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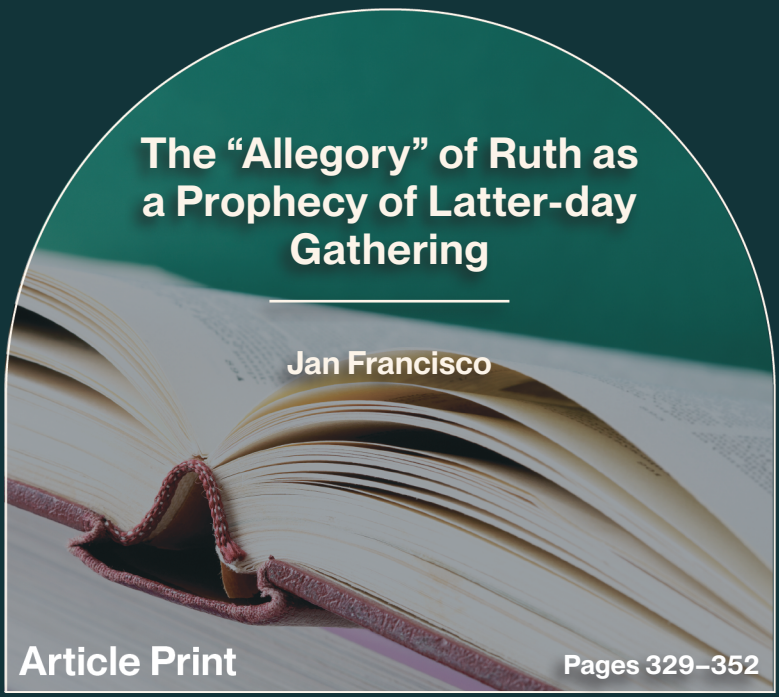

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The "Allegory" of Ruth as a Prophecy of Latter-day Gathering

Jan Francisco

Abstract: *In the historical context of the late fifth century BC, the book of Ruth was a powerful story of hope and redemption for the eventual gathering and restoration of Israel's covenants. Connecting their golden period of unity under King David to this idyllic tale with a beautiful happy ending may be more than a family story. It could also be read allegorically to prophesy the promised gathering of Israel by the Gentiles in the Latter-days. The key to understanding the symbolic layer of this story lies in deciphering the Hebrew meanings of the characters' names, with Naomi representing the Israelites, and Ruth the Gentiles. Doing so unlocks the messages in the story of the Gentiles gathering Israel, the marriage relationship of Christ and the Church, and the promise of a Millennial Messiah. Exploring the connection of the book of Ruth, Pentecost, and harvest themes adds more significance to this allegory.*

The book of Ruth is both a love story and a family story, and while it can be read with that lens, there are many other lenses that can give depth and inspiration to the story. Seeing it as a simple folktale, a commentary on social justice issues, an example of Mosaic legalities, or as a polemic against xenophobia are interpretations that others have espoused to explain the book of Ruth.[1] The lens and interpretation

1. To read about the social justice lens, see Gaye Strathearn and Angela Cothran, "Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz: Borders, Relationships, Law, and Hesed," *Covenant of Compassion: Caring for the Marginalized and Disadvantaged in the Old Testament,* ed. Avram R. Shannon et al. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University [BYU]; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), 163–65, rsc.byu.edu/covenant-compassion/naomi-ruth-boaz. For a deeper look

in this article is one of allegory, with the characters in the story representing the Israelites, Gentiles, and the Lord in their respective roles in the latter-day gathering of Israel. When read this way, the story joins the prophecies of Isaiah, Nehemiah, Ezra, and other Old Testament prophets who anticipated the future gathering and restoration of Israel. The Hebrew meanings behind the names give more substance to this lens, though "allegory" is just one of many ways that the story can be interpreted.

An allegory is a literary device wherein each part of the story represents a different element in the actual world. For example, a lost coin represents a precious wayward soul, the one searching for it is the Lord (or a fellow Christian), and the celebration after it is found represents the joy in heaven over reclaimed souls. An allegory is different than a parable or a type, though all three have allegorical elements.[2] A parable is more generally a "wise saying" or a fictional short story.[3] The *Dictionary of the Bible* asserts that there are no sustained allegories in the Bible, though many of Jesus Christ's teachings in the New Testament have allegorical elements, such as the lost coin, the sower of the seeds, and searching out one sheep when leaving the ninety-nine. This paper uses the term "allegory" in quotes because the term most closely represents the intention of the author in uncovering a hidden layer of meaning beneath the story, though it is not recognized as a proper allegory in the traditional sense as the story exists in its own right and has various interpretations beyond what this article proposes.

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into the Mosaic legalities, see Brad Embry, "Legalities in the Book of Ruth: A Renewed Look," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41, no. 1 (2016), doi.org/10.1177/0309089216628519. For the folktale lens, Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield, UK: JSOT, 1989), archive.org/details/ruthcommentary0000niel/page/6/mode/2up. This book is a compilation around the idea that if Ruth was written in the post-exilic period, during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the teachings of those two prophets were not inclusive for foreigners. Ezra 4:1–3; 9:1–4; Nehemiah 13:1–3 are examples of the disdain for foreigners, and the story of Ruth could be seen as an answer to that position.

2. John L. McKenzie, S.J., *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing, 1965), s.v. "Allegory."
3. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible,* s.v. "Parable."

The Story

Naomi, wife of Elimelech and mother of Chilion and Mahlon, together with her family moved to Moab in consequence of a famine in their home region of Bethlehem. While they were in Moab, her sons married two Moabites. Chilion married Orpah and Mahlon married Ruth. Tragically, Elimelech and his two sons died in Moab, which left Naomi and the two Moabitesses widowed and without means of support. Knowing that their chances of survival in Moab without a family network were slim, Naomi determined to return to Israel and encouraged the two young women to remain in Moab, where they had connections and possible prospects for remarriage. Orpah agreed to stay in Moab after some urging on Naomi's part. Ruth declared that she would follow Naomi to her home in Israel.

When Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, they learned of a near kinsman of Naomi's late husband, Elimelech, a man named Boaz who owned many large fields. Naomi encouraged Ruth to go and glean in his fields. Boaz took note of Ruth as a hard-working individual and gave her special privileges that allowed her more comfort as she worked. It also permitted her to take an abundance of grain home. Naomi, noticing his positive attention and his position as one of their redeeming kin, encouraged Ruth to stay in those fields and work with his workers.

After the barley and the wheat were gathered, Naomi schemed a risky proposition: she sent Ruth to the threshing floor late one evening when she knew Boaz would be there. She instructed her to lie down at his feet and do whatever he asked her to do. Fortunately, he didn't ask her to do anything compromising, and she asked him to redeem her and Naomi as a *go'el*, or redeeming kinsman. Boaz agreed, but first had to clear it with a nearer kinsman, who had the first right of redemption. When that kinsman declined his superior right, knowing that it would compromise his family dynamics to add another wife and potential child to the mix, Boaz proceeded to take Ruth as his bride. Their son, Obed, was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David, who would become king over all Israel.

Historical Context of the Book

Some scholars place the penning of the book of Ruth either during the Babylonian exile or the post-exilic period (586–550 BC).[4] Both of

4. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Book of Ruth," britannica.com/topic/Book-of-Ruth.

those time periods were full of upheaval, uncertainty, and fear. Robert Alter attributes the timing as a polemic against Ezra and Nehemiah's xenophobic rhetoric, which also places the timeframe as post-Babylonian exile.[5] He points to the style, which includes some "late Biblical usage — as, for example, the verbs used for taking a wife (Ruth 1:7), for wait or hope (Ruth 1:13), and for removing a sandal (Ruth 4:7)."[6] There is also a little aside in Ruth 4:7: "Now this was the manner in former time in Israel, concerning redeeming and concerning changing, for to confirm all things; a man plucked off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbour: and this was a testimony in Israel," narrating to the audience how it was done "in former time." The narration shows a distance between the occurrence and the writing of the story.

The *Dictionary of the Bible* affirms,

> In the [Hebrew] canon the book is placed in the third part among the Writings . . . which suggests a later date of its acceptance and probably of its composition. The LXX and Vg (and Eng Bibles) place it after [Judges]. . . . Most modern critics place the book after the exile. This judgment rests principally upon a large number of Aramaisms in such a small book and on its general style and tenor.[7]

The *Oxford Companion to the Bible* differs in its assessment: "Linguistic criteria and judgments about its place in the development of thought, invoked in the past as pointers to a late date, have lost their cogency. A date anywhere in the time of the Judean monarchy is plausible."[8]

Many scholars and critics agree that the book is a work of carefully crafted fiction, a vessel for the genealogical information at the end.

> The question turns rather on whether the genealogical information is a genuine ancient tradition, and whether the story is composed on the datum that one of David's ancestors was a Moabite. . . . One may therefore take the genealogical

5. Robert Alter, *Strong as Death is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah and Daniel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), 57.
6. Alter, *Strong as Death is Love*, 57.
7. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible,* s.v. "Ruth."
8. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible,* ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 663.

> data as a reliable piece of historical information while regarding the story as a whole as a free invention.[9]

If the story was circulating after 537 BC when Cyrus decreed that the Jews could return home (post-exile), the Assyrians had already conquered and assimilated Israel, the Northern Kingdom, 200 years previously in 721 BC. The Babylonians had already conquered Judah, the Southern Kingdom, in progressive stages from taking their elites captive (like Daniel and his three friends; Daniel 1:1–6), installing a puppet king (Zedekiah; 2 Kings 24:17–18), to full invasion and destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC (2 Kings 25:1–2). Having this story circulating during a period of immense upheaval and destruction makes it plausible that there is an additional prophetic or allegorical layer under the surface of the happy story. The timing of its origin is part of its story; it bears further examination of why the story unfolds as it does, why the characters behave as they do, and what lies deeper beneath the surface.

Symbolism of the Names

The symbolism of the story can be unraveled by investigating the meaning of the names of the characters in Hebrew. The names' obvious double meanings to a Hebrew audience further confirms the idea that the story is a carefully crafted work with layers of meaning.

Naomi, the protagonist of the story, means "pleasant one."[10] Her name is also translated as "my delight." Even though the title is *The Book of Ruth*, it is Naomi around whom all the actions revolve; her survival is intertwined with the survival of Ruth. She represents the "pleasant people" of the Lord: the Israelites. As an allegory, her actions in the story are the actions of the Israelites. Being the "pleasant one" or the "delight" of the Lord is further solidified by her relationship with her husband, Elimelech, which means "God is King."[11] Naomi could have been the delight or pleasant one of an infinite number of things, but in tandem with her husband, she is the delight of God. God's covenant people, the house of Israel, are his delight and his pleasant ones.

Naomi and Elimelech begin the story at a disadvantage, prefigured

9. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible,* s.v. "Ruth."
10. From the Hebrew word נעם (*naam*) meaning "to be pleasant." Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 2001), s.v. "נעם."
11. A combination of the Hebrew words אל (*el*, or God) and מלך (*melech*, or king). Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, s.v. "אל" and "מלך."

by their hometown. They are referred to as "Ephrathites of Beth-lehem-judah" in Ruth 1:2 and again in 4:11. They belong to the very place where Rachel, beloved wife of Jacob, tragically died in giving birth to Benjamin. "And Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Beth-lehem" (Genesis 35:19). The pillar on her grave was set there, a reminder of the tragically shortened life of Jacob's delight. An allegorical connection with the "delight" of the Lord, the House of Israel, beginning its story at the place of Rachel's death, portends anguish and tribulation.

To compound their misfortune, a famine forced their move to Moab. The famine could be symbolically viewed as an indication that they had broken their covenants through wickedness and disobedience. Deuteronomy 28 enumerates Israel's covenants with God, both the blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience. Famine was the first curse pronounced for disobedience: "Therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies which the Lord shall send against thee, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things" (Deuteronomy 28:48).

Their broken covenants were manifest in the cause for their move and their location. The trip to Moab would have been a route-reversal of the Israelite's journey into the Promised Land back over the Jordan River into the wilderness. This was an "inverted exodus" where the couple goes out full and Naomi comes home empty, unlike Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, or the Israelites on their exodus journeys leaving with flocks, cattle, and wealth.[12] Israel's apostasy could be represented in the couple's move. Perhaps the writer was making a statement about the Israelites' worship of a false god, or a corruption of their understanding of the true God, in having Elimelech leave the promised land with his wife. God the King, the Divine Father, was not apostate, but their understanding of him had been corrupted. He does not appear in the rest of the story, only to illustrate that the couple had left the promised land and were living among the Moabites when he died, leaving her stranded in a foreign nation. Her connection with him was severed.

Elimelech and Naomi were not alone in the gentile land of Moab; they moved with their two sons. The names of their offspring represented the condition of the Israelites, now bereft of their protective

12. Peter J. Leithart, "When Gentile Meets Jew: A Christian Reading of Ruth & the Hebrew Scriptures," *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 22 (May 2009): 21–22.

covenant — Mahlon, meaning "sick"[13] and Chilion, meaning "annihilation" or "decrease."[14] They only appear in the story for four verses, to present their weak and ill-fated names and to announce that not only were they sick and failing, but that they also married Moabite gentile women, outside of the covenant people. Allegorically, the consequences of Israel leaving their covenants with the Lord were manifest in both destruction and sickness: the offspring of their idolatrous choices.

The wives of these two sons were named Orpah and Ruth (Ruth 1:4). *Orpah* means "hard necked" or "obstinate."[15] The "back of the neck" figuratively symbolized either a fleeing foe or apostasy. Jewish tradition explains that this name was to symbolize that Orpah turned her back on her mother-in-law.[16] She was also painted as a promiscuous harlot when she returned to Moab in later Jewish writings (circa 700–950 AD).

> Once she had taken her leave of her mother-in-law, her subsequent actions are deemed extremely negative. She is said to have lain, that very night, with one hundred men, and even with a dog. The Philistine Goliath, who fought the young David during the battle in the valley of Elah, was born of this promiscuous activity (*Ruth Rabbah 2:20*). Orpah's wanton behavior is said to be characteristic of her and one of the exegeses of her name describes such conduct: "Orpah — because everyone ground her like bruised corn [*harifot*]."[17]

Ruth's name represents, symbolically, the opposite of Orpah's betrayal. Ruth means a "friend," "female companion," or "neighbor woman."[18] Her role in the story is that of an intermediary savior, the

13. From the Hebrew word חלה (*chalah*) meaning "to fall sick, be ill." Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, s.v. "חלה".
14. From the Hebrew word כליון (*kilayon*) meaning "annihilation, decrease." Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, s.v. "כליון."
15. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, s.v. "ערפה."
16. "Ruth Rabbah 2:9," Sefaria, sefaria.org/Ruth_Rabbah.2.9?lang=bi. Ruth Rabbah is an old text, but not as old as the book of Ruth. It was written in ca. 700–950 AD, it is an explanation of each verse in the book of Ruth, It is part of the Midrash Rabbot, which also includes the books of Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and the Book of Esther.
17. Tamar Meir, "Orpah: Midrash and Aggadah," *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, Jewish Women's Archive (website), jwa.org /encyclopedia/article/orpah-midrash-and-aggadah.
18. James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody,

outside caregiver who would restore Naomi to her former position and respect. She represents the Gentiles in the latter-days who are instrumental in restoring Israel to their covenants. Ruth would not leave Naomi; her famous expression of loyalty has been quoted for centuries:

> Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. (Ruth 1:16–17)

In sum, Ruth stays and Orpah goes. Ruth is symbolically the friend who will redeem the family line through her great sacrifice and commitment; Orpah turns against her family. Ruth is the progenitor of David; Orpah bears Goliath. The Gentiles are symbolically and symmetrically cast in the story as playing two opposing roles in the future of the Israelites' gathering and restoration. Here is a summary of the story to this point, using the symbolic names from Hebrew:

> *The Pleasant One (Naomi) and God the King (Elimelech) were married, but they forsook their covenants and left their promised land. They bore children of Sickness (Mahlon) and Destruction (Chilion). When God the King died, the Pleasant One was left for ten years with Sickness and Destruction. When her sons died, everyone else abandoned her and the Pleasant One was left destitute, without support, and far from home. She had two connections with Gentiles: Nape of the Neck (Orpah), who turned her back on her, and the Friend (Ruth), who was devoted to her and her God.*

Naomi could be symbolically seen as the original prodigal. At the depths of her desperation, she looks back to her home and hears that there is some food there. She returns in meek poverty, announcing that she is no more Naomi (Pleasant One), but Mara (bitterness) (Ruth 1:20). The inverted exodus is clearly stated by Naomi: "I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty" (Ruth 1:21). She was too old to bear another child and secure future support for herself or a new husband for Ruth, so she was forced to rely on the mercy of distant relatives who might take pity on her. Being a childless widow in

MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), s.v. "H7327, H7468 [Ruth],-," 1573, 1575.

the ancient world was a precarious position. Casting the two characters in the story as childless widows was a well-executed literary trope to describe desperation and hopelessness.

> Israel had no pension plans, no social security, no assisted living. The responsibility to care for the elderly fell upon their families. It was first the responsibility of children to provide for the aged and the widow; this is one reason why the loss of children was such a staggering blow. . . . If a married man died without children, his brothers were responsible to care for his wife. Part of this care was for one brother to marry and impregnate the new widow; therewith the firstborn child bore the dead brother's name and served as his heir.[19]

The manner of caring for widows through marrying a near kinsman (like a brother, uncle, or nephew) who would then father a child to carry on the deceased husband's name is called the Levirate. It was a law for the Israelites to observe to protect the vulnerable from neglect (Deuteronomy 25:5–10). Thus, when Ruth followed Naomi out of gentile Moab, she, too, left all means of providing for herself. Ruth had no other brother-in-law to marry and conceive a child to provide for her older years. She was also a Moabitess, an outsider from a neighboring oppressor. The story is narrated from the beginning as occurring in "the days when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1). The Moabites in Judges 3, with the grotesquely fat King Eglon, had been oppressing Israel for eighteen years (Judges 3:14). After Ehud, an Israelite, assassinated the Moabite king and slipped away into the night, the Israelite army went into Moab and slew 10,000 Moabite "men of valor" (Judges 3:29). Ruth was not only a foreigner and a widow, but perceived as an enemy to the Israelites. She had no one but Naomi, and neither of them had much to support themselves. They had to wholly rely upon the attention of the Lord.

> *The Pleasant Ones are not forsaken by their Friends. The rest of the world may "turn their back" on Israel, but one group will stay with them. The Israelites God will be their God. The Gentiles will follow and preserve the Israelites.*

19. Kerry Muhlestein, "Ruth, Redemption, Covenant, and Christ," in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, ed. D. Kelly Ogden, Jared W. Ludlow and Kerry Muhlestein (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 2009), 189–90, rsc.byu.edu/gospel-jesus-christ-old-testament/ruth-redemption-covenant-christ.

Marriage to the Redeemer

The role of the Gentiles in bringing Israel back to its covenant with God is embodied by the relationship between Ruth and Boaz (Elimelech's relative). The name *Boaz* has a meaning of both "strength" and "swiftness," depending on the lexicon used. Thus, his name has been interpreted as "in him is strength, swiftness, quickness."[20] He is introduced as a "kinsman of her husband's, a mighty man of wealth, of the family of Elimelech; and his name was Boaz" (Ruth 2:1). Boaz is the rescuer, the redeemer, the bridegroom, the savior. As the Son of God (family of God the King), Jesus Christ is the Redeemer, Bridegroom, and Savior—he is the allegorical manifestation of the character of Boaz.

The relationship between God and his people is often described as a marriage. When they left their covenants, the Lord described the Israelites as an unfaithful wife, a harlot. (See, for example, Isaiah 1:21, Jeremiah 2:20, Ezekiel 16:15, and Hosea 4:15.) They lost their privilege to be the Lord's covenant bearers, and the Gentiles picked up the relationship. Though Naomi was never an unfaithful wife or a harlot, she had been forsaken and left destitute. Ruth, a Gentile, entered into a redeeming relationship with Boaz and together the two saved them all. This is a common theme of many symbols and stories: God is the bridegroom, and his Church is the bride, whether that church is Israelite or Gentile.

> Often in the scriptures the covenant which God made with Israel is referred to as a marriage covenant. The same conditions which are at the core of the bond of marriage are also at the core of the bond between Jehovah and Israel: honesty, love, and fidelity. The covenant of marriage and God's covenant with his chosen people are, in fact, very similar. Hosea's message concerning Jehovah and his people is expressed in that kind of language.[21]

In Hosea 2 we read,

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20. Ruth 2:1 note a, in the Latter-day Saint edition of the King James Version of the Bible; see also *Strong's Concordance*, s.v. "H1162 [Boaz]," 1478; Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, s.v. "בֹּעַז."
21. Kent P. Jackson, "The Marriage of Hosea and Jehovah's Covenant with Israel," in *Isaiah and the Prophets: Inspired Voices from the Old Testament*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 1984), 57–74, rsc.byu.edu/isaiah-prophets/marriage-hosea-jehovahs-covenant-israel.

> And I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord. . . . And I will sow her unto me in the earth; and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God. (Hosea 2:19–20, 23)

The temple endowment ceremony has elements of a wedding between the participants and the Lord. The clothing, veils, tokens, and altar are the symbols of a covenant of marriage. Members participate in those ordinances and gain power in their covenantal relationship with the Lord, just as though he was now their legal husband, protector, and redeemer, authorized to access his *hesed.* President Russell M. Nelson has emphasized the power of temple worship in strengthening our relationship with the Lord.

> Once we make a covenant with God, we leave neutral ground forever. God will not abandon His relationship with those who have forged such a bond with Him. In fact, all those who have made a covenant with God have access to a special kind of love and mercy. In the Hebrew language, that covenantal love is called *hesed.* . . . A celestial marriage is such a covenant relationship. A husband and wife make a covenant with God and with each other to be loyal and faithful to each other. *Hesed* is a special kind of love and mercy that God feels for and extends to those who have made a covenant with Him. And we reciprocate with *hesed* for Him.[22]

Temple ordinances allow worshippers to enter covenants to bind themselves to the Lord, declaring that they are willing to give everything the Lord needs to build up his kingdom. In return, the Lord promises to care for and protect them, as a husband. This kind of commitment is also illustrated in the story of Ruth, with a similar reward.

> Orpah and the potential redeemer in 4:3–6 are ready to give *some* help; the drama lies with the greater risk and

22. Russell M. Nelson, "The Everlasting Covenant," *Liahona,* October 2022, 5–6, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2022/10/04-the-everlasting-covenant.

> commitment required of Ruth and Boaz to bring good out of bad, a theme expressed in the key concept *hesed*, "kindness," in 1:8; 2:20; and 3:10.[23]

Because Ruth and Boaz were willing to give it all, each through their own sacrifice, they embody the loving-kindness, mercy, and commitment in *hesed*, the word for covenantal love.[24]

The story of Boaz and Ruth was woven through with ancient temple symbolism. The very name *Boaz* would have immediate temple connotations. The left brazen pillar of the Temple at Jerusalem was named Boaz (1 Kings 7:21). The pillar not only held up the entrance to the temple, but symbolically held up the firmament of heaven. The name *Boaz*, the temple, and the creation were all intertwined. Another temple image was the location of their midnight meeting on the threshing floor. Threshing floors were centers of agricultural communities. People gathered there for work, legal agreements, celebrations, and rituals. They believed that Jehovah blessed their threshing floors or cursed them, depending upon their righteousness.[25] David purchased a threshing floor on Mount Moriah (the temple mount), which then became the base for the temple of Solomon (2 Samuel 24:15–25) and, later, the temples of Zerubabbel and Herod.[26] The threshing floor of David was at the foundation of them all. Ruth and Boaz made their arrangement in a place that echoed both legal and spiritual covenants, prefiguring the covenants in holy temples between the Gentiles and the Lord in the latter days.

Additionally, the use of the word *wing* in their relationship has symbolic meaning: "The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust" (Ruth 2:12). Again, when Ruth bravely surprises Boaz on the threshing floor, she answers, "I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman"

23. *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 663.
24. See Nelson, "Everlasting Covenant."
25. Jaime L. Waters, "Threshing Floors in Ancient Israel," review of "Threshing Floors in Ancient Israel: Their Ritual and Symbolic Significance," by John D. Currid, *Bible History Daily*, Biblical Archaeology Society, 8 April 2016, biblicalarchaeology.org/reviews/threshing-floors-in-ancient-israel/.
26. David Rolph Seely, "The Temple of Herod," in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society: A Background to the Texts of the New Testament,* ed. Lincoln H. Blumell (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), 53–70, rsc.byu.edu/new-testament-history-culture-society/temple-herod.

(Ruth 3:9). The Hebrew word for *skirt* is also translated as *wing*.[27] These allusions to wings, along with the symmetrical descriptions of Boaz and Ruth as worthy, recall a pair of matched winged figures—the cherubim on top of the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies, facing one another, arms lifted to God.[28] Their marriage was imbued with celestial, eternal imagery.

Wing imagery was also a powerful representation of Christ's grace and atonement. He alluded to gathering his people under his wings in symbolic language representing his unmatched ability to provide safety, comfort, and salvation. (See Psalms 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; and 91:4, as well as 3 Nephi 10:5–6.) Matthew Bowen explored the relationship between the imagery of wings (or the divine embrace) and the Savior's protective love. Within the book of Ruth, he noted the symbolic repetition of the image of wings.

> Boaz commends Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi, mother of her deceased husband, and to Naomi's God in language that echoes the foregoing passages in the Psalms: "The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings [*kĕnāpâw*] thou art come to trust [to take refuge]" (Ruth 2:12). Boaz's language foreshadows Ruth's request to Boaz that he fulfill the role of kinsman-redeemer (*gōʾēl*).[29]

Boaz's role was that of redeemer, or *goʾel*, as well as husband. The role was an essential part of ancient Israelite culture; it was the only way that mercy could intervene without robbing justice. In the allegorical interpretation of Ruth, the Law of Justice may be the nearer kinsman that Boaz, the redeemer, had to negotiate with who had the first right of redemption. Christ's atonement paid the demands of justice so that mercy could have her full power (Alma 42:15).

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27. *Strong's Concordance*, s.v. "H3671 [skirt]," 1516.
28. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, "KnoWhy OTL20A—How Does the Book of Ruth Provide a Model for Marriage?," Interpreter Foundation, 21 May 2018, interpreterfoundation.org/knowhy-otl20a-how-does-the-book-of-ruth-provide-a-model-for-marriage/.
29. Matthew L. Bowen, "'Encircled About Eternally In the Arms of His Love': The Divine Embrace As a Thematic Symbol of Jesus Christ and His Atonement in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 59 (2023): 117, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/encircled-about-eternally-in-the-arms-of-his-love-the-divine-embrace-as-a-thematic-symbol-of-jesus-christ-and-his-atonement-in-the-book-of-mormon/.

> In Israel, the family had another responsibility in looking after its members who had come under hardship. Israel and her ancient Near Eastern neighbors required that all possible means be taken in order to meet a debt. If an individual had difficulty in paying his debt, family land and even family members, including the debtor, were required to be sold as an attempt to meet the obligation. No allowances were made in justice, which demanded debt repayment. Yet the law of Moses also provided a way for mercy to be extended through family members. The closest family member had a right and an obligation to redeem, or buy back, family land or family members who had been sold. "After that he is sold he may be redeemed again; one of his brethren may redeem him: either his uncle, or his uncle's son, may redeem him, or any that is nigh of kin unto him of his family may redeem him; or if he be able, he may redeem himself" (Leviticus 25:48–49). The man who bought his family land or kinsman back was known as the redeemer, or in Hebrew, the *gō'el*. This was not free deliverance; this was deliverance at a price, and the *gō'el* paid that price. He met the debt owed by his relative which that kinsman could not pay on his own.[30]
>
> *The Strong One who is Swift to Save (Boaz) paid the price justice demanded and covenanted with the Friend (Ruth). Together they brought the Pleasant One (Naomi) back into the safety of her promised blessings.*

The end of the book of Ruth provides a shining ray of hope, possibly the reason the whole story was written: "There is a son born to Naomi. . . . [H]e is the father of Jesse, the father of David" (Ruth 4:17). For the exiled Jews reading this story, the connection to David would have been auspicious. He was the hero underdog who, with five rocks, saved Israel from Orpah's giant—he represented their best days: freedom, independence, unity, righteousness, and wealth. This was the poet-king-priest whom God had selected to lead them. And, importantly, he was the symbol of the promised Messiah. Jesus Christ's lineage through the Davidic line was a token of his legitimacy. During the post-exilic period everything was in upheaval and separation. Babylon had already invaded, destroyed, and taken prisoners; the Assyrians had already disbursed the ten tribes, assimilating them by

30. Muhlestein, "Ruth, Redemption, Covenant, and Christ," 191–92.

breaking them up into small groups or individuals in far-flung points throughout the vast empire. It seemed that all hope of an independent, united nation was merely a dream. Then the book of Ruth came with hope of a Messiah and redemption. Interestingly, it is Naomi, not Ruth, who is listed as the parent of Obed. When the Messiah comes again, he will be fully Israelite, not Gentile in his lineage. Jesus Christ was born into the tribe of Judah, and continues to bear that lineage, no matter the help the Gentiles offered in the ongoing restoration.

In the context of the story as an allegory, understood by the Hebrew audience more clearly because of the meanings behind the Hebrew names, the inclusion of David at the end also points to a reunified, powerful Israel, and a new reign of the Messiah. Only the Messiah, from the line of David, could expand the reach of the kingdom.

> *After the Redemption of the Gentiles and the Israelites, there will come a Savior fit to rule the earth as David ruled. And there will be peace, righteousness, and prosperity forever.*

The Role of the Gentiles

Once Ruth and Boaz were married, Naomi was brought back to her original station. This message encapsulates the allegory. Gentiles will seek a relationship with the Lord (a little presumptuously, as they were not the covenant people — like Ruth on the threshing floor) empowering them to help the Israelites also be restored to their original station. "The typological redemption of Ruth follows this pattern: Naomi, the Jewish widow, is bereft; the Gentile daughter Ruth joins her; Naomi gets a redeemer when Boaz attaches himself to Ruth. The pattern is not 'salvation, then incorporation of Gentiles' but 'incorporation of Gentiles, then salvation.'"[31]

Gentile is a difficult word to define because it is situationally determined. Paul Y. Hoskisson explains,

> The word Gentile has several meanings that can be traced back etymologically to one original concept, the idea of a people or tribe. The English word *Gentile* comes from a Latin word that means "tribe, clan, family, people, etc." This

31. Leithart, "When Gentile Meets Jew," 23.

> means that Gentiles, in general terms, simply implies a segregation between various people; it gives the idea of *them* and *us*.[32]

Nephi used the word *Gentile* more than any other writer in the Book of Mormon with over eighty occurrences in his record. He was contemporary with the Babylonian exile in which the book of Ruth may have emerged. His story mirrors hers in certain ways as well—his family left Jerusalem, fleeing tribulation of a different sort. They were persecuted for their belief in Christ and inspired to leave and populate a new land of promise. Other faithful families were also commanded to leave to protect themselves and preserve Israelite heritage in yet unknown parts of the world.[33] The literal scattering of Israel illustrates that many who left the land of Israel were not apostate but were being obedient to the commandments of the Lord. In the book of Ruth, their move out of Jerusalem symbolically showed the distance that the House of Israel had created from their blessings and the safety of their covenants. Nephi's familiarity with the role of the Gentiles in the restoration of the House of Israel shows that this prophecy was part of the religious conversation in Jerusalem at the time of their exodus.

One hundred and fifty years previous to Nephi, Isaiah had written:

> Thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles, and set up my standard to the people: and they shall bring thy sons in their arms, and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders. And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers: they shall bow down to thee with their face toward the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord: for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me. (Isaiah 49:22–23)

Nephi included many of Isaiah's writings in 1 Nephi 20–21, 2 Nephi

32. Hoskisson, s.v. "Gentile(s)," *Doctrine and Covenants Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), quoted in John Hilton III et al., "Gentiles in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 33 (2019): 269–70, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/gentiles-in-the-book-of-mormon/.
33. For example, the Mulekites, and the ancestors of many native people, have similar Hebrew origins to the Nephites, in both North and South America and on the islands. Jesus even told the Nephites that "other sheep" needed him to visit them, and there are stories from Russia to the Ojibwa that Christ visited them after his resurrection.

7–8, and 2 Nephi 12–27. All of these inclusions are intended to give hope to his posterity that they will be gathered again; they are not cast off forever. "It is a light thing that thou shouldst be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel. I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the ends of the earth" (1 Nephi 21:6). The role of the Gentiles in gathering Israel is a favorite theme of Nephi.

> And blessed are the Gentiles, they of whom the prophet has written; for behold, if it so be that they shall repent and fight not against Zion, and do not unite themselves to that great and abominable church, they shall be saved; for the Lord God will fulfil his covenants which he has made unto his children; and for this cause the prophet has written these things. (2 Nephi 6:12)

Nephi shows that there is a divide in the loyalties of the Gentiles. Those who will repent and join Zion will be saved—those are the friends, like Naomi. Those that unite with the great and abominable church will not—those turn their backs, like Orpah. The invitation was to all the Gentiles, but not all will accept it.

The deeper message within the story may be that, eventually, all the Israelites will return to their covenants and be reunited. A prolific number of prophecies regarding Israel's eventual gathering and restoration abounded during the scattering. The earlier prophesies of Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah all point to a latter-day gathering with the help of the Gentiles.[34] These prophets predated the scattering

34. Chapter 25, "Prophecies of a Latter-Day Gathering (Jeremiah 23; 30–31; 33; 46–51; Obadiah)," in *Old Testament Student Manual, Kings–Malachi* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 253, archive.org/details/oldtestament1kin00chur/page/252/mode/2up. Hosea prophesied, "Afterward shall the children of Israel return, and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and shall fear the Lord and his goodness in the latter-days" (Hosea 3:5). In the context of the book of Ruth, his inclusion of "David their King" as part of the latter-day restoration is significant. Amos uses the imagery of sifting the house of Israel, "like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth" (Amos 9:9). He also employed a planting metaphor to describe their return to their blessings: "And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of their land which I have given them, saith the Lord thy God" (Amos 9:15). These agrarian themes are also central to the book of Ruth. Micah compares Israel to a flock of sheep that will be gathered (Micah 2:12) and as sheaves gathered into the floor (Micah 4:12). Isaiah's prophecies are very clear regarding the partnership between the Gentiles and Israel, which will be addressed later in the body of this article.

of the Northern Kingdom, teaching from 826–721 BC, right when Assyria invaded. They used agrarian themes of planting and harvest to describe Israel's return in the latter-days, as well as references to King David's reign, just like the book of Ruth.

The later prophets (620–540 BC), Jeremiah, Ezekial, and Zechariah, in the turmoil of conquest, prophesied of future restoration. Jeremiah saw a vision of future gathering: "Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am married unto you: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion" (Jeremiah 3:14). He also prophesied of hunters and fishers, who would search out missing individual Israelites from "every mountain, and from every hill, and out of the holes of the rocks" (Jeremiah 16:16). After many words of condemnation for backsliding Israel, Ezekiel also prophesied that hope would come in the future:

> Thus saith the Lord God: I will even gather you from the people, and assemble you out of the countries where ye have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel. And they shall come thither. . . . And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you: and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh and will give them an heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 11:17–19)

Zechariah prophesied of the Gentiles joining Israel:

> And many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people: and I will dwell in the midst of thee, and thou shalt know that the Lord of hosts hath sent me unto thee. And the Lord shall inherit Judah his portion in the holy land, and shall choose Jerusalem again. (Zechariah 2:11–12)

In the context of this prophetic tradition and message — that the Gentiles will assist the Israelites in returning to their covenants, their promised land, and the Lord — the book of Ruth could be seen as the illustrative version of their prophecies.

The restoration of the Gospel through Joseph Smith and subsequent Latter-day prophets is the fulfillment of these prophecies. The expansive missionary effort, steadily increasing for nearly 200 years has swept every continent and penetrated every clime, as Joseph Smith prophesied.[35] The "gentile nations," in the geo-political sense,

35. "Church History," 1 March 1842, p. 709, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/church-history-1-march-1842/4.

of the United States with a large demographic of northern Europeans, began the work to gather Israel back to their covenants in the 1830s. As the work has rolled forward, Israelites (both by birth and by adoption) from all over the world are being brought back to their relationship with God through covenantal ordinances. They, too, have joined the missionary force in gathering *other* Israelites, and the work of God compounds exponentially.

The first shall be last and the last shall be first applies to the order of distribution of gospel truth. The Jews had it first and will be last in the latter days; the Gentiles had it last and were first in the latter-day restoration. The book of Ruth illustrates this principle with the story of a gentile woman nurturing, sacrificing, and loving a Jewish woman, supporting her in her destitution, and bringing her back to a place of security and comfort.

Pentecost

The book of Ruth is the traditional reading of the Pentecostal festival.[36] Pentecost is one of the three main feast days of Israel, and each are associated with a different harvest. Passover ends with the Festival of First Fruits—the barley harvest. Pentecost occurs fifty days later and celebrates the gathering of the wheat. The fruit harvest occurs in the fall around the Festival of Tabernacles, or the feast of in-gathering.[37]

Observing these three feasts are commandments of the Lord, written in Exodus 23. They each have layers of significance and a relevance for the story of Ruth. The Passover serves as a reminder of the exodus from slavery in Egypt but also carries the symbolism of Christ's atoning sacrifice, with a sacrificial lamb, protective blood, and the destroyer "passing over" the Israelites. This feast is connected to the barley harvest. The last day of the seven-day feast is called the First Fruits.

Barley is the first grain harvested, and when it is ripe, its heads bow down, evoking an image of humility and obedience. It is the easiest to harvest. The grains and chaff can be separated without much physical persuasion, just the wind. Given the proximity to the symbolic atonement of Passover (within the same week), it could be argued that the

36. *Oxford Companion to the Bible,* 662. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible,* s.v. "Ruth." Commanded to be observed in Exodus 23:14–16.

37. Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Feasts," in the Latter-day Saint edition of the King James Version of the Bible, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bd/feasts.

barley harvest represents the faithful righteous of Israel, first and easily gathered. Christ is labeled "the firstfruits" by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:20–23. John prophecies that the 144,000 who join the Lamb on Mount Zion are "redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb" (Revelation 14:4). Others have called the barley harvest "the overcomers." The faithful, obedient, righteous saints who follow easily and humbly are gathered in first.[38]

The Pentecost is tethered to first fruits by fifty days. It commemorates the gathering of the wheat. Wheat, unlike barley, stands up straight and erect, its chaff is more stubborn and uses more physical persuasion to separate the grain — called threshing. The ancient method of separating the chaff and wheat was using a threshing board, inlaid with chips of flint or stone, and called *tribulum* in Latin (from whence *tribulation* is derived). The wheat harvest could symbolize the gathering of the more stubborn, stiff, and disobedient, who require the persuasion of tribulation to see their way back to God. This could also be a symbol of the gentile nations shedding their false beliefs and idols so they could be gathered, in contrast to the humble barley-Israelites.[39]

The final festival commanded by the Lord, the feast of Tabernacles, coincides with the harvest of the fruit, especially the grapes, but also olives, pomegranates, and figs. This occurs six months later, in the fall. The grapes were crushed by feet in a winepress, creating deep red liquid, reminiscent of blood. The symbolism here is of the wicked being judged. The wicked are harvested, just as the righteous are, but they will be burned as tares. John prophesies of the punishment of the wicked as grapes being harvested and thrown into the winepress.

> And the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden without the city, and blood came out of the winepress, even unto the horse bridles, by the space of a thousand and six hundred furlongs. (Revelation 14:19–20)

Harvesting was a cyclical microcosm of the lifespan of the earth — the gathering of souls in phases, bringing them safely into

38. Iain Gordon, "Revelation Chapter 14: The Harvest of the Earth," *Bible Study Series, Jesus Plus Nothing* (website), jesusplusnothing.com/series/post/bible-study-revelation-14-harvest-earth.
39. Gordon, "Revelation Chapter 14."

the storehouse of heaven. The parables of the vineyard, the sower of seeds, the wheat and the tares, the olive tree allegory in Jacob 5, the end of days revelation by John — all of these use the metaphor of harvesting to symbolize gathering, judgment, and eternal life of different degrees of glory.

The harvests in Boaz's fields were central to the plot of the story, and the timing of the harvests also coincided with the message of the allegory. Ruth and Naomi arrived at the beginning of the barley harvest, they were still unredeemed by their *go'el* at that point in the story, but he sent them home with loads of grain, symbolizing the gathering of the Israelites before the time of the Gentiles. Ruth worked in his fields through the barley and wheat harvests and came to the threshing floor during the winnowing of the barley. Thus, she approached Boaz between the time of the wheat harvest and the thrashing of the wheat, the same time that Pentecost is celebrated. As a formal, literary allegory, it is imperfect, with not every element matching up, but there is some significance to the plot of harvesting, the fact that Ruth (Gentile) brings in an abundance of barley (Israel), and the timing of the meeting on the threshing floor.

After Christ's resurrection, when he visited his apostles, he explained their commission to go to all the nations, teaching repentance and the remission of sins. The sign that they were to begin this world-wide gathering was when the Holy Ghost came upon them (Acts 1:2–8, Luke 24:46–49). This sign occurred on the feast of Pentecost, when the Spirit filled the house where they were gathered and gave the Christians the ability to speak in the languages of the Gentiles (Acts 2:1–18). That day 3,000 souls were baptized from many nations, though they were all Jewish, attending the feast of the Pentecost. Perhaps Peter thought that it was sufficient that they were baptizing Jews from all nations to fulfill their commission to go to all the world.

Several weeks later, the commission to go to the Gentiles was reaffirmed with Peter's vision of the unclean animals. He was commanded to "rise, Peter; kill and eat" (Acts 10:13). The vision may have been a gentle rebuke and reminder that he was to take the gospel to *all nations*, not just *the Jews* of all nations, which the Lord had instructed him previously should commence with the reception of the Holy Spirit. "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common" (Acts 10:15). The past tense phrase indicates that God had already cleansed or approved of them. When Cornelius showed up at the door moments

later, Peter understood the meaning behind the vision—he was to gather the Gentiles into the gospel net too.

Thus, the times of the Gentiles commenced with Peter and continued through the apostasy and into the restoration.[40] The sign was given to begin on the day of Pentecost, as they were gathered in a private home, likely reading the book of Ruth and eating their wheat bread offering, when the Holy Spirit rushed through the house like tongues of fire (Acts 2:2). The harvest of the wheat had begun, and the book of Ruth anticipated the event each year for centuries.

Conclusion

In the context of the post-exilic scattering, the allegory embedded within the story of Ruth was a powerful explanation of their current condition (sickness and destruction) with a shining ray of hope (Gentiles will help to reunite them with their *go'el*). The names of the characters in the story tell a deeper, more meaningful story of a people who needed help to come back to their promised land, pledge loyalty and fidelity, and ultimately find safety in their Lord's wings. The fact that it is tied to the harvest of the wheat, read at the Pentecost, strengthens this allegorical lens of the role of the Gentiles in gathering Israel. The story of Ruth is a microcosm of Israel's journey and destiny.

> *The Pleasant One and God the King leave the safety of their covenants, resulting in sickness, destruction, failing and annihilation. Then all means of support vanish—her husband and sons perish while she is far from home. There are two groups of Gentiles who she relies on: One who Turns Her Back and leaves, and another who is a Friend and Neighbor. The Friend and Neighbor follows the Pleasant one with loyalty—she will go with her anywhere, worship her God, be a part of her people. The Friend works hard to support the Pleasant One, gathering in the humble stalks of barley and bringing home an abundance, sanctioned by the owner of the field.*
>
> *He who is Swift to Save notices the Friend and offers her*

40. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation,* 1:196, quoted in *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 94, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/doctrine-and-covenants-student-manual/section-45-looking-forth-for-the-great-day-of-the-lord.

more than her share of the harvest, protects her, and opens his fields and home to her. She stays in his fields and doesn't go anywhere else. During the winnowing of the barley, the Friend boldly goes to the threshing floor, the place where covenants were made, the place reminiscent of the temple in Jerusalem, and requests that He who is Swift to Save will redeem both her and the Pleasant One. He promises that he will if he can. He has to make arrangements with one who has closer claim on them than he does. He negotiates with the nearer kinsman, who declines to help, and offers mercy and salvation to the two women. The Friend and He who is Swift to Save are married and have a child. Through their lineage, David will be born, he whose right it is to rule. Through this, the Pleasant One's future is assured and her safety and protection are restored. The Messiah, through David's line, will come because of this union and reinstate peace, prosperity, and unity to the Pleasant One and to the Friend.

Jan Gillespie Francisco *graduated from Utah State University with a BA in History and Secondary Education. She lives in Lander, Wyoming, with her husband, Ben, and their six children. She loves learning about the scriptures and ancient cultures. She maintains a blog at indefenseofwomen.wordpress.com relating to her experiences as a woman in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.*

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