

# Bonus Material: Wings of Shelter

*John Pople*

Ruth's story is told, yet her influence is far from finished. She and Boaz have introduced a powerful spiritual metaphor through their choreographed courtship on the threshing floor: the over-arching Wings of Shelter. Interestingly, the word for "wings" (*kānāp̄*) is a feminine noun in every scriptural case, extending the feminine motif that pervades in these Leading Ladies studies.

## Psalm of David

Ruth is the great-grandmother of the greatest king Israel has yet seen: David. Given the typical lifespans and reproductive ages of the era, Ruth and David likely knew each other, but even if not, there is no doubt David heard as a child the amazing account of his great-grandparents meeting, and fully appreciated the spiritual power of the patterns by which they courted. What we know for certain is that there are seven psalms which employ the Sheltering Wings motif. Six of these psalms are known to be authored by David and the latter, Ps 91, has no official author listed, but I am convinced it is David for precisely this reason.

*Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings. (Ps 17:8)*

*How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. (Ps 36:7)*

*Let me dwell in your tent forever! Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings!  
(Ps 61:4)*

David loved to describe the comfort of God's protection with the metaphor he learned from his great-grandmother.

## Samuel's Wings

The Wings of Shelter metaphor also helps explain some verses which are otherwise mysterious; and adds extra layers of depth to our understanding.

*And Samuel said to Saul, "I will not return with you. For you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel." As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt (kānāḇ) of his robe, and it tore. And Samuel said to him, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you." (1Sam 15:26-28)*

God is removing His approval of Saul. Saul's reign will no longer enjoy the sheltering wings of God. How perfect then, that we see Saul grasp in desperation at the 'wing' of Samuel's robe, only for it to tear off in his hand. Ruth's metaphor helps us see the deeper tragedy and pathos of this rejection scene.

## Saul's Wings

Once when Saul returned from battling the Philistines, he allowed his bloodlust to fuel enraged jealousy of his replacement-to-be, David, and Saul pursued him with homicidal intent into the En Gedi desert. During this flight for his life, David appeals for God's protection, again using his great-grandmother's language.

*"Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by." (Ps 57:1)*

David and his men hide in the back of a cave at En Gedi. Dramatically, Saul enters the same cave to relieve himself. David sees he has Saul at a disadvantage and surreptitiously approaches.

*Then David arose and stealthily cut off a corner (kānāḇ) of Saul's robe. (1Sam 24:4)*

This seems an excellent tactic to demonstrate how David could've killed Saul, yet spared him. But then we're hit with a seemingly incongruous detail.

*David's heart struck him, because he had cut off a corner (kānāḇ) of Saul's robe. (1Sam 24:5)*

This verse is inexplicable without Ruth's metaphor. David, a man of such deep spirituality, would not care about damage to a physical garment, especially if the point of the damage was the godly motive to preserve the life of the Lord's anointed. Yet we see David believes he has in some way violated Saul.

*He said to his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD's anointed, to put out my hand against him, seeing he is the LORD's anointed." (1Sam 24:6)*

Ruth illuminates the matter: David has cut off Saul's wings. The physical robe is of no importance, but it still has 'wings,' the symbols of shelter Saul is able to bestow. David has amputated one of them. He has essentially asserted the authority he knew was not his to assert: he has removed Saul as the Shelterer of Israel; he has clipped his wings. Worse, he sees in horror that he has violated the beautiful metaphor he's known from childhood as the heart of his great-grandparents' union. This is why he is cut to the heart.

## Jesus' Wings

*"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing." (Mt 23:37)*

Here is the culmination of the sheltering wings: the express intent and purpose of Jesus. Jesus neatly ties the stories of Leading Ladies Deborah and Ruth together: he is the Mother in Israel, as Deborah was; the Redeemer protecting her chicks under sheltering wings, as Ruth clearly saw. And Jesus' wings, unlike any others, have eternal power.

*When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." (Jn 19:23-24)*

Again, this is such an unusual event. The gentle Son of God is being tortured to death by crucifixion – why record what happened to his clothes? One answer is that the verse shows a prophecy being fulfilled,<sup>1</sup> which helps us identify Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah. But there's more.

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<sup>1</sup> Ps 22:18

The garment was never cut. When Saul tears God's prophet Samuel's garment, Saul no longer has shelter beneath God's wings. When David tears Saul's garment, Israel no longer has shelter beneath Saul's wings. But Jesus' garment was not torn. Israel will always be protected beneath His wings.

John's gospel shows Jesus' wings weren't even amputated in his death. Jesus still sheltered people in death, as well as in life: his wings still functioned. That is a key part of the gospel message, that Jesus' death is our covering; his sheltering wings never departed, even when his life did. It's an extraordinary revelation.

## Our Wings

Spiritual patterns rarely appear without an inspiring encouragement, and responsibility, for us to act. It's good to see beautiful patterns, but not enough if we miss their call, and the sheltering wings symbol is no exception. In one of the most beautiful verses of scripture, a favourite of many people, we can now also see an inspiring call to action.

*Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (Is 40:30-31, NIV)*

We can already enjoy the graphic metaphor of taking flight and soaring above the world. But now Ruth has shown us much more in the call to 'spread our wings.' The metaphor says: "We can ascend to Heaven by spreading our wings and learning to fly." It's an inspiring picture, and Ruth's story illuminates what 'spreading our wings' means. It means to provide mercy and shelter – in real tangible terms of time, effort and money – to the world's vulnerable. That is how we learn to fly. That is how we ascend to Heaven, how we come closer to the God of all: by attending the needs of the poor.

## God's Wings

With so many examples, it's no surprise that this metaphor is reflected in Heaven itself. Indeed right from the foundation of the Earth, God revealed to His people how He protects them.

*As an eagle stirs up its nest, hovers (rāḥaḇ) over its young, spreading out its wings, taking them up, carrying them on its wings, so the LORD alone led [Israel].*

*(Dt 32:11-12, NKJV)*

God holds his people with His eagle's wings; an image that traces back to the formation of the Earth itself.

*The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering (rāḥaḇ) over the face of the waters. (Gen 1:2)*

We have been sheltered since the dawn of time.