

## Study Notes for Ruth Chapter 4



*Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi* by Philip Hermogenes Calderon (1833-1898).

So, is Naomi steamed at Boaz about something – or is she just adopting the typical mother-in-law scowl?

If you read the passage I had assigned in preparation for today (Lev 25:23-28) you may have been able to ascertain something of the importance attached to the redemption of the property of Ruth’s father-in-law Elimelech (and by extension the property of his two sons, Mahlon and Kilion). Rights to the land of Israel were very different that what we understand as ownership rights in modern America. The land in Israel was an essential part of the Covenant between God and the Israelites. It remained the property of Yahweh and the people were His tenants (Lev 25:23). Specific procedures were laid down for its redemption in the case of it being sold (Lev. 25:25-28), and these obligations on family members were treated very seriously.

In fact, if you re-read the first part of Ruth Chapter 4, you can deduce that commercial transaction of real estate as we know it was not even possible for Israel. “The Year of Jubilee” which is the year following “every seven Sabbaths of years” – therefore the 50<sup>th</sup> year – marks the year in which the original owners return to take control of their land (see Leviticus 25:11). So, land could not be sold in perpetuity anyway! It was kind of like a lease-hold contract instead of a free-hold contract.

The scene described in Ruth 4:6-8 has caused barrels of scholarly ink to be spilled. I asked you to read Deut 25:5-10 in order to get an idea about what the Law specified must be done in this type of situation. Is the action called for in Deut 25:5-10 what is

actually transpiring in this passage from *Ruth*? Maybe yes, but maybe no. The *Ruth* passage certainly has some similarities to that of Deut. 25:5-10. But it doesn't seem to be nearly as acrimonious as the scene prescribed in Deuteronomy; there is no widow (in this case either Naomi or Ruth) coming up to spit in the nearest kinsman's face. And Boaz seems to be requiring the sandal, not as a mark of derision but simply to publicly attest the fact that Naomi's nearest kinsman has given up his right of redemption, and those rights now pass to Boaz.

The risk which the nearest kinsman has refused to accept is a very real one. Should he redeem Naomi's land and produce an heir by Ruth, and should that child survive other children from the man's previous marriage, the child by Ruth would inherit all the nearest kinsman's land *into Elimelech's line*. This is what is referred to by the phrase, “I might endanger my own estate” in Ruth 4:6.

But Boaz chooses to accept this risk anyway. He will buy Naomi's land back into the original line of Elimelech, and he will accept Ruth as his wife, even if that means endangering his estate and the birth-rights of his pre-existent children. He knows what his duties are with respect to the Law, and he has faith that God, in His divine faithfulness, will respect the faithfulness of Boaz and reward him for it. Once again, we see the major theme of “*hesed*” rising to the surface of the story line. Boaz puts his faith in divine providence. The nearest kinsman to Naomi prefers to leave his own faith squarely in the hands of human initiative.

Chapter 4, as well as being the final chapter of the story, is also the point where so many threads of the Old Testament and the New become woven together. Let's take a look at a few of these.

We have seen how *Ruth* opened with a series of mistakes by Naomi and Elimelech which resulted in a nightmare scenario of events. The family had chosen to run off to Moab to escape God's justice, which was being visited on faithless Israel in the form of famine. However, by recognizing Boaz and Ruth in their faithfulness, God blesses the couple – and by extension Naomi. We read a

beautiful description in Jeremiah 18:1-6 in which God, as the consummate potter, can reshape what is marred into something that is very beautiful indeed. And we find resonance with the New Testament, particularly in Paul’s letter to the Romans Chapter 8 verse 28.

We have talked about the blessings for Naomi and Ruth that come from Ruth’s “*hesed*.” But it is in Chapter 4 that we also see the blessings for Boaz. He is no longer alone. He now has his faithful “helpmeet” in Ruth to accompany him through life. It is only at this point that we can begin to draw parallels between Boaz’s slumber on the threshing floor and his awakening to someone who will be his life’s companion, and the slumber of Adam before encountering his own helpmeet, Eve. (See Gen. 2:20b-24)

The conclusion of the chapter opens to us the far-reaching consequences of these peoples’ faithfulness. But Boaz and Ruth are not to see these results – and one gets the impression that they are entirely happy with this. They have played their part in God’s plan and played it well. And they are content with their portion of God’s providence. This is so very similar to the message which the Apostle Paul is trying to give the Corinthians.

“What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be regarded according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building” (1Cor 3:5-9)

Finally we must never forget that while God’s purpose is always providential toward us, it is not **centered** on us. It is obvious by the beginning of this chapter that Boaz is deeply in love with Ruth. But notice how he insists on applying God’s Law justly to the

situation and thus assures that the nearest kinsman has relinquished his rights and responsibilities to Ruth, before Boaz can receive her as his own wife. He understands that God’s great plan must take precedence over his own.

In writing to the Ephesians, Paul talks about the pre-eminent place of God’s eternal plan in his own life (Eph 3: 7-12). But, the incredibly wonderful thing about falling in with God’s plan is that the blessings on our own lives become much more than we could possibly construct for ourselves. Paul states this clearly with a verse that has become so famous: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in all the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever, Amen” (Eph 3:20).

Amen indeed! To God be the Glory!!

*James Barnhill, May 2016*