

Omnibus – Joshua, Judges, Ruth
By Rich Lusk

Prologue

Do you ever find anything in the Bible that offends your moral sensibilities? Anything that embarrasses you? For many people today, the Old Testament is a rock of offense and a stone of stumbling. Probably the most scandalous section of the Hebrew Scriptures is the conquest of Canaan recorded in the book of Joshua. It looks like God is commanding full-scale genocide, more diabolical than anything the Hitlers, Maos, and Pol-Pots of our era have cooked up.

Celebrity atheist Richard Dawkins puts his distaste for the Old Testament in rather colorful terms:

The God of the old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, blood-thirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

Dawkins' charges against the Christian God can, of course, be refuted. But even inside the church, it's not uncommon to find people who pit the harsh, angry, blood-thirsty God (or god?) of the Old Testament against the sweet, loving, tenderhearted deity revealed in Jesus.

As we will see, the conquest of the land of Canaan was not genocidal. It was not an "ethnic cleansing" at all. It was actually a revelation of God's perfect justice. And more than that, it was an important chapter in the unfolding narrative of God's plan to bring his saving grace to all peoples.

How do Joshua, Judges, and Ruth fit together? These three books form an interlocking story in the midst of a crucial, transitional period of Israel's history. Joshua records Israel's entrance into the new Eden of the Promised Land. God gives a holy land to his holy people. Judges records Israel's Adam-like fall in the new Eden. The Israelites forget God is their king; instead each Israelite believes the Satanic lie and makes himself a king in his own eyes. Finally, Ruth gives us a glimpse of Eden restored, reminding Israel of God's gracious promise by showing the nation what the true Redeemer-King will look like. In the midst of Israel's misery, she should long for a servant-ruler like Boaz. The fact that Boaz takes a Gentile bride is obviously a significant indicator of God's ultimate intention to bless all the nations of the earth through Israel's coming king.

General Information

Author, Context, and Setting

Joshua, Judges, and Ruth are an important threesome in the unfolding story told by the Hebrew Scriptures. God had promised to the patriarchs a seed and a land, an abundant posterity and a country of prosperity (Gen. 12:1–3, 7; 15:5–7, 13–21). The first of these promises came to initial fulfillment while the Israelites were still in Egypt (Ex. 1:7). The second of these promises comes to initial fulfillment after the exodus, as the Israelites conquered the land of promise under Joshua (Josh. 23–24). Joshua was chosen to be Moses' successor, and the conquest should be viewed as the completion of the exodus. Unfortunately for Israel, once they settled into the land, things got rocky. Israel triumphed over the Canaanites militarily, and yet spiritually, never quite eradicated the influences of Canaanite culture. This failure would come back to haunt them, as the period of the judges reveals. Israel was chosen by God to model his righteousness in the sight of the nations (Deut. 4:6–7), but during much of this period, Israel looks just like the other nations. By the end of Judges, the tribes of Dan and Benjamin have nearly completely apostatized (or Canaanite-ized).

The book of Joshua emphasizes God's side of the covenant. God has been faithful in fulfilling his promise to give the land to Israel. In Joshua, God trains his people to fight, an important stepping stone in their maturation. Because God has given them success, they are able to rest in the land. Joshua 11:23 gives a thematic summary: "So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments. And the land had rest from war."

The book of Judges emphasizes Israel's failure to finish the conquest. Throughout the days of the judges, Israel wrestles to break free from pagan influence so she can live as God's holy people in his holy land. But her faith falters and she never quite finishes the job Joshua began. Like a skipping CD, we find Israel going in repeated cycles, rising in righteousness, only to fall back into idolatry, again and again. Instead of doing what is right in her own eyes, Israel must learn to acknowledge that the Lord is her king; rather than crowning her own king like the nations, she must trust and obey the Lord alone as her king (Judg. 21:25). When the time is right for her to have a human representative of the Lord's kingship (and that time would come, according to Deuteronomy 17), she should look for a righteous and mighty man like Boaz, the redeemer of Naomi and husband of Ruth.

In Joshua, men do all the fighting, led by the Lord. In Judges, women play important roles in battles (Judg. 4–5; 9:53–54). As in Genesis 1–2, the woman comes after the man, and serves as his helper. The book of Judges shows faithful women acting as classic female archetypes. We find mothers (e.g., Judg. 5:7; 13:2), daughters (e.g., Judg. 11:34), and brides (e.g., Judg. 1:12) in prominent positions—twelve women in all, matching the twelve judges. We also find women playing immoral roles (Judg. 16).

Literarily, Judges is full of irony, intrigue, and humor. We should not read the Bible so seriously that we miss the hilarity of stories like Ehud overcoming Eglon by deceptively thrusting a sword into his fat belly, or the comedic wisdom in Samson's riddles and military tactics.

Ruth is a beautiful narrative in which content and form perfectly merge. Ruth is the Bible's very own romantic comedy. But is also a gospel-shaped story, a death-and-resurrection story, prefiguring the redemption of the nations in Christ. God works behind the scenes through Boaz to bring Naomi (a Jew) and Ruth (a Gentile) from desolation to fullness, from sadness to joy, from curse to blessing. Ruth is a ray of light shining into a dark period in Israel's history.

Where did these books come from? Who wrote them and when? We cannot say for sure; the books themselves do not tell us so their origins are shrouded in mystery. But we can use circumstantial evidence to piece together some of the basic facts and on that basis we can make some educated guesses.

Joshua seems to be the primary author of the book that bears his name (Josh. 24:26; cf. 18:1–10), but he could not have been the one to put it into its final form (cf. Josh. 24:29–33). It was probably completed later by an inspired prophet, though there are some clues indicating it could not have been much later. For example, Joshua 6:25 was written while Rahab was still alive and Joshua 9:27 was written before the Gibeonites were nearly slaughtered by Saul (1 Sam. 21:1–2). If the conquest began approximately 1406 B.C., and lasted 7 years, we may place the primary composition of Joshua shortly thereafter.

Samuel is a very likely candidate for the authorship of Judges. Samuel himself was the last judge. Because the people demanded a king prematurely, Samuel crowned a Benjaminite named Saul for them (1 Sam 8–10). But Saul fell into sin and lost his claim on the throne (1 Sam. 13–15). Following God's lead, Samuel anointed David, a man of Judah and a descendant of Boaz, to take his place (1 Sam. 16). By the way the book of Judges treats the tribes of Judah (David's tribe) and Benjamin (Saul's tribe), it provides a strong apologetic for David's claim to the throne at a time when the Israelites were having to decide which royal house to side with (cf. Judg. 1 and Judg. 20).

Finally, Samuel probably also authored Ruth. The story takes place during the days of the judges (Ruth 1:1); the retrospective language suggests the monarchy has been set up by the time of writing. The genealogy at the end of Ruth concludes with David, which means it was likely written while David was still on the throne. Like Judges, Ruth provides a strong apologetic for Davidic kingship, especially with its closing genealogy (Ruth 4:13–22). We can date the writing of Judges and Ruth to roughly 1000 B.C., sometime after the beginning of David's reign.

Significance

The books of Joshua, Judges and Ruth are significant because they serve both as a testimony of God's ongoing care of his people and His faithfulness to His covenant promises. They also serve as a bridge between Moses and the giving of the law and David and the establishment of the kingdom. These books of the Bible play a very significant role in setting out Israel's purpose. They show us God's faithfulness in fulfilling his promise to Abraham and completing what he began in the exodus under

Moses. But these books also show us Israel's failure, and her need for a Redeemer greater than Joshua and any of the judges.

These books also contain some of the most discussed and controversial issues in all of the Bible. First, among them is the Israelite conquest of Canaan and the extermination of the Canaanites. This "holy war" is presented as proof positive that God either is or was a capricious dictator who sanctions the slaughter of the innocent and the guilty and plays racial favorites with His special people Israel. There is plenty of evidence to the contrary (which will be discussed in an upcoming session), but unbelievers often point to these very books and evidence of God's injustice and of religion's barbarism.

These books do have application for us as well, but Christians have struggled to figure out how to apply these books, especially Joshua. In the book of Joshua, the Israelites wage a "holy war" against the inhabitants of the land of Canaan. We know that God does not want us to fight this kind of violent, bloody battle today. Paul said our warfare is not against flesh and blood (Eph. 6:10–20) and our weapons are not carnal (2 Cor. 10:4–6). We will inherit the nations, but not through bloodshed (Rev. 2:26–27). What, then, do we do with the holy war theme found in the Old Testament? Specifically, how do we reconcile the conquest with God's love and the church's mission? If we look at the Bible's story arc from beginning to end, we can arrive at satisfactory answers.

Worldview

Holy War and the Church's Mission

The book of Joshua begins with a transition. Moses has preached his farewell sermon and passed from the scene. Joshua has been appointed his successor. Can the people follow Joshua the way they did Moses? Will God give them the victory under Joshua's leadership? Is there life after Moses?

The book shows us that Joshua is a new Moses. Here are several clues:

- Moses led the people through the Red Sea on dry ground; Joshua will lead them through the Jordan River on dry ground.
- Moses sent spies into the land; Joshua sends spies as well
- The people saw the miracles of Moses and trusted; in the same way, Joshua was exalted before the people, and they feared him because of what God did through him.
- Moses met with the Lord in the burning bush and took off his shoes because he was on holy ground. Joshua met the commander of the Lord's army and took off his shoes as well.
- Moses is called the "servant of the Lord;" Joshua is as well.

The point is clear: Moses may have died, but a new Moses has taken over. Under Joshua's Moses-like leadership, the people will be able to conquer the Canaanites just as they overcame the Egyptians.

The New Testament Scriptures show us how we should apply the conquest of Canaan in our own day. First, warfare imagery is used to describe the Christian's battle against sin (Gal. 5:17). We are called to "conquer our personal Canaanites," as it's been put. The same kind of *herem* warfare Israel was supposed to wage on the inhabitants of the land is now to be waged on sin that dwells in our own hearts (Matt. 5:29–30; 1 Pet. 2:12). Just as God enabled Israel to drive out the Canaanites "little by little" (Ex. 23:29–30; Deut. 7:22), so our growth in a grace and obedience is often a slow and grueling process.

But more importantly, the New Testament shows us that the conquest serves as a blueprint for the church's mission. Joshua's "little commission" points to Jesus' Great Commission. Luke constructed the early chapters of the book of Acts so that they track with the early chapters of Joshua. In other words, the church's fulfillment of her mission (Matt. 28:16–20; Luke 24:46–49) witnessing to the nations is the new covenant counterpart to Joshua's conquest of Canaan. Joshua and Acts show a number of striking parallels:

- In each case, the leader of God's people has just left the scene (Moses in death, Jesus in his ascension)
- In the book of Joshua, Joshua is called to be Moses' successor and carry forward God's purposes in the conquest; in Acts, the Holy Spirit comes to be Jesus' successor, and carry forward the church's mission
- The Lord commands Joshua to be strong and courageous at the beginning of the book; at the beginning of Acts, the Lord promises power will come upon the disciples to make them strong and courageous (as seen in the sudden transformation of Peter from coward to preacher)
- In Joshua, Israel is commanded to conquer the land; in Acts the church is commanded to bear witness to the ends of the earth
- In Joshua, the people are led through a clear sequence of events: they cross over the Jordan in a kind of baptism (cf. 1 Cor. 10:2), they get circumcised, and they celebrate Passover. In Acts, the sequenced is similar: the Spirit baptizes the church, 3000 are baptized with water (the new covenant equivalent of circumcision per Colossians 2:11–12), and they break the bread of the Lord's Supper together (cf. Acts 2:42–46; the Lord's Supper is the new covenant fulfillment of the Passover according to 1 Corinthians 5:7–8).
- In both books, the first move of God's people is to invade a key city; Jericho falls by shouting and trumpeting, while Jerusalem is invaded by means of prayer and preaching
- Almost immediately in both books, we find the people of God hindered by sin in the camp: In Joshua, Achan steals booty that belongs to the Lord, and is put to death on the spot (Josh. 7). Likewise, in Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira steal from the Lord by lying about some property they had sold, and they are executed on the spot. Note the word for stealing in Acts 5:2 is a rare term, but is also used in the Greek (Septuagint) translation of Joshua 7:1. Further, in Acts 20:33, Paul explicitly repudiated having committed the sin of Achan (Josh. 7:21), showing he understood his mission work as a successful "holy war" campaign.

- In both books, fear enters the enemies of God’s people, allowing the covenant community to score significant victories (Josh. 2:9–13; 5:1–2; Acts 2:2:43, 5:5, 11; 9:31; 19:17)
- In both books, we see Gentiles brought in, though with significant controversy (Josh. 9; Acts 15) and attack (Joshua 10; Acts 6–7)

Acts is about new covenant holy war, as the church “invades” Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. But the nature of her warfare has been transformed. There is a shift from killing to converting. Unlike Joshua, in the book of Acts, Peter and Paul do not inflict suffering, but bear suffering. Unlike Joshua, Peter and Paul advance the kingdom through service rather than force.

Thus, God’s people no longer fight with a literal sword and fire; instead they use the sword of the Spirit (the Word of God; Heb. 4:12) and witness in the fiery presence of God’s Spirit (Acts 2:3). The weapons of holy war have morphed. The church can learn a great deal about her mission from the book of Joshua, but to do so she must apply Joshua’s use of sword and flame in a metaphorical way, guided by Acts and the rest of the New Testament.

Further, the battleground and promised territory is no longer a strip of land in Palestine, but the entire earth. The New Testament is very clear that the land promises God made to Abraham have been expanded to include the entire globe (although it is also clear from the Old Testament this was God’s intention all along; cf. Gen. 12:3 and Rom. 4:12). The New Testament ascribes no special importance to any geographic area; what was called the “holy land” in the old covenant is now theologically irrelevant. All the blessings associated with the land in the Old Testament (such as inheritance, rest, and holiness) are now found in Christ and the church. Christ and his people fulfill the old covenant priesthood, temple, sacrifices, and kingdom (1 Pet. 2:4–10). In the old covenant, Gentiles were called “aliens” and “strangers” to the covenant because they had no home in the land of promise. But now they are full members of Israel, totally apart from living in a certain geographic region (Eph. 2:11–22). Thus, Paul can change the wording of the promise in the fifth commandment from “land” to “earth” (Eph. 6:3) and Jesus can do the same with Psalm 37:11 in the beatitudes (Matt. 5:3). Hebrews 3:12–4:11 assures us that in Christ we have the true rest that Joshua’s conquest could only attain in a provisional, shadowy way (Josh. 1:13, 23:1). In sum, the privileges and responsibilities of God’s covenant people are no longer defined by living in Palestine but by living in union with Christ. Or, as Christopher Wright has put it, being “in Christ” has taken over the meaning of being “in the land” (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20).¹

Finally, note that importance of worship. Earlier, Abraham and Jacob had journeyed through the land, setting up altars (Gen. 12:7, 8; 28:18–22; 35:1, 16–22). The worship of the patriarchs had already marked out the land as God’s chosen dwelling place, serving as a kind of liturgical “proto-conquest.”

Worship continues to be important when Israel finally invades the land. In Joshua, worship and warfare go hand in hand. Israel’s battles start off looking more like worship

services than military conflicts. In the battle of Jericho, Israel's army seems to be more like a priesthood and choir than a traditional regiment of soldiers. The seven day circling of the city puts the climatic act of warfare on the seventh day, a Sabbath, which is associated with worship. The ram's horn (Lev. 25:9) and ark (Ex. 25:10–22) are obviously liturgical objects, rather than ordinary weapons. In short, Joshua did *not* fight the battle of Jericho; rather the Lord fought for his people when they worshipped him.

We see this same theme unfold repeatedly throughout the book of Joshua. In fact, the goal of the conquest may be viewed as replacing Canaanite altars with the worship of the true God. Israel cannot rest in the land until God's house, the tabernacle, is set up in Shiloh as a centralized place of worship (Josh. 18:1).

There is an instructive lesson here for the church. We will not “conquer” any area with the gospel using “normal,” worldly means. We cannot rely on political activism, improved education, or the latest technology. That's not to say these tools and methods are bad or should be totally shunned. They just aren't powerful enough to win the battle. We will only transform the culture around us if we turn to God in praise and prayer. We must preach and sing our way to victory. We can only win unbelieving cities for the gospel if we worship God faithfully as Joshua and the Israelites did in Joshua 6. As Peter Leithart puts it, “When Israel worships God, He brings the walls down.”² Liturgical warfare is the key to the church's success in her mission to the nations.

Politics Human and Divine

In Joshua, the conquest advances because God fights for Israel. By the end of the seven year period recorded in Joshua, Israel has established herself in the land and God's land promises have been definitively fulfilled. However, Israel still has to drive out remaining Canaanites, lest they prove to be a temptation and a trap to the covenant people.

As the book of Judges opens, the tribe of Judah has success in claiming her promised inheritance. But the other tribes fail in taking full possession of their allotted land (Judg. 1:21–36). In Joshua, Israel's success was related to faithful worship; in Judges, the nation's failure is linked to her unwillingness to tear down the altars of the Canaanites (Judg. 2:1–3). In fact, before long, we find Israel worshipping at Canaanite altars (Judg. 2:11–23)!

Israel moves through an easily identifiable spiritual cycle in the book of Judges several times. Again and again, Israel falls into idolatry, and so the nation is subjugated by a pagan oppressor. It's as if God says, “If you want to worship pagan gods, let me show you what life is like under pagan rule!” The Lord “sells” (Judg. 1:14) Israel back into slavery, reversing the exodus and conquest. When Israel finally comes to her spiritual senses and repents, God sends the nation a deliverer. Each judge is a new Moses and a new Joshua who acts to free the people from bondage and re-establish rest in the land. But the peace never lasts. Israel can't stand prosperity. And so the cycle repeats itself. However, as we move towards the end of the book, we see that not only is Israel seriously flawed as a people, but even the judges themselves begin to show serious

blemishes. The early judges are presented as having very minor defects, at most. But the later judges, like Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson have very significant problems, to say the least.

Towards the conclusion of Judges, we find an emerging refrain that serves as one of the interpretive keys to the whole era (albeit an ironic one): “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 17:6; 21:25; cf. 18:1; 19:1). Of course, Israel *did* have a king in those days: the Lord was her king (cf. Judg. 8:23)! But because the nation refused to submit to the Lord’s rule, her kinglessness became her undoing.

Having a human monarch, per se, would not have solved Israel’s problem. We know that from later history. Many of Israel’s kings would actually lead the nation further into idolatry, rather than saving her from such rebellion. But even within the book of Judges we see that human kingship cannot be the answer because Israel actually has a king during the era of the judges, at least briefly.

Gideon started out well, serving God faithfully, and delivering Israel from the Midianites (Judg. 6:1–8:21). He even refused the offer of kingly office when it was offered to him, pointing the people to the Lord as king (Judg. 8:23). But towards the end of his life, he decided to seize kingly privileges and prerogatives that did not belong to him. He collected gold, multiplied wives, and led Israel into idolatry (Judg. 8:24–35). He even named one of his sons Abimelech, meaning, “my father is king.” This is the turning point of the entire book of Judges.

The seed of rebellion planted by Gideon becomes a full-grown thorn bush in the next generation. Abimelech one-ups his father’s sin by explicitly trying to create a monarchy in Israel, with himself on the throne. He kills his 70 brothers (minus one) to eliminate possible rivals (Judg. 9:5). The entire episode turns into a disaster (Judg. 9:22–57), until Abimelech’s head is finally crushed by a woman with a millstone and he dies in shame (Judg. 9:53–54; note the allusion to Genesis 3:15).

While we should give the twelve judges their due as men of faith (cf. Heb. 11:32–40), we should also examine why Israel was not able to sustain multi-generational faithfulness in this period. The repeated declaration that Israel has no king (Judg. 17:6; 21:25) is not a statement about Israel’s governmental structure, so much as it is a commentary on their spiritual condition. Israel’s problems cannot be solved merely by a new political arrangement. Getting a king is not going to help, especially if that king is like the kings of the pagan nations.

The concluding chapters of Judges identify the problem beneath the problem, as it were. We find that, ultimately, Israel is failing to submit to the Lord not because she lacks a human king but because her priests (remember these men not only performed sacrifices, they also served as Israel’s pastors) fail to guide her according to the law. The priests are not teaching the people the ways of the Lord; instead, they are falling into idolatry themselves, creating a counterfeit temple and system of worship (Judg. 17–18). In Judges

17–18, a Levite hires himself for money to lead worship at Micah’s idolatrous image. With Levites like this, is it any wonder Israel is imitating the Canaanites rather than conquering them?

Again, there is a lesson here for the church, and it echoes the lesson of Joshua. The nation of Israel falls apart when her spiritual leaders are unfaithful. The deepest problems of any culture cannot be solved through political means. The faithfulness of the church in teaching and worship is always the key to cultural strength and transformation. Only when the church faithfully proclaims the kingship of the Lord, and worships him as true king, will the nation as a whole follow suit and mature in righteousness. If we want the Lord visibly enthroned in our society, we must enthrone him upon our praises. In the new covenant, we are now a nation of priests (1 Pet. 2:4–10), and so it is our job to inspire people through our teaching, service, and example to submit to the Lord as their true King.

Gospel Typology

Following Jesus’ lead (Luke 24:25–27, 44–45; John 5:39), the church has traditionally read the Scriptures in a typological fashion, looking for ways in which the old covenant prefigured the new, and the new fulfills the old. We do not need to turn the Old Testament Scriptures into Christian literature because the whole Old Testament is *already* all about Christ. We just have to learn how to see him there. The New Testament writers build their theology out of various old covenant typologies. For example, we find Jesus presented as the new Adam (Rom. 5:21–21), the true tabernacle/temple (John 1:14; 2:19–21), the Passover lamb (John 1:28), the Greater Solomon (Matt. 12:42), and so on. Likewise, the church is portrayed as the new Israel and new priesthood (1 Pt. 2:4–10); baptism fulfills sea and river crossings (1 Cor. 10:2) as well as the flood (1 Pet. 3:18–22); the Lord’s Supper fulfills the Passover meal (1 Cor. 5:7–8); and our worship, mercy, and obedience are new covenant counterparts to the animal sacrifices (Rom. 12:1–2; Phil. 4:18; Heb. 13:15–16). Of course, the typologies explicitly developed in the New Testament are not comprehensive; rather, the New Testament gives us selected interpretive models, showing us how we should read the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures as a whole. We should not treat types as isolated “snapshots” of Christ and/or his people; rather, typology flows out of the biblical story taken as a whole, as God’s plan progresses from promise to fulfillment, and his people move from childhood to maturity.

As expected, then, the narratives of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth abound in typological structures that point us to Jesus and the church. Ruth, in particular, is a masterpiece of typological literature, a tragic-comedy that points us to Christ in profound ways. However, to understand the story, we have to do more than recognize the story’s archetypes and the way they come to fulfillment in the new covenant. We have to understand a couple of key Old Testament institutions on which the whole narrative turns, namely the levirate and the kinsman-redeemer.

The levirate marriage is described in Deuteronomy 25:1–10. When an Israelite man died without a son, his surviving brother (or, by extension, another close male relative) was to

marry his widow, so as to continue his brother's family line, name, and inheritance. The firstborn son of a levirate marriage belonged to the deceased man and, essentially, took his place. The tribe of Judah was implicated for failure to practice this custom in Genesis 38, resulting in judgment falling on Judah and illegitimate children being brought into the tribal line. The levirate institution is what stands behind the otherwise cryptic language in Ruth 1:11–13 and 4:10, 12, 17. The book of Ruth shows us a man of the tribe of Judah who did what Judah himself failed to do, namely act as a faithful levir on behalf of a helpless widow, Ruth, who is a new Tamar.

The kinsman-redeemer institution is outlined in Leviticus 25:25, 28, 48, 49. The obligations of the kinsman-redeemer fell on the nearest male blood relative. Those duties included redeeming a lost inheritance and/or buying the person out of slavery. The kinsman-redeemer could also act as an avenger of blood in cases of murder (Num. 35:21). The pattern for the kinsman-redeemer is ultimately God himself, who frequently goes by the name "Redeemer" (Ex. 6:6; Isa. 43:1; 41:14; 44:6, 22; 48:20; Ps. 103:4; Job 19:25).

In the story of Ruth, Boaz plays the role of both levirate husband and kinsman-redeemer. There is some ambiguity about this because he is not Elimelech's brother, and not even Naomi seemed to know exactly how close a relative he was (cf. Ruth 2:20, 3:1–4). Nevertheless, these two institutions explain Ruth's action on the threshing floor in chapter 3 and the transaction between Boaz and the nameless relative in chapter 4. In Ruth 3, Ruth decks herself out as a bride and approaches Boaz, essentially proposing marriage to him. But nothing immoral happened on the threshing floor that night (and so the passage reverses, rather than recapitulates, the events of Numbers 25 and Genesis 19:30–38). Ruth was simply calling on Boaz to play his role as a close relative, a potential levir and kinsman-redeemer. Boaz graciously agrees to do so (Ruth 3:10–13) and then follows through in a timely and lawful manner (Ruth 4:1–12).

What, then, is the story of Ruth about? The story abounds in exquisite and ironic detail. Elimelech's name means "My God is king"—but this is a period in Israel's history in which the Israelites, by and large, refuse to acknowledge the kingship of the Lord over them (cf. Judg. 21:25). Elimelech and his family live in Bethlehem, which means "house of bread." But there is no bread in the breadbasket! The land that was supposed to produce abundant food has been hit with famine (cf. the curses in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28). And so like Adam and Eve, Elimelech goes into self-imposed exile out of the place where God dwells. Elimelech's family goes eastward to Moab (an odd choice to find refuge in light of Numbers 21–22; cf. Deut. 23:4), but there the curse only intensifies. Elimelech's sons marry Moabite women, but soon all the men in the family are dead. Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah are left as powerless widows. Naomi pleads with both of her daughters-in-law to turn back to their family, but Ruth, like Abraham, insists on leaving her homeland and journeying with Naomi to a land she does not know. In an account that resonates with exodus themes, the lonely pair returns to Bethlehem.

Naomi and Ruth are widows mired in poverty when they arrive in Bethlehem. Resourceful, hard working Ruth goes out to glean (Lev. 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut. 14:28–29)

and “chances” upon a field belonging to Boaz (note the touch of irony in 2:3). What a wonderful providence this turns out to be, since Boaz is a relative of Naomi’s and therefore a potential kinsman-redeemer (Ruth 2:20)! Boaz, as a merciful, kind-hearted man, takes good care of Ruth, ensuring that her gleaning is successful. When Naomi finds out that Ruth has connected with her relative Boaz, she concocts a plan to bring the two together and, as the saying goes, the rest is history!

What’s the meaning of the story? The narrative begins “when the judges ruled.” But the last word is the name of Israel’s most famous king, David. At one level, this historical account is a parable of Israel’s plight. Naomi (and her sidekick Ruth) pictures Israel, with no food, no husband, and no sons. When God shows her mercy and restores her, it is a picture of what God has promised to do for Israel. By the end of the narrative, Naomi and Ruth have been given abundant food (Ruth 1:6; 2:14, 17–19; 3:15, 17), Ruth is married (Ruth 4:13), and a child has been born to take the place of Naomi’s fallen husband and sons (Ruth 4:13–22). This is a true rags-to-redemption story.

The writer makes critical connections clear by means of some very clever word plays and symbolism. For example, the same word used for Elimelech’s sons in chapter 1 (best translated “lads”) is used of Obed in chapter 4. Obed is the replacement son (though in light of Ruth 4:15, we must note that Ruth is too, since she even better to Naomi than seven sons!). In Ruth 1:21, Naomi says she has come home *empty-handed* (apparently ignoring the fact that Ruth is with her!). In Ruth 3:17, Boaz gives Ruth six ephahs of barley so that she will not return to Naomi *empty-handed*. The fact that Boaz provides *six* ephahs is a crucial piece of symbolism, one that does not escape Naomi’s notice since she says the man will not *rest* until he has settled the matter. That is to say, the six ephahs serve as a pledge of a seventh, a Sabbath, to come when Boaz has secured Ruth’s future. In Ruth 3:1, Naomi spoke of rest as the goal of approaching Boaz; at the end of the chapter Ruth can rest because Boaz has made it clear he will not rest until he has provided her permanent rest.

In Ruth 2:12, Boaz commends Ruth for her faithfulness in gleaning and caring for her mother-in-law. Boaz blesses her, saying, “A full reward be given you by the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge.” In Ruth 3:9, Ruth gives Boaz an opportunity to fulfill this blessing, when she asks him to “Take your maidservant under your wing.” The “wing” language in these texts is covenantal and marital (cf. Ezek. 16:8). In Ruth 3:9, it refers to a garment that a husband and wife share when they become one flesh.

The twist in the plot is the threshing-floor revelation of a rival kinsman-redeemer, a relative closer to Naomi than Boaz (Ruth 3:12). The narrator has led us to pull hard for a Boaz-Ruth marriage, but now that outcome is in doubt. The next day will be decisive. Boaz has men from the city assemble at the gate to serve as witnesses (Ruth 4:1–2). He summarizes the situation for the closer relative to digest so he can make his decision. The closer kinsman says he will redeem Naomi’s land; after all, Naomi is old and won’t be having any more children to take Elimelech’s place, so this is a relatively painless way for the man to expand his own estate in the end (Ruth 4:3–4). The plot thickens and

suspense builds. Boaz then plays his trump card: he tells the closer kinsman that actually he will have to marry Ruth, and in so doing, raise up a seed to take Elimelech's place and reclaim his land (Ruth 4:5). Suddenly the situation has changed: the nameless kinsman will have to buy back Elimelech's property, but he won't get to keep it. When the son he has with Ruth gets old enough, he will claim that land as his own. The closer relative does a quick recalculation and decides to pass the redeemer duties off to Boaz (Ruth 4:6).

Not everything about Boaz' strategy is clear, but we can discern that he acted in righteousness and in wisdom, with the result that we was able to both obey the law and get what he desired. Ironically, the closer kinsman passed up his redeemer duties because he was so concerned about preserving his own name—and yet the text leaves him nameless! He refused to perpetuate the name of the dead, and yet it's his name that has not been perpetuated in history! He missed his chance to make his name great in Israel because he would not make a sacrifice for a fellow covenant member in need. Boaz, on the other hand, demonstrated his true worth as a self-giving, merciful leader in Israel. He married Ruth and the Lord gave the happy couple a son (Ruth 4:9–15) to perpetuate the name of the dead (Ruth 4:16–17).

Of course, as Christians, we cannot help but see the Christ/church relationship in the marriage that takes place at the end of the book. This book is the gospel in miniature; it is "the littlest gospel" as it's been called. It is a microcosmic retelling of all of redemptive history. Elimelech and his sons represent the first Adam. They are associated with curse, famine, and death. Boaz represents Jesus as the second Adam. He becomes what Elimelech and his sons should have been. Through him, the Lord shows his covenant love. Today, we put our hope in the greater Boaz, the greater David, a mighty man of valor, who has shown us mercy and provided for our every need. The fact that Boaz marries a Gentile but in so doing also cares for a Jewish woman, is a beautiful foreshadowing of the new covenant, which weaves Jew and Gentile together into the redeemed bride of Christ.

Jesus is the Greater Boaz, acting as both the church's levirate husband and kinsman-redeemer (Rom. 7:1–6; Heb. 2:14–18). The first Adam had widowed us by his rebellion, leaving us in exile, under the reign of death and the curse. Jesus is the second Adam who marries us, restores our inheritance, and buys us out of slavery. Naomi's story is the church's story: we have moved from emptiness to fullness, from barrenness to fruitfulness, from cursed to blessed, through the work of the True Boaz.

By Rich Lusk

For Further Reading

Veritas Press Bible Cards: *Genesis through Joshua*. Lancaster, Pa.: Veritas Press. 28–32.

Veritas Press Bible Cards: *Judges through Kings*. Lancaster, Pa.: Veritas Press. 33–39.

Davis, Dale Ralph. *Such a Great Salvation*. Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2003.

Session I: Prelude

A Question to Consider:

One of America's more famous politicians once said, "Change in America begins in the ballot box." In light of your study of Joshua and Judges, what do you think about that statement? Can we really change our culture through politics? What are the limits of the political process? What is the role of politics in cultural transformation? What is the role of the church in cultural transformation? Which has more potency in bringing about cultural renewal – the ballot box or the prayer closet? The state or the church? Why?

Obviously, in light of the message of Joshua and Judges, we should not expect too much from politics. That's not to say Christians should give up on politics! There is no question that we should be involved in the political process as much as possible. We should be grateful that we live in a nation where every voice has the potential to be heard. The state is ordained by God (Rom. 13:1–7), and to be called into the political arena, either as a magistrate in office or an ordinary citizen trying to make a difference, is a noble vocation. Civil law plays an important role in serving the common good by restraining wickedness and providing external pressure to practice virtue (cf. Aristotle's Politics, quoted by Thomas Aquinas in Summa Theologica: "lawgivers make men good by habituating them to good works"). Thus, politics is vitally important.

But, that being said, we have to recognize the severe limitations of what political means can accomplish. Politics cannot bring salvation; in truth politics is one more aspect of our culture that needs saving in Christ! We should also notice that American Christians have been all too prone to trust to in politics to bring about the cultural change we desire. We have relied too much on legislation and not enough on the gospel.

From the General Information above, answer the following questions:

1.. How would you answer Richard Dawkins' claims that the God of the Old Testament is "blood-thirsty" and "genocidal"? Is the conquest really an act of genocide?

The conquest was an act of divine justice, perfectly measured and applied. God patiently waited until the Canaanites were fully worthy of such a complete judgment (Gen. 15:6). If God did not punish such evil, he could hardly be considered a just, loving God.

2. What is typology? Explain how one or two characters in Joshua, Judges, or Ruth serves as type of Christ.

Typology presupposes that God governs history and has built patterns into history. Typology does not simply mean that later events repeat earlier events; while there is correspondence between type and anti-type (fulfillment), there is also escalation and intensification. The book of Hebrews considers this a move from shadow to reality.

Boaz is clearly a Christ-figure. He is a type of Christ in that he is a mighty man of valor who rescues a woman (really, two women) in need as a kinsman-redeemer. He makes provision for his bride and shelters her under his wing. In the same way, Jesus is our kinsman-redeemer, delivering us from the curse and bringing us into his family at great cost to himself. The story of Ruth has the same shape as the gospel story; what Boaz accomplishes on behalf of Naomi and Ruth is analogous to what Jesus accomplishes for the church.

In short, we can plug-in Christ for Boaz and the church for Naomi/Ruth, and we have a very faithful retelling of the gospel story.

3. One of the pillars in Solomon's temple was named after Boaz (1 Kings 7:21). What does this tell you about Boaz's character?

Boaz was a model for later kings. A pillar was named after him to hold up his example before all the people. In his generosity and faithfulness, he is also an exemplar for us. According to Revelation 3:12, we will receive the same honor as Boaz if we persevere in obedient faith.

4. Assuming that Judges and Ruth were first composed during the early days of the monarchy, explain how the books address the pressing questions of the day for Israel? Specifically, how do these books compare Judah and Benjamin, the tribes of David and Saul, respectively?

Judah was already identified as the kingly tribe in Genesis 49:10. In Judges 1, Judah is presented as the leading and most successful tribe. The same chapter accentuates Benjamin's failure by contrast. We also see the failure of the tribe of Benjamin at the end of the book, although the Benjaminites are allowed to survive in a small remnant (Judg. 19–20). In Ruth, a man of Judah, Boaz, shows many admirable, kingly qualities, and the book's end highlights his connection to David. Biblically, kings are supposed to care for the fatherless and widows and rescue the poor, which is exactly what Boaz does in the book of Ruth (cf. Ps. 72; Isa. 11:1–10).

5. If holy war has been transformed into worship and evangelism in the new covenant, does that mean all Christians should be pacifists? Is all warfare now immoral?

This is a good place to discuss the "just war" tradition. The Bible is definitely not a pacifist document and does not equate violence with evil per se. Instead, the Scriptures distinguish righteous from unrighteous uses of violence (e.g., Jer. 22:3). Thus, John the Baptist and Jesus did not command soldiers to give up their profession when they repented, and Paul spoke of the sword-wielding magistrate as a minister of God's vengeance. While we must condemn many (or even most) wars as unjust and immoral, in a fallen world, there are legitimate, moral wars. There are also moral guidelines for carrying out warfare (cf. Deut. 20). The Christian tradition, especially beginning with Augustine, has reflected extensively on these matters in light of biblical teaching.

It is important to distinguish the kind of total herem warfare of the conquest from just war because God's people will never fight another "holy war" in history the way Joshua

did. But that does mean that there is no such thing as a Christian way to wage war in the new covenant period of history.

Reading Assignment:

¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 168. A good deal of this discussion about Joshua, holy war, and the land is drawn from Wright's work.

² Peter Leithart, *A House for My Name* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2000), 111.