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Thursday Morning Bible Study

The Book of Ruth Chapter 3

We are starting on chapter 3 of Ruth, and where are we now? Well we learned that Naomi, a married gal from Bethlehem, living during the time of Gideon the Judge in Judah, had, with her husband Elimelech and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion, had traveled to the land of Moab, during a particular really bad time of famine in the land of Judah. During a ten-year sojourn within Moab, Elimelech dies but not before marrying off his two sons to local Moabite women Orpah and Ruth, but then the two sons die unexpectedly and we now have three widows, one relatively old and two very young, and because of this, not able to support themselves.

After much discussion regarding the fact that Naomi needs to go back to her people and where Naomi strives to send the girls back to their respective families before she goes. Orpah relents and does return, but Ruth insists she must stay with Naomi, so Naomi and Ruth head back for Bethlehem, where they are greeted warmly, but the fact remains, that without the two sons there is no inheritance and no income to take care of them. My guess is, they probably went back to Elimelech's house to live, but how are they to eat?

WE have been introduced to Boaz who is a relative of Elimelech and owns fields of wheat and barley, and Naomi and Ruth come back just in time for the harvests. This also brings us to understanding a couple of Jewish Laws regarding the harvest, and that is the harvesters and reapers are to leave the corners of their fields for the poor, the widows and foreigner to glean left-over stalks of grain and grain that falls from the stalk lying in the field. Ruth takes it upon herself to go to the harvest and glean food for her and Naomi. There she does meet Boaz and Boaz, knowing who she is and that she is taking care of Naomi, grants her special favors, and his protection.

That evening Ruth heads back to Naomi with her day's gleanings totaling almost a bushel plus a part of her lunch time meal, so that Naomi can share in all the benefits Ruth encountered and was given. Ruth regales Naomi with the whole day's adventures and her fortunes. The last chapter ends up with Ruth going back

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to the fields every day under the protection of Boaz, until the whole of the harvest was over.

Ruth 3: 1 through 5; (read)

1] "Then Naomi, her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you?"

Naomi is concerned and with good reason. Her lifespan is short, and relatively speaking she is old and near the end and this was why she had hoped that Ruth would have stayed with her own family in Moab, and thereby would have found a new husband. But in this situation, there is no father or real mother to contract her off, and when Naomi dies, what happens to Ruth? So, this is Naomi assuming responsibility for a girl who is not really family, just an in-law with no family.

2] "Now Boaz, whose young women you were with, is he not our relative? In fact, he is winnowing barley at the threshing floor."

Naomi has her thinking cap on. She realizes she has no authority regarding establishing any contract with marriageable men in the family, but because Boaz is a close relative of Elimelech, maybe through him, the Elimelech line can be saved. This is important for Jewish inheritance laws, and the continuing of the family line.

The next thing we consider here is, Boaz is a wealthy man with many fields and as wealthy as he is, he personally oversees and partakes in the threshing of the wheat and barley sheaves, and the winnowing of the grain. The threshing floor is a flat area near the fields especially prepared for this task. It is leveled and rolled out, and as a couple of writers suggest a layer of fine chalk is sprinkled over it to make it smooth. I have seen some pictures where they use flag stones and fill in the spaces between. Now threshing takes place during the day and winnowing in the evening with the evening breezes helping to do the work. At the end of the day when it gets dark, the foreman or in this case Boaz himself, will literally sleep right next to or directly on the threshing floor to protect the grain from marauding animals or even robbers. Other workers will probably go on back to their homes or to their little tabernacles surrounding the fields.

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3] "Therefore wash yourself and anoint yourself, put on your best garment and go down to the threshing floor but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking."

I found this piece of advice to be peculiar at best and had to study regarding what other scholars thought about this. We know that Naomi is a righteous woman who truly cares about Ruth's welfare, and we know that she knows Boaz and his righteousness and virtuousness, and that he is a close relative. I have left this out until now, but most scholars seem to think he was a brother to Elimelech and as we shall see further into the subject, there may be another brother closer in age to Elimelech who apparently was not so righteous nor virtuous.

As we well know, after working the fields all day, we can build up a good stink, and especially if a woman wants to attract a man, she needs to remove the stink before she approaches him. Naomi tells Ruth to clean up, add a little dab of perfume and put on her best garments, go down to the threshing floor secretly until the eating and general chit-chat of the day is over. By that time Boaz will prepare his bed (probably gathered up straw) and the others will have left.

4] "Then it shall be, when he lies down that you shall notice the place where he lies, and you will go in uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what you should do."

We have gone to great length to put this story in its perspective, but let me add this part of the law as written in Deuteronomy 25: 5 & 6:

"If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the widow of the dead man shall not be married to a stranger outside the family; her husband's brother shall go into her, take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And it shall be that the first-born son which she bears will succeed to the name of his dead brother that his name shall not be blotted out in Israel."

So what this is, Ruth is to fulfil a requirement that Naomi cannot. Only she is able to bear the continuing line of Elimelech, Naomi realizes this and this is what she is pushing. Remember cultures of different people can sometimes be strange to us. All she is doing is have Ruth go to Boaz, in a subservient attitude, and allow

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Boaz, if he is the brother of Elimelech, to make the choice of taking Ruth in lieu of Naomi who is far too old, and carry on Elimelech's line as required by law.

5] "And she said to her, " All that you have said to me, I will do."

That simple. Ruth knows what is going on and as a woman and now a widow, what the rules are, and she obeys.

B] Ruth 3: 6 though 13; (read)

1] "So she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law instructed her. And after Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart was cheerful, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain; and she came softly, uncovered his feet and lay down."

It is safe to say, Boaz has had a successful day, the threshing has gone well and after some good food and wine, he is feeling good, and ready for a night's rest. What happens as the historians tell it, is first there are oxen who pull a sled and break out the grain from the stalk, then the winnowers start with forks and take the straw and shake out all loose grain on to the floor, then take wooden shovels during the evening when the breezes are strongest, and throw the grain up in the air and the breeze will blow off the lighter chaff leaving the clean grain on the floor which is then swept up and bagged and carted off to grain silos for storage. All of this can take days to accomplish, depending on the size of the fields.

This is what Ruth encounters as she heads back down from the town to the threshing floor, and by this time Boaz is settled down to sleep, and Ruth sneaks up and does as she was told to do.

2] "Now it happened at midnight that the man was startled and turned himself; and there was a woman lying at his feet, and he said, "Who are you?"

Frankly that would startle me, and especially at midnight to be awakened like that, after consuming enough wine to help me sleep, I think he probably awoke to head for the latrine. And there she is, but it was dark and hard to tell who she was.

3] "So she answered, " I am Ruth, your maidservant. Take your maidservant under your wing, for you are a close relative."

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So, as we remember the Law, she speaks to Boaz as the widow in absentia knowing that she is stepping in for Naomi and explaining to Boaz that this is the way to keep Elimelech's line going and it is up to Boaz as to how this all plays out. She is not putting herself out there for Boaz to take advantage of, but for Boaz in his virtuousness to make proper decisions.

4] "Then he said, "Blessed are you of the Lord, my daughter! For you shown more kindness at the end than at the beginning, in that you did not go after young men, whether rich or poor."

WE see the true honor of this man. He knows who she is and has seen in her a virtue like his own. Naomi is family, and Ruth has taken great care of her attending to her needs and obeying her instructions. Ruth has not looked for a husband among all the young men of the village, and Boaz has noticed this. She is keeping all of this within the family.

5] "And now my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you request, for all the people of my town know that you are a virtuous woman."

Isn't this the kind of reputation we all long for? In just the short time Ruth has been in Bethlehem, her reputation has been shown as spotless. How she has carried herself, how she has looked after Naomi, and how she has obeyed every word Naomi has declared. Boaz acknowledges this and promises, he will take care of her as she has requested.

6] "Now it is true that I am a close relative, however there is a relative closer than I. Stay this night and in the morning it shall be that if he shall perform the duty of a close relative to you---good, let him do it. But if he does not want to perform the duty for you, then I will perform the duty for you, as the Lord lives. Lie down until morning."

This all pertains to the law as written in Deuteronomy, and apparently if Boaz is a brother of Elimelech, then there must be another brother who, as I said earlier, must be closer in age. Now there is a law that pertains to the brother who does not want to take care of the widow of his brother (Deuteronomy 25: 7 through 9) and this is pretty stiff.

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"But if the man does not want to take his brother's wife, then let his brother's wife go up to the gate to the elders and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to raise up a name to his brother in Israel; he will not perform the duty of my husband's brother.' Then the elders of his city shall call and speak to him. But if he stands firm and says, 'I do not want to take her,' then his brothers wife shall come to him in the presence of the elders, remove his sandal from his foot, spit in his face and answer and say, 'so shall it be done to the man who will not build up his brother's house.'

This is where cultures clash because of their differences. Folks today, look at this and say, "how awful, and how primitive." But that was society then and keeping the family name was extremely important. You did not want the surname blotted out from the records. As you read that law, note that the wife knows what needs to be done and because she married into the family and her job was to bear at least one viable son who carries on the family sur-name, she becomes the important figure here. So we see the conundrum that Naomi had, and that carried on to Ruth.

C] Ruth 3; 14 through 18; (read)

1] "So she lay at his feet until morning, and she arose before one could recognize another. Then he said, "Do not let it be known that the woman came to the threshing floor."

To maintain their virtuousness, she awakes before dawn breaks so it is dark and one still cannot see clearly who is there, and Boaz tells her to not say a word about this little meeting, and just keep it a secret. We know that nothing indecent happened but we also all know how villagers talk and hens cackle."

2] "Also he said, 'bring the shawl that is on you and hold it.' And when she held it he measured 6 ephahs of barley and laid it on her. Then she went into the city."

Boaz is a kind and honest man and has her hold out her shawl where he measures out about 5 bushels of barley grain to take back to Naomi. He has a job to do this day and he cares about the family, about Naomi in particular, and Ruth especially.

Now for some interesting tidbits. It takes about 3 cups of flour to make a 1.5 lb loaf of bread and a bushel makes about 100 loaves or 300 cups of flour. So this gives one an idea how much barley kernels Ruth was given. Therefore, between roasting or parching some barley kernels for consumption, and grinding for mealtime or making flour for bread, Naomi had enough between what Ruth has gathered and what Boaz has donated to open a small bakery. (just making a comment)

3] "When she came to her mother-in-law, she said, 'is that you my daughter?' Then she told her all that the man had done for her. And she said, 'these six ephahs of barley he gave me; for he said to me, 'do not go empty handed to your mother-in-law.'"

Again we see the stress in the writings, that Naomi is "mother-in-law" so the reader doesn't confuse the real relationship we have here. Boaz is remembering Naomi as a sister-in-law and she IS family and he will help take care of her.

4] "Then she said, 'sit still my daughter, until you know how the matter will turn out; for the man will not rest until he has concluded the matter, this day."

Naomi instructs Ruth to stay put until Boaz has confronted this other brother about carrying on the line of Elimelech, and she is sure it will be dealt with immediately.

Girls, remember, this is a different time and people. Women found it an honor to bear children and carry on genetic lines. These lines were important, especially in Israel. Women had position and that was to be the homemaker and they managed the household and the children. In essence they ruled the roost and the men handled the outside work, and daily politics. And the final training of their sons. So there was essentially a measure of equality, and each knew their responsibilities.