

Land, Lineage, and Legacy

Introduction:

Last week we finished the lesson as Ruth and Boaz left the threshing floor independently of each other, so that “no one would see a woman on the threshing floor at night.” There is no definitive reason that can be verified, that is, why women weren’t allowed on the threshing floor. It would appear, however, that guarding the crop was considered a role exclusive to men at the time. But like I said, we don’t know for sure. We were left with the announcement, however, that there was another family-redeemer who had first place ahead of Boaz to respond to the request that Ruth made. What makes that announcement important is that Ruth’s request was for the family-redeemer to pursue his responsibility in her and Naomi’s situation.

Reading today’s passage we see that morning has fully arrived and Boaz is doing what he said he would do. We don’t know where Ruth is. One writer thought she was staying at home with Naomi waiting to find out the outcome of Boaz’s intervention. However, the picture I get of Ruth is that she was more likely out working in one of the wheat fields, since the barley crop had been fully harvested and prepared for sale and/or storage. I can’t imagine that she would be the kind of woman who could just sit still and wait. Furthermore, gleaning was a day-to-day economic necessity for people in their situation. The writer of Ruth, for his part, shifts the plot entirely to Boaz and his arrangement of handling the arrangement as requested by Ruth.

Our selected reading for today begins with Ruth 4:5. However, starting there doesn’t permit us to ponder Boaz’s plan to have Ruth for himself. Boaz’s exploitation of the situation appears to be the most romantic element of this story, at least from the man’s perspective. He starts with the land issue. In class last week, Suzanne reminded us of the utmost importance of the “land” in Jewish cultural identity for centuries, which I suggested might still be a carry-over today. The gate of the town was the center of legal transactions. It was a kind of outdoor, public, courthouse. This was not yet a culture in which legal aspects were finalized in writing. At the gate, Boaz meets the other redeemer and interrupts whatever he had been doing to take care of legal business for the clan. He then calls together ten other leaders of the village who happened to be there at the time, and the transaction begins. **Let’s read vv. 3 & 4.**

The suspense of the plotline thickens as the commercial break comes to an end. Boaz knows he must offer the transaction to the other redeemer. Thus, he begins the transaction with the most important item as far as the economics of the society are concerned: the land and its worth in terms of harvests. The other redeemer sees the advantage to himself by taking over the land and agrees to the transaction.

We have been mentioning that there are two aspects of Naomi’s and Ruth’s situation: the maintenance of the land and the continuity of the line. The Hebrew word for “redeemer” is *go’el*, and it refers exclusively to the land issue in this situation. There does not seem to be a precedent for the *go’el* to maintain the line. That’s the job of the brother-in-law or *levir*, from which we get the name of a custom, a levirate marriage.

The unnamed redeemer is ready and willing to take on his responsibility in relationship to the land, in particular because there is no brother-in-law and thus no hope for a future heir. The land would stay his. The reader, however, is left with the question, “But what does that mean for Ruth?”

I. Boaz’s handling of the transaction. Ruth 4:5-8.

It would appear that the other redeemer was not even aware of any role that Ruth might be playing in this situation, if indeed he even knew anything about her. Boaz, for his part, recognized that adding a wife to the situation, for the sole purpose of having a child as an heir for another man, in particular an heir to the land he just bought, would be seen as a serious disadvantage. Thus, Ruth is an add-on, with the idea that “you can’t have one without the other.” Furthermore, because of this situation, at some point the redeemer is going to lose the land he just agreed to redeem. In other words, there are times that the job of a redeemer could be costly. The other redeemer backs out of the deal. As far as Boaz is concerned, we don’t know for sure which is more important to him, temporarily redeeming the land, or getting the woman. However, chapters 2 and 3 of the story indicate that he sees a great deal of attraction in the character of Ruth, and that she would be an advantage to him, as much as the land. Furthermore, he would still have her, once he might have to give the land back to their eventual son, depending on Boaz’s age at the time, of course. Boaz has fulfilled his word to Ruth and demonstrated why Naomi could put such trust in him. He has done what was necessary to save both the land and the lineage of Elimelech, Naomi’s husband.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How do you recognize Boaz’s presentation of the situation in terms of “the whole truth”?
2. What do you see that Orpah, Naomi’s other daughter-in-law, and the un-named redeemer have in common?
3. Public agreements have to be acknowledged publicly. We normally use signatures. At the time of this story in Israel, the transfer of rights was sealed with a transfer of a sandal. What other unusual types of symbols are you aware of from other cultures?

EXCURSUS: “Buying the land.”

At the time this story took place, it was the role of the redeemer, the *go’el*, to keep that land productive and keep its ownership within the clan. That was done through the leasing of the property with rights to a certain percentage of the harvest until such time as the heir could take over that role. If there was no heir, the land would remain the property of the redeemer. ‘Buying’ is the correct word only when there’s no heir. This is what the redeemer who was first in line in our story was hearing when the offer to redeem the property was offered. He may have known that there was no brother-in-law, no *levir* that is, and saw the advantage of the lease for eventual ownership. As Boaz now tells the offer, supposedly as Naomi is offering it, the prospect of producing an heir by the redeemer taking on the role of brother-in-law changes any level of advantage or profit. Furthermore, adding another wife and children to daily costs would be an expense he hadn’t counted on. Thus, the response, “I might endanger my estate.”

II. God saves the lineage. Ruth 4:9-13

This is one of the shortest and least prepared marriages in the Bible. However, we know that despite the seriously transactional event Boaz has created, without even the presence of his bride, he is expressing his *hesed* toward her—his loving-kindness and loyalty. There was no rabbi, no special dress or jewelry for the bride, no party, and the only vows made were toward the dead, previous husband, in terms of both his property and his name! And yet, the marriage was official, witnessed, and sealed. How's that for a dream wedding?! Boaz has taken on the responsibility of both the *go'el* and the *levir* in this situation as it pertains to Ruth's dead husband. And God blesses the process with the conception and birth of a son. Both the land and the lineage have been rescued.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. As a *go'el* in this situation, Boaz had no responsibility to become also a *levir* and marry Ruth. Why do you think he did it? What does that say about him, given that this event takes place about 50 years into the period of the Judges?
2. Verses 11 & 12 of this reading present the blessing given to Boaz by the official witnesses and other spectators. What do you see as the focus of that blessing?
3. The following question comes from the teacher's guide: How can we avoid the temptation of helping someone out of obligation rather than out of genuine desire to show love?

III. The legacy. Ruth 4:11-17 (Yes, I would like us to repeat verses 11 & 12.)

The commentator for this lesson, Karen Winslow, writes, "the book of Ruth transforms ... [the] all-male genealogies found throughout the Bible by this story about women building Israel." The text we just read names four women: Rachel, Leah, Tamar, and then Ruth. Two of these four are also found in Matthew's genealogy of the ancestors of Jesus. Why these names: Rachel, Leah, and Tamar? Not just because they guaranteed a lineage for their husbands, but because of the legacy they created. All 13 tribes of Israel recognize their existence as brought about by Rachel and Leah and their hand maids. (Yes, 13 tribes, because Joseph was given the 'double portion' of the birthright making the 12 sons faced an inheritance divided 13 ways. Levi, received no property, only cities in each of the other twelve territories, whereas Joseph was divided into Menasseh and Ephraim, the names of his two sons.) In terms of Tamar, the entire tribe of Judah acknowledges its existence from the birth of the children resulting from the illicit mating of Judah and Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law. Ephratha was one of the clans of Judah, with Boaz coming on the scene several generations after the son of Tamar and Judah.

Matthew adds two other women's names to his genealogical list, women whose names don't appear in this book, but may have something to do with it. We know that Bathsheba was the last of David's several wives, and the mother of David's successor as king: Solomon. Rahab isn't mentioned at all in Ruth. However, she had an important role in the story. According to Matthew, she is the mother of Boaz, and as such, bore quite of the responsibility for the development of Boaz's character both as a man and as a faithful Jew.

Beyond land and lineage, this final paragraph has everything to do with legacy—the legacy leading to David, and the legacy leading to Jesus. I would like us to look at several points in this rather unusual legacy:

1. Rachel and Leah represent the fiercest example of sibling rivalry in the Bible. It started before their teen years and continued even after the death of Rachel. From the time Jacob arrived at their house and preferred the younger, prettier sister over the first born, throughout the 20 years they all lived with their father Laban fighting over who would get to sleep with their shared husband or over the fertility herbs that one of Leah's sons found. During that time, we know they were idol worshipers. Then there was the time when Jacob transferred the right of the first born from Leah's first-born to Rachel's first born, to the years in Canaan when Jacob could not be comforted over the death of Rachel and the loss of Joseph, despite Leah's love for him. Even as this blessing is given in Ruth, Rachel's name appears first, even though Leah was the mother of Judah.
2. Tamar was the Canaanite daughter-in-law of Judah. Her husband died before they had children because God responded negatively to his evil character. Her two younger brothers-in-law refused to complete the duty of the *levir* for their older brother. She, after years of waiting, and after the death of her mother-in-law, disguised herself as a temple prostitute and enticed her father-in-law to be with her. She became pregnant and gave birth to Perez and his twin brother from whom the whole tribe of Judah derived its existence.
3. Rahab is next. We looked at her story a few weeks ago. She's the Canaanite woman who ran the bar/brothel in Jericho and hid the spies Joshua had sent to scout the city when the king's men came to find them. Obviously, her new faith in Yahweh caused major transformation in her as seen in the character of her son Boaz.
4. Ruth, the Moabite, who should have been shunned according to Deuteronomy, becomes rather the beloved one in this story because of her *hesed* toward her Jewish mother-in-law.

Conclusion:

One of the darkest moments in Israel's history, at least to some people, is the time when, during the third period of the reconstruction of Israel after the exile, Ezra decided that all Jewish men who had married foreign wives should divorce them and send them away with their children, in order to preserve the purity of the race. Foreign wives, he said, would lead the men away from their faith in Yahweh. The story of Ruth says that may not always be the case.

God's plan of salvation does not come about through meticulous observance of legal codes or racial purity. God works, rather, through the scorned older sister, the incest of a widowed father-in-law with his daughter-in-law, the conversion of a Canaanite prostitute, the reversal of a shunning ordinance, and the sinful lust of God's anointed king: all of that and more to bring about His plan of salvation. That's the legacy attached to this story. It is a legacy of the transforming grace of God in the lives of outsiders, sinners, and faithful people who live out the grace of God as they relate to other people, whoever or wherever they are.