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**Boaz (Ruth 2: 1-14)**

*Pentecost V*

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So our two heroines, Naomi and Ruth, have made their return from Moab to Naomi's homeland, arriving in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. And now suddenly, for the first time in a long time, there's a hint of a turn in their fortunes. 'Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz'. Oh.... well, that's interesting. What's also interesting, from a literary point of view, is that this 'factoid' appears in the text out of seemingly nowhere. There's no suggestion at this point that Naomi intends to appeal to this kinsman, this Boaz; nor has he made any attempt to get in touch with her. It's as if the narrator just wants us to be aware, he's 'just sayin', and we hearers prick up our ears.

Meanwhile, Ruth is concerned about their survival. She asks Naomi's approval to 'go to the field and glean among the ears of grain', and Naomi bids her go. The notion of 'gleaning', as many of you will know, was a key element in ancient Israel's welfare system, a practice of redistributive justice. Out of concern for the poor and the sojourner in the land, the Levitical laws required reapers in the fields at harvest time, and also [those tending] vineyards and olive groves, to leave a portion of the crop so they might be gathered or 'gleaned' by the needy (Lev. 19: 9-10).<sup>1</sup> It's a strikingly different philosophy from that enjoined by our economic system, which seeks to wring every last ounce of profit out of workers and resources. In a world in pursuit of ever more exacting 'efficiency dividends', the idea of such mandated redundancy is almost inconceivable. Which is not to say that Israel's system was perfect. Being forced to glean to survive is still an extremely vulnerable space to occupy in the social hierarchy,

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<sup>1</sup> David Atkinson, *The Wings of Refuge: The message of Ruth* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p.59.

especially if you're a young woman gleaning in the countryside behind large groups of men.

And this is where Ruth lucks out. She finds herself in the part of the field belonging to Boaz – not by design, because she doesn't yet know of Boaz's existence, but because she just happened upon it. Or, as the King James Version puts it, 'her hap was to light on a part of the field belonging unto Boaz, who was of the kindred of Elimelech' (2:3).<sup>2</sup> And Boaz turns out to be a thoroughly decent chap. He notices her and when he hears she's the young woman who's come back with Naomi, he takes an interest in her welfare, encouraging her to stay in his field near 'his young women' and ordering the young men not to bother her. His kindness goes further still. He says that if she gets thirsty she's to go to the vessels and drink from the water the young men have drawn. Even though he doesn't at this stage disclose his kinship with Naomi, we can see that he seems quite taken with Ruth. And this would have been even more glaringly obvious to an Israelite audience.

One of the major features of biblical literature is the use of what Hebrew scholar Robert Alter calls 'type-scenes'. Type-scenes are narrative episodes that are repeated in different contexts with different characters. Once some of the conventions or elements of a type-scene appear in a story, those who have 'ears to hear' can get a sense of what's coming.<sup>3</sup> There are contemporary type-scenes too – like the set-piece conventions in spaghetti Westerns. Once the sheriff starts to walk down the suddenly and eerily empty main street, we all know the shoot-out isn't far away. In biblical literature, it's the same – and one of the most significant of these type-scenes concerns betrothal.

Typically, the basic elements of the betrothal type-scene go something like this. The future bridegroom journeys to a foreign land, which signifies his emergence from his immediate family circle. There he encounters a girl or girls at a well in the desert. The

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Atkinson, *The Wings of Refuge*, pp.59-61.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981), 51ff.

girl or girls draw water from the well which establishes a bond between them and then they rush home to bring news of the stranger's arrival. Finally, there's the betrothal, in most cases accompanied by an invitation to a meal and the sharing of hospitality. And if you think of the patriarchal stories of Isaac meeting Rebekah, Jacob meeting Rachel, and Moses meeting Zipporah, all contain these motifs.

Well, there's a sense in which the whole book of Ruth is devoted to the circumstances leading to a betrothal, and this means the distinct outlines of the type-scene are less easy to discern. But, according to Robert Alter, the author of Ruth finds an ingenious way not only to *allude* to the betrothal type-scene, but to *elaborate* it in subtle and significant ways.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Alter says, the author has played with the usual conventions, rotating them '180 degrees on the axes of gender and geography'. What does that mean?

Well, when Ruth encounters Boaz, it's she (not he) who has left her family to journey to a foreign land. 'The protagonist is a heroine, not a hero, and her homeland is Moab, so the "foreign soil" on which she meets her future mate ... is Judea'.<sup>5</sup> Do you see the inversion? There are some young women, other girls present – Boaz tells Ruth to follow them and in the traditional type-scene, they'd be the ones to draw water. But here, since Ruth is the female protagonist who has come to a foreign land to find a spouse, it is the male counterparts of these girls – the young men – who are said to have drawn the water and it is from their vessels that Boaz offers her to drink.<sup>6</sup> Finally, to conclude the dialogue, Boaz invites Ruth to a meal of roasted grain and bread dipped in vinegar – and what's stressed is the abundance of this meal. He heaps up her plate and she eats until she's satisfied and still has some left over. This is the feast, the hospitality which traditionally follows the drawing of water and the conversation between the future spouses at the well. The element of betrothal is still implicit in Ruth's tale, but by

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<sup>4</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p.58.

<sup>5</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p.58.

<sup>6</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p.59.

now, the attentive auditor should be getting a sense of what's likely to unfold between this pair.

And here's the significance of this subtle and beautiful reworking of the betrothal motif. The point of a biblical type-scene isn't merely to communicate a particular moment in the narrative by means of established conventions – like the moment their eyes locked. The type-scene also functions to 'attach that moment to a larger pattern of historical and theological meaning'.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the recurring themes of these occasions signal to the reader that this episode is part of a much larger story of God's involvement in Israel's destiny. When these motifs are present, we're supposed to recognize that something is occurring that's part of the unfolding of God's providential purposes for his covenant people, that Isaac was destined to marry Rebekah, Jacob was *meant* to marry Rachel, and so on.

The author of Ruth is deliberately invoking the same understanding of providence at work as we find in the ancestral tales of the book of Genesis. When Boaz praises Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi, he echoes the tradition's praise of Abraham's faithfulness. 'You have left your father and mother and the land of your birth and gone to a people you never knew', he says. And by aligning her meeting with Boaz to the betrothal stories of the patriarchs, Ruth is being characterized as a kind of matriarch by adoption – a pivotal figure in the history of Israel.

And the significance of this? It seems the author is preparing us for the momentous revelation still to come – that by Boaz Ruth will give birth to a son, who will become the father of Jesse, who will become the father of king David. Ruth the Moabite, the migrant worker gleaning in the fields, is to be remembered by the tradition as the ancestress, the progenitrix of the 'divinely chosen house of David',<sup>8</sup> and so ultimately of Israel's Messiah. But how that comes about through the consummation of this still only hinted at betrothal will have to wait now, till next week!

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<sup>7</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p.60.

<sup>8</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p.60.