

RUTH
3:1-5

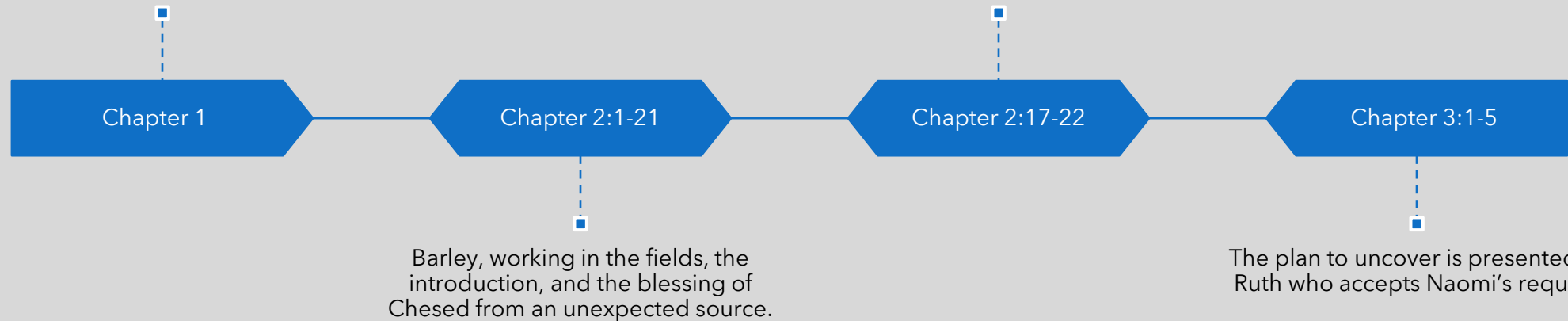
The Plan to Uncover

Timeline of Ruth So far

From Bethlehem to Moab
(Famine to Respite)

And from Moab to Bethlehem (From death to hope)... "The arrived at the beginning o the barley harvest."

The introduction of Go'el: Boaz and God "take generous notice of Ruth and Naomi"



Opening Prayer

Dear Lord,

As we enter deeper into the drama of Ruth, we acknowledge that you are the Lord of history and that sometimes you write straight with crooked lines. We know that you were with Naomi and Ruth as they created and refined their plan, and we know that you used the events of that night on the threshing floor to advance Israel's history to the arrival of your son.

We ask you to be with us and to help us see your presence in our lives. Our own history is in your hands, but we often feel alone and unprotected. There are so many things that terrify us! Lead our lives in the way of your Son and give us your Holy Spirit to be our guide. May we discover your truth deep within us and in our own circumstances. May we see your Son in the face of everyone we meet, and may we find the courage to face the days ahead fully confident in a future that is yet to be revealed. We ask all of this in the name of your blessed son, Amen!

3:1 Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you.'

"Matchmaking is an ancient tradition, central to Jewish culture. In Hebrew it is referred to as Shidduch and is considered a mitzvah (commandment). Traditionally, any member of the community could (and often would) try his hand at matchmaking, thus becoming a matchmaker or shadchan. Often, when the amateur matchmakers (mothers, family members, friends, etc.) failed to succeed, a professional shadchan would be hired. At a time when contacts between young Jewish boys and girls were restricted if not forbidden, this community involvement ensured that every Jewish single of marriageable age would find a mate so the community would survive and eventually grow." (Simantov International.)

"After approximately two months (the duration of the barley and wheat harvests; see 1:22 and 2:23), we find Naomi hatching a plan. She states that it is for Ruth's own good (3:1), but if all goes well, Naomi, too, will benefit (see 2:18; 3:17; 4:9, 14-17)." (Working Preacher.)

The word Menuha (which in 1:9 was translated as "security") here means a permanent home or a "resting place." This plays on the theme of the last sentence of the last chapter, "She lived with her mother-in-law." "As a widow and a foreigner, without property or protector, Ruth has no home of her own...Naomi's hopes had been raised by the attention Boaz paid to Ruth at their first encounter. But as the harvest season draws to an end without any further action from Boaz, Naomi sees that she and Ruth will need to 'work out their destinies'" (NIB, quote from Phyllis Trible, "A Human Comedy," in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978,] 195.)

Shadchan!



3:2 Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing-floor

“Carefully Contrived Ambiguity” (Edward Campbell, *Ruth*, 131): *Goel* or *yd*? Naomi has called Boaz a “kinsman redeemer” before (*goel*;) in fact, this is her favorite name for Boaz. But here, she uses a word that shares the same root with the verb “to know.” This verb is used multiple times in Scripture to describe all sorts of knowing: Intellectual, emotional, and sexual knowing. Examples of this last type of knowing are: “And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the Lord” (Genesis 4:1, 4:17, 4:25, 19:5, Judges 11:39, Judges 19:25, 1 Kings 1:4 KJV.)

Connection between Naomi’s plan and the stories of Genesis 19:30-38 (The ancestors of Moab) and 38:12-19 (Tamar’s deception.)

Desperate women without husbands who took matters into their own hands. Naomi draws from their example and devises a plan that will include some of the same procedures used by these women.

“No one could have heard the story of Ruth the Moabitess without thinking of Lot’s daughter (Ruth’s ancestress) and the incestuous beginning of the Moabite nation.” (Warren Austin Gage, “Ruth upon the threshing floor and the Sin of Gibeah; A Biblical-Theological Study,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 51 (1989) 370.)

A reader of the story of Ruth knows that the success of the plot depends on several factors, including Boaz being drunk with wine, and consequently having no memory of the event. (NIB)

3 Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing-floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.

“Washing, anointing (or perfuming oneself), and donning one’s best clothes may symbolize either the end of a period of mourning (cf. 2 Sam 12:20) or the preparation of a bride for a wedding (cf. Ezek 16:9.) (NIB)”

“Do not make yourself known... until...” Again, this is carefully contrived ambiguity. The author has Naomi say, “know him (seduce him, have sex with him,) but not until he is drunk.” But the author doesn’t say this. Rather he uses unclear language, filled with code and sexualized ambiguity. The author says what he wants to say, without actually saying the words.

“Until the man has finished eating and drinking.” It would have been customary for a man of means to have plenty of good wine at his meals. The implication is that if Ruth waits, Boaz will be drunk enough to sleep with her without even knowing it. This expression is full of double meaning and ambiguity.

“It is quite possible that when he is startled awake and finds himself lying half naked next to a Moabite woman, Boaz imagines that Ruth has done what her ancestress, Lot’s daughter, did before her.” (Phillips, “The Book of Ruth -Deception and Shame,” 14.)

3:4 When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.'

Sakab (Sleep, lay down): These words can be used in an innocent manner. "I go to sleep, you lay down to take a nap, etc." They can also be used to indicate sexual intercourse. " See for example Genesis 19:33-35. See also Genesis 30:15-16.

Gala (Uncover, is a sexualized term when paired with any form of nakedness): "None of you shall approach anyone near of kin to uncover nakedness: I am the Lord." (Leviticus 18:6.) In some cases, the word can mean "removed" as in removed from the nation for political reasons

Nakedness in most of these Levitical contexts is a euphemism for genitalia: Isaiah 47:3

The word used here for "feet" is also used in Scripture to mean genitalia. The literal translation is best seen as "lower body" rather than feet. See for example, Isaiah 6:2, "Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet (lower body), and with two they flew." Read Ezekiel 16:25, where prostitution is described as the offering of one's feet to every passerby." But English translators say, "yourself," "your services," and even "your body." We have forgotten the biblical meaning of uncovering feet and without this understanding, we often misunderstand biblical texts.

"The language used here conceals as much as it reveals. Clearly there are sexual overtones, but "undertones" may actually be more accurate." (Working Preacher.)

The expression, "He will tell you what to do" assumes that Boaz, although inebriated, will be receptive to the young woman's advances. This is a risk that could have ended badly.

5 She said to her, 'All that you tell me I will do.'

Once again, Ruth is presented as the model of obedience, enacting the full meaning of Naomi's now frequent term of endearment, "Daughter." She says, "All that you tell me I will do." In other words, "I am your dutiful daughter and I have pledged obedience to you. Whatever you command, I will do!"

We must not allow this unconditional obedience to obscure Ruth's own smarts and creativity. She will do what her mother-in-law asks, but she will alter the script in a significant way, as we will see next week.

The way the author uses language in this passage is intended to do something very specific in the mind of the reader. This is, if you will, an undoing of the behaviors of Lot's daughters. The author wants you to see how uncovering someone's nakedness (an act prohibited by Leviticus) may be required to obtain redemption: "With the language he uses, the narrator encourages the audience to consider ways in which 'uncovering' (with all its possible innuendos) can lead to 'recovering' -to the redemption of what was lost." (NIB.)

This provocative introduction places Naomi on par with "women in the Bible who found ways to transcend, if not subvert, the seemingly incorrigible patriarchy." (Jurgette Honculada.) Let us take a closer look at these 5 women.

5 Women who Subvert the Patriarchy in the 42 Generations of Jesus the Messiah in Matthew: Tamar

Tamar: Taking matters into her own hand using sexuality. Genesis 38: Judah, one of the brothers of Joseph, marries the daughter of Shua and has a son he names Er. He then has two more sons, Onan and Shelah. Judah arranged a marriage for Er to a woman named Tamar. Er dies leaving Tamar childless and inheritance-less. In accordance with the Levirate marriage law, Judah asks his sons Onan and Shelah to take Tamar and give offspring to their dead brother. Onan used the girl but refused to “give seed” to his dead brother. The other son refused. The third child was just a young kid. Judah said to Tamar, “Remain a widow in your father’s house until my son Shelah grows up.” The implication was that this last son would fulfil the Levirate mandate. Soon, Judah’s wife died, and he moved to the country. Tamar heard of his return and went to meet him, but before he was able to speak to him, she learned that the young man was already married, which means that Judah did not fulfil his promises and she was destined to remain a childless widow for ever. Tamar took matters into her hand. She dressed as a Temple prostitute and met Judah. He, thinking she was a prostitute, slept with her and she became pregnant with twins. Three months later, Judah becomes the avenger of blood. His daughter-in-law is pregnant, and because she is unmarried, she is accused of practicing whoredom. He then must avenge his son’s honor. When Judah is told that she was the stranger with whom he had sex, he forgives her, he lets her go and “he did not lie with her again.” When the twins were born, Judah provided for them. Perez, the older twin, becomes an ancestor of Boaz, whom we meet in the story of Ruth.

Rahab, the Canaanite: “Mother” of Boaz

A Wise Prostitute who Uses her Cunning to Save a Family and a Nation. Joshua 2: Joshua sends two spies to the city of Jericho before he starts the conquest of the Promised Land. The spies bridge the wall of the city through the house of a known prostitute who gives them shelter and allows them safe passage to spy on the land. Rahab realizes the strength and fierceness of the would-be attackers and develops an alliance with them. When the invasion takes place, she wants the Israelites to spare her family, “Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them—and that you will save us from death.” The spies agree to the request and order her to gather all her relatives in her house and to place a crimson ribbon on all windows and doors as a sign to the invaders. If any relatives are found in the street and killed, their blood will be on Rahab. She agrees and does as she is told. Her entire family is spared and allowed to remain and thrive in the land. Rahab then marries a Jewish man from the tribe of Judah by the name of Salmon. Both Rahab and Judah become descendants of Boaz’s mother, making Rahab one of only 5 women names in the genealogy of Jesus of Nazareth. Rahab’s lie to her own military people, concealment of the spies, assistance in the invasion, and marriage to a Jewish man are seen in Biblical literature as an act of complete devotion to an unknown God and people, which predates Ruth’s own conversion. This is now the second prostitute to be listed in the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah.

Ruth, but After Ruth Comes Bathsheba, Wife of Uriah the Hittite

Since we are in a study of Ruth (the Third Woman in the genealogy of Jesus) let us concentrate on the Forth Woman in the list.

2 Samuel 11: Bathsheba is the wife of one of David's warriors. She is young, childless, and beautiful. As David is walking on his terrace, he saw the young woman taking a bath completely naked. He inquired about her and was notified that she was the wife of Uriah. He orders her to be brought to him and has sex with her while she is in her period purification. The young woman becomes pregnant and David schemes a convoluted plot to make Uriah believe that the child was his. Uriah acting as a loyal and faithful soldier refuses to follow along with David's plans. In a complete comedy of errors that sounds unbelievable, Uriah returns to the battlefield without laying with his wife. David, at this point, believes he has no choice but to orchestrate the death of Uriah. He sends orders to move the soldier to the front lines, where is killed in combat. God punishes David through the loss of Bathsheba's pregnancy. After a long period of mourning, David takes Bathsheba as his wife and gives her other children. One of these is Solomon, who becomes King of Israel after David and who is part of the lineage of Jesus of Nazareth. Bathsheba shares "sexual promiscuity" with the former three women in the list of 5. She slept with another man while married to Uriah. Although readers understand her powerlessness, she still bears some (minor) responsibility.

Halleluiah (Leonard Cohen)



Mary

Luke and Matthew allow us to see Mary from the eyes of faith, which instantaneously places her in a very favored light. But when you look at Mary's life and actions, without the benefit of Biblical literature, this is what you get:

Luke 1:26-38: A young virgin is promised into marriage to a man named Joseph (which Matthew places directly in the 42 generations of Jesus of Nazareth.) Mysteriously and secretly this young woman is found to be with child, but not from her promised husband. In fact, this promised husband has no idea how the pregnancy originated. In accordance with the Law, Joseph is contemplating sending the young woman back to her father's house, who would have the responsibility to avenge the honor of the family's and the village by punishing, exiling, and/or putting the young woman to death. Joseph agonizes over this decision because he loves the young woman whom he considers an adulteress in his heart. In a great show of mercy and compassion, the righteous Joseph decides to keep the young woman's secret and to marry her. Later, he decides to adopt the child as his, giving the legitimacy of his family name to a child born out of an unfortunate liaison. The child grows in Joseph and Mary's house with the couple, which according to various sources had other children. At some point, Joseph, the father, dies and Jesus becomes the head of his household. At some point, he becomes one of many political revolutionaries in Palestine and was executed for sedition by the Roman authorities, just like the others before and after him. A group of his friends, however, spread a story about this Jesus' resurrection, and before the end of that century almost a million people had come to believe their story... When you take away allusions of angels, God's plans for the salvation of the world, the biblical story of the resurrection, and the evangelists' testimony about Jesus, Mary becomes a woman like Ruth, who met a righteous man to forgive her indiscretion and to redeem her honor.

The Stage is Set

We have reached a crucial place in the great drama of Ruth. We have heard Naomi's plan and we all have our misgivings. If we didn't know the rest of the story, we would be very worried about Ruth's safety: The girl could be stopped for trespassing, she could be accused of trying to seduce Boaz, she could be labeled a "loosed woman," she could face physical or sexual attack if any man saw her in the threshing floor at midnight, she could be expelled from the village, etc. Then, what if Boaz disapproves? He can have her punished and even stoned.

If we didn't know the story, we would be somewhat angry that Naomi seems to be following Abraham's storyline in Genesis 12:10-13, or Lot's storyline in Genesis 19:7-8. Naomi is literally, pimping Ruth out, in part out of self-interest.

At this stage, it would be normal to see Ruth as a gullible young foreigner unaware of the local customs regarding out-of-wedlock sex and a poor understanding of Levirate expectations. I caution against seeing Ruth as totally innocent, gullible, and malleable. When it comes to Ruth, we have seen a certain courage and cunning that should warn us against thinking that she will follow Naomi's script strictly as instructed.

It would be normal to think of Ruth as a type-cast for Lot's daughters, the elder of which became the ancestress or Mother of Moab. Here is a Moabitess doing what her mother did at the beginning of Moab's history. This might be in the author's mind, but how the author resolved the conflict will reverse the shame of Lot's eldest daughter.

Closing Prayer: A Prayer for Justice

Living God,
deliver us from a world without justice
and a future without mercy;
in your mercy, establish justice,
and in your justice, remember the mercy
revealed to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.