

Ruth 4:1-22; Luke 1:46-55

Today we read the final chapter of the Book of Ruth. It's a chapter of victory, triumph and redemption on many levels. Life is transformed – definitely for Ruth and Boaz as they have a son, for Ruth as she's now married, for Naomi as she's got people to look after her, for the late Elimelech whose line continues, for Israel as Obed's grandson will become the great King David and eventually for us as Jesus is a direct descendant of this same line. Transformation has been accomplished and healing of the world has begun.

It all happened because God willed it but also because characters in the story were willing to cooperate with God's higher purposes (whether they understood them at the time as such or not) and came up with initiatives of their own.

What were those initiatives in this chapter? It all begins with Boaz arranging a meeting with the other guardian-redeemer who's closer to Naomi. We're puzzled right from the start as Boaz mentions a field we've never heard of before. Did Naomi know about it? Was she in fact selling it? That would be unprecedented as only men could sell and buy property. Or was it actually a field that they had lost through debt but according to the laws of redemption could have been bought back if the family themselves or a guardian redeemer could afford it?

The last possibility seems most viable. In any case the offer made by Boaz flushes out the fact that the other guardian redeemer has the means to help Naomi but he hadn't done this so far. He hadn't come to their help. Now he's keen to get a field as a way of investment but when he hears that a condition of that would be to marry Ruth and produce an heir for Mahlon, he refuses. It wouldn't be a good business opportunity as the field would have to go to the offspring he would have from Ruth – and not to his own family. It might be that he took the prohibition to marry Moabites to heart and didn't fancy lowering his status by marrying a despised foreigner either. None of this, none of what we know of the man, endears the readers to him – it hasn't endeared him to the author of the book either. We never learn his name – as he refused to help his kin, his name was erased from the annals of history.

In the Bible in general names or lack of them is telling. In the Book of Ruth all names have a meaning. Noam Zion in his Megillat Ruth paper which I quoted from before (it turned out to be a veritable fountain of knowledge about the Book of Ruth we're studying!) suggests an interesting retelling of the story using the meaning of the names of the characters. They are lost on us as we read our English Bibles and don't speak Hebrew but they bring an interpretation with them which is crucial to deepening our understanding. Nowadays one could probably retell this story using emojis too, smileys used in electronic messages and web pages. As you would have to see it to understand it though, we'll use the old-fashioned spoken words to retell Ruth's story.

Some of the names we mentioned before: Elimelech means My God is King, Naomi means the Pleasant One, the village of Bethlehem where they come from is the House of

Bread, the name of the people Judah means Confessor and the family move to Moab which means From Father or Of His Father. Let's listen to this retelling.

“Once many years ago, famine drove My-God-is-King and Pleasant- One from House-of-Bread in the land of Judah/Confessor to the land of Moav/From-Father. There My-God-is-King died. His two sons Disease and Destruction married local women, but after a while the sons also died, leaving only Pleasant-One and her two daughters-in-law.

When they heard that there was bread in the House-of-Bread, they set out to return. On the way, Pleasant-One released her two daughters-in-law and sent them back to their mother's houses to begin new lives and find rest with new husbands.

Back-of-neck tearfully turned and left, but Friendly /Dewy stayed with her mother-in-law, now no longer Pleasant-One but Bitter-Woman, for God had killed her men.

In House-of-Bread they encountered their redeemer He-who-has-Strength-Within. First, God, then Pleasant-One, then Dewy/Friendly, and then He-who-has-Strength-Within planned to bring them all together. Finally He-who-has-Strength-Within married Dewy/Friendly and from this union came He-who-Serves, the grandfather of Beloved.”¹

Obed of course means Servant and the Beloved is King David – David means Beloved or Friend in Hebrew. He was beloved of the Lord indeed as his line ruled in Israel for over 400 years.

Noam Zion points out another important truth. He writes: ‘Yair Zakovitz adds that the Book of Ruth placed in the era of the Judges and located in the Septuagint between the Book of Judges and the Book of Samuel is designed to polemicize against the legitimacy of Saul's dynasty and in favor of David's. For the Book of Judges ends with the story of rape in Givah – the capital of Saul who is from the tribe of Benjamin that perpetrated the gang rape that almost led to the tribe's destruction. The tribe sinned by its Sodom-like perversions of hospitality toward brother Jews.

However David is descended from Ruth, Naomi and Boaz from Bethlehem in Judah where law is upheld, not trampled under foot, where hesed - aid to the stranger and widow is practiced, and where Boaz protects vulnerable women from predatory young men. Elimelech = "My God is King" is a forerunner of David, the true king.’²

And it's not just ordinary aid that's been displayed either. Orpah, the daughter-in-law who turned away to go back to her own people, and the nameless man who refused to look after Naomi and Ruth are examples of ordinary kindness and generosity that doesn't extend to greater lengths than it needs to. They're not essentially bad people – just ordinary. While Ruth and Boaz display hesed in Hebrew or agape in Greek – the deep

¹ Megillat RUTH: Hesed and Hutzpah. A Literary Approach, Study Guide by Noam Zion, p. 81 (http://www.lookstein.org/resources/ruth_literary.pdf).

² Ibid, p. 85.

love of God and human beings. The love that goes the extra mile, the love that always seeks to do more to help another in need.

The women around Naomi are in awe of this love Ruth displayed. They say: ‘your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons’. That’s of course said at the time when sons were valued more than daughters as they were the ones who could provide for you. But the women see the hesed love Ruth had for her mother-in-law and surprisingly praise her as better than seven sons (seven being the number of perfection).

What can we then take away from the Book of Ruth? First of all, love trumps all. Not the erotic love, not the romantic love – but the hesed love, the agape love which is a deep love for God and for his creation. That love that goes the extra mile to help and show kindness to another and that doesn’t ask for anything in return. That self-sacrificial love that seeks the wellbeing of another.

Secondly, God has plans for us and for the world but we need to work with him. We need to act on what’s in our hearts and seize opportunities that God places before us. We’re in a special partnership with the Creator of the world.

Lastly, God can and does work healing and transformation through the direst of circumstances. We might not be able to see it immediately but God’s plans and thoughts are good for his creation. His love for us is unmatched by anything we can ever feel or show. When we grasp that, we can repeat with Mary: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour’. Amen.