

The Book of Ruth with Notes

Introduction

The Book of Ruth is rather short, about 5 or 6 pages in most Bibles yet it is well-written and dense with meaning. Scholars debate when it was written and by whom, but these notes sidestep those questions to discuss the text itself. We'll explore the genre, themes, and concerns, how it connects to the rest of Scripture, and how it is remembered in the life of the Church. The introduction calls attention to these topics briefly, allowing the reader to more fully discover them in the text.

Genre

The genre of the book is a love story in an idyllic setting. The story revolves around the barley and wheat harvests in the mid to late spring. The plot involves the redemption of Ruth and Naomi via the marriage of Ruth and Boaz. But note that in contrast to modern love stories, there is little of romanticism in this story. In *Ruth*, love dwells on loyalty and covenant, expressed through actions rooted in the rhythms of the harvests.

Themes

Feminine Perspective and Solidarity

Ruth is one of 3 books named after women in the Bible. (*Ruth*, *Esther*, and *Judith*. [*Susanna* is also named after a woman, but is usually considered a chapter of *Daniel*.]) Of the three, it is the most concerned with the domestic feminine perspective. Ruth is the protagonist, and her relation with her mother-in-law is central to the story. In this relationship, the book gives a vignette of female solidarity in the midst of difficult times. This is expressed from the first chapter where Ruth pledges her loyalty to Naomi to the final chapter where Naomi adopts Ruth's son. Out of this gentile, feminine relationship, God works salvation for this family, which produces King David, and ultimately the awaited Messiah.

Salvation and Redemption

Redemption as portrayed in the *Book of Ruth* is rich, multi-faceted, and holistic. Behind the scenes, we see the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, (three otherwise obscure nomads) the defender of the powerless, working through human actions in the everyday domestic sphere. The *Book of Ruth* assumes familiarity with the Torah, and Boaz is presented as one who rescues Ruth from poverty and abuse, bringing her into his household and giving her a future, and giving her, a foreign woman, a name among the children of Israel. The book ends with a genealogy showing the great King David was born of her line.

Salvation of the Gentiles and Christ's Genealogy This genealogy is expanded in St Matthew's first chapter. He names Ruth as one of only four women in Christ's genealogy. The women in Matthew's

Gospel were born as foreigners but they later encountered God through his people and were then incorporated into his people. The Gospel is for all people, and while expanded in the New Testament, it is prevalent in all the Scriptures. Christ enables sinners and foreigners to receive a place at his table in his Kingdom. We are called to cast aside our former way of life and embrace Christ and his Gospel.

Those things which happened to Ruth should be seen as figures. For she was an outsider and had fallen into extreme penury; but Boaz, seeing her, did not despise her on account of her poverty, nor was he horrified on account of her impiety; even as Christ received the church, who was both a stranger and laboring, in need of great good things. Ruth is not joined with her consort before forsaking her parents and her nation and her native land: never was anyone so much ennobled by marriage. Thus the church was not made lovable to her spouse before she had forsaken her prior customs. The prophet says, “Forget your people.” (Psalm 44/45.10)

St John Chrysostom — *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew* 3.4

Importance of Names

One last note is the importance of names in this work. Nearly every name herein has an important meaning, revealing something of their character or situation. In the last chapter this takes an ironic twist as there is one character who is not named.

Chapter 1

IN THE DAYS when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. ²The name of the man was Elimelech^a and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion^b. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, ⁵and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

The *Book of Ruth* starts by giving us the setting, during the days when the judges judged (literal translation)^c. In the days of the judges, ‘there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 17.6, 18.1, 19.1, 21.25). The Lord warned against his people living this way before they crossed the River Jordan to possess the land (Deuteronomy 12.8) and the Book of Proverbs (12.15) calls fools those who live doing ‘what is right in their own eyes’. In this time the Lord seemed to withdraw and famine encompassed the land. Like Abraham of old, Elimelech left the country to find food (Genesis 12.10). But instead of Egypt, Elimelech goes to Moab.

Elimelech is the first name we encounter in this book; many of the names have significant meaning. This one is no exception, it means “My God is King.” However, without the explicit word of God, the name

^aRuth 1.2: Translated “My God is King”.

^bRuth 1.2: Translated “Weakness” and “Fragility”

^cThis is during the collapse of the Bronze Age, a generally lawless time for the Ancient Near East.

takes on an ironic meaning as he is not trusting in God, his king, to provide for his family. Another irony is that he is from the town of Bethlehem^d “house of bread.” Moreover, his two sons names, Mahlon and Chilon, translate to “Weakness” and “Fragility”.

Elimelech dies relatively quickly after leaving Judah, while the two sons take wives but die after about 10 years. The opening paragraph closes with a tragedy; Naomi is widowed and without sons to support her. This is particularly perilous as women without a protecting man in the ancient world were not able to support themselves and subject to oppression and abuse.

In contrast to the customs of the other nations, throughout the Scriptures we read that God has a special affection for widows and orphans — those who were powerless in the ancient world. In the Torah, God commands the Israelites to not take advantage of them or pervert justice^e. Moreover, he says the justice of the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner is his concern. “He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing” Deuteronomy 10.18. The Psalms declare “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God settles the solitary in a home” Psalm 67.6-7 [68.5-6]. Jesus restored to life the son of the widow of Nain, having compassion on her. The early Church took up this call to care for widows and created the office of deacon to properly minister to them. St James, the brother of our Lord says, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” James 1.27.

As we go through the story, we will see God will give Naomi a family. Mystically we also see ourselves, once cut off from the inheritance of God, struggling under the oppression of sin being taken into the family of God and given an inheritance.

⁶Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food. ⁷So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. ⁸But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. ¹⁰And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” ¹¹But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹²Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, ¹³would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.” ¹⁴Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah^f kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth^g clung to her.

Destitute in Moab, Naomi has heard that God has visited his people in Judah, and the famine is over. Again and again in the Scriptures we hear that God hears his people and sees their affliction (Exodus 2.23-25, 3.7, 3.16, Judges 3.9, 2 Ezra 19.9 [Nehemiah 9.9], Psalm 105.44 [106.44]). This pattern culminates in the

^dNote the connection between Bethlehem here and the very dark story that makes up the end of Judges starting in chapter 17.

^e“You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child.” Exodus 22.22

^fRuth 1.4 Translated “To turn back”

^gRuth 1.4 Translated “Friendship”

Incarnation as the Virgin sang “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people” (Luke 1.68).

Now Naomi desires to go back to Judah and send her daughters-in-law back to their mothers’ houses. They were still young and presumably could find other husbands to care for them. Initially they protest and say they shall go with Naomi, but she counter-protests that she is past the age of childbearing and will not produce sons for them to marry, or even if she did, would they wait till they were old enough? At this point Orpah takes Naomi’s advice and kisses her goodbye, but Ruth embraces Naomi. Fittingly, *Orpah* means “to turn back” and *Ruth* means “friend” or “companion”.

¹⁵And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” ¹⁶But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” ¹⁸And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

And here we come to one of the most moving passages of Scripture. Naomi again tries to get Ruth to go back to her people (and her gods!) but Ruth pledges herself to Naomi with an oath, that she shall not leave her. The last section can also be rendered “if even death parts me from you”. This originally would have meant Ruth would be buried beside Naomi when they went the way of all the earth (Joshua 23.14, 3 Kingdoms [1 Kings] 2.2). However, we know that in the Resurrection, not even death can separate us from God and his people. For God in Christ entered into death, and redeemed us from it, opening paradise^h. But more on the concept of the Redeemer and redemption as we continue.

The Fathers point to this passage as an example for us from the Gentiles being joined to Israelⁱ.

Now let us look at Ruth, for she is a type of the church. First she is a type because she is a stranger from the Gentile people who renounced her native land and all things belonging to it. She made her way to the land of Israel. And when her mother-in-law forbade her from coming with her she persisted, saying, “Wherever you go, I shall go; your people shall be my people; and your God shall be my God. Whichever land receives you as you die, there I too shall die.” This voice without doubt shows that she is a type of the church. For the church was called to God from the Gentiles in just this way: leaving her native land (which is idolatry) and giving up all earthly associations, she confessed that he in whom the saints believed is the Lord God; and that she herself will go where the flesh of Christ ascended after his passion; and that on account of his name she would suffer in this world unto death; and that she will unite with the community of the saints, that is, the patriarchs and the prophets. This company, by virtue of which she [Ruth] might be joined to the longed-for saints from the lineage of Abraham, Moses revealed to us in the canticle, saying, “Rejoice, you nations, with his people, (that is, people of the Gentiles), pour forth what you believe; exult with those who were first chosen for eternal joy.” (Rom 15.10)

St Isidore of Seville — *On Ruth 2*

^hChrist is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life.

ⁱCf. Ruth 2.11 where Ruth is compared to Abraham.

This also echos the statement God gives to children of Israel in slavery in Egypt (Exodus 6.7) “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God.”

¹⁹So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?” ²⁰She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi^j; call me Mara^k, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

²²So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Naomi and Ruth are received warmly in Bethlehem but Naomi, who’s name means “Pleasant”, asks to them to call her “Bitter” for she has felt hard pressed by the Lord who has brought calamity upon her.

“Mara” is also used in Exodus 15.23 where the sons of Israel encounter bitter water which they cannot drink. In response God tells Moses to throw a tree in the water and it is made sweet. This also echos the Passover, where the bitter herbs of the passover meal represent the bitterness of slavery in Egypt. This bitterness is transformed by the hyssop branch painting the lintel and doorposts with the paschal blood. Additionally they Israelites escape through the Red Sea by the sign of the Cross upheld by Moses with his staff.

Yet while Naomi says she was brought back empty, Ruth has become her companion and is the means by which the Lord will work the redemption of her family, and through her Offspring, the whole world. The Lord brought calamity upon her (or allowed it to occur) in order to show her his grace in providing Ruth a family and including them in the genealogy of the Messiah. (Matthew 1.5)

The barley harvest occurs around Passover, so the story takes place between Pascha and Pentecost (the wheat harvest mentioned at the end of the next chapter) and mirrors the redemption of Israel from Egypt (Exodus 9.31-32).

Chapter 2

NOW NAOMI had a relative of her husband’s, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz^l. ²And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor.” And she said to her, “Go, my daughter.” ³So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers, and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech. ⁴And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem. And he said to the reapers, “The Lord be with you!” And they answered, “The Lord bless you.” ⁵Then Boaz said to his young man who was in charge of the reapers, “Whose young woman is this?” ⁶And the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, “She is the young Moabite woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of

^jRuth 1.20 Translated “Pleasantness”

^kRuth 1.20 Translated “Bitterness”

^lRuth 2.1 Translated “Strength”

Moab. ⁷She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers.’ So she came, and she has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest.”^m

Here Boaz, whose name means “strength”ⁿ is introduced. Following the Torah (Teaching/Law), (Leviticus 19.9–10, 23.22) the owners of fields were to leave the edges and corners of their fields unharvested and not go back and get forgotten sheaves (Deuteronomy 24.19). This was so the poor among Israel including the widow, fatherless, and sojourner were able to reap this leftover grain and not starve. However, Boaz is not passively following the Torah; he notices Ruth and inquires after her and her family.

⁸Then Boaz said to Ruth, “Now, listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. ⁹Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping, and go after them. Have I not charged the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn.” ¹⁰Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, “Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” ¹¹But Boaz answered her, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. ¹²The 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!” ¹³Then she said, “I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants.”

Boaz exceeds what the Torah requires. After inquiring of Ruth, he ensures she is taken care of, including telling the men not to harass her. Ruth is astounded by this, especially since she is a foreigner. But Boaz tell her he’s impressed with her faithfulness and compares her to Abraham who left his land and came to somewhere he did not know before. He says she has come under the protection, the wings, of the God of Israel. Note the language about ‘wings’; this will appear again in chapter 3.

¹⁴And at mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine.” So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed to her roasted grain. And she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. ¹⁵When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, saying, “Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her. ¹⁶And also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.”

Boaz offers Ruth a meal, bread and wine, which calls to mind Melchizedek offering Abraham bread and wine in Genesis 14.18. This hospitality prefigures the Eucharist where in Christ offers the faithful himself in the Bread and Wine. Boaz exemplifies godly strength by protecting and providing for Ruth, a defenseless widowed foreigner.

¹⁷So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah^o of barley. ¹⁸And she took it up and went into the city. Her mother-in-law saw

^mRuth 2.7 Compare Septuagint, Vulgate; the meaning of the Hebrew phrase is uncertain

ⁿIt didn’t fit elsewhere in the narrative, but one of the pillars at the entrance to Solomon’s temple is named Boaz (1 Kings 7.21 / 3 Kingdoms 7.7, 1 Chronicles/Supplements 2.11)

^oRuth 2.17 An ephah was about 3/5 bushel or 22 liters

what she had gleaned. She also brought out and gave her what food she had left over after being satisfied. ¹⁹And her mother-in-law said to her, “Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.” So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, “The man’s name with whom I worked today is Boaz.” ²⁰And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “May he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” Naomi also said to her, “The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers.” ²¹And Ruth the Moabite said, “Besides, he said to me, ‘You shall keep close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest.’” ²²And Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, “It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, lest in another field you be assaulted.” ²³So she kept close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

Naomi, amazed at the amount of barley Ruth had gleaned (about 5 gallons) asks her in whose field she worked. When Ruth tells her, she relates Boaz is a kinsman-redeemer. (We’ll discuss this in another chapter.) She blesses God which is quite a contrast from the end of the previous chapter and advises Ruth to stay close to his young women for her safety. Ruth, true to her word in chapter 1, continues to live with Naomi. This pivot of Naomi’s hope parallels the agricultural and festal calendar. The barley harvest occurs right around Pascha (Passover) when the Israelites were delivered from bondage in Egypt, and the wheat harvest occurs around Pentecost (Shavout), a festival of first fruits and the revelation of God to Moses on Mt Sinai.

Chapter 3

THEN NAOMI her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? ²Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.” ⁵And she replied, “All that you say I will do.”

Naomi reminds Ruth that Boaz is their relative. She tells her to essentially propose marriage to him, by meeting him after dark on the threshing floor and uncovering his lower body. Naomi advises Ruth that Boaz will tell her what to do, and Ruth faithfully pledges to obey Naomi.

⁶So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. ⁷And 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. ⁸At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! ⁹He said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings^p over your servant, for you are a redeemer.” ¹⁰And 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

^pRuth 3:9 Compare 2:12; the word for ‘wings’ can also mean corners of a garment

rich. ¹¹And 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. ¹²And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. ¹³Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, 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.”

Ruth does what Naomi says and Boaz is startled in the middle of the night by finding Ruth lying at his feet. She essentially proposes marriage to him by asking him to cover her with his wing. This echoes Boaz’s comment to Ruth that she has taken refuge under the wings of the God of Israel (2.12) Later on in the prophets, Ezekiel (chapter 16) compares Israel to an orphaned daughter that the Lord cared for and spread his wings over and took for his bride (verse 8).

Ruth tells Boaz that he is the redeemer for her and Elimelech’s family. A redeemer or kinsman-redeemer was a role in ancient Israel who was to keep his family from falling into poverty or slavery (often the same thing in the ancient world) and was responsible for avenging a murder of his relative. The Torah had many laws to ensure there was no poverty among the sons of Israel (Leviticus 25, Deuteronomy 15.4), and the role of redeemer was instrumental in that regard. This concept of redemption was a holistic one, not just a rescuing from calamity but a restoration to honor and dignity.

The prophet Isaiah expands this theme of redemption and envisions God as the Redeemer of Israel.

Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands far away; for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey.

The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. According to their deeds, so will he repay, wrath to his adversaries, repayment to his enemies; to the coastlands he will render repayment. So they shall fear the name of the LORD from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun; for he will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the LORD drives.

“And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression,” declares the LORD.

“And as for me, this is my covenant with them,” says the LORD: “My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children’s offspring,” says the LORD, “from this time forth and forevermore.”

— Isaiah 59.14–21

And the New Testament declare Christ is the Redeemer of humanity, because he himself became human.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

— Galatians 4.4–5

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham.

— Hebrews 2.14–16

Boaz recognizes Ruth's righteousness in that she pursued him — an older man — not out of the passions but out her love for Naomi. Boaz mentions there is a closer redeemer and he will settle the issue in the morning, but has her stay the night.

¹⁴So 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.” ¹⁵And 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. ¹⁶And 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, ¹⁷saying, “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.’” ¹⁸She replied, “Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today.”

As Boaz is a righteous man, not desiring scandal, he sends Ruth away before dawn, but not before generously giving her six measures of barley. Ruth relates the story to her mother-in-law and she again emphasizes Boaz's character, that as he promised he will do everything to settle the matter that day.

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, What’s-Your-Name; sit down here.” And he turned aside and sat down. ²And he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, “Sit down here.” So they sat down. ³Then 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. ⁴So 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^q 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.” ⁵Then Boaz said, “The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth^r the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance.” ⁶Then 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.” ⁷Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: 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. ⁸So when the redeemer said to Boaz, “Buy it for yourself,” he drew off his sandal.

^qRuth 4.4 Hebrew: he

^rRuth 4.5 Masoretic Text: you also buy it from Ruth

The first thing Boaz does that morning is to find the nearer redeemer and settle business with him. The first thing to note is that Boaz obviously knows the man's name, it's a small town and he is Boaz's relative, but the text does not preserve his name^s. In the exchange Boaz proves a shrewd negotiator. While What's-his-name originally wants the land, Boaz lets him know the foreigner Ruth comes with it. The nearer redeemer does not want the responsibility of raising a son to perpetuate the name and inheritance of Elimelech. He declines to redeem Ruth and the land because it would impair his own inheritance. And here we see the sublime irony of the text leaving out his name! By being so concerned with his own inheritance, What's-his-name loses his own name (and sandal) and is not remembered, his identity is obscured by the role of the stock character he plays.

The Torah specifies a ritual when a brother does not want to produce an heir for his deceased brother.

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. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a 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 a 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.'

— Deuteronomy 25:5–10

A variant of this is practiced in *Ruth*, where the nearer redeemer removes his own sandal. How often do we willingly and obviously choose the worse path because we think to serve our own interests? Disgraced and discolored, Mr Unshod negatively illustrates the proverb:

“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.”

— Proverbs 22.1

A common theme in Scripture is that it leaves unnamed certain people. Many of these we are somewhat surprised they are unnamed: the wealthy, the movers and shakers of this world. For example, St Luke writes, “Blessed are you who are poor” (6.20) and relates our Lord's parable of Lazarus and the unnamed rich man (16.19–31). In the first chapter of Exodus, the mighty Pharaoh (the god-emperor of the most powerful empire of time) is unnamed (1.8), yet the lowly midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who delivered the Israelite sons from destruction are named and remembered by God. This also is the heart of our prayer “May his memory be eternal”, that God would remember our departed loved ones in his kingdom.

⁹Then 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 Chilion and to

^sThe Hebrew has a playing rhyming phrase [*p'loni almoni*] used as a placeholder, perhaps derived from the words 'mute' and 'certain'. The ancient translations of the Hebrew shed some light on this. The Greek translation calls him 'The Hidden One' signaling the name was redacted. The Latin Vulgate translated it as 'So Boaz called him by name, saying, "Turn aside and sit down"' pointedly leaving out the name. Amusingly, some modern Spanish translations use *Fulano*, which is derived from Arabic *fulan* (فُلَان) [also used in some Arabic translations] which is cognate to the Hebrew phrase.

Mahlon.¹⁰ Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, 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.”¹¹ 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,¹² 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.”

Boaz publicly declares his redemption of Ruth and the land of Elimelech. He explicitly states that he will perpetuate the dead’s inheritance and confirms they will have an inheritance in Israel. This is witnessed by the community at the gates of the city. The elders bless the union, and Ruth particularly, comparing her to Rachel and Leah, the wives of Israel and mothers of the twelve tribes.

They also compare Ruth to Tamar, which needs some explanation, as the story is a bit obscure (We don’t teach it in Sunday School.) but touches on the practice of Levirate marriage. In Genesis 38, Judah had 3 sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. Judah arranged Er to marry Tamar, but because Er was a wicked man, the Lord ‘put him to death’. As Er had produced no children, Judah gave his next son Onan to her. Onan did not want to raise up a brother for Er so he took measures to avoid it. For this wickedness, God killed him also. Well, Judah was reluctant to give Tamar his third son, lest he die, so he put her off and delayed. Now after some time Judah’s wife died, and he had still not given Shelah to Tamar. So at the time of sheep shearing, Judah is at Enaim^t, and Tamar puts on a veil, disguises herself, and stands at the crossroads. Judah, a man bound by his passions, assumes she is a cult prostitute, and seeks her services. She asks “What will you give me?”^u and he pledged a goat with his signet, cord, and staff. When he goes back to find her the next day with the goat, he cannot find her and no one knows who she is. Three months later it is reported to Judah that Tamar is pregnant; whereupon Judah seeks to have her killed. She displays the signet, cord, and staff and declares, “By the man to whom these belong, I am with child. Please identify them.” Judah confirms them and states that she is more righteous than him^v. She gave birth to twins: Perez and Zerah. Perez is the ancestor of Boaz.

St Ephraim the Syrian wrote a wonderful Nativity/Theophany hymn which I’ve included in full as another handout, as it was too good to only present an excerpt.

¹³So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son. ¹⁴Then 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! ¹⁵He 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.” ¹⁶Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. ¹⁷And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed^w. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

^tTranslated as ‘eyes’. The Scriptures make great use of irony.

^uIronic, considering he did not give her his youngest son as required. Often in the Torah, women – as they are without power – use deception to accomplish righteous goals. Compare again the midwives of Exodus 1.

^vNow the next chapter details Joseph’s chastity with Potiphar’s wife, and these serve as a contrast in the narrative. But that is outside the scope of these notes.

^wRuth 4.17 Translated ‘Servant’

Noami and Ruth are restored by God through Boaz's strength. She takes Obed upon her lap as Jacob adopted Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48). The arc of the story is now complete and the women who question Naomi in chapter 1, bless her and praise that Lord who gave her a redeemer. Ruth, the foreigner is adopted into the people of God and praised as being greater than seven sons. How this parallels our position, outside of the people of God, we are oppressed and suffer famine (Isaiah 51.9, Amos 8.1). But God redeems us through his strength, not in grand displays of power, but through humble everyday moments. Christ was born in Bethlehem in a humble cave to a peasant girl. But God has chosen the foolish things of this world to shame the wise (1 Corinthians 1.27), he chooses the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom (James 2.5).

¹⁸Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, ¹⁹Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, ²⁰Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, ²¹Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, ²²Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.

The book ends with the genealogy of Boaz, leading up to David, the great King of Israel. Of course through reading the rest of Scripture, we know the Messiah was promised through David's line. This idyllic story focussing on feminine relationships is revealed as the means through which God works redemption and salvation, by this union were all the nations of the earth blessed as God promised Abraham (Genesis 12.3, 28.14).
