

REDEMPTION IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

The book of Ruth is a beautiful, compact, and vivid story. Naomi's husband Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons had to leave their ancestral inheritance at Bethlehem during a drought. Naomi lost Elimelech her husband and her two sons while she was living in Moab. When the widowed and sad Naomi returned from Moab, her widowed Gentile daughter-in-law, Ruth, refused to leave her, and came to Bethlehem with her. Ruth began to glean in Boaz's harvest fields. Boaz was kind to Ruth, and she brought Naomi a good supply of grain. Naomi was overjoyed to hear that Ruth had been working in Boaz's fields. Naomi told Ruth to go to Boaz at his threshing floor, as she knew that he was a kinsman. Boaz promised to act as Ruth's levirate "redeemer." The term "levirate" comes from the Latin word *levir*, which means "a brother-in-law." Boaz challenged an unnamed kinsman, who had a prior claim to Elimelech's family property, to redeem it. When this kinsman wanted the property, Boaz informed him that he was obligated and entitled to do more, marry Ruth. The unnamed kinsman then refused to assume his duty as the "redeemer." Thereupon Boaz announced before the town's leaders his intention to redeem Naomi's property and marry Ruth. Naomi's joy increased when Ruth's son Obed was born.

The book ends with the genealogy from Judah to David, through Obed. Ruth was a descendant from Lot. Both the Moabites and the Ammonites came from the daughters of Lot through incest with their father. In this way, Ruth, a descendant of Lot, became the grandmother of Jesse, and the great-grandmother of King David. Her far greater honour is that she in this way became an ancestor of the promised Messiah, and was one of the four women that the Gospel according to Matthew explicitly mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus in chapter one. She appears there alongside another Gentile woman, Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho, who hid the Israelite spies, and two other women with a stain on their characters, Tamar, and Bathsheba. Tamar had twin sons after she acted as a prostitute to trap Judah, her father-in-law. Bathsheba gave birth to Solomon after she lost her first son, who had been born after adultery with David. The point to make is that Jesus descended from human stock with nasty and shameful pieces in His family tree.

A special feature of the book of Ruth is its illustration of the Old Testament custom of "redemption." The regular rule in the Old Testament was that close relatives were forbidden to marry. A person could not "approach the flesh of his flesh." In other words, marriage was unlawful within three degrees of relationship. A person was not permitted to marry an aunt, a granddaughter, or a daughter in law. Normally, therefore, a person could not marry the wife of his deceased brother. However, the Old Testament provided an exception to prevent the property that a man had inherited in Canaan from passing out of the family if he died without children. When a man died without children, his brother married his widow, and people regarded a son as the son of the deceased man. God designed this law both to protect the widow at a time when there were no widows' pensions, and to guarantee the continuation of the family line and its inheritance. The son whom the brother had by way of "redemption" was related in blood to his deceased legal father (Deut 25:5-10).

Since Elimelech apparently had no surviving brother, another close relative qualified to be the "redeemer." There was no automatic obligation for a kinsman to be a "redeemer." He did not have to take on the responsibility if he could not meet the price of redemption. He had to be willing to redeem the widow (Rth 3:11), and he had to be free to marry her. In the story of Ruth, the man who was more closely related than Boaz to Elimelech and his and Naomi's sons was cautious. He was probably afraid that, if he had only one son and heir by Ruth, his own property would transfer to the family of Elimelech. Strictly, his risk was no greater than that of Boaz. However, his refusal to be the kinsman-redeemer emphasised by contrast Boaz's kindness and generosity to the two widows, Naomi and Ruth, who needed protection.

This levirate provision is familiar to readers of the New Testament in the story that the Sadducees concocted to try to trap Jesus. They tried to ridicule the resurrection by telling a story about seven brothers in succession who married the same woman. They asked which of the brothers would have the woman as his wife in the "resurrection", which they denied (Mt 22:23-33). The Sadducees probably got the germ of their story from the non-canonical book of Tobit. Sarah, the daughter of blind Tobit's closest relative, had seven successive husbands. A demon killed each of them on their wedding nights. In that story, Tobit and Sarah prayed for deliverance. God sent the angel Raphael to act as intercessor. Tobit regained his sight, and Sarah married Tobit's son Tobias.

However, back to the story of Ruth. The obligations of a redeemer were wider than providing an heir for a brother who had died. He redeemed land that a poor relative had sold outside the family (Lv 25:25-28). He even redeemed a relative who had been sold into slavery (Lv 25:47-49), and had the duty to avenge the killing of a relative (Nm 35: 19-21). Therefore, we can understand the revival of Naomi's hopes when she heard that the

Lord had led Ruth to the fields of a relative who might assume the role of a kinsman-redeemer. This was the turning point in Naomi's life.

We do not know whether Elimelech had to sell land that he owned near Bethlehem when his family left for Moab. If that was the case, Naomi retained the right to buy the land back. If she was too poor, she could ask the kinsman-redeemer to do it for her. It is possible that Naomi still held title to the land, but was being forced to sell it after she came back to Bethlehem because of her poverty. Which of the two was the situation, the kinsman-redeemer had the duty to buy back any land that was in danger of passing out of the family's control.

The Old Testament used the word "redeem" in other important contexts. Israelites had to redeem first-born sons from having to be priests by a sacrifice. That applied when Joseph and Mary presented Jesus at the temple on the fortieth day. If an Israelite did not want to pay the cost to redeem a first-born male animal, he had to break its neck (Ex 13:13, 34:20). A sacrifice redeemed the firstborn male animal from death. When a person paid the purchase price for a slave and gave the slave his freedom, he "redeemed" him. In this sense, God redeemed Israel in Egypt at the time of the Passover. He saved their firstborn sons from death, through the blood of the Passover lamb, and freed the nation from slavery.

The Old Testament had prepared believers in the New Testament to know the meanings of "redemption." They knew that, in redemption, there was a cost to pay. The redeemer Boaz was willing to pay what his kindness cost him. "Redeem" meant "buy back", "rescue", and "bring salvation." It was always a kind, restoring act. An important element in all redemption was the payment of a cost. When we ask how God, in His strict justice, can graciously declare people righteous when they are wicked and still sinful (Rm 4:5), the answer lies here. The cost of redemption was the atoning sacrifice, the blood, of His Son, Jesus Christ (Rm 3:24-25). Because of this cost, which God has paid to redeem sinners, He is both the One who is just, and the One who justifies sinners through faith in His Son's redemption (Rm 3:26).

Our redemption entailed gracious, undeserved, sacrificial cost. Peter wrote: "You know that you have not been redeemed with perishable things, with silver or gold, from the worthless lives you had handed over to you from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a spotless and unblemished lamb" (1 Pt 1: 18-19):

Luther had this passage in mind in his explanation of the Second Article of the Creed. He wrote: "At great cost He has saved and redeemed me, a lost and condemned person. He has freed me from sin, death, and the power of the devil - not with silver or gold, but with His holy and precious blood and His innocent suffering and death."