

The Book of Ruth

Chapter 3

This scene brings the **tension** of the story to its climax. In what follows we have simply the working out of the resolution:

- in the first scene the problem was posed,
- in the second a possible solution was presented,
- but here all is at **risk**.

The scene is also dominated by the **motif of secrecy**.

In the other scenes there are **other actors** on stage: the women of Bethlehem, Boaz' servants, the elders and even "all Bethlehem". Here there are never more than two players "on stage" at once.

The **choice of words** too reinforces this sense of secrets and mystery:

- "at night" - when all is dark and one does not see clearly - 3:2 cf. 3:14;
- "do not make yourself known to the man" 3:3;
- "he will tell you what to do" 3:4;
- "she came secretly") 3:7;
- "behold, a woman... who are you?" 3:8-9;
- "Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor." 3:14.

The individuals here are presented with a **choice**. In each case the action characterises the person. Orpah is a somewhat obedient daughter-in-law much like any other, the first redeemer thinks inevitably of his own heritage before that of Elimelek. Ruth and Boaz stand out from these "ordinary" people as worthy of Naomi's confidence and therefore of God's trust and blessing. Though in many ways it is true to say that the question is only open for Boaz, for Ruth's faithfulness has been proclaimed so often it would be unthinkable to doubt her.

Though evidently Naomi has no doubts, for if she had, she would surely never have placed Ruth at risk in such a way. In 1:9 Naomi prayed for a home and a husband for Ruth and therefore she leaves the events of this night of secrets in God's hands

Act Three - The Pivot

Verse 23 of chapter 2 presented the **essential elements of the problem**: Ruth gleaning in Boaz' fields, but living with her mother-in-law. This is where the storyline has got to so far. Ruth has met Boaz, but remains without husband. Naomi has Ruth, but **no hope of a**

3:1-2 The RSV (like NIV) shows the style of the Hebrew with its two rhetorical questions both expecting a positive answer:

- "My daughter, should I not seek a home for you, that it may be well with you?"
- "Now is not Bo'az our kinsman, with whose maidens you were?"

NRSV, by contrast, smoothes the English but in doing so disguises the form of the original.

Cf. 2:8-9 where Boaz addressed two rhetorical questions, also expecting the answer yes, to Ruth. There he, also, called her "**My daughter**". This echo, and their similar style, reminds us that Boaz is of Naomi's generation, old enough to be Ruth's father.

It seems unlikely that Boaz would really be working at **night**, rather one winnowed using the evening breezes, and in fact *halaylah* (the word rendered "at night") can be translated "evening" (cf. Josh 2:2).

3:3-4 "Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your...":

the *kethib* reads singular = "**coat**", while

the *qere* gives the plural form = "**best clothes**"

the versions are divided: LXX gives plural the others singular.

In any case it is clear that Ruth is to doll herself up for an important meeting. Note the use of perfume, which we can be sure was absent in the harvest fields!

When she is properly prepared Ruth is to "*go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down*". Ruth is not, this time, to approach Boaz in public but to wait. Wait also till, having eaten and drunk in celebration of the harvest, he is in a good mood.

At this point Naomi trusts Boaz to know what to do to ensure that the story has a happy ending: "**he will tell you what to do.**" The telling here is thoroughly ambiguous:

● does Naomi expect Boaz to offer marriage,

● or does she confine her hopes to the giving of a child, a successor to Elimelek, Mahlon and Chilion?

Neither we readers, nor more importantly Ruth, are told!

The very choice of words makes the Hebrew reader well aware of this:

● "**know**" with its possible overtones of "carnal knowledge";

● "**lie**" cf. Gen 19:32,33,35; 2 Sam 13:11; and many other cases where it is the man who "lies with" the woman;

● "**go**" (which is literally "go in" or "enter") cf. Judg 15:1; 16:1; Gen 6:4; 16:2; 30:3; 38:8-9; 39:14 etc.;

● "**uncover**" cf. Lev 18:6-19; 20:11-21; Ez 22:10

● and even "**foot**" as this word is sometimes used as a euphemism Ex 4:25; Judg 3:24; 1 Sam 24:4; 2 Kgs 18:27 = Is 36:12; 6:2?; 7:20 to refer to the male sexual organ.

However, despite this multiplication of words which **might** carry sexual innuendo, here they do not have such a sense overtly:

● Ruth not only does not "know" Boaz, she is told not to "make herself known to" the man

● she is to notice where "he lies", will even "enter" there, but she is not told to, nor is she described as, lying "with" him cf. Gen 19:32; 2 Sam 13:11,

● similarly she is not told to "uncover his nakedness" (the phrase where sexual activity is in view) but his "feet" (and the word is dual, "a pair of feet" - bizarre if the word is understood euphemistically).

All in all, it is clear that the sexual sense **possible** within the words which are used is not intended to convey this meaning, but equally the author has chosen a remarkable conglomeration of such words. Sexual overtones echo in the ears of the hearer, but never on the surface of the text. Thus the text underlines the risks inherent in the situation Naomi proposes. Boaz and the young woman, Ruth, will be alone together for the night. If they do not act with **integrity and faithfulness**, though the required baby may be born Ruth will be unmarried and the story broken.

If she obeys Naomi, Ruth will put her future on the line, betting on Boaz' integrity.

3:5 The transition between the introduction which sets the scene in vv.1-4 and the action of the chapter is made in verses 5 & 6 here Ruth tells Naomi (and us) that she will follow the plan: "**All that you tell me I will do**". The narrator will effectively repeat this in v.6 introducing the new scene.

3:6 The situation having been set up (using highly ambiguous language), and Ruth's obedience promised, the narrator now confirms this: [she] "**did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her**." In her obedience Ruth acts "**stealthily**", the word is appropriate, used elsewhere usually for murky deeds (Jdg 4:21; 1 Sam 18:22) and magic arts (Ex 7:22; 8:3, 14). Motifs of darkness and secrecy run through this chapter adding to its ambiguous effect!

3:7 After eating and drinking "[Boaz] **was in a contented mood**", we should not over-read and assume that Boaz is drunk, merely contented and happy with the warm glow of harvest and a good feast. Ruth now does as she was told, we receive a third confirmation. First she promised, then the narrator told us and now her actions are recounted.

3:8 "**The man was startled**" which is hardly surprising, he went to bed alone and now ... a woman at his feet!

3:9 The question "**Who are you?**" is not strange in these circumstances, but note how it recurs at v.16.

3:10 According to Boaz, "**this instance of [Ruth's] loyalty is better**" than before, because she has "**not gone after**" any of the young men, "**whether poor or rich**" but rather with him. Note that he assumes she is sufficiently attractive that both rich and poor would gladly have sought her (even though she is a barren widow).

3:11 "**Don't be afraid**" in such circumstances, with her whole future in his hands, Ruth will naturally tend to be apprehensive! He reassures her, she is not about to lose honour or future.

"**I will do for you all that you ask**" cf. v.5 where Ruth said "**All that you say I will do**." (Boaz' phrase is, in Hebrew, an expanded version of Ruth's) between these two phrases Naomi's plan has been realised, and her prayer of 1:9 is now answered.

"**you are a woman of worth**" cf. 2:1 (and Prov 31:10ff.) these two are 'made for each other' it is a 'marriage made in heaven'. Note how, in the circumstances, if either of them had not been worthy of Naomi's confidence all would have been ruined, and if someone finds them together this night disaster could still strike.

3:12 "**another kinsman more closely related**" just as it seems that all is set up for a happy ending, the solution is once more in jeopardy.

3:13 "**I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning**" Ruth can trust both the Lord and Boaz, therefore she can sleep in peace. Naomi, at home, has left the affair in the hands of Boaz, Ruth and the Lord. So, whether she does so or not, she also can sleep in peace, since all three are worthy of her trust.

3:14 "**if he will act as next-of-kin for you**" by this phrase Boaz introduces the possibility that the other *Go'el* might not act, thus opening the possibility again of a "happy ending". In terms of plot construction this is interesting. The complication is introduced and its solution mentioned as a possibility by the **same** words. The "other *Go'el*" may act - Boaz and Ruth

will not marry - he may not act - they will marry. Ruth and we, hearers of the story, have just been told by Boaz that he "will act". What is tested here is not Ruth, or our, belief in Boaz, but rather in God's providence. For Boaz' and Ruth are made for each other!

3:16 "How did things go with you, my daughter?" literally 'Who are you, my daughter?' already the early versions recognised the difficulty with this expression and tried to smooth it - as NRSV does. One hardly greets someone as "my daughter" yet at the same time asks "Who are you?". Am 7:2,5 give some support to NRSV's translation. (Cf. 2QRuth^b which already read "what" in place of "who".)

Why does Boaz become "**the man**" here? He has already been fully identified to the characters as well as to us by this point.

3:17 "You must not go back... empty-handed" at 1:21 we noticed the thematic importance there of the word "empty", here it forms a kind of reminder and contrast. Ruth here returns "not empty" because Boaz has made her a promise rather than because of the barley (though six measures was no mean quantity!), for Boaz word is worth as much as the action.

3:18 As Naomi now confirms to Ruth and to the reader: "**Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.**" The words "*how the matter turns out*" makes no mention of God's providence, indeed by its formulation it seems to exclude divine care. However we have already met such a phrase in 2:3. Here too the underlying assumption of the author is clear, there are no accidents with God. All that happens is his doing.

As at 2:23 the word "**wait**" (literally 'sit' or 'live') introduces a pause in the telling, and thus the narrator signals the intermission between acts