

The Book of Ruth • Act 4 & Epilogue

And so we come to the final act of the Book of Ruth, a 3000-year-old historical story that encourages us to see how good things can emerge out of difficult circumstances.

The story so far has seen a Jewish family move from Israel to Moab to escape a famine, only to have all the male members die, leaving three widows to uncertain futures.

Naomi returns to Israel with Ruth, one of her Moabite daughter-in-laws, who pledges to serve Naomi and Naomi's God.

Ruth proves to be a resourceful, hard-working woman, gleaning during the barley harvest to provide food for herself and Naomi.

While doing this, the landowner, Boaz (a close relative of Naomi's) takes a shine to Ruth and, through Ruth's creative initiative, offers to be her 'guardian-redeemer', an Ancient Near Eastern custom where a relative marries a woman who has been widowed, to prevent her from destitution and her family line from being ended.

But Boaz has remembered there is another male relative who has priority in offering to be Ruth's guardian-redeemer.

Act 3 of the Book of Ruth ended with Boaz vowing to meet with this man the next day. Act 4 opens with Boaz arriving at Bethlehem's town gate.

Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat down there just as the guardian-redeemer he had mentioned came along. Boaz said, 'Come over here, my friend, and sit down.' So he went over and sat down.

Ruth 4:1

And, what do you know? As Boaz sits down, the guy he's looking for walks by.

This verse gives us another example of how our English translations often mask what the author is trying to convey.

The man Boaz was looking for is not given a name, and we never get to know what it is.

The translation we are using, the New International Version, has Boaz address him as ‘my friend’, but in the original Hebrew, it is *peloni almoni* which means ‘unknown and unspoken’. In other Bible passages *peloni almoni* is used to refer to places without mentioning their name.

*David answered Ahimelek the priest, ‘The king sent me on a mission and said to me, “No one is to know anything about the mission I am sending you on.” As for my men, I have told them to meet me at a **certain place** [peloni almoni].’*

1 Samuel 21:2

*Now the king of Aram was at war with Israel. After conferring with his officers, he said, ‘I will set up my camp in **such and such a place.**’ [peloni almoni]*

2 Kings 6:8

When used of people it means something like ‘thingamabob,’ someone who’s not important enough to remember what their name is.

As listeners to the story, we’re already curious to know what is going to happen... most of us are hoping that Boaz will get to marry Ruth.

And now we’re wondering, why doesn’t Boaz use the guy’s proper name?

Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, ‘Sit here,’ and they did so. Then he said to the guardian-redeemer, ‘Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our relative Elimelek. I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and 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.’

Ruth 4:2-4a

‘Thingamabob’ would be buying the land from the person it was sold to, and as Naomi’s closest relative, it would become part of his estate.

What will ‘thingamabob’ decide?

‘I will redeem it,’ he said.

Ruth 4:4b

Oh dear...

The listeners all take a deep breath...

‘Thingamabob’ has accepted the offer!

But Boaz isn’t done yet...

Then Boaz said, ‘On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the dead man’s widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property.’

At this, the guardian-redeemer said, ‘Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it.’

Ruth 4:5-6

Hurrah!

‘Thingamabob’ is happy to buy the land, and probably OK with allowing Naomi to live out her remaining years on it.

But acquiring Ruth, who, as Boaz made a point of saying, is a Moabite, is a step too far, and ‘thingamabob’ decides not to proceed with the deal.

(Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalising transactions in Israel.)

So the guardian-redeemer said to Boaz, ‘Buy it yourself.’ And he removed his sandal.

Ruth 4:7-8

Here the author of the story explains a custom that he doesn't think his audience will be aware of.

The explanation will remind them of the words of Deuteronomy 25...

If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

Deuteronomy 25:5-6

And especially the punishment for not obeying it...

However, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to carry on his brother's name in Israel. He will not fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to me.' Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, 'I do not want to marry her,' his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, 'This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line.' That man's line shall be known in Israel as 'The Family of the Unsandalled.'

Deuteronomy 25:7-10

But as we have already noted, what is happening here differs significantly from what these verses are describing.

- There has been no indication that Boaz was talking about 'thingamabob' having to marry Naomi. This is purely a land transaction.
- The elders do not try to persuade 'thingamabob' to change his mind.
- Naomi doesn't remove one of his sandals, spit in his face and accuse him of failing in his family duties. It is unlikely that Naomi is present.

I think this is another case of the author using allusion.

Naomi has lost everything, and Ruth, although she has put her faith in Naomi's God, and done her best to look after her mother-in-law, faces an uncertain future.

What has become known as Levirate law (the word comes from the Latin for 'husband's brother'), as weird as we may find it, was a way of assuring the welfare of a widow, and the maintaining of her family line.

But taking your brother's widow into your family would also have been a costly thing to do.

The Land Redemption laws that are also being alluded to ensured that families didn't permanently lose their security and identity through tragedy or financial crisis.

The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers. Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.

If one of your fellow Israelites becomes poor and sells some of their property, their nearest relative is to come and redeem what they have sold. If, however, there is no one to redeem it for them but later on they prosper and acquire sufficient means to redeem it themselves, they are to determine the value for the years since they sold it and refund the balance to the one to whom they sold it; they can then go back to their own property. But if they do not acquire the means to repay, what was sold will remain in the possession of the buyer until the Year of Jubilee. It will be returned in the Jubilee, and they can then go back to their property.

Leviticus 25:23-28

'Thingamabob' is not doing anything wrong by refusing to buy back Naomi's land, but he is not doing anything especially right either.

Boaz however is going ‘the extra mile’. He could have simply married Ruth. But he is also buying back Naomi’s land.

It’s why the author doesn’t name ‘thingamabob’. He is what is known as a ‘diminished character’, significant only for what he *doesn’t* do.

Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, ‘Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelek, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, 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 his home town. Today you are witnesses!’

Ruth 4:9-10

Boaz is going to marry Ruth!

Let the celebrations begin!

Then the elders and all the people at the gate said, ‘We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.’

Ruth 4:11-12

The elders and the crowd that has gathered to see what was going on confirm that what Boaz has proposed is legitimate and good.

And as often occurs at significant points in Bible stories, a blessing is given that brings together the threads of the story.

Ruth is compared to Jacob’s two wives, Rachel and Leah, the mothers of the twelve sons who founded the twelve tribes of Israel.

The blessing promises that she will be a person of standing in her home town of Bethlehem (Ephrathah is the ancient name for Bethlehem).

And (very significantly) the blessing closes with...

Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.

Ruth 4:12

This would take the audience back to one of the many strange and dark stories in the book of Genesis.

Judah was the son of Leah, the Leah we just mentioned, wife of Jacob.

In Genesis 38, Judah moves away from his family and marries a Canaanite woman. They have 3 sons.

One of the sons marries a Canaanite woman named Tamar.

He dies, and another son marries her. But he dies as well.

(hmm... a family moves to a foreign country, two sons marry, and die...)

Judah's third son is not old enough to marry Tamar, so Tamar is sent back to her family, with the promise that when the third son is old enough things will be sorted.

However, Judah is concerned that his remaining son will also die if married to Tamar, so he doesn't contact her.

Tamar, realising that Judah has broken his promise, hatches a cunning plan to get pregnant (yep, like Naomi's scheme for Ruth & Boaz, but this one makes Naomi's plan look positively innocent).

Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and waits alongside a road she knows Judah will be travelling along.

Judah, not realising it is Tamar, propositions her, promising he will send her a young goat for her services. Tamar accepts, but demands, and gets, Judah's seal, cord and staff as a pledge for payment.

Tamar then returns to her family, where it becomes clear that she is pregnant. This news reaches Judah, who is furious, and orders for her to be brought to him so he can have her burned to death.

When Tamar hears this she sends Judah his seal, cord and staff with a message asking him if he recognises who they belong to.

To Judah's credit, when he realises what has happened he admits his guilt, and declares Tamar as being more righteous than himself.

And why am I telling you this?

It's all about the allusions...

— A Judean moves to live among gentiles: *Ruth 1:1-2, Genesis 38:1*

— The sons marry: *Ruth 1:4, Genesis 38:2,6*

— Two sons die: *Ruth 1:4-5, Genesis 38:7-10*

— A scheme is laid to procure a child: *Ruth 3:3-4, Genesis 38:15-19*

And these are just the really obvious ones, there are dozens of shared plot points, word plays and elements contained in the two stories.

And as in the comparison of Ruth with Jacob in the last talk, Ruth is revealed to be the more righteous character.

Naomi plots for her to seduce Boaz, but Ruth finds a creative way around this. Ruth, a non-Jew, is once again being depicted as being morally superior to Israel's venerated ancestors.

At the end of the Genesis story, Tamar gives birth to twins, Perez and Zerah.

And, as we will see soon, Perez is an ancestor of Boaz!

And so, back to the story...

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: 'Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.'

Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, 'Naomi has a son!' And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Ruth 4:13-17

And so we approach the end of this wonderful story. Boaz marries Ruth, and Ruth gives birth to a son.

The women of the town don't address Ruth, but Naomi. When Naomi returned to Bethlehem, she declared herself empty and bitter. But now her life has become full and sweet. She has her land back, and a family.

Naomi, like many grandmothers in the middle-eastern cultures, becomes a second mother to Ruth and Boaz's son.

The son is named Obed, which is Hebrew for 'servant'. He will help to look after Naomi in her old age.

And so the final act of The Book of Ruth ends, balancing the three deaths of Elimilek, Mahlon and Kilion at the beginning, with three births, Obed, Jesse and David, at the end.

The Book of Ruth begins with despair, but ends with hope.

The end.

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But then, like many modern films, just as the closing credits are rolling we get an epilogue.

This, then, is the family line of Perez:

Perez was the father of Hezron,

Hezron the father of Ram,

Ram the father of Amminadab,

Amminadab the father of Nahshon,

Nahshon the father of Salmon,

Salmon the father of Boaz,

*Boaz the father of Obed,
Obed the father of Jesse,
and Jesse the father of David.*

Ruth 4:18-22

As with many Bible genealogies, this is selective and symbolic.

Five of the names lived before the Exodus, and five after, complete with the linking of Boaz to Judah's son Perez.

And where the previous verses were all about the women, this one is about men, including Boaz, who is the great-grandfather of Israel's most loved king, David.

Conclusion

The Book of Ruth is a story with many layers.

At its most basic level, it is a tale of two women who go through great tragedy, but who through a Moabite woman's initiative, and the actions of a good and generous Jewish man, find security and joy.

And, like most Bible stories, it is about how God works through ordinary people to bring about his redemption of humanity from sin and death.

A thousand years later, Matthew's Gospel opens with the words...

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David...

Matthew 1:1a

Ruth, a Moabite widow becomes the great-grandmother of David, king of Israel, the ancestor of Jesus, king of kings!

And Ruth isn't the only 'foreigner' in Matthew's genealogy.

*Judah the father of Perez and Zerah,
whose mother was Tamar...*

*Salmon the father of Boaz,
whose mother was Rahab,*

*Boaz the father of Obed,
whose mother was Ruth,
Obed the father of Jesse,
and Jesse the father of King David.
David was the father of Solomon,
whose mother had been Uriah's wife...*

Matthew 1:3-6

There is, as we've already talked about, Tamar, a Canaanite.

And then there is Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute who protected Israelite spies before the invasion of Canaan. And she is an ancestor of Boaz! ('mother' can mean 'female ancestor').

And, although she is not named, there is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.

Matthew's Gospel is the most 'Jewish' of all the gospels, and yet its opening is emphasising that God has weaved other nations into his plan of salvation.

There are those who see the Bible as advocating nationalism and racism.

The Old Testament does contain commands to drive out the nations from the land of Canaan, and that prohibit intermarriage with non-Jews.

And yet God also protects the Moabite nation (Deuteronomy 2:9).

Then the LORD said... 'Do not harass the Moabites or provoke them to war, for I will not give you any part of their land.'

Deuteronomy 2:9a

So does God love the Moabites? Or does he hate the Moabites?

The answer of course is 'yes'.

God is love. And God created every human being in his image. Every Jew, Moabite, Jamaican and Londoner is equally loved by God.

What breaks God's heart is when humans turn their back on him, and worst of all, encourage others to do the same.

The Old Testament is filled with examples of how God blesses Israel with his protection and teaches them how to live good lives.

And from the day that God spoke to a pagan rich boy called Abram, God's plan was to create a nation that would be an example to the surrounding nations, encouraging them to reject their false gods and accept the one true God.

'I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'

Genesis 12:2-3

Sadly, the nation that Abraham founded regularly turned their back on the God who so richly blessed them, preferring to serve the gods of the surrounding nations.

And, as we've seen, there are examples of gentiles deciding to reject their gods and accept the one true God.

So, it's plainly not as simple as 'Jew good, gentile bad.'

Just as it is never as simple as 'Everyone in our tribe is good, everyone in all the other tribes are bad.'

As always, it requires us to use discernment, to use wisdom.

The Book of Ruth is an excellent example of the scriptures not giving us absolute answers, but seeing how God's plan has always been for Israel to invite *all* nations to worship the one true God.

How his hatred is not for the foreigners, but for the lies that they worship, lies which regularly proved too tempting for the Israelites to resist.

As Christians living 3,000 years after this story was first told, we are called to trust in God's goodness, especially during difficult times, and to demonstrate his truth and love to our family, friends and neighbours.

And I know that this is something that many of you do. It is easy to beat ourselves up about the things we do wrong, and the right things we don't do, but let me tell you that a lot of you do a lot of things really well.

I know that you love Jesus. I know that you care for your children, your grandchildren, your parents and friends. I know that you pray for one another. I know that you work hard to make sure this small but precious church community survives. And Jesus loves that.

As we leave church today, let's meditate on the message of The Book of Ruth, and let it encourage us to continue to be God's ambassadors in the communities that he has placed us.

Amen