



Seasons of Hope: Home Study Module - Spring 2021

The Book of Ruth: Hope in Hard Times

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The Book of Ruth is a book for all times, not just for hard times. It richly merits reading and re-reading and, like all the best books, new discoveries can be made each time. The following are only three of the many reflections which the book inspires.

1. Hope after hard times

In the *NRSV* translation of the Book of Ruth, which you were sent, the first verse begins rather prosaically: "In the days when the judges ruled". But in Hebrew the first words of the Book of Ruth have the connotation of the well-known phrase "Once upon a time". Combined with the vagueness of the "days when the judges ruled" it is immediately clear that we are dealing with a story, rather than a factual account, but contrary to the romantic notions associated with "Once upon a time", this is no fairy story.

Far from being a fairy tale, in the first five verses alone we are confronted with famine, exile, fatal illness or accident, the premature death of two young men, widowhood, barrenness, and consequent destitution. The toll these successive calamities has taken is summed up vividly in Naomi's bitter complaint against God:

call me Mara,
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.
I went away full,
but the LORD has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi
when the LORD has dealt harshly with me,
and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me? (Ruth 1:20-21)

The severity of the famine which drove Naomi, her husband and their two sons from their native Bethlehem (ironically the place name means the House of Bread) is evident from their destination: exile in Moab. Moab to the Israelites was bad news, one of the last places one would want to go. The Moabites took their name from their ancestor Moab, the son born of

Lot's daughter's incestuous relationship with her father (Genesis 19:36-37). The notoriety of their origins was compounded when the Israelites, as recounted in Numbers 25, had sexual relations with the women of Moab and were enticed into worshipping the Moabite gods and "the LORD's anger was kindled against Israel." These and further transgressions by the Moabites led to their formal excommunication in Deuteronomy 23:3-4: "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, ... because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you." The "tenth generation" is effectively forever. Only utter desperation and destitution would have brought Naomi and her family to a place which was a byword for depravity and apostasy.

They may have found food in Moab but death stalked them nonetheless, as first Elimelech, and then his two sons die. The deaths of the two young men may have presaged by their names Mahlon and Chilion, which can be translated as "sickness" and "consumptive" respectively. The three men's deaths leave all three women, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah, not only grieving, but childless widows, one of the worst fates that could befall them. Susan Niditch sums up the implications for Israelite women: "In terms of long-range security in the social structure, it is more important for a woman to become her children's mother than her husband's wife. The Israelite woman might pass through various categories of protection: as a daughter she is under her father's protection; as a wife she is under her husband's; and in the event of her husband's death, as a mother she is under the care of her children." Naomi has none of these options at her disposal. For a young woman like Ruth, Niditch suggests, there are only two proper roles: "She is either an unmarried virgin in her father's home or she is a faithful, child-producing wife in her husband's or husband's family's home." It is unclear if Mahlon and Ruth were married long enough for her to be considered infertile, but opportunities for re-marriage could be slim for a potentially barren widow. It is a deeply worrying time for the widowed women.

The plight of Naomi and Ruth when they reach Bethlehem is not much better. No support seems forthcoming from friends or neighbours, and Ruth turns to gleaning to find sustenance for Naomi and herself. It cannot be claimed that Ruth was trafficked, but as a vulnerable migrant worker she is liable to suffer economic and sexual exploitation and racist discrimination. It is back-breaking toil, working long hours "on her feet from early this morning ... without resting even for a moment" (Ruth 2:7). Moreover, Ruth faces the common perilous situation which is recorded in the Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope*: "Do not pounce on a widow when you find her in the fields". Well aware of the dangers, Boaz advises Ruth for her own safety to "keep close to my young women... I have ordered the young men not to bother you" (Ruth 28-9). The desperation of her situation is evident in her hazardous visit to the threshing floor (Ruth 3:6), an unsavoury haunt especially by night, associated with thieves (1 Samuel 23:1) and prostitutes (Hosea 9:1). Ruth's suspect foreign origin seems known to many and she is branded as "the Moabite" seven times in the short

text. The potentially derogatory usage recalls the terrors of the French Revolution, when the hostile crowds referred to Marie Antoinette as “The Austrian.”

Amidst all these hard times where is the hope? By the end of the story Ruth and Boaz are married and Ruth has borne their son Obed. These two events bring considerable benefits to both Ruth and Naomi, and to Boaz as well.

- Ruth and Naomi are now enjoying the social status and financial security provided by Boaz, “a prominent rich man” (Ruth 2:1). There is the additional bonus that Naomi’s property has been retained in her possession through Boaz’ good offices.
- The stigma of childlessness has been wiped out for both Ruth and Naomi. Indeed, Obed seems to be as much Naomi’s child as Ruth: “A son has been born to Naomi” (Ruth 4:17). The local women assure Naomi, “He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age” (Ruth 4:15).
- Moreover, Naomi’s lonely state has been eradicated by the “daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons” (Ruth 4:15).
- Boaz has gained a wife who has been compared favourably with the famous matriarchs, Rachel and Leah (Ruth 4:11), and he is now the father of a dynasty (Ruth 4:21).
- A secure future for Ruth is implied by the successive generations named in the concluding genealogies. Even if Boaz, usually considered an older man, predeceases her, Ruth’s well-being will be safe in the hands of her son Obed, and his son Jesse (Ruth 4:17-22).
- Ruth, the migrant worker from despised Moab, now takes her proud place in a genealogy which leads to King David.

Most of all, as we will see below, there is a strong sense of God’s loving care. Out of an apparently hopeless situation God has granted Ruth and Naomi a happy future.

2. A person for our times

Much to my surprise it is Boaz who speaks to me in our current difficult circumstances. Is it because Boaz exhibits some of those virtues which have blossomed in response to the pandemic? He is a man with a practical, caring heart, remarkably generous, and with a shrewd ability to negotiate solutions to complicated problems, while exhibiting grace under pressure.

Boaz’ practical care for Ruth’s safety in the corn fields has already been noted. He treats her kindly, as if she were one of his own servants, instructing Ruth, “If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn” (Ruth 2:9). At mealtime he invites

her to eat and drink, ensuring that she is more than well fed: “he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over” (Ruth 2:14).

Boaz’ generosity does not end there. He goes far beyond the biblical laws which cater for the needs of the poor and the stranger. According to the tenets laid down in Leviticus 23:22 and Deuteronomy 24:19, as an alien and a poor widow, Ruth is entitled to glean, that is, to gather ears of corn left behind by the reapers, to forage at the edges of the field, and to gather any forgotten sheaves. Boaz gives her permission to glean among the sheaves, which would give her access to greater amounts of dropped grain, and contrary to usual custom instructs his men to “pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean” (Ruth 2:16). The extent of his generosity is confirmed when Ruth brings home “an ephah of barley” (Ruth 2:17), which is enough grain for several weeks’ consumption. Similar extraordinary generosity is evident at the end of chapter 3 when he gives her “six measures of barley”, which strictly speaking is too much for one person to carry, but it is an indication of Boaz’ exceptional charity.

His greatest act of generosity occurs in chapter 4 when he redeems Naomi’s “parcel of land” and arranges to marry Ruth. Under the laws of redemption (Leviticus 25:25) the next of kin should redeem a family piece of property that was being sold. Boaz, who is only a distant kinsman of Naomi’s husband, is under no such obligation. Similarly, in the case of levirate marriage where the brother of a childless dead man is obliged to marry his widow to raise up a child for the deceased (Genesis 38:8; Deuteronomy 25:5-10), Boaz is not required to marry Ruth since he is not Mahlon’s brother. Moved by love and compassion Boaz willingly takes on responsibilities that are not his.

To achieve both objectives of marrying Ruth and redeeming Naomi’s land he skilfully orchestrates the scene at the city gate where such disputes are settled publicly. Having secured the attendance of the kinsman who has the nearer claim, he carefully gathers the required quorum, “ten men of the elders of the city” (Ruth 4:2), and unfolds his plan in judicious stages. All eyes are trained on him, the elders, the business people, other passers-by, in short, “all the people” (Ruth 4:9). Once the kinsman has agreed to redeem the land, Boaz springs the surprise of adding marriage to Ruth to the conditions, perhaps shrewdly surmising the next-of-kin would not jeopardise his own inheritance (Ruth 4:6). Once the next-of-kin relinquishes his claim, Boaz calmly and competently concludes the business, calling on all present to be his witnesses.

Boaz reminds me of the many people who have shown such great qualities of heart, mind, and spirit during the last year. Not only those who have played their part in front-line roles, but also family, friends, neighbours, and volunteers who have cared for those in need and shown their solidarity and friendship in kind and practical ways, giving of themselves, of their time, money, and resources. Those who have used their gifts to bring creative and effective solutions to a wide range of issues, from creating vaccines to cheering the nation; those who

are in the public gaze and those whose work is unseen. We are blessed with many Boazes, both male and female, among us.



Boaz' integrity is cleverly expressed in this medieval illustration by William de Brailes, which clearly indicates his view that nothing untoward happens between Boaz and Ruth at the threshing floor.

- The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, USA

3. *Where is God?*

Many complain that God seems conspicuous by his absence in the book. Only twice is God seen to intervene (and of these events one is by hearsay only): Naomi *heard* that “the LORD had had consideration for his people and given them food” (1:6), while Ruth bears a son because “the LORD made her conceive” (4:13). As Kirsten Nielsen observes, God “provides bread and babies”. But God never appears explicitly or is observed to speak or to meet with people, and there are no messages conveyed through dreams or angels. Superficially it seems somewhat hopeless. Where is God? Has God abandoned them?

Prayers

Nonetheless God's presence is kept alive in a variety of ways. First, in the prayers and words of the characters. The Lord's name seems to be as often on the people's lips as in Irish prayers and conversations long ago. Naomi begins when she commends her daughters-in-law and prays, “May the LORD deal kindly with you ... the LORD grant that you may find security” (Ruth 1:8-9). Later she prays that God will reward Boaz for his kindness, “Blessed be he by the LORD” (Ruth 2:20).

The first words Boaz utters contain the LORD's name, as he exchanges greetings in the corn field: “He said to the reapers, ‘The LORD be with you.’ They answered, ‘The LORD bless you’” (Ruth 2:4). This exchange is a delightful reminder of the traditional Irish greeting when encountering someone at work, “Bail ó Dhia ar an obair” (the blessing of God on the work). Boaz goes on to praise Ruth in fulsome terms: “May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have

come for refuge!” (Ruth 2:12) Again in chapter 3 he commends her, “May you be blessed by the LORD” (Ruth 3:10) and confirms his promise to act as next-of-kin by swearing “as the LORD lives” (Ruth 3:13).

The omnipresence of God on people’s lips is underlined in the final chapter when it seems almost the whole city, all the people who are at the city gate together with the elders, pray publicly that the LORD will make Ruth like Rachel and Leah, and then refer to the children “that the LORD will give you by this young woman” (Ruth 4:12). In the final reference, probably in a more private setting, the women acknowledge the special blessings Naomi has received from God: “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin” (Ruth 4:14).

Ruth and Naomi

The speeches of Ruth and Naomi in chapter 1 emphasise God’s presence in two different ways. Ruth famously declares her new-found allegiance to Naomi’s God:

your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

Naomi’s bitter grievance against God may be even more revealing. She complains angrily that God has “dealt bitterly” with her, brought her back “empty”, “dealt harshly” with her, and “brought calamity” (Ruth 1:20-21). In times of extreme difficulty it is understandable to think that God has abandoned us. But in a careful structuring of the text the author reveals the fuller truth: in chapter 1 Naomi had complained about God to the women of Bethlehem; in a meticulously arranged parallel scene in chapter 4, this time the women of Bethlehem speak to Naomi, reminding her, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin”. Our final view of Naomi (Ruth 4:16) is as she takes “the child and laid him in her bosom”. The grieving, “empty” Naomi is empty no longer. Her previously empty arms are now miraculously full. God is good, indeed.

Loving Kindness

God’s loving action does not end there. The book of Ruth is notable for the subtle importance of *hesed*, that key biblical concept, used both of divine-human and human-human relationships. It is impossible to express in one word or phrase, but it has numerous connotations, including loving kindness, fidelity, loyalty, reliability, compassion, and steadfast love. In the Hebrew Bible God is the possessor *par excellence* of *hesed*. In the Psalms alone God is associated with this quality in 53 individual psalms, most notably in Psalm 136 where the same line is repeated in each of the 26 verses: “his steadfast love (*hesed*) endures for ever”. It is often associated with a constellation of other virtues, e.g., in Psalm 86:15:

But you, O LORD, are a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness.

Hesed is not just an emotional response to a particular situation; it is a practical activity which benefits the recipient, who is frequently in extreme need. One such example is Lot’s rescue from the imminent destruction of Sodom (Genesis 19:19). It can also benefit the dead, as in

Saul's burial (2 Samuel 2:5) and can assist the living on behalf of the dead, as when David showed loving kindness to Mephibosheth on behalf of the dead Jonathan (2 Samuel 9:7). Fundamentally it is a divine attribute, which human beings reflect and imitate when they show *hesed* to others.

The term occurs three times in the story (Ruth 1:8; 2:20; 3:10) but its presence may not be immediately evident, as each reference can be translated differently: "deal kindly"; "kindness"; "loyalty". In Ruth 1:8 Naomi expresses the hope that the LORD will show Ruth and Orpah *hesed*, in return for the *hesed* they showed to the dead (Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion) and to Naomi herself. In the next chapter Naomi praises Boaz, "Blessed be he by the LORD, whose kindness (*hesed*) has not forsaken the living or the dead!", but it is unclear whether this refers to Boaz or the LORD. Perhaps we can take it as both. In Ruth 3:10 Boaz commends Ruth for her *hesed*, when he says, "May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty (*hesed*) is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich."

Perhaps it is not surprising that Boaz is praised for his *hesed*, but it is particularly striking that the Moabites Orpah and Ruth are commended for theirs. It sends a clear signal, which may have startled some of the book's original readers, that God's loving kindness knows no borders and can be shown and received by Israelites and non-Israelites alike. Even when God appeared absent his loving kindness was expressed through loving human actions.

Hesed is beautifully conveyed in visual form in an illustration in *The Saint John's Bible*. The stamped motif sparkling around Ruth and Naomi's heads reflects a sign of God's favour and God's miraculous provision for the two widows in this story.



The Book of Ruth thus offers us both a challenge and an invitation. The challenge is to heed God's call to act with loving kindness toward one another. The invitation is to recognise that every act of loving kindness, even, or perhaps especially, in the midst of a global pandemic, is a revelation of God's love for us.

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