

The Book of Ruth

Chapter 4

At the Town Gate 4:1-12

4:1 The change in point of view in this act is quite marked. On the surface, for the first time in the book, the attention is focused on men and their doings.

Even the **grammar** of the first sentence in Hebrew reinforces the sense of change. We have had a series of sentences predominantly with the most usual order Verb - Subject - Object, the verbs have been in the form which is normal for narrative ("*wayyiqtol*") now we have a sentence in the unusual form Subject - Verb - Object and therefore the verb is in the simpler but less usual form ("*qatal*"). Such changes often signal a changed point of view.

There is also a **discontinuity** between the *sjuzet* (telling) and the *fabula* (the events told about). In the telling Boaz activity at the gate follows directly on Ruth and Naomi's conversation at the end of Chapter 3. However it is possible that "really" the two events happen at the same time, or alternatively that Boaz' activity is noticeably later.

"**friend**" the expression used here by Boaz suggests that he is anonymous or unknown. He is "Mr So-and-so". Of course Boaz must have known him, for he knew he was a closer *go'el*. The expression used underlines his anonymity. If the narrator simply didn't know the name he could have phrased it differently: *Boaz said to him "...:*

- that Boaz didn't know is unthinkable;
- perhaps the narrator doesn't want to offend his descendants? In that case why underline his role, not least by this expression *peloni 'almoni* (Mr So-and-so)?
- perhaps there is a clue in the way the man acts. Like any prudent paterfamilias he protects his heritage, perhaps he is so strongly anonymous because he represents Mr Everybody?
- also note that Boaz avoids the term *go'el*, for he doesn't wish the man to act the *go'el*, the narrator by contrast does call him the *go'el*.

4:2 "elders of the city" in the Pentateuch the "elders of Israel" appear as an authoritative group, this was so for other communities too (cf. Num 22:11), Boaz makes this conversation formal and "official".

4:3 "our kinsman Elim'elech" literally "our brother" rightly for a western audience translated "kinsman" for there is no suggestion that they have the same father or mother (cf. 2 Sam 1:26; Am 1:9; Lev 25).

"**Naomi... is selling**" - How does Boaz know this? The narrator has not told us, indeed we do not know that Boaz knows this, he may be speaking an untruth - such uncertainty is typical of the "gapping" of biblical storytelling.

4:4 "So I thought I" Subject - Verb - Object, with the subject stressed by being mentioned separately as at v.1 marks a change in point of view.

4:5 "acquiring Ruth the Moabite" cf. vv. 3,4 "sell" of the field, though the verb has a somewhat more general sense of "acquire" and certainly there is no sense of paying a dowry or bride-price here. Cf. Ex 15:13,16 "the people you have redeemed" and "the people you have bought".

4:7 "in former times" the expression is used in Jgs 3:2; Neh 13:5; Job 42:11 (Jos 11:10?) and clearly means more than a generation:

- in 1 Chr 9:20 it refers to 700 years,
- while in Ps 102:25 it is translated "long ago" and refers to creation (NIV even renders it "in the beginning" there!).

The narrator has dramatically broken the frame of the story and admitted the gap between the time of telling and the time of the events. Is this merely unavoidable because we need the "footnote" clarification, or is it a preparation for the ending where we will hear the genealogy of the Messiah?

4:8 "he took off his sandal" this is the phrase that made the explanation of v.7 necessary. Therefore either:

- the action itself is important in some way to the story - perhaps because "taking off the sandal" is intended to convey another meaning as well (Dt 25:9) or possibly in this case to avoid conveying that other message!
- this action was part of the received "story of Ruth" which the author could not omit, any more than we can omit the porridge from Goldilocks, but it needed explaining for his hearers.

4:9 Notice how Boaz' speech is nicely rounded off by the reversal v.9 "**elders - all the people...**" v.11 "**all the people - elders**". And how their reply repeats his first word (in Hebrew), "**witnesses**".

4:11 "like Rachel and Leah" note the reversal for Leah was the elder, and the first wife. Ruth reflects Rachel, she is preferred, infertile (but just wait). The reversal of precedence contributes to our sense of reversal in this passage.

"**produce children**" in Hebrew "do *chayil*" cf. 2:1; 3:11 usually means 'be victorious', here but here "do *chayil*" means be fertile cf. Joel 2:22; Job 21:7,8 (Pr 31:3?).

4:1-12 : Boaz Organises Things

Chapter 2 moves slowly and formally in the fields, chapter 3 takes place in secret in darkness, here things move fast for Boaz is used to getting things done (3:18). Indeed at last it looks as if all is being wrapped up. Except that we are still at the level of blessing and not yet of accomplished fact (v.12).

Scene Two - Birth and naming of Obed 4:13-17

4:13 As we have seen things now move very **fast**. In contrast to the childless, ten-year, marriage with Mahlon, here in 13 words we move from marriage to child, compare also 2 Sam 11:26b-27. There too a couple marry and a son is born, there as here words are not wasted (18 in v.27 which tells the same facts), but aside from the fact that both are in the lineage of the Kings of Judah what a difference in the rest of the story!

4:14 "may his name be renowned in Israel" to whom does this refer (cf. 2:20)? Is it:

- Boaz,
- the "son" or
- the Lord

whose name is to be renowned?

4:16 "became his nurse" this is not what the text probably means, though it is a natural translation and perhaps the easiest, yet
● a male version of the phrase exists!
● and Naomi is too old cf. 1:12;
better read "**took care of his upbringing**".

4:17 "named him" (literally "called to him a name") cf. 4:11,17 where also "a name" is proclaimed, cf. v. 17b "**They called him Obed**" (NRSV also "named him" obscures this slight difference) is the more usual formula. "Proclaim a name" often has the sense of celebrate Dt 32:3; Jer 44:26; Ps 99:6; cf. Gen 4:26.

4:13-17: Conclusion

Here the women speak, and **only the women speak**. By contrast with 1:19-21 where they only say two words (contrast Naomi's quite lengthy complaint), here they speak at length.

Naomi's complaint fitted with those of other righteous sufferers Elijah, Job, Jeremiah who complain to God of his injustice and of his seeming to be "against" them. God never justifies himself, but in each case the complainant is given a new task (1 Kgs 19:1+14 cf. 19:15-18; Jer 15:10-18 cf. 15:19-21 for Job in a sense the task is the whole book and it begins before his complaints cf. 42:8+10).

Ruth is worth seven (perfect number) of sons, and note the importance of sons in this story! Although in some sense it is a "love story", Ruth is also the only subject of the verb "to love" in the story (v.15).

Coda (4:18-22)

"Now these are the descendants of" this is a phrase typical of the genealogies found in the Pentateuch (usually ascribed to the "P"strand) and in Chronicles.

The genealogies here and in 1 Chr 2:3-15; Mt 1:3-6 and Lc 3:31-33 are confusing and do not easily form a synopsis. The genealogy in Ruth is rather like Chronicles in its contents - though with some spelling differences. However, the style - running direct without following other lines - is more like the genealogies of the "P" strand of the Pentateuch.

Note that Matthew preserves three women in the list of the Messiah's ancestry: Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. Putting Ruth thus with and between a prostitute and an adulterer is hardly flattering, yet from such company comes the Messiah, king of Judah, and the Messiah, saviour of the world! The LORD does not demand moral perfection in his servants (Rahab), even uses sinners (Bathsheba and David). Among those he uses, some, a few, are saints who manage to reflect some of his qualities (Ruth and Boaz).