**Part 9: The Instructions of Naomi**

**Ruth 4:1-22** [New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised](https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Anglicised-NRSVA-Bible/) **(NRSVA)**

The JPS Commentary notes that in this last chapter, Ruth moves from the world of women into the world of men and yet in this book, women do have the last word (4:17). What was done in private to bring Ruth into a formal relationship with the Hebrew community and with an individual husband now ends in a public setting. The process of betrothal takes place after the men have reached agreement in the gates of the community.

### The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth

4 No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, ‘Come over, friend; sit down here.’ And he went over and sat down. 2Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, ‘Sit down here’; so they sat down.

3He then said to the next-of-kin, ‘Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. 4So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you.’

So he said, ‘I will redeem it.’ 5Then Boaz said, ‘The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruththe Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance.’ 6At this, the next-of-kinsaid, ‘I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.’

7Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, one party took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. 8So when the next-of-kinsaid to Boaz, ‘Acquire it for yourself’, he took off his sandal.

9Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, ‘Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon.

10I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses.’

11Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, ‘We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; 12and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.’

**Redeeming Ruth (4:1-12):** It is at the city gate where legal transactions take place. The term, ‘buy’ seems to be applied to both land and to Ruth herself. It appears to be a business transaction that runs counter to the overall story. Alter depicts it as alien, where a closer relative was willing to buy the land, but did not want the package deal which included Ruth.

There was a closer relative who would be expected to become Ruth’s patron and to marry her, but when he declines, Boaz says he will do so. The entire community accepts this arrangement, signaling that Ruth, a Moabite, is becoming one of them; she is included in their community. It was not actually a levirate marriage of obligation, but one which was chosen.

Ruth did not ask for marriage on the threshing floor, but for redemption. And their son was never referred to as the son of Elimelech (Naomi’s husband) or Mahlon (Ruth’s husband). This son, Oved, was not intended to perpetuate their names. In other words, this was not a marriage of duty and obligation but one of choice. A levir’s shoe would be loosened and he would be shamed in public by the woman if he did not accept his role (Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

It should be noted that this is a significant contrast with other biblical passages which indicated that a union with Moabites should be rejected (Ezra 9-10, Nehemiah 13:1-3, Deuteronomy 23:4). In the story in Ezra, this marriage of Ruth and Boaz would have been considered unacceptable and a scandal. Can you think of parallels to this situation in our modern day where bonds between people from differing nationalities, races, or religions are still considered unacceptable?

But there are other passages which are parallel to Ruth and Boaz where the foreigner is welcomed (Isaiah 56:1-7). The common thread seems to be acceptance and salvation for those who will “maintain justice, and do what is right” (Isaiah 56:1); the Lord’s deliverance will be revealed to them.

“And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer…for my house shall be called a house of prayer *for all* peoples.” (Isaiah 56:6-7).

### The Genealogy of David

13So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. 14Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! 15He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.’ 16Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. 17The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, ‘A son has been born to Naomi.’ They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

**Betrothal, birth, and more blessings (4:13-17):** And it is the community that validates the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, not just the family. In fact, Ruth’s family of origin was far away, and her covenant was with Naomi. It is in the Book of Ruth that an unusual mention of “mother’s house” instead of “father’s house” can be seen (Ruth 1:8). It is unusual for matriarchs to be mentioned in the Bible outside of Genesis. The *JPS Commentary* suggests this public declaration of Boaz’ intentions toward Ruth sealed the matter legally and with the blessings that followed, this simple public ritual would be consistent with marriage rituals from the ancient world.

The blessings offered to them by their elders show that Ruth, the Moabite, has been fully accepted into their community. There was a prohibition of Israelites marrying Moabites. Ruth had referred to herself as a “foreigner” early in the story, but from this point on in the story, she is never again referred to as a Moabite. She has become one of the tribe.

Ruth herself was a descendant of Lot and his older daughter, from which the Moabites came. The text says that “Boaz married Ruth; *she became his wife…*” She moves into his household at that time. The wording indicates that this was not a one-sided decision by one spouse but one in which they both participated in the choice.

She was an adult woman without a father, and her mother-in-law, Naomi, had actively encouraged the relationship. This added phrase, *“she became…”* is seen in other biblical stories of marriages where the bride was also a widow and entitled to make vows without male relatives’ approval (since there were none).

 “May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel! Prosper in Ephrathah and perpetuate your name in Bethlehem! And may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah….[4:11-12].

Reference to these women ancestors is important because their marriages also had some kind of unusual or irregular features to them – attempted but failed levirate marriage, illicit or incestuous unions.

18Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, 19Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, 20Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, 21Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, 22Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

**Epilogue: Reweaving the web of life (4:18-22):** Ruth bears a son, which in biblical narrative usually signifies divine favor. But that is not the end of the book.

It is a story about *hesed*, about going beyond legally sanctioned boundaries, and about caring for those for perhaps one has no obligation to care for. The elderly and now childless widow, Naomi, will not be left alone. She becomes a grandmother – not by blood – but in every sense the recipient of blessings.

The women in the town say to her, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today!” She was not redeemed by a levirate marriage. Ruth was not legally bound to Naomi, yet remained committed herself to her.

Boaz was not legally bound to marry Ruth, yet he received her. Naomi will live to a happy old age, raising their son which is reckoned as hers. “A son is born to Naomi!”…“She took…” and “she held…” The child becomes her redeemer.

The village women say to her that Ruth was better than seven sons. The village women have redefined kinship by naming Obed, and giving Naomi a lineage even though it may not be biological or legally recognized. Israelite women’s handling of household and local faith decisions was normal and accepted in their communities.

In the genealogy at the end of Ruth, Naomi’s two sons, including the deceased husband of Ruth, are not mentioned, so it is clear that Obed was not being claimed as a product of a levirate marriage to produce Mahlon’s son. Alter says that the name, Obed, may be short for Obediah, which means “worshipper, servant of G-d.”

Ruth’s acts of generosity and *hesed* toward Naomi symbolically reverse the lack of hospitality shown by the Moabites that led to the breakdown in relationship with the Israelites. Boaz’ actions reverse the story of the dishonorable actions of his relative, Judah, when Judah did not allow Tamar, his widowed daughter-in-law to marry his other son, then confused her with a prostitute because she covered her face, and then impregnated her.

Obed becomes the grandfather of the King of Israel, David. The Book of Ruth transforms a perspective of family relationships from strict, patriarchal blood lines to the building of identity through covenant commitments, crossing cultural, legal, and gender lines.

Jesus was claimed to be in Ruth’s blood line. And even in Jesus’ family, Joseph was said not to be his biological son, so the idea of a “blended family” is also seen in the lineage of Jesus. This is a long way from the earlier tribal idea that excluded any people not in the family by blood.

**Food for Thought:**

1. How has use of terms such as “legitimate” and “illegitimate” children proven to be so harmful? In your lifetime, have you known anyone who was treated as “not really belonging” because of this idea?
2. What are the implications for the redefining of kinship which we see in the Book of Ruth and down through the line of David?
3. If you identify as Christian, what will be the basis for “belonging” in light of the Gospel? Jesus himself redefined family as those who do the will of G-d. As he was dying on the Cross, he told his mother, Mary, to behold her son, and for John, his disciple, to behold his mother.

Here, Jesus seems to be transferring responsibility to each of them to be in relationship. What relationships have you enjoyed that were or became as important or more important than blood relatives?

1. How has Ruth honored and legitimized women forming covenant relationships with other women as well as choosing a husband? How has Naomi honored and legitimized the acceptance of children into families who are not biologically related? What is the role of our faith communities in creating new bonds of belonging to one another?
2. In some very important ways, we all undergo our own “exodus.” It could be a treacherous undertaking, such as leaving an abusive relationship. It could simply be choosing to become a more independent person, becoming more responsible for ourselves. We take a risk, we enter an unknown world, we become much more vulnerable; we lose our place of safety and give it up for the hope of something more. Which character in the Book of Ruth do you most closely identify with in your own journey?