

Wings of Shelter: Ruth's Story

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Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. (Ruth 1:16)

What I find most inspiring about Ruth is how powerfully she transforms her social and spiritual standing with her own living faith. She begins at the rock bottom of both ladders: socially she is an immigrant widow from the despised nation of Moab, and spiritually she has no knowledge of Israel's God. In both cases she's in a helpless state, the stereotypical damsel in distress, and in need of a Man of God to help her, teach her, and redeem her. By the grace of God, she finds just such a man in Boaz. But where this may have been the end of an ordinary widow's tale, this is just the beginning for Ruth. Having once been the defenceless damsel helped to her feet by the shining knight Boaz, she immediately dons the knight's gleaming armour herself. She uses her own faith and resources to redeem her mother-in-law, Naomi, and even redeem the prototypical widow of scripture, Tamar.

Her contribution to the glittering achievements of the Leading Ladies is a shining icon of the power of godliness, altruism and friendship to create a glorious God-focused life from existence that teetered on the precipice of disaster.

Ruth's story is very much a tale of two halves. From the ashes of famine, bereavement and despair in Moab, arises a tale of compassion, cooperation and caring for others in Israel. Ruth's story is told as a chiasm, a literary mechanism employed to highlight the centerpiece element as the pinnacle of the story. This central element is Ruth's choice to follow Israel's God, as follows:

- ... Naomi leaves Israel for Moab (1:1)
- Scene of famine and mourning (1:1-5)
- Ruth is bereaved of her husband (1:5)
- Naomi directs Ruth to Moab (1:11-15)
- Spiritual union of Ruth and God (1:16)
- Ruth comes to Israel; Bethlehem (1:22)

..... Ruth gains a husband (4:10)
..... Scene of joy and plenty (4:13-17)
... The King of Jerusalem is born (4:22)

There are four pairs of opposite events sandwiching the single central feature of Ruth's chosen dedication to the God of Israel; with every first-half component being disastrous, and every second-half component being joyfully positive.

Overall, the book of Ruth has two storylines: one where Boaz redeems Ruth, enclosed by one where Ruth redeems Naomi and Tamar. The epilogue,¹ despite its anodyne appearance, is the triumphant declaration of Ruth's redemption of the Bible's original widow, Tamar. This is Ruth's crowning achievement, spanning centuries, cleverly encoding Ruth's finest hour.

This is why Ruth's story is so powerful: it's a meteoric rise from needy to needed, fueled by the rockets of her burgeoning faith.

Under Your Wings

As we first meet Ruth, her circumstances could barely be more desperate. She is a widow. She is an immigrant. Worse yet, she is an immigrant from Moab: a country Israel despises,² and now during an era when the two were at war.³ We begin at a critical scene.

*And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down. At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet.
(Ruth 3:7-8)*

Midnight, the threshing floor, and Boaz is fast asleep. Ruth creeps up, uncovers his feet, and lies down by him. When he's startled awake in the night, he's understandably shocked to find Ruth lying there.

What is she doing?

¹ Ruth 4:18-22

² Deut 23:3

³ Jdg 3:12-30

This is no random action; it's been planned by Naomi, with the purpose of finding Ruth a husband and a home.⁴ Naomi intends to invoke the law of Levirate marriage,⁵ where a man is prompted by good conscience to marry a relative's widow in order to provide for her.

Boaz challenges Ruth: *Who are you?*

In the pitch-dark of the threshing floor, he can't recognize her.

"I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer." (Ruth 3:9, NIV)

Ruth requests covering from the corner of Boaz' garment she folded back from him. The clause clumsily rendered *corner of your garment* in the NIV is a single Hebrew word (*kānāp̄*) meaning 'wing.' This is essential to understand; the entire spiritual thrust of Ruth's story hinges on this critical detail. Some English translations (e.g. ESV, NKJV) perceive this, and translate Ruth's comment very appropriately: *Spread your wings over me*. This more emotive translation better conveys the true meaning. Boaz is related to Ruth's deceased husband Mahlon, and so is a designated kinsman-redeemer, who can spread wings of protection over her.

The symbol of the garment's wing has meaning in biblical culture; God announces His betrothal to Israel with this metaphor.

*When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment (*kānāp̄*) over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine. (Ezek 16:8)*

Boaz the Widow's Redeemer

There's even more wordplay here. It's lost in translation, but there's an attractive contrast between the Hebrew word for uncovered (*gālā*) and kinsman-redeemer (*gā'al*), with the latter essentially meaning "coverer." Ruth creeps up to Boaz to uncover him (*gālā*), and then requests he cover her (*gā'al*). We understand the functional point of this: the request for marriage protection. But there's much more power in this metaphor.

⁴ Ruth 3:1-4

⁵ Deut 25:5-10

Ruth uncovers Boaz, and he lies on the threshing floor with his feet exposed. Academics commonly claim a sexual allusion between the feet and the genitals,^{6,7,8} but these arguments don't withstand analysis,⁹ ending merely as incongruously crass. This interplay is not a seduction, despite the claims of Athalya Brenner and others.¹⁰ Tikva Frymer-Kensky explains that the Hebrew constructs aren't correct for an uncovering of sexual organs.¹¹

Ruth's actions reveal simple emotional and social truths. By uncovering Boaz while he sleeps, he will get cold. He is exposed, vulnerable to the elements. Ruth is inviting Boaz to consider her circumstances. She has no social covering: she's a widow, and an immigrant from hated Moab. When Boaz awakens, doubtless with cold feet, he will realize how much he appreciates his covering, the 'wings' of his robe. The 'wings' Ruth doesn't have.

There is a deeper level to this, as well. Ruth is giving a spiritually coded reply to a comment Boaz made to her a couple of months before at an earlier harvest. Boaz had said:

I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband... May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge. (Ruth 2:11-12)

Boaz told Ruth he understood she had come to take shelter *under the wings* of Israel's God. He isn't just using an attractive metaphor to describe God's protection, either. He is referencing a specific set of wings; this is a spiritually intelligent comment. Boaz is referencing the Ark of the Covenant, and being *beneath the wings* there has great meaning.

And you shall make two cherubim of gold... on the two ends of the mercy seat... The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings. (Ex 25:18,20)

⁶ Susan Niditch, "The Old Testament Library: Judges," 2008, p81

⁷ Amy-Jill Levine, "Ruth," in "Women's Bible Commentary," Eds. Carol Newsom & Sharon Ringe, 1992, p78-84

⁸ Jennifer W. Knust, "Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions About Sex and Desire," 2011, p32

⁹ The valid Biblical connections that exist are twofold: an idiomatic synonym between "covering the feet" and urinating (e.g. Jdg 3:20, 1 Sam 24:3), potentially due to the need to lower clothing for that purpose; and a description of childbirth as emanating from "between the legs" (e.g. Dt 28:57), which we have also already seen in Deborah's Song (Case 3). Beyond that, there is no evidence offered to allege a connection between feet and genitals.

¹⁰ Athalya Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth," *Vetus Testamentum* 1983, 33, 4, p387

¹¹ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Reading the Women of the Bible," 2002, p247

The wings of the cherubim on the ark overshadow the area which represents God's mercy. It's a clever metaphor by Boaz; and has dual purpose. It allows Boaz to communicate what is closest to his heart: his understanding of God's protection. It also acts as a filter, determining whether Ruth recognizes the metaphor he's invoked or not.

Brilliantly, Ruth does recognize Boaz' coded message and she responds in the same metaphor: "Perhaps you can cover me with your wings?" This reply is also coded with a special meaning, which Boaz sees, and being sufficiently moved by her deeper message, he replies:

May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich." (Ruth 3:10)

This merits careful analysis. Boaz says there have been two kindnesses. Frymer-Kensky believes the two kindnesses are Ruth returning to Israel with Naomi, and then Ruth considering Boaz as a life partner.¹² I think Boaz is commenting more personally, that he sees two kindnesses from Ruth to him. The first is that Ruth "doesn't run after the younger men," i.e. doesn't exclude the older Boaz from consideration as her husband. The second kindness is what she has just said.

Boaz: "I see you have come to take shelter under the wings of the God of Israel"

Ruth: "Maybe I can find shelter under your wings?"

Boaz sees Ruth as saying: "I can shelter under God's wings if I can shelter under yours," that is, "You reflect the image of your God." Boaz couldn't be better praised; or happier, and he knows it. Ruth has learned the symbols and patterns by which God operates, which enabled their articulate and elegant courting. Boaz is now delighted to redeem Ruth: he will provide for her (and Naomi) the protection they desperately need. And Boaz's moral sense of care toward the outsider was very likely learned at his mother's knee: his mother is none other than Leading Lady Rahab, whose life story modeled the value of the godly stranger to Israel. Boaz will 'resurrect' the fallen Mahlon at his own expense; yet will gain enormously himself as he unites with a spiritually powerful Leading Lady of his own.

The powerful imagery of the Wings of Shelter is only just begun: from here it takes off through an entire range of old testament and new testament scriptures, even helping to explain

¹² Ibid., p248

verses that, without understanding this metaphor, remain impenetrably obscure. We explore these spiritually deeper veins of treasure in the Bonus Material.¹³

Ruth the Widow's Redeemer

Boaz has redeemed Ruth the widow. Ruth is the Redeemed of Boaz, yet rather than rest in her new-found state of safety she presses forward to become the Redeemer of Naomi, whose story begins earlier, at the start of the book.

Naomi, crushed by the despair of losing her husband and both sons, loses grasp of her faith, interpreting her circumstances as a direct assault upon her by God.

The hand of the LORD has gone out against me! (Ruth 1:13)

Worse yet, even though Naomi is aware that the Living God is in Israel, she advises Ruth not to accompany her into Israel, but go back to her people in Moab.

See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law. (Ruth 1:15)

This is a spiritual nadir for Naomi: to turn people away from the Living God, especially those whom she genuinely loves, is the worst thing she can do. It's only a good idea to return to Moab if there is no God, and so it's only atheist academics who praise her advice.¹⁴ In reality it's a disastrous recommendation. But Naomi is experiencing maximum distress and trauma, and feels hopeless in her despair. Bible characters are real people, not caricatures, and we must understand them as such. Naomi's life was so profoundly destroyed in Moab that when she re-enters Israel she is unrecognizable to those who knew her! It is perhaps out of deep embarrassment, as much as despair, that she wants her name *Naomi*, meaning *sweet*, to be replaced with *Mara*, meaning *bitter*. She is struggling in faith and life.

Enter Ruth in the role of Elijah, the "Man of God."

Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you. (Ruth 1:16-17)

¹³ See the Bonus Material page for this article

¹⁴ Athalya Brenner, Op. cit., p396

Just like archetypical Elijah, Ruth takes on the name, *My God is Jah*, claiming Israel's God as hers. In fairness, Ruth's first loyalty seems to be to Naomi, but the result is the same. Most expositors obsess over the degree to which Ruth dedicates herself to Naomi, some saying one would be nothing without the other,¹⁵ some even claiming that this proves Ruth and Naomi had a lesbian relationship¹⁶ (which derails the story entirely, and would render Boaz's role bizarre). We focus on the central important theological fact: beyond even the steel bond of faithful friendship Ruth (whose name means *friendship*) has forged with Naomi, Ruth has chosen Israel's God. This is her victory. *My God is Jah*, says Ruth, naming herself *Elijah*, and as such she is the one who comes first to prepare God's salvation.¹⁷

The salvation Ruth enables strikes soon enough. Naomi's motivation for life is rekindled. Naomi is transformed to see God once again as a source of blessing, not persecution,¹⁸ and is now motivated to work alongside the Leading Lady. She draws on her more extensive life experience and superior knowledge of Israeli customs to plan excitedly for Ruth's betrothal, and thereby their joint survival, designing the choreography at the threshing floor where this case study began.

Vitaly, Ruth is the redeemer here. The biblical record stresses this by recording an unusual detail that, when Ruth's son is born, Naomi cares for the child so completely that the women of the town lovingly declare the child as Naomi's.

*Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi."
(Ruth 4:16-17)*

This tiny detail has huge spiritual importance. The child is Naomi's, metaphorically, yet was birthed by Ruth. Thus: *Ruth has provided the widow Naomi with a son*. This is the hallmark of the Redeemer, the mark of Elijah. Now Ruth the Widow is also Ruth the Redeemer.

¹⁵ Otto Eissfeldt, "The Old Testament: An Introduction," Tr. Peter R. Ackroyd, 1966, p481

¹⁶ Rebecca T. Alpert, "Finding Our Past: A Lesbian Interpretation of the Book of Ruth," in "Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story," Eds. Judith A. Kates & Gail T. Reimer, 1994, p91-96

¹⁷ Compare with Mal 4:5

¹⁸ Ruth 3:20

And there's more. Ruth the Redeemer performs even greater work than this, as recorded in the seemingly anti-climactic ending of the book: the genealogy from Perez.

This, then, is the family line of Perez: Perez was the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David. (Ruth 4:18-22, NIV)

A dreary ending, or so it appears, and also a strange one, because Ruth's life with Boaz is neither at the beginning nor the end of the list. Why start the lineage with Perez? Bauckham sees no reason for starting there beyond "giving Boaz the honoured seventh position."¹⁹ This misses the magnificent point: this is the long-awaited redemption of Tamar. The focus on Tamar is introduced by the clue of the town elders' comment:

"May your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the Lord will give you by this young woman." (Ruth 4:12)

Tamar is the prototypical widow who remained abandoned and unredeemed by the failures of the inadequate men in her life. Tamar's fate for birthing a child by prostitution was to be banned from the Lord's assembly for *ten generations*.²⁰ What's listed at the end of the book of Ruth is the *ten-generation restoration of Tamar!* That's why it's such a powerful climax. Note the numbers as we read the quote again:

- (1) *This, then, is the family line of Perez:*
- (2) *Perez was the father of Hezron,*
- (3) *Hezron the father of Ram,*
- (4) *Ram the father of Amminadab,*
- (5) *Amminadab the father of Nahshon,*
- (6) *Nahshon the father of Salmon,*
- (7) *Salmon the father of Boaz,*
- (8) *Boaz the father of Obed,*
- (9) *Obed the father of Jesse,*
- (10) *and Jesse the father of David.*

¹⁹ Richard Bauckham, Op. cit., p39

²⁰ Deut 23:2

Boaz was considered culturally too old to marry, so the lineage would have died with him, if not for Ruth's kindness in not discounting him. Ruth provides the continuity to allow Tamar's line to proceed to her redemption at the tenth generation: King David, the Man after God's Own Heart. Ruth, metaphorically, births King David, providing a son to redeem Tamar, the original widow of the Bible. Ruth's child also prevents Tamar's line from extinguishing before the tenth generation, at which time she is re-admitted to Israel's congregation, from which Judah's sin had caused the Law to exclude her.

There's one more vital thing to see. Redemption is the process of being lifted up from diminished circumstances to a fuller life. Redemption is thereby connected to resurrection: the former being a shadow of the latter. To be resurrected is to be elevated from the most minimal existence possible (i.e. death) to life. Resurrection to immortality, therefore, as promised on the day of the Lord's return, is the greatest redemption of all. Concerning that day we are told this:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. (Mal 4:5)

Before resurrection, Elijah must first appear as herald. For the widow at Zarephath, it was the literal Elijah, which is why his name is given to the temple. For Ruth, it was Boaz as Elijah. For both Naomi and Tamar, it was Ruth as Elijah. For the first coming of Messiah, it was John the Baptist.²¹ The Final Resurrection day is still to come. Messiah will be in God's role as the one who resurrects, and Elijah must come first, per the above quote. Who will be Elijah this time, preceding the Messianic advent?

It's simple: it is us! Our job is to testify *My God is Jah*, and to assist and appeal for the widows of this world, both literal and spiritual, believing in faith that we will be heard, because God listens to the voice of Elijah.²² Ruth understood all of this, and so must we. The pattern of widows, and God's promise of resurrection via them, has come full circle. Callous man does not care for the widow, but the Man of God is empowered to redeem them. Nor are these Men of God limited to the male gender. Elijah is precedent, and Boaz a worthy replica. Ruth, our Leading Lady, stands shoulder to shoulder alongside them.

²¹ Mt 11:10-14; Although the Pharisees, ever literalists, believed that *literal* Elijah had to be brought back from the dead, and John the Baptist had to explain that he was not the literal Elijah (Jn 1:21).

²² 1 Kgs 17:22