

The Message of Ruth

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The Book of Ruth is a text that people turn to when they need to be reminded of the goodness and kindness of God's chosen toward strangers, and how He demonstrates His faithfulness through the actions of normal people. Elements common to the human condition, including: life, death, hardness, sustenance, love, and happiness are all the things that make the story of Ruth so important to the Biblical narrative. We consider Ruth when we want to be reminded about the acceptance that God displays toward us, and how He desires us to all be redeemed and be one with Him.

The account of Ruth begins during the time of the judges in Israel, when there was a famine in the land (1:1). Because the famine was so significant, Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons had to move to Moab to live in order to survive (1:2). While living in Moab, Elimelech dies (1:3). The two sons marry Moabite women, one of them being Ruth (1:4), but after a period of ten years both of the sons die, "and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband" (1:5). A dilemma arises for Naomi, as to what to do next with her life.

The good news is that Naomi hears "that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them" (1:6). As she prepares to return to the Land of Israel, she tells her two daughters-in-law, "go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband" (1:8-9a). The two daughters-in-law are distraught, declaring, "We will go back with you to your people" (1:9b). But Naomi tells them that she is unlikely to remarry, much less have any more sons for them to marry (1:12-13). The first daughter-in-law, Orpah, kisses her goodbye, "but Ruth clung to her" (1:14). As she leaves, Naomi encourages Ruth to do the same, but Ruth tells her very clearly: "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" (1:16). Ruth commits to staying beside Naomi, and that only "death separates you and me" (1:17). "When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her" (1:18).

Both Naomi and Ruth make their way to Bethlehem, whose inhabitants somehow recognize that Naomi has returned. Yet, Naomi is clear to tell the people, "Don't call me Naomi...Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty...the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me" (1:20-21). The reason she says this to her old neighbors is quite clear: it was greatly bitter to be a widow in the Ancient Near East—one with no husband, sons, or any significant others to support her. Both Naomi and Ruth, while having come to Bethlehem in Israel, still find themselves destitute.

Naomi is not without any hope. She does have "a relative on her husband's side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz" (2:1). Ruth goes to glean from the fields, so that the two of them might have food to eat (2:2), and as she does so, "she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz" (2:3). While she is gleaning, Boaz arrives, greets the harvesters, and asks "Whose young woman is that?" (2:5). A foreman explains to Boaz that she is a Moabite, having recently arrived in Bethlehem with Naomi (2:6). Boaz decides to be quite generous to her, saying, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled" (2:8-9).

Ruth is surprised at Boaz' graciousness, and asks him, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?" (2:10). Boaz simply says, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how...you left your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge" (2:11-12). Boaz then invites her to come and eat all that she wants (2:14), and he instructs his men to show her some special treatment when she comes to glean again (2:15-16). When Ruth returns to Naomi that evening, all she can ask her is, "Where did

you glean today?...Blessed be the man who took notice of you!" (2:19a). Ruth then tells Naomi that it was Boaz (2:19b).

Naomi explains to Ruth how important Boaz has been for her family: "He has not stopped showing kindness to the living and the dead...That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers" (2:20). A kinsman-redeemer¹ was one whose responsibility it was to redeem family lands and pay outstanding debts, to make sure that family members were not reduced to complete servitude (Numbers 27:8-11). Naomi, with little doubt, considered herself to be of "the dead," having lost her husband and sons. Naomi advises her to stay close to Boaz' estate, as he will allow her to glean (2:22-23).

Naomi has the wisdom to wait and see what will become of Ruth and Boaz' new acquaintanceship. One day she tells Ruth, "My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for? Is not Boaz...a kinsman of ours?" (3:1-2). Naomi instructs her to go to Boaz' threshing floor, wait until he eats and lies down, and then uncover his feet and lie down. She is to wear "perfume...and put on [her] best clothes" (3:3). Lying down next to one's feet was a customary, nonverbal way of requesting marriage in those days.²

Ruth follows Naomi's instructions. "When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet" (3:7-8). Awakening, Ruth tells Boaz, "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer" (3:9). Boaz cannot help but be impressed with her, as he has showed her kindness and beneficence since he first saw her. He responds with the words, "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character" (3:10-11).

Boaz then tells Ruth, "there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it" (3:12-13). While Boaz was a close family member to Naomi, there was apparently another kinsman-redeemer who was much closer in relation. Because he was closer, he got the first choice of Ruth—but Boaz is clear to say that if he declines he will gladly take her. Boaz lets her return the next morning to Naomi, with "six measures of barley" (3:15) not wanting her to be empty-handed (3:16-17). Naomi is pleased with what has transpired, and is clear to tell Ruth: "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today" (3:18).

Boaz goes to the gate of the town, waiting for the closer kinsman-redeemer to arrive (4:1). Explaining the situation in front of the town elders, he tells the man, "Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our brother Elimelech. I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line" (4:3-4). The man agrees, but then Boaz is keen to tell him, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabitess, you acquire the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property" (4:5). It is then that this kinsman-redeemer does not wish to acquire Naomi's land, as it may endanger his own estate (4:6). Boaz now has the right to acquire this property himself (4:8). Boaz then assertively declares to those gathered around him:

"Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records. Today you are witnesses!" (4:9-10).

¹ Heb. *go'elenu*; "one of our closest relatives" (NASU).

² *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, 391.

Those at the gate of the city express their desire that God would bless him, and that “the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel” (4:11). “So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife” (4:12), and Ruth has a son. Naomi is restored to a place of having her needs taken care of, and God is clearly credited with sending her a kinsman-redeemer (4:14-15). Naomi helps to raise Boaz and Ruth’s son, Obed. As the book closes, Obed “was the father of Jesse, the father of David” (4:16ff).

The Book of Ruth has a timeless message for every person who reads it, who needs to be reminded that when one joins to God’s people, He is sure to provide. For some reason or another, the Moabitess Ruth knew there was something significant about Naomi’s people and the God of Israel, and she did desire to join with them leaving Moab behind. Destitute and without a means of provision, Boaz takes a liking to Ruth, and is not only willing to purchase Naomi’s land, but also take Ruth as his own wife. Boaz steps in as the kinsman-redeemer, when the closer kinsman-redeemer did not desire to take the required action. As idealistic as it may sound, the Book of Ruth concludes with a happy ending, and the reader is told that from the line of Boaz and Ruth would come King David.

While Ruth can surely be read and considered at any time of year, in the Jewish tradition Ruth is often contemplated during the festival of *Shavuot*. Why is this the case? It is because the giving of God’s Torah on Mount Sinai to Israel is not to be an Israel-only affair. It is to be something that involves Israel reaching out beyond itself and serving the nations. Moab was one of the most rightly-hated nations by Israel, due to its great idolatry, abominations, and the child sacrifices it would offer to Molech. Yet in Ruth, a Moabite woman is nevertheless attracted to Israel’s God, welcomed among Israel’s people, and is shown true love by Boaz.

What does the Book of Ruth teach us as today’s Messianics? It asks us to make sure that we are accomplishing that mission—of seeing that even those of some of the most hated people can be welcomed into the fold, and be shown all of the goodness and grace that God offers. Fulfilling this task is only intensified for those of us who believe in Yeshua, who has provided final atonement for all sin, and in emulating the example of His Apostles who accomplished this call to the max.

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