Redemption and Marriage for a Blessed Future

Ruth 4

Ruth 4: Synopsis and Big Idea

• Through the charitable initiatives of Boaz, involving legal negotiations for land and for widows at the town gate, God answers prayers and gives Ruth and Boaz a son, who serves as the heir to Elimelek’s estate, the provider for Naomi, and the grandfather of King David.

• God’s blessings are often realized through the faithful actions and prayers of his people.
Ruth 4: Key Themes

- God graciously provides for his people and cares for their needs.
- God answers prayers in his own time and in his own ways.
- God’s blessings can come through unexpected means.
- God has long-term plans to bless his people.
- David is descended from faithful people.

Ruth 4: Literary Context

- The Ruth story opens with death and emptiness and closes with life and fullness (1:3–5, 21; 4:13–17); opens with a bitter situation and closes with a blessed one (1:20–21; 4:11–15).
- Ruth 4 has two literary components that correspond in reverse order to the two literary components of chapter 1.
  - The family history in 4:18–22 recounts future births, whereas the family history in 1:1–5 recounts past deaths, and each of these sections lists a total of ten proper nouns.
  - The story of marriage and descendants in 4:1–17 parallels the story of widows and childlessness in 1:6–22, and both of these sections stress the Lord’s gifts (1:6; 4:11–13), the husband’s house (1:9; 4:11–12), bearing sons (1:12; 4:12–13, 15–17), name calling (1:20–21; 4:11, 14, 17), and speeches of the local women (1:19; 4:14–15, 17).
Ruth 4: Background

• The gate of Bethlehem (3:11; 4:1, 10, 11):
  – presently unidentified in the archaeology.
  – associated with a well (2 Sam. 23:15–16 // 1 Chron. 11:17–18).
  – the threshing floor is presumably located just outside it.

• The gate with its adjacent square is the socioeconomic “center” of town because it is the bottleneck through which everyone enters or exits to go about their daily business.
  – Diverse functions: military security, market activity, legal transactions, administrative matters, ceremonial gatherings, religious rituals, etc.
  – It’s supposed to be a place where justice is maintained (see Deut. 21:19; 22:15; Prov. 22:22; Isa. 29:21; Amos 5:10, 12, 15).

Ruth 4: Background

• Gates often include meeting spaces (inside or outside) with seating to settle situations like the one described in Ruth 4, where Boaz sits down with the closer kinsman and ten elders of the town (4:1–2), a scene that is reminiscent of Prov 31:23.
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Ruth 4: Theological Emphases

• The final chapter of Ruth emphasizes God’s gracious provision for his people. This theme is made explicit by the **three uses of the verb “to give” (ntn) with the Lord as subject**.
  – The witnesses at the gate bless the marriage twice:
    • “May the Lord give” that Ruth is a matriarch like Rachel and Leah (4:11)
    • “May the Lord give” that Boaz is a patriarch like Judah “through the offspring [Heb., zera’] the LORD gives” through Ruth (4:12).
  – The third instance is expressed when the narrator reports: “the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son” (4:13 ESV).
Ruth 4: Theological Emphases

• Connections with Genesis are unmistakable in these verses as God’s gifts are expressed in terms of his covenant relationship with his people.
  – God not only creates new life in Ruth’s (presumably) barren womb, but he also orchestrates the redemption of land and widows (4:9–10, 14) and eventually blesses his people with a faithful human king who will make the way for the divine King (4:17, 22).

Ruth 4: Theological Emphases

• This chapter also emphasizes answered prayer.

• The short story of Ruth is packed with prayers of blessing that are spoken on behalf of others, and all of these prayers are answered in chapter 4.
  – Naomi’s prayers for the widows (1:8–9) are answered—at least for Ruth—in 4:10–13.
  – Boaz’s prayers for Ruth (2:12; 3:10) are answered in 4:10–11, 13, 15, 21.
  – Naomi’s prayers for Boaz (2:19–20) are answered in 4:11–13, 21.
  – Finally, the witnesses’ prayers for Ruth and Boaz (4:11–12) are answered in 4:13, 15, 21–22, and the women’s prayer for Obed (4:14) is answered in 4:17, 21–22.
Ruth 4: Theological Emphases

• In this summary it is evident that
  – God is predisposed to answering selfless prayers,
  – selfless prayers can inspire others toward selfless prayer
  – faithful petitioners can also participate in God’s answers to their prayers
    • Naomi takes action for Ruth’s benefit in 3:1; Boaz takes action for the widows’ benefit in 3:11–13; 4:9–10).

Ruth 4: Application

• Avoid a typological approach (the marriage of Boaz & Ruth prefigures Christ’s relationship to his Gentile bride, the church).
  – The problem with this interpretation, found in neither Testament, is that it tends to circumvent the story’s relevance for the ancient Israelite audience.
• The best approach to applying the book of Ruth is to keep in mind that the objective is not necessarily to be like Boaz or Ruth but rather is to model God’s character.
  – Granted, the characters in this story are exceptional examples of what godliness (or wisdom) might look like in a particular context.
  – But they are not intended as perfect examples or as prescriptive models for all God’s people in every time and place.
• The story should serve as a catalyst to inspire torah-living in the present context.
Ruth 4: Application

• Be a *torah* person.
  – Because God is just and faithful, his followers must be the same—people who love others by seeking their flourishing and taking measures both to maintain equity and to mitigate exploitive abuses of power.
    • This is what it means to uphold the spirit of *torah* (cf. Lev. 19:9–18; Deut. 16:19–20; Hosea 6:6; Mic. 6:8; James 1:27; etc.).
    – The specific applications of *torah*-living may take various forms, but *selflessness* is a key virtue.

Ruth 4: Application

• Be a *torah* person.
  – A selfless individual can serve as an agent of redemption for others, maintain justice in his/her sphere of influence, and leave a legacy of loyalty (*ḥesed*) by being like Jesus, who perfectly fulfills the *torah* and urges his followers to do the same (see Matt. 5:17–20).
  – The story of Ruth, which features everyday people in various stations of life, shows that anyone can be a *torah* person
    • “God can use common folk (Ruth) as the foundation for major stages in his plan (David)” (Walton).
Ruth 4: Application

• **Pray for others.**
  – One specific way that anyone can embody the *torah* is by praying for God’s blessings in the lives of others.
  – This selfless, loving act is displayed in every chapter of the book of Ruth. Amazingly, prayers for others
    • May inspire others’ prayers for others.
    • May inspire personal initiatives on behalf of others
  – It is evident in Ruth 4 that *God delights in fulfilling selfless requests and that his answers may go way beyond what petitioners ever expect or imagine.*

Ruth 4: Expository Remarks

• **Levirate Marriage:**
  – *Deut. 25:5–10* explains: *a brother-in-law marrying his widowed sister-in-law in order to produce an heir for the deceased brother’s estate.*
  – The practice is illustrated in *Gen. 38*—a narrative that is unmistakably echoed in Ruth 4:12—and throughout ancient and modern world cultures.
Ruth 4: Expository Remarks

• Levirate Marriage:
  – The scenario in which Boaz or the unnamed relative could marry the widow may not be technically levirate marriage (at least according to Deut. 25) because Mahlon has no living brothers (cf., 1:11–13).
  – However, the fact that Boaz marries Ruth “in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property” (4:5, 10; cf. Deut. 25:7) indicates that the redemption scenario in this story is a levirate-like situation carried out by the closest willing relative.
    • Boaz is portrayed in Ruth 4 as upholding not the letter but the spirit of torah by “doing justice” both for the widows and for the estate of Mahlon, although Boaz is under no obligation to do so.

Ruth 4: Expository Remarks

• Friend (4:1)
  – Hebrew p’loni ‘almoni is a farrago (see Sasson)
    • “a (rhyming) medley of words that gains meaning through context.”
  – If it refers to the closer kinsman (thus translated “So-and-so”; cf. NJPS), then it is a “pointed refusal to name this character” (Glover).
  – But it more likely refers to an indeterminate place (cf. 1 Sam. 21:2; 2 Kings 6:8); thus, Boaz says, “Sit here at such and such spot” (Sasson).
• Nevertheless, the closer kinsman still remains unnamed in this story, perhaps because he refuses “to maintain the name of the dead” (4:5), and he therefore serves as an effective literary foil for the frequently named Boaz, who becomes “famous in Bethlehem” (4:11).
Ruth 4: Expository Remarks

• Our relative Elimelek (4:3)
  – Boaz and the unnamed kinsman are probably not literal “brothers” of Elimelek
    • because “they would have inherited the field on this basis,” making redemption unnecessary (see Levine).
  – It’s more likely that they are Elimelek’s cousins.
    • The precise relationships of the two redeemers to Naomi or to Elimelek are ultimately uncertain, although Jewish traditions offer some interesting speculations.

Ruth 4: Expository Remarks

• You also acquire Ruth (4:5)
  – Text-critical questions about the Hebrew
    • The subject of the verb could be either second person (Qere, a few medieval Hebrew manuscripts, LXX, Vulgate, modern English translations) or first person (“I acquire”; Kethib).
  – In either case, regardless of who might marry Ruth, Boaz asserts that the child legally belongs to the other family line (Holmsteadt), and that is the bottom line in this negotiation.
Ruth 4: Expository Remarks

• Endanger my own estate (4:6).
  – In light of Boaz’s condition (4:5), the kinsman realizes that he “has little or nothing to gain and a great deal to lose” (Weisberg).
    • He would be “disinherited through his own actions” because “the deceased’s property is transferred to [Ruth’s] children rather than reverting back to his family of origin. . . . The only incentive . . . is a sense of fraternal or familial obligation” (Weisberg).
  – One might compare this closer kinsman to Onan, who “knew that the child would not be his” (Gen. 38:9).
  – The kinsman appears to act out of self-interest by deeming the acquisition as a poor financial investment, whereas Boaz appears to act out of loyalty to his family by taking a risk for others’ benefit.

Ruth 4: Expository Remarks

• Took off his sandal (4:7).
  – This parenthetical mention of earlier customs shows that the time of composition/editing is somewhat removed from the setting of the historical events.
  – Footwear like sandals was symbolic for ownership and dominion in the biblical world (cf. Deut. 25:9–10; Pss. 60:8; 108:9).
  – By removing and passing his sandal to Boaz in 4:7–8, the kinsman legally relinquishes his right to tread on the designated piece of land.
Ruth 4: Expository Remarks

• So Boaz took Ruth (4:13).
  – Seven times prior to this point Ruth has been called “the Moabite” (1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10), but here in this final reference (also in 2:8, 22) the narrator just calls her Ruth, with no ethnic identifier.
    • “Ruth’s name is used without the Moabite tag whenever her re-situation within Israel has been recognized” (Glover)
  – This may show that “biological descent is not always necessary for ethnic belonging” (Glover).

Ruth 4: Expository Remarks

• Family line of Perez (4:18).
  – This linear genealogy is like Genesis
    • employing “These are the generations” (used 10x in Genesis)
    • preserving 10 generations like Gen 5 and 11.
    • emphasizing the 7th and 10th positions like Gen 5 and 11
      – Boaz is thus compared to Enoch; David is compared to Noah or Abram
  – Verses 18–22 are by no means an appendix or secondary addition to the story of Ruth.
    • The genealogy serves as a coda (Berlin) or an integrated conclusion to a story that opens with past family deaths and recounts God’s blessing and providence toward his faithful people.
Ruth 4: Expository Remarks

• Family line of Perez (4:18).

  – The last word of the Hebrew text ("David") shows
    • that Israel’s ideal king emerges from righteous stock
    • that the “fragile thread” leading to David (and ultimately to Jesus) is forged through acts of faithfulness, initiated by a foreign woman.

  – Also, the genealogy shows that by blessing Naomi’s family, God brings blessings to the whole nation (and ultimately to the whole world).