**Part 5: The Return to Bethlehem**

**Ruth 2:1-10** [New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised](https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Anglicised-NRSVA-Bible/) **(NRSVA)**

### Ruth Meets Boaz

2 Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband’s side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. 2And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, ‘Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor.’ She said to her, ‘Go, my daughter.’ 3So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. 4Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, ‘The Lord be with you.’ They answered, ‘The Lord bless you.’ 5Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, ‘To whom does this young woman belong?’ 6The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, ‘She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. 7She said, “Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.” So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment.’

8Then Boaz said to Ruth, ‘Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. 9Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn.’ 10Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, ‘Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?’

We now begin Chapter 2 where Ruth finds favor and harvests food in the field: When Boaz meets Ruth. We continue to follow the *JPS Commentary* outline for our study for verses 1-10. The women in the town who spoke to Naomi are not around now, and the two women are left to fend for themselves. They are at home and starting their lives over. Naomi mentioned that she had a rich relative, yet no one came forward to help them. Boaz was related to the family of Elimelech, Naomi’s deceased husband.

We note that in her new country, Ruth first asked Naomi’s permission to go glean. Gleaning was a traditional practice by which the poor could be fed, by collecting the grain that fell to the wayside in the harvesting process. Perhaps Ruth did not want Naomi to glean because of her age or she was previously well-to-do and might feel shame because of her change in circumstances.

We don’t know how Ruth found her way to Boaz’ fields. Was it only chance? Do you believe in chance? This is one of those instances where what transpired might be assumed to be chance, while others may view it as divine intervention. The Book of Ruth seems to infer that even if we see it as chance, the recipient of the blessing has to be responsive in the moment of opportunity.

We see that Naomi attributed both fortunate and unfortunate events to G-d; she bemoaned being the victim of loss and hardship, losing her husband and her sons. Rabbinic tradition suggested that Boaz was Elimelech’s cousin and Naomi’s nephew.

Boaz noticed Ruth in the fields and he already knew she was caring for Naomi. Then, perhaps as a result of his extended family relationship with Naomi, he made it easier for Ruth to glean in his fields. There was no one else in Naomi’s family stepping up to assist her.

Ruth went to the fields to glean so they could eat. Extensive laws and rules developed in their culture to allow access and to prevent abuse. Gleaning posed some risk for the gleaners, especially for unattached women. Some commentators suggest that Naomi was aware of this risk (verse 22).

We don’t know for certain, but it seems possible that Naomi demonstrated less concern for Ruth’s well-being than Ruth was of hers. Alter notes that she seemed to step back. Maybe she was anxious about having enough to eat and thus willing to take a risk with Ruth going into the fields to glean. Maybe Naomi felt conflicted about bringing a Moabite to her home.

Or maybe she was ashamed of being dependent upon Ruth. Or perhaps she was overwhelmed by and focused upon her own sorrow and bitterness to be able to give full attention to Ruth. At that time, the Torah excluded Moabites from Israelite community (Deuteronomy 23:4-7) and so they both took a risk of being excluded by others in the community by returning from Moab together.

Naomi later attributed their good fortune with Boaz extending *hesed*  to them as coming from G-d. We don’t know why Naomi did not tell Ruth about her extended family. Their circumstances change only after Ruth initiated going to the fields and gathering food for them to eat. Ruth didn’t sit helplessly, waiting for someone to come forward to take care of them.

**Boaz, a man of substance:** Based on the Hebrew text and culture in their time, we think Boaz was an older man, and the term *gibor hayil* is applied to him. This was a similar term which was also used for the chieftain Gideon (Judges 6:11) or for David before coming King (I Samuel 16:18). The word can mean a hero or a warrior, or a person who is in a higher status economically or socially.

In the *Targum* in Aramaic his name means a person who is “strong in Torah.” Power or wealth is not its only meaning. One of the two pillars at the Temple Great Hall (I Kings 7:21) was also named Boaz, so perhaps the implication was that he represented a pillar of society.

Boaz recognized Ruth’s courage and her commitment to Naomi as her sole support. He eased the conditions so that Ruth could more easily glean. She earned the respect of the landowner and was welcomed. Boaz is a benevolent and godly man who was concerned for his workers. G-d’s presence was seen in his interactions.

**“The Lord be with you!”** Boaz greeted the field hands with this blessing and they responded in kind. These words are still part of the priestly Blessing used in synagogues today (Numbers 6:24-26). And Christians also use this phrase as well. This direct type of blessing was accepted in their era, but later Jewish sources were said to have made the blessing less personal as in, “May the Word of the Lord be at your assistance.”

**Ruth, a woman of valor:** The text in this chapter continues to refer to her as “the Moabite,” so her status had not changed as a result of her commitment to Naomi. A feminine form of the same term used for Boaz, *“eshet hayil,”* is translated as a “woman of valor” or one who is generous and prosperous. It was used in describing the good wife or woman in Proverbs (31:1-31) And here, the same term was used by Boaz in describing Ruth (3:11).

Verse 2:3 uses the term “as luck would have it” but the Hebrew term is not simply based on luck: rather, divine providence is at work in making or allowing something to happen. The phrase is used in other Hebrew Bible stories, such as when Abraham’s servant was seeking a wife for Isaac, he prayed, “make it happen before me” (Genesis 24:12).

**‘Whose girl is that?’** Three questions were asked to establish her identity, which tied the questions to other biblical stories. We see that Abraham’s servant also asked Rebekah at the well whose daughter she was. Or, Saul asked who David was.

Boaz was asking to what household did Ruth belong. Nowhere was it suggested that his eye is drawn to her because she was physically attractive. It appears that her manner is what attracted him. Her hard work gained his respect. Boaz’ servant tells him that she was on her feet constantly and rested little (2:7).

She was placed right behind the reapers so she could get first pickings. Then Boaz told her to stay close to his girls and to follow them. He refers to her as ‘my daughter,’ just as Naomi had done. The term may imply their superior social status as well as their age, but also it conveys concern and protection.

**I have ordered…** [2:9]: Boaz went beyond providing better gleaning conditions by telling her to stay close to his own girls. He ordered the men not to harass or molest her. The term in Hebrew, *naga’* is the same as used when G-d protects Sarah from Abimelech (Genesis 20:6).

**When you are thirsty, go to the jars and drink…”** [2:9]: There are other biblical narratives that depict meetings at a well when a man has traveled looking for a wife [Rebekah and Isaac, Genesis 24; Rachel and Jacob, Genesis 29, Moses and Jethro’s daughter, Exodus 2]. The *JPS Commentary* noted the contrast between Ruth, as a woman from Moab, being offered water by an Israelite man – after a long history and tradition of enmity between their two groups.

They never forgot when Moabites refused water to Israelites during their exodus (Deuteronomy 23:5). We are also reminded of Jesus asking the Samaritan woman for a drink at the well [Gospel of John 4:7-9 and, similarly, there was no love lost between Samaria and Judea.

Isn’t it interesting that all of these women were going about their daily work when they were chosen as wives? And up to this point in time, there is no indication that Boaz saw Ruth as a marital prospect, but the offering of water to her contrasts with the usual pattern where women are the ones to serve and to offer men a drink.

And in some sense, it suggests a symbolic reparation between their two groups by an Israelite reaching out to a Moabite woman. The Moabites’ crime was refusal to provide water and food. And, symbolically, Israelites who were victimized reached out to those who previously denied them their needs for survival. Perhaps there’s a lesson here: Do we wait for the other to apologize and make amends, or do we make the first overture?

**Food for Thought:**

1. In today’s world, the specifics of what one might look for in a potential spouse are on one level framed very differently. But the character of such a person can be compared to Boaz or Ruth. Both were responsible, industrious, kind, and charitable. A good man or a good woman is hard to find! If you were advising a young person in your family or faith community who is thinking about entering into a committed relationship, how could you use the story of Boaz and Ruth to help them?
2. Naomi had mixed feelings toward Ruth while Ruth made a covenant and a commitment to care for Naomi. How was Ruth demonstrating her continued commitment? In your own life, can you think of situations in which you had mixed feelings about someone with whom you also had some kind of bond of friendship or perhaps a member of your family? How did you deal with your ambivalence while maintaining the commitment that you had? What helped you when you had mixed feelings?
3. Have you ever been in an unfamiliar situation or place and someone who had no reason to do so reached out and helped you? How did this feel? What did you learn? Have you ever had the opportunity to serve someone else who was a stranger or in an unfamiliar situation? What was the response and how did you feel?

**Personal Notes:**

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