

The Book of Ruth

Chapter 2

In this act we begin to get a real feel for the author's way of working. In two places **verbal echoes** draw our attention to similarity between two characters.

- In v.1 Boaz is a man of renown in 3:11 he will declare that Ruth is a woman of renown, truly these two "deserve each other".
- In v.12 Boaz is placed, as we have also seen, in parallel to the Lord. Here he commends Ruth for seeking refuge "under the wings" of God, in the next chapter she seeks refuge under the "wings" of Boaz' garment!

Such a putting in **parallel of human and divine** is also a feature of the ambiguity of v.20, if Boaz' faithfulness were not like God's there would be no openness to such uncertainty of referent. In one case the paralleling works at the level of story, showing us two people "made for each other"; in the other case it is theological, humans ought to reflect divine goodness and faithfulness, and it is in human goodness that we meet the maker.

There is a further theological message carried through echoes between 2:11-12 and 3:9-10. There is a correspondence between Ruth's faithfulness to her family-by-marriage and the blessing. This faithfulness which mirrors the Lord's leads to his blessing.

Two key phrases carry the major theme of this act: "**find favour with**" (vv.2, 10, 13) and "**take notice of**" (vv.10, 19).

- In v.2, during the abstract which introduces the act, Ruth speaks of her **need** of an unknown "someone" with whom she will find favour.
- By v.10 she will recognise that she has **found** this "someone", Boaz, and his goodness is underlined by the echo between "take notice of" and "foreign woman".
- In v.19 this goodness, like Ruth's faithfulness, receives its corresponding **blessing**, though the blesser still does not know his name or identity!

Verse 13 is a crux for our understanding of Ruth. Traditional interpretation sees here a repetition of her grateful remarks of v.10 and an expression of her humility towards Boaz. A model woman! "*You have been kind to me even though I am not even one of your servant girls.*"

For already in v.7 differences of custom between the protected peasant girls of Bethlehem and the haughty Bedouin girl may have appeared. If we translate "*Please let me glean and gather the sheaves behind the reapers*", Ruth does not expect charity but rather the chance to earn her food by working.

Verse 13 can in this case be rendered "*Be gracious to me, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your maidservant, **however** I am not like one of your maidservants.*" One can also even make a case for translating "*But as for me, I shall **never** be one of your servants*". Ruth is not attached to Boaz house, she is independent of him and of everyone.

If we accept this last proposal there is a further layer of irony, this time "dramatic irony" for one day she will be part of Boaz household, not as servant but as mistress!

Introduction: Ruth & Naomi (2:1-2)

2:1 The word translated "**kinsman**" - *myd (kethib)* or *mwd (qere)* - poses some problems, which were recognised in antiquity, not only by the scribes but by the versions. However it need not delay us since its approximate sense is clear "a family member". A similar word (if one reads the *kethib* here) or the same one (if one accepts the *qere*) recurs at 3:2. These are both key texts in the transformation of Boaz, from distant relative, to husband of Ruth and parent of Obed. Here Boaz is introduced as candidate (though unknowing); at 3:2 Naomi recognises and proposes this candidature.

The phrase "**a prominent rich man**" *'ish gibbor chayil* is literally something like: a man, mighty and renowned. This phrase might well describe a warrior, in the context it is Boaz' reputation in Bethlehem that is being stressed. Later Boaz himself will apply the feminine version of the same description to Ruth in 3:11 *'eshet chayil 'atte* "a woman of renown are you". The word occurs again at 4:11 in the blessing by the elders on the future marriage.

2:2 "**someone in whose sight I may find favour**" - finding favour recurs in vv. 10 & 13, notice how in v. 10, through Ruth's question, the anonymous "someone" of verse 2 is identified as Boaz, and in v. 13 "may I continue to find favour in your sight" Ruth requests a continuation of Boaz favour (and its extension?) because he has comforted her and spoken kindly to her.

Scene One: Ruth in the Fields (2:3-17)

2:3 "**as it happened**" in this book nothing just "happens" everything, even Naomi's undeserved suffering, comes from Adonai (though sometimes Naomi, Boaz and Ruth give him a helping hand!). It is typical of our author, and of the best Hebrew short story style, to speak overtly of chance while making clear that there is no such thing in God's creation.

2:4 "**Just then**" this translates the Hebrew *yehinneh*. This translation certainly captures the sense of divine providence which is present in this passage, however it fails to really suggest the other strong possibility: that we are being invited to "watch" Boaz' arrival through Ruth's eyes.

"**Adonai be with you... Adonai bless you**" this greeting and response does not mean that they were specially religious people, this was a natural way for such meetings to be marked.

2:5 "**young woman**" (*na'arah*) can also mean servant-girl, the word translated "**servant** in charge of the reapers" is the masculine equivalent *na'ar*.

"**belong**" does not as strongly suggest servitude however in Hebrew "to whom is this young woman" - for a "young woman" (by implication - if inaccurately in this case - unmarried) must be attached to some male!

2:6 The reply indicates both that Ruth is attached only to another woman "**with Naomi**" and that she is foreign "**the Moabite**". These two verses remind us in several ways of Ruth's lack of position or status in Bethlehem.

2:10 The echo, in Hebrew between "**take notice of**" *nakar* and "(female) **foreigner**" *nakriyah* attracts attention to the word "take notice of" which will be repeated in 2:19 "*Blessed be the man who took notice of you*" and 3:14 where Ruth must leave the threshing floor before anyone can "*recognize*" that a woman has been there!

2:11 Again helping to build up Boaz' character is his claim that "**all you have done... has been fully told me**" while he only summarises briefly what we already know.

2:12 The picture language "**under whose wings you have come to take refuge**" is the same as at 3:9 where it comes out as "**spread your cloak over your servant**" (some translations give "marry" here!) - in both cases the picture refers to protection - and provides an interesting example of the parallels that this book keeps making between humans and God.

"**Servant**" the word Ruth uses twice in this verse is different from the one Boaz used earlier. In biblical usage Ruth's word implies the status of a slave, while Boaz' word is used for young relatives as well as for servants.

2:14 "dip your morsel in the sour wine" literally "dip your fragment [of bread] in the vinegar" some commentators discuss reasons for using sour wine in such workers' picnics, I see this as Boaz acting the 'perfect host' - "share my humble repast". Either way this is one of few examples of litotes in the Bible. Typical of biblical narrative poetics is the way we only discover later (v.18) why it is significant that "**she had some left over**".

2:15-16 "pull out some handfuls... from the bundles" Boaz makes sure Ruth will get results from her work!

2:17 "she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat [it] out" confirms the foreman's impression of her dawn-to-dusk (another translation of "morning" (v.7) and "evening" (v.17) determination.

Scene Two: Naomi & Ruth (2:18-23)

2:18 "mother-in-law" Naomi is named by her relationship to Ruth, subtly reminding us that Ruth and Naomi are not blood relatives, and keeping all the characters unnamed in this scene until Boaz' name appears at the end of v.19.

"**she... gave [Naomi] what was left over after she herself had been satisfied**" even without using the newly gleaned provisions both women are "satisfied".

2:19 "Blessed be the man" Naomi blesses Boaz before she discovers the identity of Ruth's benefactor.

2:20 The Hebrew is ambiguous. The phrase "**whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead**" could be a reference to God or to Boaz. That there should be uncertainty is typical of our author's thought, humans are or have become like their God.

2:21 Ruth quotes Boaz. When one character quotes another small differences are often significant.

2:22 Naomi now approves, almost repeating part of what Ruth has said, but with a small change.