

The Book of Ruth – Chapter 3

Love's request...

Introduction

Naomi was faced with three issues:

1. How could the name of Elimelech be maintained among the tribes of Israel since both her sons were dead?
2. What steps should be taken to protect her inheritance, which Elimelech had left in Naomi's trust?
3. How could she provide rest and security for her faithful daughter-in-law?

A marriage between Ruth and Boaz would solve all three problems. But it also meant that Naomi would renounce her own claim to Boaz as the close relative and give it to Ruth, the younger widow.

The Threshing Floor

The harvest involved threshing grain and preparing it for market. The threshing floor was a large, flat parcel of ground where there was a prevailing wind. After grinding grain, the harvesters would throw it up in the air and the wind would cause the grain to fall a short distance downwind, with the chaff falling further away. One would thus end up with two piles: the closer one would be good for market, and the further one would be burned as rubbish.

Threshing floors were often prominent places. David purchased the threshing floor of Arunah, which later became the site of the Temple (2 Samuel 24 v 24).

The harvest was not only a time of work, but also a time of celebration. Typically the afternoon was spent threshing, and at night the harvesters would throw a party (Isaiah 41 v 15, 16). The owners would sleep at the threshing floor to prevent theft of the grain.

The Law of the Levirate Marriage

See Deuteronomy 25 v 5 to 10. The word *levir* is Latin for 'a husband's brother'. The 'Law of the Levirate Marriage' dealt with a situation where there was a widow with no children. She could go to the next of kin and put a claim on him to take her to wife to raise up children for the family.

The 'kinsman-redeemer' or גֹּאֵל (*go-el*) had to meet three conditions:

1. First, he had to be a near kinsman
2. Second, he had to be able to perform his duties as a kinsman-redeemer
3. Third, he had to be willing to perform his duties as a kinsman-redeemer; it was not compulsory. If he chose not to take her to wife, then he had to give her his sandal as a symbol of shame – because he had failed to do the kinsman-redeemer's part.

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Naomi's instructions to Ruth (Ruth 3 v 1 to 5)

- What instructions did Naomi give to Ruth, and what were Naomi's motives?
- Do you think Naomi was looking out for Ruth, or was her primary motive self-interest?
- How do these verses show Naomi's 'shrewdness' in recognizing male behaviour? "Rest" (i.e. security, v 1) – see also Ruth 1 v 9.
- To what extent did Naomi have to trust in Boaz's good character and behaviour?
- What risks were Naomi and Ruth both taking?

Ruth and Boaz at the threshing floor (Ruth 3 v 6 to 18)

Boaz would lie down by one heap of grain (v 7), and his servants would be scattered over other areas guarding the heaps of grain there, thus affording a measure of privacy for Boaz and Ruth. The heaps of winnowed grain would be at the edge of the threshing floor, as the centre was reserved for the threshing itself. Being at the edge of the floor with his pile, and separated from the others, would provide a further measure of privacy.

"Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down" (v 7) – Ruth took the servant's position, in which the servant lies diagonally at his master's feet. The position was a lowly one, representing Ruth as a petitioner; but when Ruth says "I am Ruth, your servant" (v 9), the Hebrew word for 'servant' is אַמָּה ('amah), which implies that she presented herself as one who was eligible for marriage...

"Spread your wings" (v 9) – the Hebrew word is קָנָף (*kanaph*), which can be translated as 'wings, edge, border, skirt, hem, fringe'. Here it refers to the corner of a garment, and to the custom in which a man spreads this garment over his wife as well as himself.

Do not misunderstand this episode – in our culture it might seem that Ruth is propositioning Boaz, but there is actually much more going on! Ruth is making a claim on Boaz to take her to wife because he is obligated under the Law of the Levirate Marriage. By invoking the 'kinsman-redeemer' custom, Ruth subordinates her own happiness (e.g. choosing a young man, v 10) to her family duty of providing Naomi with an heir.

- In her behaviour towards Boaz, and her request, what do we learn about Ruth's character and attitude?
- What qualities of Ruth should we try to emulate, as followers of Christ? See Matthew 5 v 5.
- How does Boaz respond (v 10, 11)?
- What do these verses tell us about Boaz's character and attitude?
- What qualities of Boaz should we try to emulate, as followers of Christ?

"Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I" (v 12) – here there is a twist in the plot, and as readers we are left in suspense to see whether in fact Boaz will 'lose' Ruth to the nearer kinsman. The matter gets resolved in Chapter 4.

The "six measures of barley" are a code, which Boaz designed for Naomi, not Ruth (v 15, 18) – "the man will not rest" (v 18). How long did it take God to create the earth? Six days (Exodus 20 v 11), and on the seventh day he rested. When Boaz gives six measures to Naomi, she understands that he is saying that he will not rest until the matter is resolved...