

A Tale of Two Redeemers, Part II (Ruth 4:1-17)

1. The Curious Details of the “Sandal” (v.7-9)

The goal of the levir (Deut. 25:5-10)

- To produce an offspring for the deceased brother to prevent his name from being blotted out permanently from Israel, prevent alienation of the family estate to another tribe, and provide security for the widow (the widow would become the brother’s wife as he performed the levirate role).

The procedure for the bereaved widow (Deut. 25:7-10)

- A. The bereaved widow is to come to the town gate and present her complaint before the elders (v.7).
- B. The elders of the town summon the deceased man’s brother for an official town hearing (v.8).
- C. The brother is invited to speak for himself (v.8).
- D. The widow may perform a ritual of public humiliation by removing a sandal from the brother’s foot, spitting on his face, and declaring “this man refuses to build up his brother’s house.”
- E. That brother’s family is known as the “Family of the Unsandaled.”

The only place in Scripture where the sandal was involved in something official was the levirate duty of the brother to his deceased brother. However, in Ruth 4:7-9, it is in reference to the redemption of the land.

Several differences exist between Deut. 25:5-10 and Ruth 4:7-9: First, the brother of the deceased lives in the same compound (Deut. 25:5). We don’t know where Boaz and Peloni Almoni live. Second, Moses invited the widow to come to the elders to present her case (Deut. 25:7). Naomi and Ruth are nowhere to be seen. Third, the widow was to take his sandal off the disgraced brother’s foot (25:9). Instead, Peloni Almoni takes off his own sandal (Ruth 4:8). Fourth, the widow is to spit in the face of the brother who refuses to carry out his duties as the *levir* (Deut. 25:9). There are no women present to carry this out, and there is no perceivable shame or disgrace that anyone communicates to the reader, whether by Peloni Almoni, Boaz, or the crowd. After all, technically, Peloni Almoni is not the brother of Elimelech or Mahlon.

Peloni Almoni transfers his position as closer kin by removing his sandal and (supposedly) handed it to Boaz, thus symbolizing Boaz’ position from “one of the redeemers” to “the redeemer” (2:20; 3:9-12). This shoe is a sign of authority and of inheritance (Deut. 1:36; 11:24; Josh. 1:3; 14:9). It was the custom of the day (4:7).

2. The Consent of Boaz’ Marriage to Ruth (v.10, 13)

- Boaz has accepted the transfer rights of the redeemer through this public ceremony.
- He publicly acknowledges (again) that he intends to marry Ruth and function as the *levir* (in the spirit of the law, since Boaz is not the brother of Elimelech or Mahlon). The reader is informed for the first time who Ruth was married to previously (Mahlon).
- Ruth has been described as a worthy woman, and the personification of lady wisdom in Prov. 31. She emulates lady wisdom in her trustworthiness (Prov. 31:11), industry (v.9,13-15, 27), shrewdness (v.16, 18), generosity towards the needy (v.20), and efficiency (v.29). She is praised at the gates (v.31).
- Boaz is not marrying a wicked and depraved woman: she is upright. The same Hebrew word is used to describe Boaz and Ruth: worthy (2:1; 3:11).

3. The Crowd of Witnesses at the Gate (v.11-12)

- What began as twelve men (Boaz, Peloni Almoni, and ten elders), has now grown to a crowd. We are unsure of how many were there, but this was a public hearing. Men and women passing by, in curiosity, would have stopped to witness this.
- In this setting, nothing was signed: there were verbal acknowledgements, and witnesses to affirm, or deny, the transaction. While judicial responsibility was reserved for the elders, the crowd served as public witnesses. Everyone is celebrating this transfer of redemption of land, and intention of marriage.

The Crowd’s Benediction for Boaz:

Progeny (children):

- A. Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29-30; 35:16-18): “May the LORD make the woman (Ruth) coming into your house like Rachel and Leah.” Rachel is placed before Leah, even though Leah was the older and more dominant wife. Leah was also the mother of Judah, whose descendants would populate Ephrathah, and Bethlehem. Rachel was barren at one point (as was Ruth).
- B. Perez (Gen 38): as the oldest twin (Perez and Zerah), he was one of the sons born through a deceptive stratagem by Tamar to seduce Judah. This line founded Bethlehem. The crowd hoped that a foreign woman would be placed besides the matriarchs of Israel! It was through Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah that Jacob’s twelve sons were born (Gen 29-30; 35:16-18), and through whom the twelve tribes of Israel were established.

Integrity: “May you act worthily.”

Popularity: “May you be renowned in all Israel.”

4. The Chorus of Women and Naomi’s Joy (v.13-17)

While not typical of birth narratives, the author includes that Boaz took Ruth as his wife (v.13). She is not referred to as “the daughter of Naomi” (1:11, 13; 2:3, 22; 3:1, 16, 18), “Ruth” (2:8; 3:10), a “foreigner” (2:10), “maidservant” (2:13), or even “wife of a dead man” (4:5) but instead, the “wife” of a living man. Boaz is the answer to Naomi’s prayer for Ruth (1:9). The narrator, for the second time (1:6), has noted that God, as the subject of the verb, gave her (Ruth) conception. In this case, it appears as though Mahlon was sterile.

The scene transitions (presumably nine months later) from the city gates to the house of Boaz and Ruth. “The women” (v.14) ends the *inclusio* that began when Naomi arrived in Bethlehem (1:19-21). We cannot state for sure if these women were the same women, but Naomi previously expressed her emptiness to “the women” (1:19, 21) and they were silent. Now, the women announce Naomi’s fulness, and Naomi is silent (4:17).

This scene is unconventional in Scripture: The announcement of the birth is separate from the marriage (v.13, 17). The child is named by “the women” (v.17). This is the only place where a name was given by someone other than a parent. Ruth is noted as being more to Naomi than “seven sons.” A boy is referred to as a redeemer (where in Scripture it is always an adult).

Up to this point, nothing has been stated by Boaz, or the narrator, of where and how Naomi fits into the picture. This son, when he was born, was placed on the lap of Naomi (bosom) and she became his “nurse.” This is not “wet nursing” but instead expressing guardianship: Naomi has joyfully received her new status as she tenderly receives this child.

The name “Obed” is most likely from the Hebrew word “to serve.” The LORD has paid Ruth in full (2:11; 3:10), which includes the redemption of land, and levirate marriage to Boaz to raise a seed for the house of Elimelech. Obed has “restored” Naomi’s life as a redeemer, for she now has hope and is full: she has food and a family. The LORD has provided!