

### The Book of Ruth

#### Lesson 7 - Chapters 3 and 4

We ended last week in Ruth chapter 3 with the startled (but pleasantly surprised) Boaz awaking in the middle of the night to find the lovely and perfumed form of Ruth lying beside his legs. And we dealt with acknowledging that while indeed there were obvious sexual overtones to Ruth's actions, we needn't go overboard and read things into the account that aren't there.

Courting obviously involves flirtatious interaction between male and female as one attempts to attract the other: but hopefully it unfolds more in the way that the God who created man and woman intended as opposed to something that is significantly less than appropriate, especially for those who honor YHWH as Lord of all. Thus we examined and discarded a somewhat new interpretation of the middle-of-the-night events taking place on the threshing floor between Ruth and Boaz. And this new interpretation is that Ruth sneaked in and exposed Boaz as a somewhat usual and customary indication of her interest in marriage. Not only does this rather strained attempt to find something provocative in this passage of Ruth not fit a straightforward, intellectually honest and plain translation of the Hebrew narrative, but it also tosses aside the context and motif of the entire story that is based on two exceptionally righteous, modest, faithful followers of the God of Israel: Ruth and Boaz.

Let's re-read part of chapter 3 and then we'll continue our examination of the passages.

#### RE-READ RUTH CHAPTER 3:6 – end

I want to go forward using the words of the Christian bible scholar D. B. Macdonald as our context for visualizing the scene; he writes this about the threshing floor incident:

***“Boaz is shown quietly handling the situation like a gentleman, and not either as an old fool or a village lout. He may be countrified but he has dignity and restraint”.***

A hidden key to Ruth's mindset and intent is in her choice of words in response to Boaz's question: “Who are you?” She responds with, “I am Ruth your handmaiden”. The Hebrew word translated as handmaiden is **amah**, and indeed while it means handmaiden it also is quite significant in that it is a socially higher term than **nokri**, which is how she presented her status to Boaz upon their first meeting. **Nokri** means a foreigner, an alien, and it can have such a negative sense to it that it even eventually came to mean an adulterous woman (when used under certain circumstances). It is not unlike a Christian referring to someone as a pagan or a heathen. The point is that a **nokri** is an outsider to the Jewish community who, by Law, was not truly eligible for marriage to a Hebrew man.

But in describing herself now as an **amah**, a handmaiden, Ruth has dropped the “outsider” persona in favor of being a member of the Jewish community, even if it is as a lowly person of

the servant class. But even more an **amah** is a class of women who can be taken by a Hebrew freeman either as a legitimate concubine or wife. Between the time of her first encounter with Boaz and now, Ruth has taken yet another step in her assimilation into the Jewish society. Some months earlier she was in process of leaving behind her gentile identification as a member of Moab, but had not yet fully transitioned to becoming a member of Israel; she was in a kind of limbo and this was expressed in her quite conscious and intended expression of herself as **nokri**. I contend that this is a good illustration of the process that every gentile disciple of Yeshua is meant to undertake as we journey from leaving behind the inherently pagan nature of the gentile world into the inherently set-apart-for-God world of Israel. Of course, especially since the advent of Messiah Jesus, this is a spiritual journey (not so much a physical one as it was at one time). We don't exchange our national identities from whatever we currently are to Israeli because we accept the work of Christ as our redemption. But we are to make a conscious connection with God's people because we have assumed their God and the divine ideals sent down to earth from that God, and accomplished it all under the terms of the private and exclusive covenants God made and maintained with the Hebrews.

But after subtly identifying herself as a person who was legally eligible for marriage, Ruth then boldly ASKS Boaz to marry her by saying, "Spread your robe over your **amah** (your handmaid) because you are a **go'el** (a redeeming kinsman)". Adding yet another key Hebrew word, what she said was, "Spread your **kanaph** over your handmaiden because you are a redeeming kinsman". We discussed the deeper meaning of the term **kanapha** few lessons ago as we studied chapter 2 verse 12 where we have Boaz blessing Ruth by saying, "May Yehoveh reward you for what you have done; may you be rewarded in full by the Elohim of Israel, under whose **kanaph** (wings) you have come for refuge".

We looked ahead at that time to chapter 3 so that we could make the connection between Ruth first coming under Yehoveh's **kanaph** for the purpose of refuge, and now under Boaz's **kanaph** for the purpose of refuge. The first was a spiritual refuge by means of a spiritual "marriage" to the God of Israel (so to speak), and the second was an earthly physical refuge by means of an earthly physical marriage to Boaz. While Ruth's words may need interpretation to us moderns, it needed none for Boaz who perfectly understood her request and intentions.

The venerable Jewish Rabbi and scholar Rashi said this about Ruth's words to Boaz: "Also, when she said, 'spread your **kanaph** over your maidservant', this was an allusion to what HaShem (God) said to the Jewish people at the time of the giving of the Torah: 'I have borne you on the **kanaphei** (wings) of eagles and brought you to Me'. Just as HaShem showed His love for the Jewish people in this way, Ruth asked Boaz to show her the love of marriage". I find that not only on target but also profound and moving. It's amazing when we look behind the English into the original Hebrew how much is there to discover.

It is here in verse 9 that we get an interesting twist: Ruth says that the reason she feels justified in asking Boaz to take her as a bride is because he is her **go'el** and thus bears an obligation to her and the family. And this takes us back to last week when we discussed the institutions of **go'el** and of Levirate Marriage. I urge to you to go back and study that lesson portion again if it's not clear to you. But briefly, Levirate Marriage was a Middle Eastern

custom (and practiced by the Hebrews) ages before the Law was given on Mt. Sinai. And the idea is that a brother-in-law is to marry his sister-in-law (his brother's widow) if that brother dies and the woman hasn't yet produced an heir, a son. And the purpose for this is so that the male child produced by this new marriage will be considered the offspring of the deceased brother, and thus the deceased brother's family line and name will continue to exist within Israel. However the divine ordinance on this matter as given to Moses on Mt. Sinai is very limited in scope and it covers only brothers-in-law bearing this duty of Levirate Marriage to their sisters-in-law. If there is no brother-in-law, or if the brother-in-law refuses to do his duty, there is no other solution available to the widow. We saw an example of this very thing with Judah's sons who were killed by God for refusing to do their Levirate duty in this manner.

So how does the law of Levirate Marriage apply to Ruth and Boaz? Answer: despite most Christian commentaries speaking to the contrary, it doesn't. Ruth's deceased husband had no surviving brothers. That should have been the end of the Levirate Marriage solution for Ruth and Na'omi but somewhere along the line (after Mt. Sinai) Hebrew society saw the need for a better way to deal with these unfortunate women and families (when there was no brother-in-law to marry the widow) so they invented another way. They added the duty of marrying a childless widow to the already existing list of various duties of the family *go'el*. So for the *go'el* the duty to marry a widowed relative (who was without a son) it would have been seen less as an onerous civil legal and Scriptural requirement (that brought great shame on a brother in law who refused to do his Levirate family duty), and more as a very positive act of *chesed* (loving kindness) that made this kind of marriage somewhat of an OPTION of the conscience for the family *go'el*. That said, this mindset not to socially ostracize a family redeemer who refused this duty of marriage is because it was usually that there were a number of potential family members who could have taken on the role of *go'el* and thus while the senior *go'el* (the closest male family member) would have been looked down upon for not doing ALL the duties incumbent upon him, there were typically other males in the family who could also perform those duties. So the refusal of the most senior *go'el* to marry the widow wasn't seen as quite as serious as it was for the brother-in-law who refused to marry his widowed sister in law.

Thus in the end what Ruth has asked Boaz to do is the result of Hebrew custom and tradition, not the laws of the Torah per se. Is there anything inherently wrong with the Israelites instituting such a new tradition? No. As an analogy: just as there are 7 ordained Biblical Feasts that are commanded by God, there is also Hanukkah (and perhaps we could also add Purim) that are regular celebrations among the Jews. Is there anything wrong about celebrating Hanukkah and Purim merely because they were created by men and are not God-ordained? Not at all. Where it can go wrong is when we, as humans, declare Hanukkah and Purim (or Easter and Christmas for that matter) holy and elevate them in importance as though they are on par with (or even above) the truly God-ordained holy days. Thus for Israel to have developed a Tradition within their society to care for widows and to see to it that the family line of a childless deceased man continues even if the solution is outside of Levirate Marriage provisions, it is certainly not wrong; but let's be clear that just because it is not a sin that doesn't make it a holy thing. Rather such things (if appropriately carried out) ought to be viewed more as deeds of loving kindness, *chesed*; good deeds, appropriate deeds, but not God-ordained deeds except in the general sense of obeying the most foundational commandment of them all: loving your neighbor as yourself.

This may all sound complex and confusing and technical, or like I'm slicing the onion awfully thin, but here's another way to think of it: nowhere in the Bible is the term "**go'el**" ever applied to the brother-in-law involved in a Levirate Marriage. A brother-in-law was NOT labeled as a **go'el**; **go'el** was an entirely separate institution totally apart from Levirate Marriage. Therefore here in Ruth we see Ruth base her appeal to Boaz to marry her NOT on the God-ordained duty of a brother-in-law for a Levirate Marriage (for indeed there was no brother-in-law in Ruth's situation) but rather the appeal was for the **go'el** (the family redeemer) to marry her, the childless widow, (even though she was a significantly distant relative of Boaz). And even that was based on a manmade Tradition and not strictly on the Law, which only put the absolute duty of marrying the widow upon a brother-in-law.

So just as we have seen that (despite modern popular interpretations) Ruth did NOT do anything of an objectionable sexual nature to Boaz in lifting up his blanket to uncover his legs, neither was there a hope of Levirate Marriage going on here (yet another poor, but standard, modern interpretation) because the circumstances simply don't apply.

Further we need to understand that the God-principle behind our Kinsman Redeemer Yeshua seeing the church as his bride, and there even being a marriage ceremony in the future, has nothing to do with either Torah-based Levirate Marriage or **go'el** based marriage of a widow because **go'el** based marriage was established as a manmade tradition. So none of those specific circumstances apply to us. Yeshua is not our brother in law, and we are not childless widows.

Moving on to verse 10, Boaz's reply to Ruth is kind of odd. He says that what Ruth has just proposed to him is her doing an act of **chesed** for him. He says, "Bless you my daughter for your latest kindness (**chesed**) is even greater than your first..." In other words Boaz seems quite grateful for Ruth's bold advance towards him. Why? Well he goes on to say that it was because she approached HIM (an old man) rather than going after the younger men for marriage. Let's not misunderstand what is happening here. While I'm sure that Boaz was as flattered at Ruth's proposal of marriage as he was excited to suddenly find a pretty young woman lying next to him in the middle of the night, the context is more contained in his words, "your latest **chesed** is even greater than your first". Ruth's first **chesed** was her selfless commitment to care for her aged Jewish mother-in-law, Na'omi, and to forsake her homeland and change her loyalty to Israel and Israel's God.

So what is Ruth's "latest act of loving kindness"? Was it choosing a man that was probably older than Na'omi, when she could have had a much younger, handsomer, more vibrant man? Not really. Rather it was that she chose to follow the Israelitish ways so completely that she never even considered doing anything but marrying her Jewish family's **go'el**. Ruth could have solved her own personal dilemma of being a poor widow by marrying a young man with a good future; but she wouldn't have solved Na'omi's problem of needing an heir to carry on Elimelech's name and clan line if she had married that younger man who was not the family redeemer.

Ruth would have been a prize catch, no doubt. It's apparent that only her outward beauty matched her tender demeanor and good character. She would have had young suitors lined

up. Instead she chose Boaz, a much older man. Consider as a practicality that Boaz was at the least in the autumn, if not winter, of his life. A few more years is probably the best that Ruth could hope for with Boaz and then she'd be a widow again. Boaz was as practical and wise as he was kind and gentle, and so Ruth's willingness to provide an heir for Na'omi by marrying a **go'el** like the aged Boaz even exceeded her very impressive kindness of following Na'omi from Moab to care for her; and Boaz instantly recognized the gravity and selflessness of Ruth's decision even in his blurry eyed state and in the darkness of that late hour.

But I cannot help but comment that Ruth also made a wise choice for herself, in the end. I think Ruth saw beyond Boaz's elderliness and saw a man of rare kindness, keen sense of duty, determined purity, and proper fear and respect for His God. Boaz had also shown Ruth much tenderness and respect. Who could possibly have been a better husband for her than Boaz?

But verse 12 throws a stumbling block into Na'omi's plan that up to now has gone along like clockwork. Boaz points out that while he is certainly prepared to "do all that Ruth has said" because her fine character is well known among the community of Bethlehem, there is another family **go'el** who is a somewhat closer relative to Elimelech than himself. And Boaz being the kind of man he is cannot disregard the rights of this other **go'el** who holds the senior position in line and uphold his own reputation. So he tells Ruth of this other family redeemer and says she should stay here at the threshing floor the rest of the night; and then in the morning Boaz will seek a meeting with this man at the city gates (the usual place of legal business in a Middle Eastern town). If this other potential **go'el** won't accept the responsibility to redeem Ruth, then Boaz will be in the clear to do so and promises that he will.

Verse 14 shows that Ruth complied (at least partly, I suppose, because Na'omi had admonished her to do everything that Boaz told her to do), but then as the night was ending Boaz told Ruth to go home before people saw her leaving the area and assumed the worst. What we see is that Boaz acted responsibly towards Ruth in four specific ways. First he did not tell her to leave and go home in the dark, thus exposing her to danger. Second he did not touch her until she would be rightfully his. Third he protected the rights of the kinsman that was a nearer relative to the deceased Elimelech than himself, and fourth he vowed to resolve this matter within hours and accept the results however it turned out.

But Boaz was not yet through with his kindness; he instructed Ruth to use her shawl (probably the **simlah** outer garment she wearing) and to grab hold of the edge of it. And into it he dumped 6 measures of barley grain for her to take home to Na'omi. We really don't know the exact quantity because we don't know what the measures were. Were they an **ephah** (about 30 pounds) or a **seah** (about 10 pounds) or something else entirely? It's of course doubtful it was 6 **ephahs** as it's hard to image Ruth carrying 180 pounds of grain back to her dwelling. Yet 6 **seahs** is a bit less than what Ruth had gleaned on the day that Boaz told his hired men to pull some stalks out of the sheaves for her to glean more easily and productively. In any case it was a generous amount of barley she returned home with.

When she arrived home it was probably not yet fully daylight, and so verse 16 has a startled Na'omi asking the shadowy person entering her dwelling place, "Who are you? Is it you, Ruth?" Then Ruth told her what had transpired that night. Na'omi saw the gift of grain and



knew exactly what to do. The barley was a sign of good faith from Boaz so Na'omi told Ruth to just be at peace and stay at home, because Boaz wouldn't rest until this whole matter was solved. Ruth would be redeemed by the as yet unnamed other **go'el**, or if he refused to do his duty Boaz would marry her. Either way Ruth was about to have a new husband and Na'omi a desperately needed heir for her deceased husband, Elimelech.

Now that the tension is building and climax of our story is nearing, let's move on to chapter 4.

### **READ RUTH CHAPTER 4 all**

We are going to get a bit technical and detailed with some of the issues in this chapter (much as we have done to some level throughout our study of Ruth) and there is a good reason for it. It is not so that we become scholarly experts in the nuances and finer details of the Law of Moses or of ancient Jewish culture. Rather it is because an underlying current throughout the book of Ruth is how a society of Believers in the God of Israel (Jews living in and around Bethlehem) grappled with matters that either had no obvious and directly pertinent answers that they could take from the Torah as a solution; or because circumstances within Israel had evolved (in the 300 years or so since the Law was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai) to a point where there wasn't always a reasonable and straightforward way that the Levitical religious code could be applied as-is to the situation at hand. These Jews of Beit-Lechem were not trying to be disobedient; rather just as we often find today it's that life is not so black and white as we might prefer it, or is it often obvious how to ascertain God's will for a situation, or is it always simple to determine which of His many laws and commands should be applied to our particular situation.

We who have returned to a study of the whole Word of God, and who seek to rediscover a desire for obedience to His biblical laws and commands (as opposed to following manmade doctrines), are not finding the path as straight as we might have hoped. How do we take those 3500-year-old laws given to Moses out in the desert wilderness (divine commands that were set down in an ancient Middle Eastern cultural setting) and apply them to our modern western 21st century problems and circumstances?

The answer for us is the same as it was for the Jews of Ruth's era; it is to make a concerted effort to understand the whole of God's Laws and commandments so that we can get a well-rounded and thorough understanding of God's underlying principles. And then using that understanding (together with Holy Spirit guidance) mold it to address the circumstances at hand in whatever era or cultural setting we find ourselves.

In the case of Na'omi and Ruth they were childless widows, but there was no living brother in law for either of them to be taken as wives under the law of Levirate Marriage. So how is this situation to be remedied? Did God intend that because Na'omi and Ruth's particular circumstance wasn't covered by the Levirate Marriage ordinances that their lives should become hopeless and that their deceased husbands' family lines ought come to a dead end? Using the underlying and over-riding God-principle of loving your neighbor as yourself, and then applying an offshoot of that principle whereby God's followers offer loving

kindness (**chesed**) to the afflicted, the Jewish sages decided that it would be an appropriate solution to require the family **go'el** to take such a widow into his home and do for her what a Levirate Marriage would accomplish if the circumstances had been different.

We'll see this same logic applied when it comes to the matter of the divine laws governing Na'omi and land inheritance. Technically, you see, there was no provision for a widow to inherit land. And I'm going to go into some depth to explain the both the unusual nature of Na'omi's predicament and the rather complex solution that was devised to solve it.

Verse 1 begins the legal process employed in that era to settle matters of land redemption. It takes place at the city gate because it was the traditional Middle Eastern place where legal transactions were concluded. We find, for example, that Abraham purchased a burial place for Sarah at the city gate. Kings would sit at the city gates to judge. Elders would meet at the city gates to settle disputes. The city gate was also where people met to debate politics or simply to have friendly conversations. It was the courtroom and town square of that time.

If you wanted to be sure to run into someone at some point during the day, you sat at the city gate and waited for them. This is what we find Boaz doing, and sure enough the senior family redeemer (**go'el**) for Elimelech's family strolled through the gate and Boaz hailed him. Now the author of the book of Ruth for whatever reason chose not to reveal the name of this senior **go'el**; we don't know why except that apparently who it was really wasn't relevant to the story. Thus we find most bibles calling him, "so and so".

Boaz asks the man to come and sit by him, and then asks that 10 men of the elders of the city also sit down as witnesses to this legal proceeding. These elders were recognized community authorities with the power to decide cases. In later Rabbinic interpretation the assembly of 10 men became the basis for the **minyan**, the minimum legal number of men needed to hold a synagogue service.

With all the needed parties in attendance, Boaz now states his case beginning in verse 3; and he begins by saying that this proceeding is about Na'omi who has returned from Moab, and that it involves the selling of the parcel of land that belonged to her family. Further that the head of the family was the now deceased Elimelech. Boaz refers to Elimelech as "our brother". The Hebrew word use here for brother is **ach**; and it is another of those terms whose meaning varies greatly according to the context. **Ach** can mean "brother", as in sibling; but even more often in the bible it is referring to any male family member, even if that member is a distant relative. It is also a term of endearment that can mean "as a brother" (like we might refer to a very dear friend as being "as a brother to me" even though no blood relationship is implied). In this case, this unnamed family **go'el** is NOT Elimelech's sibling, but rather just some anonymous member of Elimelech's clan.

Boaz explains that because Mr. So and So is the nearest qualifying **go'el** he has the right of first refusal to redeem the land through purchase; but Boaz also makes it clear that if he doesn't wish to redeem the land that Boaz will assume that duty.

Please take note how this whole matter suddenly shifts from Ruth to Na'omi. In other words,

I'll remind you that in the introduction to the book of Ruth I explained that while Ruth was the central female character and the book's namesake, in fact the story is about coming to a resolution to solve Na'omi's problem. It's just that in many ways Ruth was Na'omi's solution.

Now there is a long-standing problem with these verses that we'll end with today and some of you may have already spotted it. The problem is this: had Na'omi already sold the land to someone or was it that she intended to sell the land and this is at least part of what was going on here at the city gate?

I discussed the matter with you in earlier lessons that biblical Hebrew does not use past, present, and future tenses; instead it uses what are called perfect and imperfect or complete and incomplete. Thus in biblical Hebrew the issue is not WHEN something took place; it was whether the matter was ongoing or completed. Verse 3 used the perfect tense regarding the disposition of the land, which means the action of selling the land was completed (implying that Na'omi had already sold it to someone). But verses 5 and 9 use the imperfect tense that means that the action of selling the land was ongoing and not yet completed. Therefore there is a never-ending argument among scholars as to whether Na'omi had already sold the land to somebody or not.

But this even begs another question: what right did the widow Na'omi have to sell the family land? Only the possessor of the land could sell it, and by the Laws of Moses no widow could possess land. So how do we sort this out?

Well this is where we're going to get into some depth over the matter of women and land inheritance, but we'll do all that next week and at the same time finish up our study of the book of Ruth.