

3. AT THE THRESHING FLOOR

RUTH 3:1-18

¹Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you.

²Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley at the threshing floor this very night.

³Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.

⁴When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do."

⁵She said to her, "All that you tell me I will do."

Chapter 3 is a masterpiece of story-telling. In verses 1-5 Naomi sets up a plan to establish some 'security' (verse 1) for her daughter-in-law Ruth, a young widow who has left everything to follow Naomi. Two elements of customary law are involved. One is the role of the 'redeemer', and the other is the obligations that arise from levirate law. Without considering these we could draw the wrong conclusion that Naomi was hatching a plot to get Ruth to seduce Boaz in order to find a husband. Let us look at these two customs in turn.

In his commentary on the Book of Ruth in the Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday, 1975, page 135), Edward F. Campbell summarises the areas of responsibility of 'kinsman' who are obliged to act as a 'redeemer' [gō'ēl].

Redeeming in attested law pertains to the responsibility for recovering or retaining family property (Leviticus 25:25; 27:9-33); buying release of a kinsman from voluntary servitude entered into because of poverty (Leviticus 25:47-55); receiving restitution (in a curious act of penitence described in Numbers 5:8); and acting the part of "the redeemer of the blood", the kinsman who avenges a murder ... (Numbers 35:9-28; Deuteronomy 19:6-13; Joshua 20:2-9).

Boaz was introduced as a kinsman of Naomi's husband (2:1), and as one of Naomi's and Ruth's 'nearest kin' (2:20, 'redeemers'). As part of the 'family' they have every right to call on Boaz to carry out his obligation to see that they are not destitute.

In commenting on 1:13-15 we noted a hint at a complicated custom (called 'levirate' from the Latin 'levir', 'one's husband's brother'), whereby a male was obliged to take as his wife a woman left childless by his brother, so that his brother would not be left without a child (see Genesis 38; Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Boaz is not Naomi's husband's brother, but as one of her 'nearest kin' she could call on him to ensure that the family continued through her. Because of her age (see 1:12), the only way this could happen was via Ruth.

It is already clear to her that Boaz is a righteous and generous man. She is hoping that he may be attracted to go beyond the strict requirements of customary law and exercise the role of 'redeemer' by marrying Ruth.

While, for the reasons given on the previous page, this is not presented as a seduction scene, it is clear that Ruth is seeking a marriage commitment from Boaz. It is an intimate scene and it takes place in the dark. The word ‘feet’ in the expression ‘uncover his feet’ (verses 4 and 7; the same word is translated ‘beside’ in verses 8 and 14) is meant to leave the reader uncertain as to how much Ruth actually uncovered. ‘Feet’ can be used as a euphemism for genitals (see Ezekiel 16:25, where a harlot is accused of offering her ‘feet’ to every passer-by).

To spread one’s cloak (knp) over someone (verse 9) also has sexual connotations (see Ezekiel 16:8). Note, the same word, knp, translated ‘wings’, was used by Boaz when he spoke of Ruth seeking refuge under the ‘wings’ of the God of Israel (see 2:12).

The expression ‘lie down’ [נָשָׁא] which occurs eight times in verses 4-14 can also suggest sexual intercourse, as can the verb ‘to know’ which recurs with different connotations throughout the scene (see especially verse 3). The same can be said of ‘go into’ (verses 3, 4, 7 and 14; see, later 4:13).

The author has set up the scene in order to highlight the virtue of both Ruth and Boaz. Boaz praises Ruth for her action (verse 10). He understands this as one more indication of her care of Naomi, and of her care in seeking a husband from a kinsman (and not any of the young men around the place).

He himself acts with complete propriety. He permits her to ‘lodge’ there for the night (a word with no sexual connotations). He promises to carry out his obligations towards her, but does not take advantage of her. He knows of a kinsman who is a closer relative, and he will marry Ruth only if this other man declines.

6So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her.

7When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came stealthily and uncovered his feet, and lay down.

8In the middle of the night the man was startled, and turned over, and there, lying beside him, was a woman! **9**He said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.”

10He said, “May you be blessed by YHWH, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.

11And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman.

12But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I.

13Lodge here this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do it. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as YHWH lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.”

14So she lay beside him until morning, but got up before one person could recognize another; for he said, “It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.”

Wait for the decision

¹⁵Then he said, "Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out." So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her back; then he went into the city.

¹⁶She came to her mother-in-law, who said, "How did things go with you, my daughter?" Then she told her all that the man had done for her, ¹⁷saying, "He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, 'Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'"

¹⁸She replied, "Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today."

Once again we witness the generosity of Boaz. He sets about resolving the matter immediately.