



Ruth Chapter 3

A reflection by Dr Michael Dyer

Why does Ruth present herself on the threshing floor?

It appears that the key to understanding the third chapter of Ruth is provided by verse 12 of the 4th chapter, when the village women address Naomi: “Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.” (Genesis 38).

The reference to Tamar and the discussion with the elders in Chapter 4 suggest that Ruth’s marriage to Boaz was in the context of levirate custom: that a widow without male issue should marry a brother (or very close relative) of her deceased husband in order to produce a male heir, who would be regarded as the son of the dead husband. In Tamar’s case that person ended up as her father-in-law, Judah.

Just to remind ourselves: Tamar was married to Er, the eldest son of Judah, but he died without issue. Under the levirate custom Tamar was then married to Er’s brother Onan, but he died without impregnating her. Judah claimed a third brother, Shelah, was too young to marry, so he persuaded Tamar to return to her family until Shelah matured. Judah’s intention, however, was to call it a day, reneging on his duty. Eventually, Tamar tricked Judah by posing as a shrine prostitute, and became pregnant with Judah’s twins, the elder of which, Perez, inherited as the son of Er rather than the son of his biological father. The seduction of Judah could be compared with Ruth’s visit to the threshing floor.

A problem, however, is that while Tamar was doing no more than claiming her rights, that is not straightforwardly so in the case of Ruth.

Property Question

In chapter 4 it suddenly appears that Elimelek had owned property in Bethlehem, which is now in the control, or rather trusteeship, of Naomi: “Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, “Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelek, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon’s widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from his hometown.”

The question is: Why and when did Naomi become trustee of that land? (I use the word ‘trustee’, because I’m assuming there is patrilineal inheritance, so that disposal would involve the selection of a new husband within the terms of levirate custom. The land, I suppose, was something of a dowry). When Elimelek died would not the land pass to his male heirs i.e. Mahlon and Kilon? (Let’s say for simplicity, Mahlon). So how come the land fell into Naomi’s stewardship and became hers to sell? Would it not have passed to Ruth as Mahlon’s widow? In levirate terms was not Ruth the significant widow not Naomi? It would appear that Ruth had been disinherited.

Following the Tamar parallel, it could be argued that Ruth appeared on the threshing floor to claim her levirate rights, setting aside the existence of a closer male relative than Boaz. There is, however, no indication in chapter 3 that Ruth is aware of any customary claims, and in chapter 4 the other relative has to be made aware that Ruth is part of the deal, an addition to the transaction

of land in which Naomi not she had the interest. Naomi is redeemed not Ruth (chapter 4 verse 14 “So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. 14 The women said to Naomi: “Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer”).

It seem to me that Ruth’s ethnicity as an outsider in Bethlehem served to negate the property rights she would have enjoyed had she been an Israelite. A harsh verdict on Naomi is that she usurped Ruth’s property rights and exploited her ignorance, but I prefer to think she accepted reality and engineering a good outcome for them both. In a roundabout way it could be argued that Ruth unknowingly goes to the threshing floor to assert her levirate rights, but more consciously to pragmatically make a good catch on her trusted mother-in-law’s instruction.

In the levirate context there is no separation between inheritance and marriage rights: Tamar has a right to be remarried into the family of Judah and to enjoy the associated material benefits. In Ruth’s case, however, she has been deprived of her material rights as the wife of Mahlon. True, Boaz is a close relative of her deceased husband, but there is no evidence that in going to the threshing floor Ruth regarded Boaz as Tamar did Judah. Boaz took Ruth because he was attracted, not obligated, to her. Rather the obligation is to Naomi, as the discussion with the elders indicates. The problem is that the uncoupling of property rights and marriage obligation in Ruth has created a very messy situation. (The situation is further complicated that by the time the story was written down levirate marriage had fallen into desuetude).

Surrogacy

The thought occurs that Ruth went to the threshing floor as a surrogate for Naomi.

At the end of chapter 4: “Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. 17 The women living there said, “Naomi has a son!”

There is, I suppose, a danger of reading too much into this quotation, but it is an intriguing observation in the context of levirate practice. Naomi’s problem is that while having a “dowry” (the property of Elimelek and sons) to attract a husband, she is unlikely to be fertile and produce family heirs.* Her position is weaker than Tamar. On the other hand her daughter-in-law is likely to be capable of reproduction. Consequently, she used Ruth to ensure the continuation of her family line. It is as if Ruth and Naomi had become a single person in which their roles intermingled.

*It is notable that the closer relative does not want Ruth as part of the deal because she was likely to produce children he did not want. Naomi, however, wants more than security for herself. She wants heirs for her husband and sons.”

Conclusion

Levirate marriage is essentially about surrogacy and property rights. By the time Ruth was written the practise had ceased, and perhaps the rather confusing circumstances of Ruth’s visit to the threshing floor helps to explain why. On the other hand, the problems it sought to address have not disappeared, and new ones have emerged. The coronavirus crisis has highlighted problems in the Ukraine, particularly the rejection of surrogate babies with defects. More generally, levirate marriage raises the question of the relationship between biological and sociological concepts of fatherhood and motherhood.

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