

Study Notes for Ruth Chapter 3



Ruth and Boaz by Rembrandt. Many scholars consider these to actually be self-portraits of the artist and his wife. Perhaps an indication of the iconic place that these two Bible figures had in society up to the present day.

If you have read the passage from *Ezekiel* 16:1-14 which I suggested you might want to study in preparation for this particular lesson, you will have discovered that there are several parallels with *Ruth* 3:2-3. In fact, what the author of *Ruth* is trying to convey here is that the character of Ruth is being prepared, just like the animated Jerusalem of *Ezekiel* for a betrothal. And any reader from ancient times would have connected Ruth’s preparations with a ceremony of betrothal. The interesting thing about Ruth is that while in *Ezekiel* Jerusalem finishes very badly indeed, abandoning her role as the faithful bride, Ruth preserves in her faithfulness to the end. In fact, Ruth’s actions might be seen as a kind of “reversal” of the unfaithfulness in *Ezekiel* – even as a kind of redemptive act. I want to come back to this theme of “reversal of past faithlessness” in a minute.

It’s particularly important to keep in mind the perspective of the original readers of this story when we are dealing with *Ruth* Chapter 3. The instructions of Naomi to “uncover [Boaz’s] feet and lie down” may seem strange to our ears, but not to a reader of 600 B.C. You see, the use of “feet” in the Old Testament is often a euphemistic one. Here, I need to delve for a moment into some adult reading matter, and I hope that none of you are put off by it. The fact is, the Hebrew word for foot, “*regel*” is often used in the Old Testament to indicate male genitalia. This is perhaps demonstrated most

clearly in 2 Kings 18:27 (a verse which is repeated word-for-word in Isaiah 36:12)¹. The Old Testament authors, not wanting to present God’s word in an indelicate manner can’t bring themselves to write the word “urine.” Instead, the literal translation is “the water of your feet.” So, when Naomi instructs her daughter-in-law to “uncover Boaz’s feet and lie down,” doubtless, the original reader is going to be asking himself, “Wait a minute! Are we talking about a girl who wants to get married, or are we just talking about two adults planning some fun on the threshing floor?” It won’t be until the next set of verses that we find out for sure just what we’re dealing with. But one has to admit, this is a really effective way of getting everybody’s attention. I guess the phrase “sex sells” was true even in 7th century B.C. Judah!

The real intentions of Ruth are finally brought to full light in verse 3:9. Part of the beauty of this verse is clear to the English speaker. But another part of it is, unfortunately, lost in translation. Let’s deal with the clearest part first.

Ruth’s request to Boaz of “Spread the corner of your garment over me...” exquisitely clarifies her intentions. You will remember from your reading of Ezekiel 16:8 that this same turn of phrase is used. We have documentation even as late as the last century that in nomadic areas of the Middle East, this custom has been a symbolic part of the marriage ceremony. The man is thus figuratively promising to provide for his wife’s household needs.

Another part of the dialogue which serves to clarify Ruth’s intention is how she identifies herself to Boaz in 3:9 when she says, “I am your servant Ruth.” We don’t get the full impact of this message in the English translation of the Hebrew. Before, in Ruth 2:13 where she says to Boaz, “You have given me comfort and spoken kindly to your *servant*,” Ruth uses the Hebrew word “*šiphāh*” for “servant.” We might think of this as the equivalent of the English word “slave” or “house servant.” The *šiphāh* was the very lowest rung in the clan system of Judah, and women of this rank were little more than the property of a household. But in this evening conversation with Boaz in Chapter 3 on the threshing floor, Ruth uses the word “*‘āmātēkā*.” This is more in the vein of “handmaiden” or “consort.” It is the same word that both Abigail and Bathsheba use to describe themselves when talking to David their

¹ Without belaboring the point, I feel it necessary to point to some other places in the OT where this euphemism is used, specifically Exod. 4.25, Judg. 3.24, and 1 Sam. 24.4. It won’t be completely clear to you however without some knowledge of the Hebrew. You’ll have to trust me on this one.

husband (see 1Samuel 1:16 and 1Kings 1:17). And this is so wonderfully in keeping with the Virgin Mother’s *Magnificat* when, in Luke 1 Mary calls herself “the Lord’s humble servant whom all generations shall call blessed.” (See Lk.1:48) So, it is clear that Ruth’s intentions are perfectly honorable: she is actually proposing marriage to Boaz, and expects her proposition to be taken quite seriously.

And how does Boaz react? He calls her “a woman of noble character” (see 3:11). Once again, this is a very specific turn of phrase and with good reason. It is used only two other times in the Old Testament, and both times are in Proverbs in description of the allegorical “Virtuous Woman” or “Virtuous Wife” (see Proverbs 12:4 and 31:10). You will remember that I pointed out in our second lesson how in the Hebrew Bible or “*Tanakh*,” *Proverbs* comes directly before *Ruth*. No way is a Jewish reader from the ancient Middle East going to be able to miss this parallel. And we shouldn’t miss it either. Boaz is no dummy! He knows what a gem he has found in Ruth, and he fully intends to accept her offer of matrimony.

In Ruth 3:15 we read, “He [Boaz] also said, ‘Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out.’ When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and put it on her. Then he went back to town.” This passage has stimulated many scholarly discussions as to just what it means. What do the 6 measures of barley represent? Why does Boaz prepare a gift for Naomi (and not Ruth)? And why does Boaz leave (instead of Ruth) for town after he prepares this gift? Some Midrashic commentaries (these are commentaries written by Jewish scholars on the meaning of passages in the *Tanakh*) deduced from this passage that six “*seahs*” of barley were the minimum amount required for a proper betrothal to take place (the amount of grain here has been calculated by Biblical authorities as 57.8 lbs.). The fact that the gift is prepared for Naomi rather than Ruth may have to do with Boaz’s fulfilling the role of “*gō`ēl*” or “kinsman redeemer.” We will discuss this more in the next and final chapter of *Ruth*. The responsibility of the “*gō`ēl*” included making sure that a dead male relative’s line continued, and Boaz’s kinship obligations are based on his relationship with Naomi rather than Ruth. Boaz may have sent this gift to Naomi as a sign of good faith, his determination to carry through with his promise to try to gain the rights prescribed for Ruth as a widow of his blood relative. This may also explain

why it is he who takes the initiative to return to Bethlehem rather than Ruth. He is accepting his responsibility by taking the initiative in this situation.

To conclude this session on Chapter 3 from *Ruth* I would like to return to something I mentioned at the beginning of this lesson, the concept of “reversal of past faithlessness” (see page 1, paragraph 1 of these notes). It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word for “grain offering” is the same as the Hebrew word for “gift.” And if we further go to Leviticus Chapter 6, we see that this kind of gift was to be offered in order to provide atonement for faithlessness (see Leviticus 6:1-5, 14). But then, the question comes to mind, “For which acts of faithlessness are these actions of Boaz and Ruth atoning? Haven’t the initiatives of these Godly people been completely faithful?” If we are going find the answer here, I believe we have to think on the “macro level.” We also have to answer another question first. Does the scene between Ruth and Boaz remind you of any other night-time drama between two related people? To jog your memory, I’m going to have to ask you to read some more “adults-only” material in Genesis 19: 30-38. Once again, my apologies, but I’m afraid the Old Testament is full of sin, and in order to understand how God’s word addresses this sin we have to read about man’s fallen-ness.

You will by now have discovered that the land of Moab and the Moabite people were actually the product of an incestuous and sinful actions of Lot’s daughters, In Genesis Chapter 19. Ruth’s honorable treatment of Boaz and the fact that she trusted to God’s grace rather than man’s (or woman’s) manipulation is at least symbolically reversing this prior act of sinful faithlessness committed by her ancestors. Remember, Ruth was from Moab as well, just like Lot and his family.

And what about Boaz? After all, it is Boaz and not Ruth who actually presents the gift of atonement. I mentioned early-on in this course that we would see in Boaz a foreshadowing of the Christ figure to come, and I think we have this foreshadowing presented in a beautiful way here. Christ presented the perfect gift for all of our atonement. And it is this bread of heaven of which we partake at every Eucharist which recommits all of us to this sacred family. We are indeed redeemed by the sacrifices of our own “*gō`ēl*” who truly is The Blessed Kinsman Redeemer!