

Ruth: Boaz and Mr. So-and-So

Ruth 4:1-12

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Last week, at the end of Ruth chapter 3, we ran into a plot twist, a snag, a complication on the road to marriage, in the blossoming relationship between Ruth and Boaz. There is, it turns out ANOTHER redeemer. And it is Boaz who reveals this to Ruth (wonders how she felt?). And this other redeemer is a closer relation than Boaz, and thus would have a sort of “right of first refusal,” in the redemption of Naomi and Ruth.

And so, Boaz, who clearly wants to marry Ruth, is seen first and foremost a man of loyalty to the Torah, and this story is about hesed, covenant loyalty, above all else. And in the context of that hesed, it is also an understated and beautiful romance. We will look at the text, from Ruth chapter 4, under three headings: At the Gates in verses 1-8, Witnesses in verses 9 and 10, and Prayer of Blessing in verses 11 and 12.

I. At the Gates

First, then, at the gates: So, this is the very next day after Ruth and Boaz’s encounter on the threshing floor. And chapter 4, verse 1 tells us the Boaz went up to the town gate. The town gate was the center of the town’s life. It was the place for public meeting, for business and, especially, legal decisions to be handed down. Boaz sits down there “just as” – there’s God’s silent providence again orchestrating the little details of life – he sits down JUST AS the guardian-redeemer he had mentioned came along. Boaz says: Come over here, my friend, and sit down. Now, the words “my friend” really mean something like such and such or so and so, which is why I am calling this guy “Mr. So-and-So.” Boaz certainly knows who this man is, but notice, the narrator won’t name him. We will come back to this.

So, Boaz gathers ten elders, who would have jurisdiction in these matters, sits them down, and says to the other redeemer (again unnamed): Naomi is back from Moab and she’s selling the piece of land that belonged to our relative Elimelek. This is the first time in the story we have heard about this land.

Though buying it would very much be included, in the obligations a redeemer took in spreading the corner of his garment over – that is, in marrying - Ruth. Naomi is selling the land, or perhaps the usage rights to the land, most likely because she and Ruth need the money to live on. And the land is almost certainly not in good fruitful condition. If it was, you would think that Ruth would have gleaned on this property rather than at Boaz's field. In any event, Boaz has brought it to the other man's attention, he asks for a decision and Mr. So-and-So says: I will redeem it.

Now he is probably looking at this as a good long-term business investment. He probably knew that often this type of obligation would include raising up offspring for the dead relative. And remember how this would work. The offspring would bear the name of its dead male relative, and male offspring would inherit the property, keeping it- in this case – in the household of Elimelek. But Naomi is old, past childbearing years, so Mr. So-and-So is thinking: I will have to care for the widow for a while, and maintain the land, but, when she dies, the land will enrich my estate, it will fall to my family line.

So, it's just a no-brainer. It's a pretty good business deal. Then Boaz sort of clears his throat and says: "Oh, by the way.....one more thing." On the day that you buy the land, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite – Boaz reiterates that she's an ethnic foreigner, a Moabite – you acquire Ruth in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property.

Now, if Ruth has a child (she's been childless for 10 years previously), but if she has a child the child inherits, and no benefit accrues to Mr. So-and So's estate. And now, there's the extra work of caring for a wife, and possible offspring. You know: Little league, piano lessons, braces, college tuition, the addition he's going to have to put on his house. He can do the math. So, he says: Then I cannot redeem it, because it might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself.

Then we are told about this custom for legalizing transactions what involved redeeming and transferring property. One party takes off his sandal and gives it to the other. This is not as strange a ritual as it might appear, since the land is where one's foot treads, and this is the seal of a land transaction. God's can say things like: I cast my shoe over Edom (Psalm 60). The earth is HIS footstool, and he promised Joshua that "every place the sole of your foot treads I have given to you."

So, Mr. So-and-So takes off his sandal and hands it to Boaz, symbolizing that the land is now Boaz's. That's it. And in case you missed it, that little shoe transaction, before these ancient justices of the peace, that was also the wedding. (NT terms: Redemption entails a wedding)

II. The Witnesses

Which bring us to the second point, the witnesses. In v.9, Boaz announces to the elders and all gathered at the gate: Today, you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelek, Kilion, and Mahlon. That's the land portion of his work as a redeemer. And, he continues, I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite – he doesn't shy away from, but rather embraces, the Moabite designation – Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon's widow, as my wife. And why? Not the most romantic wedding speech ever given, but it is a demonstration of costly hesed: in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property. This is the seed portion of his work as redeemer (includes, as we have seen the levirate law function).

The reason this is so critical to the ancient Israelites, the reason it is codified in the Torah, is that it symbolized belong to the God who covenanted with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The covenant with Abraham promised land and seed/offspring. Thus, to die without offspring was to be, as a family, removed from the land and the blessings of the covenant. This all points us to Christ, the one Paul calls, THE (sg.) seed of Abraham. In Christ, we also are the seed (pl.) of Abraham. The church is the perpetually enduring seed in its union with Christ, the risen, permanent and indestructible One. And in Christ we are promised a land, the new heavens and new EARTH, which the meek shall inherit as his redeemed bride. Redemption entails a wedding.

All of that is being set forth here, signified, it is a type which point forward, given under the seed and land categories of the OT people. To this redemption of land – and the intent to perpetuate seed - all those at the gates are witnesses, Boaz says. And they reply in v.11, “we are witnesses.”

III. The Prayer for Blessing

Our third point is the prayer for blessing. That is, the prayer for blessing on the marriage. First, there is a blessing prayed for on Ruth. The elders and people say: May the Lord make *the woman* who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah. They were barren, and they together built up the family of Israel. It is as if the people sense something momentous here. Israel is floundering in the time of the judges, and they pray that Ruth will be a builder of the house of Israel. This prayer, it turns out, will be answered far beyond their wildest imaginations.

Notice also the full public reception and recognition of Ruth – the Moabitess- that this entails. They pray for God to make HER like the matriarchs of Israel. She has left family and lands and possible husbands for Yahweh's sake, and now he is restoring these to her, even now, in this age.

Second, there is a blessing prayed for Boaz. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. We will return to this.

Third, and finally, a blessing is sought for Boaz and Ruth's future offspring, for the family. Verse 12: Through the offspring that the Lord gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah. This, at first blush odd, prayer, is doing a couple of things. Now, Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, evokes an earlier levirate marriage. That is, a situation where seed had to be raised up for a dead relative. That is why its invoked here. Briefly (Gen. 38): Tamar (almost certainly a Canaanite outsider like Ruth) had married a son of Judah's (Er) who died. Judah's second son, Onan, refused to do his levirate duties and he too dies from the Lord's anger. Judah then – probably out of fear - withholds his third son from Tamar. Later Tamar becomes desperate, dresses up like a prostitute, and lures Judah into sleeping with her. Perez is born from that union.

It's a sordid story, and while Ruth is not like Tamar in very critical ways, they were both outsiders who lost their husbands, and needed the help of near relatives to have offspring. And Perez, born of Judah's incest with Tamar, his daughter-in-law, is the ancestor of Boaz and the Bethlehemites gathered at the gate. He also seems to have had some renowned and important descendants, but what the people praying this blessing could not know, was that through the union of Boaz and Ruth, Perez's line would lead to King David and, eventually, to Jesus Christ. At this point, it's probably just a prayer that God would bless your levirate marriage, and give your offspring prominence. Again, it will be answered beyond all expectations. That is the prayer for blessing.

By way of conclusion, let me make two related points of application, one about Mr. So-and-So, and one about Boaz. First, Mr. So-and-So, the first redeemer, who declined when he found out he had to marry Ruth. He had a legal right to decline. No one would contest that, or declare him a bad person. But he stands as a warning. He plays it safe. He was going to lose time and money, and possibly, eventually, the land. And that meant he was not going to engage in long-term, costly ministry where he could see no personal payoff. This in spite of the fact that there are two desperate widows and 3 deal males who are his NEAR relatives. Doesn't matter. The law does not oblige me, so I decline. He'd go home, and his Christian friends would congratulate him on being wise and judicious. "You can't take all that on, it would be reckless. You have your own family (presumably) to worry about." He's worried about his own estate – he says so in the text. He's too calculating to see the hand of God and what he might do. He asks: what's in it for me? He protects his own material legacy. He will not place his plans, his life strategy, his future, at the disposal of another. In protecting his own legacy, he buries his talent, he passes on what will prove to be, an extraordinary legacy of participation in God's plan of salvation for the world. He is blind to the logic of the book. Namely, that the path to fulness lies through emptiness. He refuses to lose his life in order to find it.

And, lest you think I am being too hard on Mr. So-and-So, what I have just outlined is precisely why he is NAMELESS in the narrative. Boaz knows this

guy's name, as does everyone at the gate. But he is being, literally, erased from the history of Israel. The silence, the refusal to name him is pejorative. As one scholar put it: Here, anonymity means judgment. Like Orpah, earlier in the narrative, he turns back and disappears.

Don't be like him in evaluating your life choices, your ministry commitments, or your self-giving. It's too easy, it's too natural. Rather, consider Boaz, and this is my second point. Boaz could have declined as well. But he is not a man who uses the law for loopholes. He realizes that the law itself is a gift of Yahweh's hesed, his kindness. And the law is meant to instill a spirit of generosity and compassion, especially toward the poor and widow. For in doing so, one imitates God himself, in his tenderness and concern for the least of these. Boaz is a man of substance. He has wealth. He has a legacy to protect, assets to guard. He knows that the land will never be in his family name as well. If he and Ruth have a son, the son inherits in Elimelek's name. He understands the long-term costs of this undertaking.

But unlike Mr. So-and So, he is a man of uncalculating generosity, who, we've seen, goes beyond the letter of legal requirements. He understands the logic of the book, that the way to fulness is through emptiness, and thus, as a man of substance, a man who is full, he pours his substance out on the empty- that they might become full. Like Christ, for the love of God and the love of his bride, he gives himself away, he puts his name, his legacy, his security, at risk.

Finally, we could say the book of Ruth is all about names. Verse 10 says that Boaz marries Ruth to maintain the NAME of the dead with his property. And Boaz cares more for this name, than he does for his own material well-being. He is a man for others. And in v.11, the people pray that he would have a great name in Bethlehem. Indeed, Mr. So-and-So is forgotten, and Boaz has been extolled throughout the ages – in Bethlehem and beyond. He has made a name for himself. And through his kindness he has become an ancestor of the One who, being full, being in substance, God, being rich beyond all splendor, emptied himself (Advent) for our sake, to fill our emptiness, to secure our forfeited inheritance. And having laid aside his reputation, his glory, for the love of his father and his bride, he has received the name above all names.

So, let those of us who confess that JC is Lord, to the glory of God the Father, imitate the generosity, the hesed, of Boaz this Advent. For in doing so we – and our legacies – are drawn into the mystery of the Word made flesh, made kinsman, made Redeemer, made Bridegroom. Amen.

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