

RUTH 3

3 One day Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi said to her, "My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. ²Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. ³Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do."

⁵"I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered. ⁶So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do.

⁷When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. ⁸In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet!

⁹"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family."

¹⁰"The Lord bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. ¹¹And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character. ¹²Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I. ¹³Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to do his duty as your guardian-redeemer, good; let him redeem you. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives I will do it. Lie here until morning."

¹⁴So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized; and he said, "No one must know that a woman came to the threshing floor."

¹⁵He also said, "Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out." When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and placed the bundle on her. Then he went back to town.

¹⁶When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, "How did it go, my daughter?"

Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her ¹⁷and added, "He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'"

¹⁸Then Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today."

Chapter 3: “Love’s Request”

In chapter two it became clear that an attachment was developing between Boaz and Ruth. In spite of this, Boaz has not taken any practical steps (towards marriage), and Naomi cooks up a plan to figure out what the intentions of Boaz are.

The scenario that unfolds in chapter three is very bizarre to the modern reader, but it is in keeping with the custom of that period and the teaching of Mosaic Law.

This is a simpler and more rustic setting from what we are familiar with. It was a time in which the wealthy owner of a large and prosperous estate would himself winnow barley and then sleep on an open threshing floor.

So Boaz wakes and is alarmed to find a woman sleeping at his feet. The words that she immediately speaks tell him all he needs to know and he understands perfectly that she is asking him to marry her. ▶

Boaz’ understanding of Ruth’s words helps us to better understand the cultural expectation. He saw nothing wrong in the fact that she had come to him in this way. Her request that he marry her as redeemer, seems to him not only natural and also *right*, but he sees it as even further proof of her “noble character” (NIV) or “virtue” (KJV) or “excellence” (NASB).

This interesting term that Boaz uses to describe Ruth pops up elsewhere in scripture. In fact, it is the same word that is used in Proverbs 31:10 (traditionally titled “the virtuous wife”). The literal meaning of the Hebrew term used here (חיל) is “valour” or “strength” and can also suggest moral worth. This is one instance where a look at the original language can help us to understand why the various translations have such apparently different meanings. A term like this may not have an obvious English equivalent, so delving into the literal Hebrew definition of the term can enhance our understanding of what scripture is getting at.

While Ruth’s actions were not un-virtuous, they did involve risk. Her position is a vulnerable one. But Boaz is also virtuous, as his actions prove. As one commentator puts it, “Even in the middle of the night he did not hesitate for a moment to do what it was his duty to do with regard to the young woman towards whom he felt already so strongly attached. He made his own personal inclinations subordinate to the traditional custom, and only when this permitted him to marry Ruth was he ready to do so.” Boaz did not know whether Ruth would have to become the wife of the nearer relation. His immediate concern is for her safety (he did not send her out till morning) and reputation (he did not want it known that she had come to him).



“RUTH AND BOAZ,” CHRIS HIGHAM

RUTH 3:9

^{9a}“Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.”

Compare the language in Ruth with the language of The Song of Songs...

SONG OF SONGS 2:4

⁴“My beloved... brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.”

A quick aside: The Song of Songs has one recurring phrase (three times in eight chapters) which gets very little attention, but which is deserves reflection:

SONG OF SONGS 2:7, 3:5, 8:4

⁷...Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready.