

# Ruth 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 09 July 2020

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     Ruth chapter 4 Now Boaz had gone up to the gate and sat down there, and behold the Redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, Turn aside, friend, sit down here.
- And he turned aside and sat down. And he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, Sit down here. So they sat down. Then he said to the Redeemer, Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech.
- So I thought I would tell you of it, and say, Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it. But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you.
- And he said, I will redeem it. Then Boaz said, The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance.
- Then the Redeemer said, I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it. Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging.
- [ 1 : 1 3 ]     To confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when the Redeemer said to Boaz, Buy it for yourself, he drew off his sandal.
- Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, You are witnesses this day, that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech, and all that belonged to Kilion and Malon.
- Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Malon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers, and from the gate of his native place.
- You are witnesses this day. Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel.
- May you act worthily in Ephrathah, and be renowned in Bethlehem, and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the Lord will give you by this young woman.
- [ 2 : 1 5 ]     So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went into her, and the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel.
- He shall be to you a restorer of life, and a nourisher of your old age. For your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him. Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap, and became his nurse.

And the women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, A son has been born to Naomi. They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Now these are the generations of Perez.

Perez fathered Hezron. Hezron fathered Ram. Ram fathered Aminadab. Aminadab fathered Nashon. Nashon fathered Salmon. Salmon fathered Boaz. Boaz fathered Obed.

Obed fathered Jesse. And Jesse fathered David. Ruth chapter 4, the final chapter of the book of Ruth, begins with a shift in the action. Boaz has seemingly wasted no time, and he's going to settle the arrangements to redeem Ruth.

[ 3 : 26 ] Boaz goes to the gate and sits down there. The gate was the place where business would be conducted, where the elders would sit and judicial decisions would be made. While he sits there, it seems that the Redeemer is passing by by chance, and he's called aside by Boaz.

On the surface of the text, it would seem that this is not something that's been arranged beforehand. The Redeemer is off guard, and not prepared. Boaz assembles elders of the city. These would be heads of extended families, or tribal or clan leaders.

And he gathers ten of them, which would seem to be an official group. He's taking charge of events. He's been described earlier in chapter 2 as a man of substance. And by his behaviour in this incident, he would seem to be a leading figure within the community.

People listen to him, and go along with his instructions. He lays out the situation. Naomi has returned from the country of Moab, and she's selling a parcel of land that belonged to Elimelech.

There are a number of possibilities for reading this. Perhaps the point is to buy back the land, land that has already been sold. Perhaps the situation is that Naomi is selling the land because she's impoverished, and the kinsman needs to buy it to save it from being lost to the family.

[ 4 : 37 ] This might be a similar situation to Jeremiah chapter 32, verses 7 to 15. It's also not entirely certain whether it's the land that's being sold, or just it's usufruct. However, whichever of these situations it is, the basic situation is that Naomi is impoverished, and she needs someone to intervene.

The responsibility of the kinsman-redeemer at this point was very much along the lines of Leviticus chapter 25, verse 35. If your brother becomes poor, and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you.

The nearer kinsman is prepared to redeem the field, but Boaz raises a problem. There are a number of ways to read this situation. It seems to be that he presents taking the wife of the dead party as a condition of the transaction.

Now, how this exactly applies is not clear. Maybe it's because Naomi will not allow the transaction to go ahead without the person redeeming the land also performing the role of lever at marriage.

Alternatively, perhaps it's something that's required in all such cases. Another way to read the situation is that Boaz is saying that he will take Ruth as his wife at the same time as the nearer kinsman buys the field.

[ 5 : 49 ] This would change the nearer kinsman's mind, because while he was expecting the field to pass into his line of the family, it would return to a limlex line as soon as Ruth's child came of age.

To this point, the discussions have been focused upon the field. But yeah, that's not really what this is all about. Boaz's end is to marry Ruth. While Ruth and Naomi have been the focus of the story to this point, we've not even heard about this field.

This is new information. And while the nearer kinsman might think that the field is the real point, it's not. The reader, like Naomi, Ruth and Boaz, knows better. It seems to me that we need to do justice to the secrecy that is emphasised in the preceding part of the story.

A secret plan has been hatched between Boaz, Ruth and Naomi. The question in chapter 3 was who would redeem Ruth and Naomi, not the question of who the redeemer of the field would be.

And Boaz presents things in a way that is purposefully ambiguous, something that's not captured in a number of the translations of this text. What day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi and from Ruth the Moabitess, you have bought the wife of the dead to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance.

[ 7 : 02 ] Now there's an ambiguity there. The field is bought from the hand of Naomi and Ruth. But who is the wife of the dead? Who is the dead? Is it Malon? It doesn't seem to be Malon.

Rather, it seems to be a Limelech, the husband of Naomi. And if the man was also expected to perform the role of lever at marriage. For Naomi, a woman who was not going to have any more children, he would ruin his inheritance.

The secret that Boaz, Ruth and Naomi know is that Ruth is prepared to raise up seed for Naomi. Ruth will vicariously act for Naomi in order to raise up seed for a Limelech.

The nearer kinsman, however, knows none of this. And so thinking that he will have to take Naomi and marry a barren widow and not be able to raise children of his own, he decides to opt out of the arrangement.

The custom with the sandal is described here and also in Deuteronomy chapter 25, where the law of the lever at marriage is found. In verses 5 to 10 of that chapter, If brothers dwell together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger.

[ 8 : 06 ] Her husband's brother shall go into her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of her husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel.

He will not perform the duty of her husband's brother to me. Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him. And if he persists, saying, I do not wish to take her, then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face.

And she shall answer and say, So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house. And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, the house of him who had his sandal pulled off.

Callum Carmichael has suggested that this is a symbolic inversion of the sin of Onan in Genesis chapter 38 verses 7 to 10. But Ur, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death.

[ 9 : 10 ] Then Judah said to Onan, Go into your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother. But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, so whenever he went into his brother's wife, he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother.

And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. Onan did not want to raise up offspring that wouldn't be his, so he degraded his sister-in-law and wasted his seed on the ground.

The motive was greed. He didn't want to create an heir to the firstborn son ahead of himself. The removal of the sandal from the foot then corresponds to Onan's withdrawal from intercourse.

Elsewhere in scripture, the foot is symbolically and poetically associated with the genitals. The pulling off of the sandal is related to sexual withdrawal. She then spits in his face, and that corresponds with the degrading spilling of bodily fluids in Onan's action.

The person who failed to perform the duty of the leveret then receives a dishonourable name for his house. However, here in Ruth, the removal of the sandal is presented more as the settling of a transaction.

[ 10 : 18 ] It is not presented as a shaming ritual, as it is in the book of Deuteronomy. At this point, Boaz reveals his cards. The elders at the gate are the witnesses that he has bought from the hand of Naomi all of Elimelech's property, and also all the property of Kilion and Malon.

However, the real surprise is that he has acquired Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Malon. She is going to be the one by which the name of the dead will be raised up. This was why secrecy was so important in the episode on the threshing floor.

The people and the elders at the gate declare a blessing upon Ruth, who is coming into Boaz's house, expressing their desire that she be like Rachel and Leah, raising up and building the house of Israel.

And very surprisingly, they also mention the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah. Boaz is, of course, a descendant of Perez. But the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis chapter 38 is a strange one.

It's a one that begins with the death of two sons and the gradual descent of a whole family into death. In that story, Tamar intervenes and raises up seed. Seed raised up through highly irregular relationship with her father-in-law.

[ 11 : 28 ] The parallels between Tamar and Judah, and the incident of the preceding chapter on the threshing floor between Ruth and Boaz, should not escape us, nor should the broader parallel.

Ruth, like Tamar, is one who's going to raise up a house that has descended into death, and is going to bring new life. As Tamar took the initiative, so Ruth takes the initiative.

And in the story of Ruth and Boaz, two stories from the book of Genesis join paths. The story of the daughters of Lot, and the story of Judah and Tamar. Ruth is a descendant of the Moabites, who were conceived in the irregular relationship between Lot and his daughters, and Boaz is a descendant of Perez, who was conceived in the similarly irregular relationship between Judah and Tamar.

Two broken histories are being healed here. The book began with the story of a man, Elimelech, and his two sons, Melon and Kilion. They die almost straight away.

By the end of the book, the spotlight is almost completely upon Ruth and Naomi. There's a focus upon Ruth in the blessing. There's a focus upon Naomi in the way that the women speak to her, in the way that Obed is presented as her redeemer.

[ 12 : 42 ] Ruth is praised as her daughter-in-law. There is also a more general focus upon the women, as the women name the child. The Lord gives conception to Ruth. The Lord's hand has not been prominently seen throughout much of this story, but in small twists of chance, and in the way that he has inspired certain people to particular actions, we can see God's agency throughout.

In the faithful actions of a foreign woman, a dead household has been raised up, and new life has been brought. New life that will eventually lead to the birth of David. Obed is presented as the son that is the redeemer of Naomi, as Naomi's son.

