Naomi’s Initiative and the Character of Ruth

Ruth 3

Ruth 3: *Synopsis* and **Big Idea**

- *In order to provide for Ruth, Naomi initiates a plan that Ruth secretively present herself to Boaz for the purpose of marriage; Ruth obeys but also advocates for redemption on Naomi’s behalf, and Boaz acquiesces with blessing, integrity, propriety, generosity, and alacrity.*

- *God’s blessings are often realized through audacious acts of love that inspire others to similar behavior.*
Ruth 3: Key Themes

• God may bring blessing through selfless actions toward one another.
• Ruth takes personal risks for the benefit of Naomi.
• Kindness is contagious.
• God’s wisdom and order are illustrated in everyday life.
• God may answer prayers for others through the one who prays.

Ruth 3: Literary Context

• Chapters 2 and 3:
  – Are centered on Ruth & Boaz during barley harvest
  – Are understood respectively as C and C’ in the chiasm
  – Each present a trifold sequence in which
    • plans are initiated (2:1–3; 3:1–5),
    • favor is expressed (2:4–17; 3:6–15), and
  – Each describe Ruth & Boaz as ḥayil (2:1; 3:11)
  – Each employ the term “wing” (kanap) in key conversations with each other (2:12; 3:9)
Ruth 3: Background

• **Threshing Floors:**
  – were often located outside the city gates
  – were typically in open areas of exposed, polished bedrock where workers could exploit the breeze in the late afternoon.

• Stalks of barley or wheat were initially brought here for threshing, which might employ animal hooves and a wooden sledge or cart pulled by draft animals in order to separate the grains from the stalks (cf. Deut. 25:4; Isa. 28:28; 41:15; Mic. 4:13).

Ruth 3: Background

• Threshing was followed by **winnowing**, which required pitchforks for tossing the threshed grain into the air so that the lighter chaff blew away and the heavier grain fell to the ground (Ruth 3:2; cf. Jer. 15:7; Hosea 13:3).
Ruth 3: Theological Emphases

• God’s blessings often come through human expressions of selfless love. That is, God grants blessings to Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz as they each act in ḥesed toward each other (see 1:8; 2:20; 3:10; cf. 4:14).
  – Naomi proposes her plan out of a concern for Ruth’s welfare and “rest” (3:1 ESV; cf. 1:9) rather than a concern for her own redemption (she mentions here only that Boaz is a “relative”; 3:2).
  – Ruth demonstrates concern for Naomi’s needs when she loyally responds at great personal risk (3:5) and specifically reminds Boaz that he is a “guardian-redeemer” (3:9)—possibly supplementing Naomi’s plan.
  – Boaz seeks Ruth’s welfare by invoking God’s blessing (3:10), identifying her as his equal (3:11; cf. 2:1), responding with integrity and alacrity (3:12–13) and sharing his barley (3:15, 17).

Ruth 3: Theological Emphases

• The actions of Naomi & Boaz in this chapter become answers to each of their prayers for Ruth
  – Naomi previously prayed that her daughters-in-law would find “rest” in a husband’s house (1:9), and here she apparently recognizes God’s orchestration of events (cf. 2:20) and personally seeks out “rest” (3:1) for Ruth by initiating her own plan (3:2–4).
  – Boaz previously prayed for Ruth’s reward and protection under Yahweh’s “wings” (2:12), and here he shows the intention to act personally as God’s “wing” (3:9) and thereby help to reward and protect Ruth.
Ruth 3: Application

• Ruth & Boaz on the threshing floor should not be sensationalized as a romantic or racy story.
  – “If this is a love story, it is primarily the love between Ruth and Naomi” (Tischler), not Ruth and Boaz.
  – Ruth’s “kindness” (ḥesed) to Naomi is precisely what impresses Boaz and motivates him to action in 3:10–11.
    • Ruth’s ḥesed is not merely a “sentimental love” but a godly love in which Ruth’s concerns for Naomi are more important than her own interests.
  – The nighttime encounter is not a scandalous sex scene, as some have intimated (cf., Ephrem, Beattie, Nielsen, van Wolde).
    • Even if Naomi’s plan allowed for sexual entrapment (see Halton), the narrator indicates that Ruth presents Boaz with a choice and that Boaz does not do what one might expect him to do during the time of the judges.

• Instead, the significance of the story comes from observations about the nature of ḥesed as it is expressed in the narrative.

Ruth 3: Application

• First, God’s love may be expressed through human acts of love. Indeed, God’s blessings come to the main characters as they bring blessings to each other (see 3:10; cf. 1:8; 2:4, 12, 19, 20; 4:14–15).
  – “To the faithful you show yourself faithful” (Ps. 18:25)
  – “If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us” (1 John 4:12).

• Ruth’s initial words to Boaz at the threshing floor (about redemption; Ruth 3:9) reveal that she is concerned mainly for Naomi’s family, yet God later provides for both widows through Boaz (see 4:13–15).
Ruth 3: Application

• Second, God may lead those who pray for others to act personally on behalf of others.
  – That is, a prayer for a needy person may be answered through the actions of the one who prays.
  – This is how God provides for Ruth in this chapter (1:9; 2:12; 3:1–4, 9–11), and it is also how God may provide for “a brother or sister in need” (1 John 3:17; cf. James 2:15–16).

• Third, this story powerfully demonstrates how kindness is contagious. That is, selfless actions stimulate others to act selflessly.
  – Ruth’s “earlier” acts of hesed toward Naomi (1:8; 2:11; 3:10) inspire both Naomi and Boaz to seek Ruth’s welfare (1:8–15; 2:8–16, 22; 3:1), and Ruth’s “greater” act of hesed to Naomi (3:10) inspires Boaz toward even further action on behalf of the widows (3:10–15).
  – In the same way, God’s people must consider how to “spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:24).

• Of course, the ultimate impetus for God’s people to express hesed to each other—even if they have not received it from other people—is that God is “abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exod. 34:6–7) and that “Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16)
Ruth 3: Expository Remarks

• Get dressed (3:3)

  – Naomi’s directives may signify a transition of Ruth’s social identity from a widow in mourning to one who resumes normal life (cf. 2 Sam. 12:20).

  – Such a change in Ruth’s appearance would send the proper signal to Boaz about her marital eligibility and interests.

Ruth 3: Expository Remarks

• Uncover his feet (3:4)

  – The term used here for “feet” actually refers to the whole lower half of the body from hips to toes, that is, the “legs” (cf. Dan. 10:6).

  – Some references to “feet” in the Old Testament are used euphemistically to refer to genitalia (cf. Exod. 4:25; Isa. 6:2; 7:20; etc.), but in the present context there appears to be “intentional ambiguity about just how much of Boaz was uncovered” (Campbell).

  – It’s possible that Naomi’s plan is for Ruth to seduce Boaz so that he might feel inclined to marry her.

    • While her precise intentions remain unclear, it is at least clear that Naomi’s plan is extremely risky because the desired outcome of marriage is not guaranteed (Boaz was not legally obligated), and Ruth’s reputation could become ruined in the process.
Ruth 3: Expository Remarks

• I will do whatever you say (3:5)

  – Ruth’s compliant words are reminiscent of Israel’s responses to the Lord’s covenant in Exodus 19:8; 24:3, 7.
  – In Ruth 3:11, Boaz uses these same words in his response to Ruth, indicating that Boaz and Ruth are complementary in character and they each act loyally for the benefit of another.

Ruth 3: Expository Remarks

• At the far end of the grain pile (3:7)

  – The narrator likely notes this detail as a subtle reminder that the events are unfolding according to plan (see 3:4) and that God is orchestrating this encounter (cf. 2:3).
  – God’s providential activity in these events may also be indicated by the narrator’s use of the term “behold” in 3:8 (cf. 2:4; 4:1) and Naomi’s final remark about “what happens” in 3:18.
Ruth 3: Expository Remarks

• Your servant (3:9)
  
  – Previously, Ruth self-identifies as a mere “foreigner” (nokriyyah; 2:10) who receives the gracious distinction of laborer (shiphah; 2:13), but here Ruth audaciously presents herself as a handmaid (‘amah) who could be Boaz’s wife. Boaz then responds by promoting her to “a woman [or wife] of noble character” (3:11), that is, a primary wife with status equal to his own (cf. 2:1).

Ruth 3: Expository Remarks

• The corner of your garment (3:9)
  
  – This is a contextually sensitive translation of the term “your wing [kanap],” which Ruth cleverly borrows from the vocabulary of Boaz in 2:12.
    • But here, Ruth employs the term in a slightly different phrase that proposes marriage to Boaz (see Ezek. 16:8).
  
  – This is an unexpected development in the scene and in the cultural context. Instead of letting Boaz tell her what to do (see Ruth 3:4), Ruth speaks and tells Boaz what to do. Essentially she says, “Marry me as an act of redemption!”
Ruth 3: Expository Remarks

• The corner of your garment (3:9)
  – This is not merely a marriage proposal for Ruth’s sake (note 3:10, “You have not run after the younger men”), but it is for the sake of Naomi and her family, and that is precisely how Boaz understands her offer (cf. 3:10–13).
  – By speaking up, Ruth also presents Boaz with the opportunity to think (before acting quickly in the heat of the moment) so that he is presented with a choice and is then able to respond in a proper and dignified manner.
    • Instead of cursing Ruth for attempting to seduce and manipulate him, Boaz blesses her (3:10) for this selfless expression of loyalty to Naomi, which he views as greater than her previous demonstration (1:8, 16–17; cf. 2:11).

Ruth 3: Expository Remarks

• Guardian-redeemer (3:9)
  – The Hebrew word go’el is translated in various ways: “covenant redeemer” (MSG), “family redeemer” (HCSB, NLT), “guardian-redeemer of our family” (NIV), and “redeeming kinsman” (NJPS), but the best renderings in Old Testament (i.e., non-soteriological) contexts are “benefactor” (Chisholm) or “guardian of the family interests” (NET).
Ruth 3: Expository Remarks

• Guardian-redeemer (3:9)
  
  – While God is the ultimate go’el of his people (e.g., Exod. 6:6; 15:13), which is a major theme in Psalms, Isaiah, and the New Testament, God’s people may also function in the same capacity for the benefit of each other.
  
  – Human applications often occur in legal contexts such as release from debt slavery, avenging murder, purchasing land, or even marrying a relative’s widow.
  
  – The common denominator in all these situations is “to recover losses and to salvage the dignity of the one who has suffered loss” (Walton).

Ruth 3: Expository Remarks

• Woman of noble character (3:11)
  
  – Proverbs and Ruth are the only two books in the Bible that employ the phrase “woman of noble character” (Prov. 12:4; 31:10; Ruth 3:11). When the book of Ruth is juxtaposed with Proverbs, one can easily appreciate the many ways that the narrative presentation of Ruth and Boaz is similar to the poetic portrait expressed in Proverbs 31:10–31. Both the Proverbs 31 poem and the story of Ruth can be viewed as inspiring illustrations of God’s wisdom and order in the contexts of daily life.
Ruth 3: Expository Remarks

• Another who is more closely related than I (3:12)
  – This disclosure of Boaz and his desire to defer to this other redeemer (3:13) reveals the improbability that Boaz and Ruth had sexual intercourse.
  – While the scenario of a woman stealthily uncovering and lying beside a man at night is brimming with sexual possibilities, the narrator presents this as a chaste encounter
    • by describing how Ruth modifies Naomi’s plan (3:9) and how Boaz responds to Ruth with the longest speech in the book (3:10–13).
    • Furthermore, the narrator demonstrates in the following chapter that he is perfectly capable of making explicit statements about sex (“he made love to her”; 4:13).

Ruth 3: Expository Remarks

• Six measures of barley (3:15)
  – Boaz’s gift is a “symbolic action of promise” that is parallel to his previous provisions for the widows in 2:14–18 (Younger).
  – The precise amount of barley placed in Ruth’s shawl is unspecified, but the idea is “that she receives as much as she can carry” (Nielsen).
Ruth 3: Expository Remarks

• Empty-handed (3:17)
  
  – The term “empty,” used only here and in 1:21, is anticipatory of Naomi’s reversal of fortunes.
  
  – These last words of Ruth, like her first words (1:16–17), “express her commitment to Naomi and Naomi’s well-being” (Eskenazi).