

Ruth – the fruit of obedience

Introduction.

We live in an age where the very notion of meaning is questioned. Life and personal effort are considered as meaningless and therefore it matters not a great deal how you live your life, as long as you achieve a personal sense of well being.

'Living in the modern world is more like being aboard a careering juggernaut rather than being in a carefully controlled and well driven motor car.'

Anthony Giddens 'The Consequences of Modernity' P53

Though this may be the understanding of life held by many people but it is certainly not a Biblical or Judeo-Christian view of life. The theologian, Leslie Newbigin expresses the human need for meaning in life this way.

'The human spirit cannot live permanently with the form of rationality which has no answer to the question "why?'. 'Lesslie Newbigin

The way you live your life does matter. The story of Ruth is a very good example of this. If the most effective teaching is by example, this book can teach us much about how to live:

The religious truths found in this book relate more to practical life than to abstract theology. Loyalty, love, kindness, the value of persons, and the need to understand one another stand out. In the midst of the chaos then in the land, meaning could be found by returning to the first principles of simple truth. The book of Ruth tells us that no matter how bad things may be, goodness can exist, if we are willing to make the effort.

The Story of Ruth

Ruth can be read as a drama in four acts, with a prologue and epilogue attached. The prologue tells us how Naomi, her husband and two sons went to Moab, where her sons married. Eventually, Naomi's husband and sons died, and she decided to return to Bethlehem in Judea (1:1-7).

In the first act, Naomi tells her Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, to stay in Moab. Orpah eventually agreed, but Ruth refused to leave Naomi and accompanied her to Bethlehem (1:8-22). The next act sees Ruth gathering barley in the fields of Naomi's relative, Boaz, who showed special concern for Ruth (2:1-23).

The third act takes place at the threshing floor where, at Naomi's instigation, Ruth hides until Boaz falls asleep and then quietly lies down by his feet. When Boaz awakes, Ruth expresses her desire to marry him according to the custom of the kinsman-redeemer. But Boaz tells her that another man has a prior claim (3:1-18). Finally, at the city gate, the other relative renounces his claim, and Boaz marries Ruth (4:1-12). The epilogue relates Naomi's joy at this turn of events and then lists some of Ruth's descendants, including David (4:13-18).

How to read this book

In stark contrast to Judges, the book of Ruth shows us a community that did what was right in God's eyes. It is "the story of God's grace in the midst of difficult circumstances. Ruth's story occurred during the time of the judges — a period of disobedience, idolatry, and violence. Even in times of crisis and deepest despair, there are those who follow God and through whom God works. No matter how discouraging or antagonistic the world may seem, there are always people who follow God. He will use anyone who is open to him to

achieve his purposes"

(Life Application Bible, NIV, Introduction to Ruth).

THE CHIASTIC (CROSSING) STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF RUTH

As is often true in literature, the structure of the piece sometimes reveals the purpose of the writer. This is certainly the case in the Book of Ruth. The writer constructed the whole book with a chiasmic (crossing) structure.¹¹

The pivotal point at the centre of the writer's emphasis is the plan laid by Naomi and Ruth to obtain rest (3:1-8).

A Naomi too old to conceive (ch. 1)

B The possible redeemer introduced (2:1)

C Ruth and Naomi's plan begins (2:2)

D Ruth and Boaz's field (2:3)

E Boaz comes from Bethlehem (2:4)

F Boaz asks "Who's is that young woman?" (2:5-7)

G Boaz provides food for Ruth and she brings one ephah of barley to Naomi (2:8-18)

H Naomi blesses Boaz (2:19)

I Boaz is the one in position to redeem (2:20)

J Ruth joins Boaz's workers (2:21- 23)

K *Naomi and Ruth's plan to obtain rest (3:1-8)*

J' Ruth requests Boaz's protection (3:9)

I' Ruth asks Boaz to act as redeemer (3:9)

H' Boaz blesses Ruth (3:10)

G' Boaz promises to marry Ruth. She brings six measures barley to Naomi (3:11-15)

F' Naomi asks, "How did it go?" (3:16-18)

E' Boaz goes to Bethlehem (4:1)

D' Ruth and a field (4:2-12)

C' Ruth and Naomi's plan ends (4:3)

B' The redeemer not denied (4:14-16)

A' Naomi receives a son (4:17)

"What benefit does the definition of plot structure afford the interpreter of the text? Once the reader discovers the type of structure(s) of the narrative, and the locus of the defining element(s) in those structures, then he can more accurately reflect on the dynamic movement (or development) of the narrative from one level to the next and then to its climax and denouement. This kind of literary analysis offers several practical benefits to the interpreter:

- (1) It reinforces and adds dimension to correct exegesis.
- (2) It highlights the artistry of the writer, and thereby the audience's appreciation for the aesthetic beauty of God's inspired text.
- (3) It prevents the interpreter's placing an improper emphasis on what may be only incidental to the development of the author's message.
- (4) It exalts the Lord by showing that He is the Master of history.
- (5) Once the structure is discovered and is shown to be theologically consonant with the rest of Scripture, that structure becomes a source of truth in and of itself. That is to say, the reader can discover truth not only through structure, but also in structure."¹²

The opening verse of the book reminds us of the leadership vacuum in Israel during the judges period (**cf. Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25**). The closing verse reveals God's provision of the greatest leader that Israel had since that time. Therefore the book seems concerned with showing how God provided for His people, especially for their leadership need.

"In contrast to the Book of Judges, where the nation of Israel as a whole and most of the characters are portrayed as thoroughly Canaanized in heart and mind and deed, this story describes an oasis in an ethical wasteland."¹³

Chapter 1 itself contains a chiasmic structure that reveals the main point of this part of the story.

- A** Famine (v. 1)
- B** Emigration from Bethlehem (v. 1)
- C** Naomi = pleasant (v. 2-5)
- D** Leaving Moab for Bethlehem (vv. 6-7)
- E** Naomi's speech (v. 8)
- F** Naomi kisses Orpah and Ruth good-bye (v. 9)
- G** All weep loudly (v. 9)
 - H** *Naomi's inability to conceive* (vv. 11-13)
- G'** All weep loudly (v. 14)
- F'** Orpah kisses Naomi good-bye (vv. 14-15)
- E'** Ruth's speech (vv. 16-18)
- D'** Entering Bethlehem from Moab (v. 19)
- C'** Naomi = pleasant (v. 2-5)
- B'** Immigration to Bethlehem (v. 22)
- A'** Barley harvest (v. 22)

The whole chapter centres on the fact that Naomi was too old to conceive.¹⁴

Our Kinsman Redeemer **Leviticus 25:25 / Ruth 1-4**

The "nearest kinsman" or "kinsman redeemer" is a *Goel*.

The word means to redeem, receive or buy back.

Provision was made in the Law of Moses for the poor person who was forced to sell part of his property or himself into slavery. His nearest of kin could step in and "buy back" what his relative was forced to sell (**Leviticus 25:48f**). The kinsman redeemer was a rich benefactor, or person who frees the debtor by paying the ransom price. "If a fellow countryman of yours becomes so poor he has to sell part of his property, then his nearest kinsman is to come and buy back what his relative has sold" (**Leviticus 25:25; cf. Ruth 4:4, 6**).

The nearest of kin had the responsibility of redeeming his kinsman's lost opportunities. If a person was forced into slavery, his redeemer purchased his freedom. When debt threatened to overwhelm him, the kinsman stepped in to redeem his homestead and let the family live. If a family member died without an heir the kinsman gave his name by marrying the widow and rearing a son to hand down his name (**Deuteronomy 25:5; Genesis 38:8; Ruth 3-4**). When death came at the hands of another man the redeemer acted as the avenger of blood and pursued the killer (**Numbers 35:12-34; Deuteronomy 19:1-3**).

Goel was used of things consecrated to God (**Leviticus 27:13–31**), of God as redeeming man (**Exodus 6:6; Isaiah 43:1; 44:22; 48:20; 49:7**), and those redeemed by God (**Isaiah 35:9; 51:10; Job 19:25**). The right of redemption and the office belonged to the

nearest kinsman, or "near of kin, near relative" (**Leviticus 25:25; Ruth 3:12; 4:1, 6, 8**, etc.). Yahweh is the great Kinsman of His people. When their liberty was lost in Egypt, He rescued them from bondage. "I am the LORD . . . I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments" (**Exodus 6:6**).

The ancient patriarch Job complained that no one came to redeem him! His faith is seen reaching out and proclaiming that Yahweh will provide His *Goel*! "As for me, I know that my redeemer (kinsman) lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth" (**Job 19:25**). Job's hope looked to the coming Messiah. He affirmed his faith that his redeemer will come to the earth.

One of the most beautiful passages where the word *Goel* is found is in the life of Naomi in the book of Ruth. The book of Ruth is a story about Naomi's *Goel*. Naomi was the poorest person in Israel, but her kinsman was the richest man in Israel. Because of the death of her husband and two sons, she and her daughter-in-laws lost all income and their homestead. Naomi was living in a foreign land and sensed the loss of her homeland and relatives. She became bitter. The secret of all her daughter-in-law Ruth had was in union with Boaz. The nearer kinsman had the first right to the property and Boaz came next after him. If Ruth's closer relative would not redeem or purchase it, Boaz was prepared to do so. The man who was nearest of kin agreed to redeem the piece of land until he found out there was a young widow involved. He graciously backed out! That left Boaz as the rightful nearest of kin who had the privilege of redeeming her land and her with it. The Moabitess and the Jew became one. Boaz was nearest of kin to her deceased husband (**Ruth 2:1**). He was able to redeem by paying the price of redemption (**Ruth 2:1**), and he was willing to redeem the land (**Ruth 4:4**). That is what makes this epic so beautiful.

Four things were required in order for a kinsman to redeem:

- He must be near of kin. (**Leviticus 25:48; 25:25 Ruth 3:12–13**)
- He must be able to redeem (**Ruth 4:4–6**). He must be free of any calamity or need of redemption himself.
- He must be willing to redeem (**Ruth 4:6ff**)
- Redemption was completed when the price was completely paid (**Leviticus 25:27; Ruth 4:7-11**).

Jesus the Messiah is my *Goel*.

- ***Jesus is my nearest kinsman through the incarnation.*** "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh" (**Romans 8:3**). He was like us in every way except that He never experienced sin. "Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (**Hebrews 2:17**). In order to identify Himself with us He "emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men" (**Philippians 2:7**). "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin" (**Hebrews 4:15**). "Jesus you are my kinsman redeemer. You had the right to redeem me." Thank God, He has the right to redeem all that I have lost.
- ***Jesus has the power to redeem me.*** "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you

through His poverty might become rich" (**2 Corinthians 8:9**). He assumed our debt and paid it with His life. Cf. **Hebrews 1:2–3**).

- ***Jesus is willing to redeem me.*** Jesus Christ "gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds" (**Titus 2:14; cf. 1 John 1:7; 2:2; Hebrews 10:12; 4:16; 2:17**). Jesus said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (**Mark 10:45**). Jesus is referring to His voluntary, sacrificial, vicarious, and obedient payment to effect the release of slaves or captives from bondage. "For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father" (**John 10:17-18**).
- ***Jesus has paid the price in full and I have received my redemption.*** "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The invitation is still open. Jesus is the sinner's nearest kinsman. It is our responsibility to lie at the feet of our *Goel*, and say, "Cover me with your blood and grace" (cf. Ruth 3:9). "For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day" (2 Timothy 1:12). Our redemption is precious. Our salvation has been purchased at a great and personal cost because the Lord Jesus gave Himself for our sins in order to deliver us from them. Our forgiveness is based on the ransom price of the shed blood of Jesus Christ. "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us" (Ephesians 1:7). The redemption work of Jesus Christ delivers believers from the slavery to sin. The means of redemption is the substitutionary death of Christ as a sacrifice for our sin. It is "through His blood" which is the ransom payment (cf. Eph. 2:13; 1 Peter 1:18-19). Only the death of Christ completely satisfied God's justice (Rom. 3:24-25).

Go back to ancient Israel in the time of the Judges. Can't you see Naomi holding her grandson in her arms? Her neighbours said, "A son has been born to Naomi!" They named him Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of King David (4:17), of the lineage of the Messiah, Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:5). God had redeemed her.

The words of Naomi's friends are a fitting reminder of God's grace in our lives. "Blessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer (or closest relative) today, and may his name become famous in Israel" (Ruth 4:14).