

Ruth 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ruth chapter 3 And she replied, So she went down to the threshing floor, and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her.

And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down. At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet.

He said, Who are you? And she answered, I am Ruth your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer. And he said, May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter.

You have made this last kindness greater than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask.

For all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. And now it is true that I am a redeemer, yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. I am a redeemer. I am a redeemer. I am a redeemer. I am a redeemer. I am a redeemer.

[1 : 2 9] Good. Let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then as the Lord lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning. So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another.

And he said, Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor. And he said, Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out. So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her.

Then she went into the city. And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, How did you fare, my daughter? Then she told her all that the man had done for her, saying, These six measures of barley he gave to me.

For he said to me, You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law. She replied, Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out. For the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.

In Ruth chapter 3, Naomi has a plan and instructs Ruth in what she should do. She informs Ruth that Boaz is a relative, someone who can play the part of a near kinsman, someone who could redeem the lost property, and perhaps also raise up seed for the dead husband.

[2 : 3 5] Boaz is currently winnowing on the threshing floor, and Ruth is instructed to dress up, presenting herself as available for marriage. To this point, she's probably been wearing work clothes or widow's garments, and now she's going to dress as someone who is available for marriage.

It wasn't typical for a woman to propose. Ruth is here communicating that she is available, and also how Boaz can act in a way that makes a difference in Naomi's situation. In Boaz's mind at this point, he presumably thinks that to raise up seed for the dead Elimelech, the former husband of Naomi, he would have to marry Naomi, but Naomi is presumably past childbearing age at this point.

Boaz can't redeem Naomi without jeopardising his own inheritance then, and also there is a nearer kinsman. Most of what he has been able to do he has done, though, by providing grain and making it easy for Ruth to glean.

Ruth comes to Boaz secretly by night. It's important that she does this, because he needs to be let into Ruth and Naomi's plan, which, if it were more widely known, might not be effective.

Boaz eats and drinks and becomes merry, and then he goes down to lie at the end of the heap of grain. He's a man who's enjoying plenty, he has all that he needs to eat and drink, and he has a great pile of grain that he owns.

[3 : 54] Ruth comes and uncovers his feet and lies down. This is a strange thing to do, and it seems to be significant in various ways. However, even before we speculate about some of the greatest symbolic meanings, it would wake him up when his feet got cold, which seems to have happened at midnight, and then he sees Ruth lying there.

This strange incident might remind us of the story of Ruth's ancestress. Moab is born as the daughter of Lot uncovers him at night after he's drunk, and lies with him.

And the firstborn said to the younger, Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come into us after the manna of all the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father.

So they made their father drink wine that night. And the firstborn went in and lay with her father. He did not know when she lay down or when she arose. The next day the firstborn said to the younger, Behold, I lay last night with my father.

Let us make him drink wine tonight also. Then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father. So they made their father drink wine that night also. And the younger arose and lay with him.

[5 : 02] And he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab. He is the father of the Moabites to this day.

The younger also bore a son and called his name Ben-Ami. He is the father of the Ammonites to this day. In Genesis chapter 19, verses 31 to 38.

There are similarities to observe between these stories. On the surface of things, Ruth seems to be behaving very much like her ancestress. Some readers might also see associations between this story and the Moabites that tempted Israel to sexual sin in the book of Numbers.

Yet the similarities here invite us to juxtapose the two stories, to see the differences between them, to see that Ruth, although she is behaving on the surface like her ancestress, is doing something very different.

A further connection we can notice is with the law of the Leveret in Deuteronomy chapter 25. That law is introduced by a strange symbolic commandment. You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.

[6 : 06] Boaz is being called to play the role of the Leveret here. And Ruth goes to meet him at the place where the oxen would tread out the grain. She uncovers his feet and then lies at his feet, as if she was the one that he was treading out.

She is, I believe, presenting him with a symbolic representation of the role that she is calling him to play. As the ox trod out the grain on the threshing floor, so Boaz was to tread out the grain by raising up seed for the dead man through sexual relations with Ruth.

There are sexual connotations in the story, of course. We've already seen some of those connotations in the story of Lot's daughters. You can also see a similar story in the uncovering of Noah after he drinks of the vineyard.

The language of uncovering or covering feet can be euphemistic elsewhere in scripture. In Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 57, in Isaiah chapter 7 verse 20, and Ezekiel chapter 16 verse 25, feet can seemingly refer to genitalia.

And the language of covering feet is used elsewhere when people such as Eglon and Saul are supposedly relieving themselves. And of course, in terms of the symbolic commandment of the oxen treading out the grain, the treading out of the oxen, the feet of the oxen, are symbolically associated with the sexual relations of the kinsman redeemer.

[7 : 25] Now, it should be clear that Ruth does not actually have sexual relations with Boaz or do anything untoward here, but she is symbolically performing something that has sexual connotations, and bringing to mind a number of earlier events in which sexual relations or some other event of sexual import occurred.

The entire relationship between Ruth and Boaz to this point, we should bear in mind, has been associated with themes of harvest and with grain. Ruth first comes to Boaz at the time of harvest and fertility.

Boaz himself here is lying at the end of the heap of grain. And at the conclusion of the scene, Boaz gives Ruth six ephers of barley. The visual imagery here should be worth noting.

Boaz pours his seed into Ruth's cloak, which she presumably carries in front of her in a manner similar to that of a woman with a child. And this is all occurring at the time of harvest.

It's suggesting more seed and harvest to come. A heap of grain brings to mind abundance and sustenance, fertility and vitality. In Song of Solomon chapter 7 verse 2, the waste of the Shulamite woman is compared to a heap of wheat set about with lilies.

[8 : 33] All of this symbolism then should prime us for what's about to happen. And there's another thing to notice about the symbolism here. In the preceding chapter, Boaz had said to Ruth in verse 12, the Lord repay you for what you have done and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

Here, in order to uncover Boaz's feet, Ruth lifts up the wings of his garment and invites him to spread his wings over her. Boaz recognized in the preceding chapter that Ruth had come to take shelter under the Lord's wings.

And now Ruth invites him to take her under his wings. And that as she comes under his wings, she might more fully come under the wings of the Lord. He had wished a blessing upon her there.

The Lord repay you for what you have done and a full reward be given you. And now he blesses her, recognizing that the kindness that she has done in this chapter is far exceeding the one that she did even in the preceding chapters.

In the preceding chapters, she had accompanied Naomi back to the land of Israel. And now she has done something even more. Ruth was a free woman. She was free to marry whomever she wanted.

[9 : 42] She could have married someone who was younger. But she chose Boaz. Why Boaz? Because Boaz was a man in the position to redeem Naomi. Boaz recognizes that what Ruth is doing here is not merely for her own sake.

Rather, it's for the sake of Naomi. It is continuing and extending her bond of loyalty to Naomi. Boaz describes her as a worthy woman. He himself has been described as a worthy man earlier in the book.

They fit together very well. Yet he points out that there is a nearer redeemer, someone who is a closer relative who could perform the role of the redeemer instead of him. Boaz, however, commits himself to get things moving, to redeem her if the nearer kinsman would not.

However, Boaz is privy to information that the other redeemer would not be. Namely, that Ruth is so associated with her mother-in-law that she will raise up seed for her. The nearer kinsman would presume that he had to marry Naomi in order to raise up seed.

But Boaz knows that he can marry Ruth in order to do so. In Deuteronomy chapter 25, the law of the leveret comes at the beginning of the laws associated with the 10th commandment, you shall not covet.

[10:51] Performing the leveret was a sort of paradigm case of not coveting one's neighbor's possessions or their station in life. It was a willingness to sacrifice your own interests in order to raise up your brother's name.

And in Ruth, we have a perfect demonstration of what this looks like. The kindness of Ruth is the fulfillment of the 10th commandment. She is lovingly putting the interests of her mother-in-law above her own.

A question to consider. Can you see any associations between the story of Judah and Tamar in chapter 38 of Genesis and the story of Ruth and Boaz in this chapter?