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Happily Ever After (Ruth 3)

Pentecost VI

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‘Charm is not a characteristic that one normally associates with biblical narrative, but this idyll is charming from beginning to end’.¹ This is Hebrew scholar Robert Alter speaking of the book of Ruth. A good part of its charm, he suggests, is that in Ruth there are no bad people. Everyone behaves decently; Ruth and Boaz in particular are exemplary. You might almost say they’re made for one another.

Last week we got up to the part of the story where Ruth and Boaz meet for the first time. She, a woman from the land of Moab, has been gleaning in the field at harvest time – a field, as it happens, that belongs to him; and he has spoken kindly to her, offered her water to quench her thirst and shared his table with her. In these elements, we noted how the author of Ruth has subtly woven the typology of biblical betrothal scenes into the account of this meeting. It seems that things are looking promising between them, but nothing as yet has been made explicit. In fact, it’s only when she goes home to her mother-in-law Naomi at the end of the day, that Ruth becomes aware of who Boaz is – that he is, in Naomi’s words, ‘a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin’. For now, she’s simply grateful for the protection he affords, and so it’s in his field that she gleans until the end of the barley and wheat harvests.

Naomi, however, has been thinking longer term. ‘My daughter, shall I not seek a settled place for you, that it be well for you?’, she asks. And naturally Naomi’s designs fix on Boaz, ‘our kinsman’, who, she understands, will be spending the night at the threshing floor winnowing his barley. Why don’t you make yourself look nice, she

¹ Robert Alter, *Strong as Death is Love* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), p.59.

suggests to Ruth; why don't you 'bathe and anoint yourself and put on your garments', and go down to the threshing floor yourself? These instructions, says Alter, initiate a nocturnal encounter between Ruth and Boaz – one that almost teasingly hints 'at an erotic experience' while remaining 'pointedly not consummated'.² It's like any good love story – we're supposed to enjoy the build up, the flirting, the sexual tension. Naomi furnishes Ruth with some homely wisdom too: 'do not let yourself be known to the man till he has finished eating and drinking'. The verb 'to know' can have a sexual meaning in biblical usage – so the fact that it is reiterated in the episode plays a role in the narrative's erotic tease of the narrative. Meanwhile the wisdom of the instruction to wait until he's fed is borne out by the fact that after his meal, Boaz comes to lie down 'in good cheer'.

The question of what happens next is not entirely clear. Naomi has told Ruth that when Boaz lies down, she is to uncover his feet and lie down too. So what does it mean to 'uncover his feet'? It *sounds* suggestive. And indeed, in some ways, it is. Alter says that the verb of 'uncovering' here is the same as the one used in biblical talk of 'uncovering someone's nakedness', and this phrase is a synonym for sexual intercourse. The implicit eroticism of the narrative, then, is again highlighted. But Alter also says that the suggestion of some interpreters that 'feet' is a euphemism for 'penis' is highly dubious.³ Her action isn't quite as bold as that – and as the story unfolds, it seems more likely that her purpose is not so much to seduce Boaz as to activate his obligations as her kinsman to marry her.

Well, there's a lot in this to make a 21st century feminist uneasy, to say the least – my flesh creeps thinking of Ruth's degree of sexual vulnerability here, as well the utter dependence of these women on winning male patronage and protection. Naomi could even be said be acting as a kind of 'pimp', putting Ruth at risk if not of rape, at least of

² Alter, *Strong as Death is Love*, p.72.

³ Alter, *Strong as Death is Love*, p.72.

permanent social death – as evidenced by the fact that she had to leave in the half-light of dawn before it could be known that she'd to the threshing floor. It all seems pretty horrendous. But, of course, we're not in the 21st century. This is a story from a different world – and from inside the assumptions and social codes of that different world, all these characters can be said to have behaved not only appropriately, but even well – remember Alter's assessment, 'in Ruth, there are no bad people'.⁴ So let's set aside our scruples for now and return again to the artistry of the text – and to a startled Boaz waking up to discover Ruth lying at his feet. Who are you, he asks? And here comes the crucial reply. 'I am Ruth, your servant. May you spread your wing over your servant, for you are a redeeming kinsman'.

Earlier in the story, when Boaz first met Ruth, he had praised her for her kindness to her mother-in-law Naomi, and prayed a blessing on her from 'the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge'. Now, Ruth echoes these words, asking Boaz to spread his wing or mantle over her - and the further connotation here is that the notion of 'sheltering wings can be a symbol of marriage' as in the book of Ezekiel, where God says to Jerusalem: 'I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness; I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you ... and you became mine' (Ezek. 16: 8). And this marital connotation is made explicit by Ruth's identification of Boaz as 'a redeeming kinsman', that is, a man eligible by his relationship to Ruth's dead husband, to marry her so as to continue the family name of the man who has died.

That Boaz understood what Ruth was asking him becomes clear from his reply: he praises her for her latest kindness or loyalty in not having gone after the young men she worked with during the day, but in seeking marriage in proper form. 'And now, my daughter', he says, 'do not be afraid. Whatever you say I will do for you' for everyone knows that 'you are a worthy woman'. And here again, the author subtly indicates that

⁴ Alter, *Strong as Death is Love*, p.58.

this pair are a match – for Ruth is said by Boaz to be ‘worthy woman’ just as he was introduced at the outset as ‘a man of worth’. As hearers of this tale, we’re starting to breathe easy – it looks like it’s all going to end happily after all.

There is, however, just one minor hitch. Though it’s true, says Boaz, that I am a redeeming kinsman and thus authorized to marry you, ‘there is also a redeeming kinsman closer than I’. That is, there’s someone whose got more right to you than I do ... someone entitled to first refusal. (And, let’s just take another short pause to settle our feminist sensibilities...). But, once again, the narration is masterful. It’s like any good love story – there’s the moment you think it’s going to turn out, followed immediately by the moment when it all seems destined to go awry – the lovers’ quarrel, the unforeseen obstacle, the existence of some random but more closely related redeeming kinsman who, incidentally, is introduced at the beginning of Chapter 4 as ‘So and so’, the only character in the story who is unnamed.⁵ Take that ...

Well, it takes a few verses in the next chapter to sort it all out, but though the unnamed redeeming kinsman is interested in buying back the property of Naomi, when he hears from Boaz that the purchase of her field will automatically mean ‘acquiring Ruth the Moabite to raise up the name of the dead man on his estate’, he backs out of the deal. He doesn’t want another wife, nor perhaps to beget a child whose inheritance rights would compete with those of his existing heirs. So the field is left clear for Boaz, and indeed, such a happy ending is signaled already at the end of Ruth’s night on the threshing floor. For as she leaves, Boaz fills her shawl with six shares of barley saying to her: ‘You should not come empty handed to your mother-in-law’.

Alter remarks, ‘The Book of Ruth is all about the transition from emptiness to fullness – from famine to abundance, from bereavement and childlessness to marriage and children’. When she first came back to Bethlehem from Moab, Naomi had told the women of the town, ‘I went out full, and empty did the Lord bring me back’. Now the

⁵ Alter, *Strong as Death is Love*, p.77.

same Hebrew word appears in Boaz's speech: the 'fullness of the shawl bearing the barley is a hint of the fullness of offspring that Ruth will enjoy and bring to Naomi'.⁶

It doesn't always end this way, we know. In this world, there is suffering that remains unredeemed. There are losses not recovered, dreams that remain unfulfilled. To pretend otherwise is just not true; it falsifies the human condition, and intensifies the agony of those whose struggles seem unremitting and unconsoled. Yet the arc of the story of Ruth speaks to something that's also perennial in the human condition – and that is the hope of restoration and new life, the stubborn faith that, despite everything, we're made for joy. And perhaps the role of a story like Ruth in the canon of Scripture is to help us hold both realities in our remembrance. In the psalms of lament and the anguish of the prophets we acknowledge the reality of suffering and sorrow; and in the story of Ruth we imagine and let ourselves enjoy a glimpse of the longed for consummation, and the dream that – one day – all will live happily ever after.

⁶ Alter, *Strong as Death is Love*, p.76.