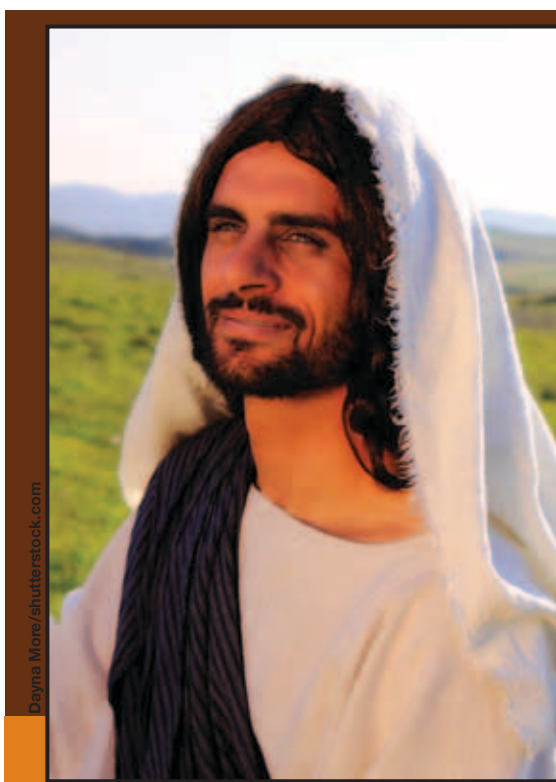
Both Orpah and Ruth loved Naomi. But Orpah's attachment does not go beyond the personal, and when faced with the potential difficulties, she decides to take Naomi's advice and walk away. But Ruth was motivated by religious ideal that led her beyond concern with personal happiness or private life. She not only loved Naomi, but she loved Naomi's God. Naomi was her teacher and her example. Her mother-in-law would show her how to love and worship the God of Israel, and Ruth felt safe to model herself after Naomi. And so the two walked together. Both women were suffering great loss, both in need of comfort and solace. Yet, each became a source of kindness for the other.

Boaz— According to Jewish history, Boaz was a man of greatness, one who came from a line of aristocratic ancestors. He was noble in thought and deed, a man of great integrity. While some looked at Ruth and saw a Moabite and a stranger, he was able to see an exceptional and beautiful human being, and his humility compelled him to honor and respect her. Naomi recognized him as a pious, wise, and gentle man, and a close relative who could serve as kinsman redeemer for her and her daughter-in-law.

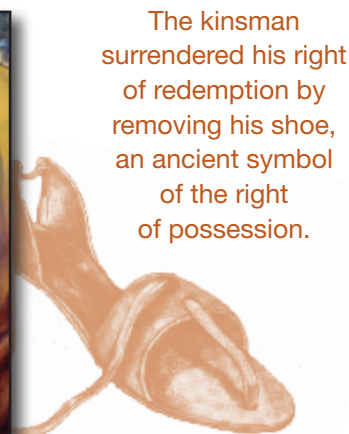
In ancient Israel, the kinsman redeemer was responsible for protecting the interests of the extended family by providing an heir for a brother who had died, redeeming land sold outside the family, or redeeming a relative sold into slavery (Deut. 5:5–10). The word for “kinsman” in Hebrew means much more than next of kin. It also means avenger, revenger, one who purchases, a deliverer, a ransomer, and a redeemer.

When Naomi instructs Ruth to approach Boaz on the threshing floor and seek a covenant relationship with him by requesting the covering of his wings, Boaz responds with the same *chesed* displayed by both Ruth and Naomi. He lovingly explains that there is a kinsman that is closer than he. But if at all possible, Boaz would willingly accept the role of redeemer and bridegroom.

Once the unnamed kinsman surrendered his right of redemption by removing his shoe, an ancient symbol of the right of possession, Boaz delights to become her husband. Ruth, daughter of Eglon, king of Moab, becomes Ruth, daughter of Naomi, wife of Boaz, lover of the most high God, grandmother of David king of Israel, and “mother of royalty” in the lineage of the Messiah. That, the rabbis say, is the reward for true, godly, selfless kindness...*chesed* personified.



avenger
revenger
one who purchases
deliverer
ransomer
redeemer



The kinsman surrendered his right of redemption by removing his shoe, an ancient symbol of the right of possession.

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"Where you go, I will go."

Today, Ruth's unshakable faithfulness to Naomi and the God of Israel has, for many, become a symbol of the growing love and commitment to the nation and people of Israel found among Christians. In this scenario, Naomi is seen as the Jewish people. She has lived in exile in her Moabite *diaspora*, and the time has come for her to return to her homeland. Orpah's refusal to acknowledge Naomi's God and support her in her choice to return to Judea can be seen as representing many in the world today who do not support Israel's right to exist in their ancient homeland.

And in many ways, Ruth can be seen as a picture of the many in the Church cleaving to Israel and refusing to be turned away. There are some differences, however. Ruth was a pagan who left behind all that she had been to become a part of Naomi's world. The rabbis recognize that her conversion was real and made her a true member of the household of Israel.

As Christians, however, we are not called to become something other than what we are. Our faith is not something to be left behind, but rather is the basis for our support of God's nation and people. And like Ruth, *chesed* should be the governing principle of our relationship. Covenant love and faithfulness expressed in unconditional friendship, building a relationship of sincerity and mutual respect, should be the hallmarks of our journey together as they were for Ruth and Naomi's.

With that as our foundation, we can truly say, "*Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God*" (Ruth 1:16).

By Cheryl Hauer, International Development Director

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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

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