

Potomac Crossing Ward, Ashburn Stake
Gospel Doctrine, Old Testament
Lesson 20: Ruth, 1 Samuel 1
June 1, 2014

The previous lesson was about how bad things go in Israel after Joshua died and before Samuel arrived. The text of Judges is cynical and depressing. The present text is opposite of Judges. Occurring during the same time (cf. 1:1), the story here is uplifting, is about faithful people who persevere and are rewarded for their faithfulness.

Didactic Nature of the Text

The question we have to ask ourselves is, "Why is this story of mundane agriculturalists which is some 3000 years old relevant to us today?" It is relevant because of what the characters in the story teach us. First we have Elimelech and Naomi and their children as the negative examples, then we have Ruth and Boaz and their son as positive examples..

Elimelech = "my God is king"

Naomi = "my delight" or "pleasing"

Mahlon = "sick"

Chilion = "pining"

Boaz = "swift", "quick", maybe "strength"

Ruth = obscure, may mean "overflowing with water" as in "well watered garden"

Obed = "worship" or "service"

Ruth and Boaz serve as types of average people who live faithfully and therefore enjoy the Lord's Providence and they end up living "Happily Ever After". All of us want to live "Happily Ever After", and so we must therefore be like Ruth and Boaz. Lets consider the woman Ruth and the man Boaz:

There are two sets of examples presented, first negative, then positive.

Negative Example

Elimilech & Naomi

1:1 Leave Bethlehem and move to Moab.

This one verse says has a lot of implied meaning. First, it is invoking the very negative context of the book of Judges, second it says there is a famine, which is a common covenant curse, and third it says they were from Bethlehem, the house of bread, and they moved to Moab, a land and people cursed by the Lord. The implications are they were not doing what they should, just like everyone else in Israel during the time of Judges and while they lived in "the house of bread" they

were left hungry, by not being faithful to the covenant, so they resort to the land of their enemies.

1:3-4 Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi with two sons. Rather than return to their native land to find them Israelite wives, Naomi stays in Moab and they marry Moabite women, which is forbidden in the Law. Both of them die, and Naomi is left with no family.

1:19-20 After all of this, Naomi blames the Lord for her misfortune and calls herself “Bitterness”. She said she left full, but returns empty. Wait a minute, the reason they left Israel and moved to Moab was because their stomachs were empty, now they return to Israel because there is food there, the promise of a full stomach? Their family followed their stomachs and blame the Lord for their misfortune, rather than keeping the faith and persevering.

Positive Example

The Woman, Ruth

1:4 Moabite (cp. Deut. 23:3, Ezra 9:1-3, Neh 13:1, 23-31), yet among Israel (faithful, despite adversity)

1:11-18 Places spiritual needs before physical needs, she has little hope of physical comfort among Israel (cf. v. 11-13) yet remains faithful

2:2 Humble, willing to submit to labor associated with poverty and servitude

2:7 Hard working

2:14, 18 Selfless, even in her own hunger she remembers her mother-in-law

2:20, 3:10 Seeks to fulfil the levir's duty and raise up a son to her deceased husband rather than persuing a young man for a husband to satisfy herself

The Man, Boaz

2:8-9 Generous and gracious, despite easy opportunity to reject her

2:11-12 Religious and spiritual, disregards race because of her faithfulness

2:14-16 Protective

3:11-13 Observes the spirit of the Law over the letter of the Law

3:11, 14 Concerned about her reputation, discreet

4:8 Redeemer, performs the levir's duty

Boaz obviously stayed in Bethlehem, where Elimilech did not. Boaz is faithful and ultimately prospers, despite the adversity. His faithfulness results in him being able to act as the redeemer of Naomi and Rachel and Elimilech's sons. Ruth, despite the adversity she faces, is faithful and ultimately prospers as well.

The message here is plain. When things get tough, persevere and you will ultimately prosper. If you give in and go the way of the world, then you will be left to suffer the way of the world.

The Threshing Floor

In chapter 3, Naomi prompts Ruth to go and claim the right of redeeming kinsman, or the Levir's duty.

Unseemly? No.

It is common for people to speculate that the story has some unseemly aspects to it. I consider such a reading to be unwarranted. Some think Naomi is being suggestive, but in v. 5 Ruth says she will do as Naomi instructs and v. 6 repeats that Ruth did just as Naomi suggested. There is no duplicity here. Ruth does not act unseemly, and Naomi did not suggest she do so.

“kanaph”

Ruth sneaks in and lays down. When discovered in the middle of the night, Boaz says:

3:9 And he said, Who art thou? And she answered, I am Ruth thine handmaid:
spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman.

For “skirt” the Hebrew is “kanaph”, which is the same Hebrew term used in 2:12 where Boaz blesses Ruth for her loyalty:

3:12 The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord
God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.

The “wings” are “kanaph”. Ruth is appealing to Boaz's prior blessing by saying he can provide that blessing on her by performing the Levir's duty. Boaz prayed for God's blessing on Ruth, and now she is saying he is the one who can fulfill that blessing. The reference to the covering of the skirt is also an allusion to marriage, cp. Deut. 23:1, Ezek. 16:8. The promise of the Levir's duty (Deut 25:5-10) is that a widowed woman would have children and a claim to subsistence.

This is a compelling appeal to faithfulness, not an unseemly appeal to a man's carnal nature. The examples of Ruth and Boaz are the epitome of faithfulness in a time of lawlessness (i.e., the book of Judges).

Why then did Naomi suggest she go at night and Ruth then go at night? To give Boaz the opportunity to accept his responsibility to Ruth without any outside pressure. When else would Ruth be able to approach him privately, giving him the opportunity to accept or reject her request? If they were to discuss this during the day, with others present, it would appear Ruth is pressuring him, not giving him the choice. In such a situation, it would appear Ruth is trying to force Boaz, and in such a case, if he wanted to back out, he could simply reject her based on her being a Moabite.

After Boaz and Ruth marry, they have a son, named “Obed”, meaning “worship” or “service”. Both of these people worship and server the Lord in faith, and the result is they fulfil the levir’s duty and end up siring the heir of the throne.

1 Samuel 1

Here we ease back into the less mundane, and more miraculous. We have a woman in a plural marriage who has no children, and is therefore scorned by the other wife. She pleads with the Lord to give her a son, promises to dedicate him to Temple service, and her faith is rewarded. And this son ultimately turns out to be the prophet Samuel.

Thus, in this lesson we see the Lord interacting with faithful women to accomplish their, and His, needs and desires when they are righteous. Especially consider how things worked out with Samuel. The Lord had obviously foreordained Samuel, so He was looking for a choice woman to grant his birth to, so that he would be raised appropriately. Here the Lord find such a woman in humble and penitent circumstances, whose faith is sufficient and whose commitment to the Lord fits His needs. If we were all more penitent like these women we would find more acts of Providence in our lives.

Conclusion

In these stories we have people living their lives. Some choose to persevere despite the adversity, while others cave in and do the worldly thing. There are no big miracles, there are no big revelations, no massive battles and providential victories. This is life, day in and day out. The message here is if we are faithful, like Ruth and Boaz, then we will be blessed in the long run. Yes, there will still be adversity, that is life, but the Lord blesses those who do the right thing.