

Ruth 3:1–4:22

Living in Grace

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The last of three studies

The story of Ruth 3 is fairly clear: Naomi takes steps to find Ruth a suitable husband. Several observations need, however, to be made to explain some of the details of the story.

Immoral Conduct?

To the modern reader some of the things done here seem immoral. However, it is likely that some custom unknown to us, but acceptable at that time, is described in these three verses. Thus, we need to avoid being critical of the conduct of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz; the author of Ruth does not judge them; nor should we. On the other hand, we should not copy them, either!

There is no suggestion that anything immoral took place between Boaz and Ruth. Indeed, Boaz probably sent Ruth away early in the morning in order to avoid any possibility of gossip about their conduct which might have hindered his plans for Ruth.

The verses do not tell us that Boaz was drunk. He was in good spirits since the harvest had been good and he had enjoyed a good meal (including, doubtless some wine). The Bible does not criticize people for being happy nor for drinking wine but it does warn of the dangers of drinking alcohol and of the sin of drunkenness.

Strange Practices

There are two Old Testament practices which are strange to us but are mentioned in this chapter.

The first is the levirate. This is referred to in Genesis 38 and especially Deuteronomy 25:5–10. In Old Testament times it was vital that a man's family name was preserved. Accordingly, if he died without an heir, steps were to be taken to ensure that he had an heir who could carry his name (and inherit his property). Thus it was customary, and required by God's law, that the widow of a dead man be married to one of her

husband's relatives. The first son of such a marriage would then be the dead man's heir.

Elimelech had died childless; or at least his sons died soon after his death, without having had any children themselves. Now only Ruth held out any possibility that Elimelech might have heirs. But Ruth was only his daughter-in-law and no duty rested on her to raise children to keep alive Elimelech's name.

Secondly, the chapter mentions the kinsman-redeemer (Hebrew: 'Goel'—a word meaning 'to recover' or 'redeem'). This person is mentioned in Leviticus 25:25–28, 47–49, verses which describe the responsibility of a near kinsman to do all that was necessary to secure the land (vv. 25–28) and support the persons (vv. 47–49) of poor near-of-kin. As we shall see, Naomi had such a kinsman (chapter 4) who had showed no great desire to fulfil his obligations. Boaz, by contrast, was under no obligation to Naomi but was willing to help her.

Thirdly, we need to ask the question, was Boaz right to want to marry Ruth? In chapter 1 we suggested that Mahlon was wrong to marry Ruth because she was a Moabite. How then could it be right for Boaz to marry her? The answer is this. Although the Old Testament laws seem to be racist, this was never in fact the case. Whoever identified with the people of God was given the full status of an Israelite. The prohibitions against marriage with someone from another race were intended to teach that God hated his people to marry outside the people of God. The Old Testament laws were not so much racist as religious. The people of God were to marry only others from among the people of God and that is the point that is important here. In chapter 1 Mahlon married a worshipper of Chemosh. That was quite wrong. However, after Ruth's confession in 1:17,18 her words and her actions have shown that she was a true worshipper of God. No obstacle, therefore, existed any longer for an Israelite to marry her. Indeed both Ruth and Boaz show such a spiritual maturity in chapter 2 that Boaz could clearly have done no better than marry Ruth!

With these facts in mind we can observe several important lessons which are contained in chapter 3.

Costly Commitment

In these verses we have a wonderful illustration of the commitment of both Ruth and Boaz to their Lord. It is possible that Mahlon died shortly after marrying Ruth. Otherwise they would probably have had some children, since family planning was largely unknown in the ancient world. Marriage usually occurred soon after puberty and it is possible that no great time elapsed between the death of Ruth's husband and her migration to Israel. Ruth was, therefore, probably only in her middle or late teens when the events described in this chapter took place (she was probably between the ages of 15 and 18). Boaz was obviously an older man (verse 10), probably, at least twice her age. However, despite the fact that Ruth was clearly marriageable and could most probably have found a more 'suitable' husband (again see verse 10) she chose Boaz. Showing remarkable spiritual maturity for one of her age and experience, Ruth recognized that faithfulness to the intention of God's word required her to marry a kinsman of Elimelech. In his response to Ruth (verses 10-13) Boaz showed that he recognized Ruth's obedience to God. He himself (see especially chapter 4) then showed the same obedience to the intention of God's word.

For both Ruth and Boaz these were costly decisions to make. But they were both motivated by a desire to obey God in all things. In obedience they found joy and blessing. The same obedience is required of us.

Fulfilling God's Word

There is another lesson. We notice that Ruth and Boaz fulfil God's word by meeting its deepest concerns. Strictly speaking, Ruth had no obligation to Elimelech. Similarly, Boaz did not have an obligation to Elimelech either. But they both knew that God's laws were intended to show his deep concerns for the welfare of his people. Thus they both went beyond mere obedience to the letter of the law, to the fulfilling of its intention.

Such obedience is expected of every true disciple. Jesus said: 'A new commandment I give to you that you love one another as I have loved you' (Jn. 13:34,35). Though they did not have the full light of the gospel, we can see that Ruth and Boaz were obedient to God in precisely this way. How much more we should follow their example who also have the example of Jesus to follow.

Boaz: A Type of Christ

In the New Testament, Jesus is described as the great 'kinsman-redeemer'. Boaz by his actions foreshadowed Jesus. Consider the following facts:

- (i) A 'goel' had to be a kinsman. Jesus became like us, to be our kinsman-redeemer (see Heb. 2:17,18).
- (ii) Jesus loved God and delighted to do God's will. So did Boaz.
- (iii) Boaz's redemption of Ruth was expensive (see chapter 4). Jesus gave up his own life to pay the price of our redemption.
- (iv) By redeeming Ruth, Boaz made her his wife. In so doing, he was ready to share his bed with a penniless alien. By redeeming us, Jesus has made us his bride and has been ready to share himself with his enemies.
- (v) Boaz acted to provide a future for hopeless Ruth. How much more has Jesus done in securing our eternal glory.

The Climax

With 4:1-17a the book of Ruth reaches its climax. Once again, the sensitive reader is expected to discern for herself or himself the lessons which lie in the story.

There are several remarkable contrasts in this chapter. First, there is a contrast between Boaz and the other, un-named, kinsman-redeemer. The nameless man was willing to act on behalf of Naomi and Ruth only if it were to his advantage. This decided the matter for him (verse 6). Doubtless the same obstacle lay in Boaz's way as well. However, Boaz was ready to follow the path of obedience to God whatever the consequences. Too often we do what is right only because it suits us. We need to learn from Boaz. Once again we notice that Boaz was motivated by mercy (see 2:13) as one who had received mercy.

At this point, however, the author of Ruth plays a subtle joke on his readers. He must have known the name of the kinsman. After all, he knew a great deal about Elimelech and his relatives. However, he does not reveal the name and surely he does not reveal it deliberately! The un-named kinsman acted to secure his name: but it has long since been lost. Boaz risked the loss of his name; but he is not only named but his fame will live on till the end of the world!

Jesus taught the same truth. We have already commented on it (see Matt. 10:39; Mk. 8:35; Lk. 9:24; Jn. 12:25). It is the great message of the book of Ruth; to hold fast to our own ambitions will lead to the loss of all. Faithful obedience to God will enable us to inherit eternal life, a lasting inheritance and an honourable name before God.

This same point is made by another contrast in this chapter. In chapter 1 Naomi was described as bereaved and hopeless (1:5,12,20). In chapter 4 she has comfort in her old age made sure by the birth of a grandson (4:13-17). In her own experience, Naomi had to learn the lesson of obedience. She also learnt that God is merciful to the person who turns back from a path of folly. Finally, she learned that God was far more merciful to her than she deserved.

The final contrast in this section is seen in Ruth herself. In chapter 1 she was a friendless, penniless and childless stranger. However, she put her faith in the God of Israel (1:17,18). In chapter 4 the same Ruth has not only become the object of a levir's attentions (see chapter 3) but is his wife (verses 10,13)! She is the centre of an admiring community (verse 15) and the mother of a son (verse 13). To have a son was a blessing indeed in the ancient world. Thus Ruth found that her sacrifice was rewarded by God. God is never anyone's debtor. As we follow him, we will learn the same lessons.

Postscript

In this list of names we have a lovely postscript to the book of Ruth. In 1:1 our thoughts were directed back to the book of Judges. In that book there is one phrase that is regularly repeated. In Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25 we are told that 'there was no king in those days'. This is not a careless or accidental repetition. In Old Testament times the life of the nation was seen as

closely linked to the life of the king. His example set the example which his people were expected to follow. But in the time of the Judges there was no such example. Everyone did 'as he saw fit' (Jdg. 21:25). The people were, then, in need of a leader after God's own heart. This is the verdict of the book of Judges. The book of Ruth picks this thought up. It tells us of a farmer in Bethlehem and a stranger from Moab who lived not for themselves but for God. It shows that their faithfulness was part of God's plan to meet the needs of all his people and to bless them more abundantly than they could ever have imagined. Ruth bore a son who was to be the grandfather of Israel's great king, David. And David himself was a king among whose descendants 'great David's greater Son' would be born. David Atkinson says, 'And his life (that is Jesus) in terms of physical descent was linked to the story of a Moabite girl gleaning in a barley field miles from home; to a caring mother-in-law and a loving kinsman; to a night-time conversation at the threshing-floor; to the willingness of a wealthy farmer to go beyond the requirements of the law in his care for the needy. In short, it is in the ordinariness of the lives of ordinary people that God is working his purposes out. Future significant lives were bound up with the history of Ruth.'¹

Footnote

1. *The Message of Ruth* (The Bible Speaks Today Series), IVP, Leicester, 1983, p. 126.

The Old Testament and Christian Mission

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For many Christians, mission began on the Mount of Ascension when the risen Jesus gave his disciples something with which to fill their time till he returned. It is not often recognized that the mission of Jesus himself, as well as the mission he entrusted to his followers, was shaped and programmed by the Scriptures we call the Old Testament. While a number of works on the theology of mission have paid attention to its OT

roots,¹ the most recent classic of the genre by D Bosch sadly devotes only four pages to the OT.² A comprehensive OT theology of mission still remains to be written. The following article merely sketches in a number of themes that such a project will need to include, without developing further the detailed exegetical and theologically constructive work that will need to be done around them.