

## Synopsis of “Marriage in the Book of Ruth”

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This essay examines how marriage is portrayed in the book of Ruth. The advantage of using this book is that it combines Israelite legal thinking about marriage with a quite moving narrative. In order to appreciate the perspective of the Old Testament on marriage one cannot simply provide a list of dos and don'ts. To be sure marriages are enacted through law; but the minimal requirements of the law fail to define a marriage in its full depth. One needs to know how the law is enacted in the concrete details of an individual life. In story of Ruth we see three important features of biblical marriage: 1. the love of God for Israel as a lens with which to examine the love between a husband and wife; 2. the relationship of the married couple to the larger network of family relations – marriage is not just an arrangement between two individuals; and 3. the necessary and non-negotiable linkage of conjugal love and procreation.

## Marriage in the Book of Ruth

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In 1943 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter from his prison cell in Nazi Germany to a young couple who had just entered the holy state of marriage.

Marriage is more than your love for each other. It has a higher dignity and power, for it is God's holy ordinance, through which he wills to perpetuate the human race until the end of time. In your love you see only your two selves in the world, but in marriage you are a link in the chain of the generations, which God causes to come and to pass away to his glory, and calls into his kingdom. In your love you see only the heaven of your own happiness, but in marriage you are placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind. Your love is your own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal—it is a status, an office. Just as it is the crown, and not merely the will to rule, that makes the king, so it is marriage, and not merely your love for each other, that joins you together in the sight of God and man.<sup>i</sup>

How strikingly un-modern this sounds. In a world that extols the autonomy of the self as the highest possible value, Bonhoeffer reminds us that in the sacrament of marriage we enter a covenant that presumes our natural affections but at the same time goes far beyond them. In a world that puts a premium on

immediacy, on the importance of "feeling it" as an index to what is true, these words call us to consider our commitments in an entirely different register. For Bonhoeffer, these cultural indicators must be reversed. "It is not your love that sustain marriage," he wrote, "but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love."

I would like to consider the wisdom of these words in light of how the institution of marriage functions in the book of Ruth. In this work we will see how the love that exists between and husband and a wife extends far beyond the immediate world of the couple itself.

## **I. The Story of Ruth**

Let me begin with a brief rehearsal of the narrative itself, which can be broken up into four scenes, each corresponding to a chapter of the book. Scene one opens with the family of Naomi and Elimelech heading into Moab as a the result of a famine in the province of Judea. When they arrive there, Naomi's husband tragically dies but her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion find brides among the Moabite women. It would seem that new life will replace what was lost. But both sons remain childless and after the passing of 10 years they too die.

Naomi, at this point in the tale, having lost everything dear to her, hears that God has brought the famine in Judea to an end. As Naomi departs for home,

both of her daughters-in-law decide to follow her. Though biological children might be expected to act in this manner, there was no corresponding obligation for daughters-in-law. Naomi, accordingly, urges them to return to their homes where their chances of remarriage are immeasurably better. But only Orpah obeys; Ruth stubbornly persists in her desire to follow Naomi to Judea. Her words are among the most famous in the Bible: "For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried" (1:16).<sup>ii</sup>

These lines are frequently recited in marriage liturgies and not too infrequently friends of mine have observed that this citation is not altogether fitting. For Ruth is not speaking of her attachment to a spouse, but to her mother-in-law. But the incorporation of this quotation into a marriage ceremony seems to me to be quite fitting in spite of this irregularity. For, as we shall see, marriage in the Old Testament is not just an affair between a man and woman, but between two extended families.

When Naomi and Ruth arrive in Judea they are immediately faced with a problem. Being without men in the family who can work the land and earn a wage, they are destitute. Ruth secures food the only way possible for people of this sort -- she gleans in the field (see Lev 19:9-10). While gleaning, she is noticed by Boaz who has heard of her remarkable decision to accompany Naomi. In

reward for her noble deed, Boaz demonstrates his own nobility by arranging matters such that Ruth can glean in the field undisturbed by the other male workers and he also provides her with proper food and excellent working conditions. It might be added here that Ruth's status is very close to what we would call an illegal alien. Being bereft of passport and all other legal protection, she was at considerable risk when she went to glean among the young male harvesters.

When Ruth returns home and tells Naomi of her good fortune, Naomi responds in ecstatic jubilation: "Blessed be he of the Lord who has not failed in His kindness to the living or to the dead! For the man is related to us; he is one of our redeeming kinsman" (2:20).

The next scene opens with Ruth, in obedience to directions Naomi has given her, proceeding boldly to the threshing floor where Boaz has gone to sleep after he had eaten and drank. Boaz is startled by Ruth's presence in the middle of the night and asks her what she is doing there. Ruth responds by asking Boaz to play the role of the redeemer-levir (the two institutions<sup>iii</sup> are uniquely combined in this book) and marry her. Boaz agrees but adds that there is a possible fly in the ointment. Another man possesses a greater right to play the role of the redeemer than he. And this man must be accorded his chance.

When the fourth and final scene opens, Boaz has assembled a quorum of witnesses at the city gate to hear the case of Naomi and Ruth. At issue in this meeting is the sale of Naomi's land the acquisition of Ruth as a bride. The nearer kinsman, who strikingly goes unnamed in our story, steps forward with great alacrity when he hears that a piece of property is up for sale. Yet when Boaz adds the important codicil that the acquisition of the land requires the marrying of Ruth, Mr. So and so backs down for he fears that adding a wife to the package will dilute his estate. For according to the laws of levirate marriage he will be required to raise up a child through Ruth who will not be his own but rather the replacement of her deceased husband Mahlon. Now we learn why Mr. So and so is not dignified in our story with a name. It is a fitting "punishment" for his refusal to raise up a son to preserve the name of his deceased kinsman, Mahlon. Mr. So and so is a man who can do the math: in his view only the expenses of child rearing will accrue to him; the benefits shall belong to others. Boaz does not share these worries about the financial side of the matter; rather, he rushes into the void and takes Ruth as his wife.

Upon being married, Ruth immediately becomes pregnant and the women gather to laud the God who has been so kind to Naomi. For the child who is to be born will not only preserve the name of the deceased but will also provide an income that will sustain her in old age. And here is the nub of the matter: marriage is not only a love affair between a man and a women but it provides the

very means of sustaining the larger household of the family. But let's put this point on hold for a second. There is another issue which we should discuss first.

## II. Israel as the Lord's Bride

It is well known that a favorite metaphor in the OT for the relationship of God to Israel is that of the love between a husband and wife. It appears already in the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophet Hosea and continues to grow in strength in two of the great prophets of the exilic period, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah.<sup>iv</sup> It is certainly due to this fact that the erotic love poetry of the Song of Songs came to be understood as a description of the love between God and his people. This interpretive tradition, so favored by the tradition, has a pedigree that reaches back into the Biblical period. But as Pope Benedict XVI has reminded us in his encyclical Deus caritas est, we should not allow this transfer of meaning to the divine realm cancel out its important unitive role among married couples. "Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love," the Pope explains, "becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa." Without the reality of erotic conjugal love, our knowledge of God's love would be so much the poorer.

There are two texts in the book of Ruth which speak to the relationship of conjugal love to divine love. The first concerns the happy accident of Ruth's arrival in field of Boaz to glean grain for herself and Naomi. When Boaz learns of Ruth's presence in his fields, it is clear that he is already aware of the startling

bravery of this young woman. He immediately takes measures to assure the safety of Ruth and to provide water for her during her labors. Struck by this unmerited generosity, Ruth falls at his feet and cries out: "Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner?" To this, Boaz quickly replies: "I have been told of all that you did for you mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before. May the Lord reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge!" (2:10, 12). The reference to Ruth's act of leaving kith and kin to return with Naomi to a people she had not known before is a clear intertextual echo of the call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1. Like Abraham, she leaves all which she had previously held dear for a journey of uncertain consequences. But most striking for our purposes are the terms of the blessing that Boaz speaks over her: "May you have a full recompense from the Lord, the God of Israel under whose wings you have sought refuge."

The reference to seeking refuge under the wings of God recalls a favorite image of the Psalter. Compare these examples:

O you who dwell in the shelter of the Most High and abide in the protection of Shaddai –

I say of the Lord, my refuge and stronghold,  
my God in whom I trust,



that He will save you from the fowler's trap,  
from the destructive plague.

He will cover you with His pinions;  
You will find refuge under His wings;  
His fidelity is an encircling shield.

(Psalm 94:1-4)

How precious is Your faithful care, O God!  
Mankind shelters in the shadow of your wings.  
They feast on the rich fare of Your house;  
You let them drink at Your refreshing stream.

(Psalm 36:8-9)

Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me,  
for I seek refuge in You,  
I seek refuge in the shadow of Your wings,  
until danger passes.

(Psalm 57:2)

This image of taking refuge under the wings of the Almighty derives from the architectural design of the Temple in Jerusalem. In the Holy of Holies, where the God of Israel had audaciously taken up residence among his people, he was said

to have assumed his seat upon the ark of the covenant which was flanked by winged Cherubim (I Kings 6:23-28). Certain texts from the Old Testament speak of individuals seeking refuge beside the altar from the danger threatened by their enemies (cf. I Kings 1:50-53). So one level of meaning to Boaz's blessing is that he compares Ruth to an endangered person who has sought asylum under the protecting wings of the God of Israel.

But perhaps we can say even more. Boaz, the name of our hero, also happens to be the name of one of two pillars that sat athwart the entranceway of the Temple in Jerusalem (I Kings 7:21-22). The names of these two pillars, Yachin and Boaz, have a significant symbolic function. They are what Biblical scholars call sentence names and when set in combination bespeak the world-founding function of the temple. We could translate them thusly: "by his strength (be-ozzo – a slight emendation following the Greek) God has established (yachin) the temple/world."<sup>v</sup> Temple pillars had a two-fold function in the ancient Near East. They not only held up the lintel over the doorway but they also held the firmament in place over the entire earth. We should note here that the firmament was thought of as a solid surface that rested upon high mountains at the periphery of the world. The two pillars of the temple, on this view, would represent the mountains upon which the firmament was set. If Boaz's name is an allusion to the pillar of the temple then his blessing points in two directions. On the one hand, Ruth's remarkable pilgrimage to Israel shall be rewarded by God's

own protective oversight. But on the other hand, the offer of that divine assistance will be mediated in some as of yet undisclosed manner by Boaz.

Strong support for this supposition comes in the third scene of our book when Ruth shows up at the threshing floor of Boaz. Having awoken from his sleep in a startled fashion due to the woman lying at his feet, Boaz asks in surprise: "Who are you?" Ruth, not showing even the slightest fear or even embarrassment, identifies herself and audaciously proposes marriage: "I am your handmaid Ruth. Spread your robe over your handmaid, for you are a redeeming kinsman" (3:9). What is noteworthy about this line is the idiom that is used for marriage, "spread your robe over your handmaid." The word for "robe" in Hebrew happens to be the exact same word as "wing". This remarkable word play carries us back to Boaz's blessing in chapter two: " May you have a full recompense from the Lord, the God of Israel under whose wings you have sought refuge." The protective wings of God mentioned by Boaz turn out to be more than just a metaphor. God will spread his wings over Ruth through the agency of Boaz's robe. Grace (God's election of Ruth) shows itself to be built on the firm bedrock of nature (marriage to Boaz). Ruth does not come to the God of Israel as a disembodied soul; rather her enjoyment of divine protection will be mediated through marriage to a particular Israelite man.

### **III. On the Inseparability of Marriage and pro-creation**

The second theme that is worth exploring is the place of marriage in the larger constellation of family life in ancient Israel. Given the high premium put on personal autonomy, the most common sort of romantic love story that contemporary culture offers us is one wherein man and woman are united over against all other ties that the world knows. Let's consider, for example, the romantic relationship that lies at the heart of the movie, Titanic. Here we have a young man of lower class origin who has fallen in love with a young woman of considerably higher stature. The rub in the story is that this young woman is already favored by a young man of equal social standing who has the unqualified approbation of her parents. Our romantic couple must engage in deception and considerable bravery to make sure that the interests of the larger family do not interfere with their love for one another. Indeed, it is precisely the opposition of the family that provides the traction against which their love will take shape.

This is a very familiar line in Hollywood movies. Can one imagine a love story in which parental reservations about a future spouse would impel a character to reject an unworthy suitor only to find in the end a far better spouse who was favored by the larger family? There may be a one or two movies out there that follow this train of thought, but I must confess that I am at a loss to name them. The standard plot line that I am familiar with is the one we find in Titanic.

This is not really an option for a Biblical love story. For to paraphrase Bonhoeffer, marriage is not about seeking the heaven of one's personal happiness but being placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind. The specific sort of responsibility is spelled out at the end of the book of Ruth. When Boaz and Ruth marry, the Lord immediately intervenes and allows Ruth to conceive a son.<sup>vi</sup> The women of Bethlehem then assemble to speak words of blessing not to Ruth but to Naomi: "Blessed be the Lord, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today! May his name be perpetuated in Israel! He will renew your life and sustain your old age; for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons" (4:14-15). And if this is not sufficiently surprising consider the next two verses with which our story comes to its end. Naomi takes the child into her arms as though she were the child's own mother and the women of Bethlehem, recognizing the unique relationship between the two, exclaim: "A son is born to Naomi!" (4:17).

Some have concluded from these lines that Naomi actually adopts Ruth's child as her own. And indeed, in the ancient Near East there is a venerable tradition of childless persons adopting children. But the Bible is curiously silent on this matter; we have no provisions in Biblical law for the adoption of a child. It seems more likely, and most commentators move in this direction, that Naomi

becomes something of a foster mother of the child, that is someone who looks after the child in a most intimate fashion.

But more important than nailing down the type of relationship between Naomi and the child is coming to grips with the specific socio-cultural reasons that propel it forward. And this we learn from the blessing spoken by the women. This child born to Naomi is to have two functions: first, that of perpetuating the name of Mahlon within the community of Israel and second, that of sustaining Naomi in her old age.

It is important to bear in mind that in the ancient world – and indeed much of the undeveloped modern world – children were not simply a "life-style enhancement" that they have become in the contemporary family.<sup>vii</sup> No one in the ancient world would have asked themselves whether they would like to have children or not, even if artificial birth control devices were available. Our own situation could not be more different. Indeed the begetting of children is a real and pressing question for modern couples. No longer are there social conventions that make this an unstated obligation; becoming a father or mother has become a matter of choice. The reason why this was not the case in antiquity is easy to provide: children were absolutely necessary for the preservation of the elderly. Indeed the most frequent reason for adoption in ancient Near Eastern culture is that of providing a means for supporting a childless couple in their old

age. Adoption documents frequently detail the parents obligation to raise the child during its years of vulnerability with the expectation that the child will honor his parents in his old age. Here honoring one's parents retains its fundamental Semitic meaning: that of providing for mother and father when they are old and infirm. In a culture bereft of retirement plans and social security, children played a crucial economic role (See Ben Sirah 3:1-16, esp 12-13).<sup>viii</sup> Having children was not a choice; it was a necessity.

Ruth has already distinguished herself in the book by undertaking the role of honoring her mother-in-law by going into the field in chapter two to glean food. In Biblical law, gleaning grain is the means by which the poor are sustained. What is surprising in this book is that Ruth extends the obligation of honoring one's parent to her mother-in-law. As Jesus would put the matter in the Sermon on the Mount, Ruth has seen clearly beyond the letter of the law to its very spirit.<sup>ix</sup> But Naomi's situation is still one of considerable vulnerability for there is nothing that will guarantee that Ruth will remain obligated to her in the future. This is the reason why Boaz responds with such surprise as Ruth's decision to pursue marriage with him. When Ruth asks him to spread his cloak over her, he exclaims: "Be blessed of the Lord, daughter! Your latest deed of loyalty is greater than the first, in that you have not turned to younger men, whether poor or rich." In other words, Ruth has viewed marriage in terms that addressed her larger adopted family rather than her immediate self-interest.<sup>x</sup> The contrast to

the way in which romantic relationships are portrayed in our day – witness Titanic – could not be greater.

The portrayal of Ruth's character is as profound in its moral depth as it is touching to the heart. But it also constitutes a considerable challenge to the manner in which we view marriage. Given the role of children within the larger family, it is crucial that Ruth come to see her opportunities for marriage in light of larger familial circumstances. And in light of these needs, it is simply impossible for our Biblical writer to tell a story of human love in the form in which we see it in the Titanic. For such a story is only possible if we exempt the couple from the larger familial circumstances in which it sits. Of course, the ancients had a considerable advantage over us in pursuing these sorts of moral goods: the necessity of children as the means of sustaining the elderly made it much more difficult to view a love relationship in terms of one's immediate needs for companionship.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

So what does the book of Ruth tell us about the sacrament of marriage? First of all, that within the sacred bond of marriage there lies a symbol of the love of God for humanity. Ruth is praised by Boaz for leaving kith and kin to adopt the God of Israel. But strikingly her adoption of this God is inextricably linked to the marriage bond she(!) will propose. The grand transformation of Song of Songs



from a simple love song to a tale about the marriage of God to his people Israel is already in evidence in the book of Ruth. Human marriage truly is an analogical expression of the love of God for his people.

Secondly, the love of a husband and wife is not extolled as an end in and of itself. Marriage is "a status and an office" as Bonhoeffer put it and over the long term it will be the right discernment of that office that will sustain and define the love that holds the couple together. On this point, however, a great abyss opens up between the world of the Bible and our own day. It was important to Biblical writers to see the marriage bond as necessarily linked to children and grandparents. Indeed, the Bible needed to make no argument for this linkage because it was a socio-economic reality of the day. What makes Ruth particularly virtuous is not her desire to marry and have children. With no retirement programs available for her, the mothering of children was as basic to human survival as the daily tilling of the fields and preparation of meals. What distinguishes Ruth is her willingness to understand her marriage in a way that will favor her adopted mother-in-law. In other words, Ruth courageously extends her level of obligation between the bare minimum and by so doing show us that persons within the Old Testament were able to discern what the spirit of the law consisted of.

In our own day, economic and technological developments have allowed young couples to view children as a simple life-style option. The result has been

a dramatic limitation of what the office of marriage consists of. The larger family unit has shrunk to the tiny circle of the couple itself. The challenge for contemporary thinkers is how to make sure the "status and office of marriage" that Bonhoeffer spoke of can continue in a culture that no longer sustains the basic social setting of pre-modern and Biblical times.

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<sup>i</sup> This oft-cited quotation is taken from D. Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison (London: SCM Press, 1953) 42-43.

<sup>ii</sup> All translations are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society version.

<sup>iii</sup> The redeemer was responsible for purchasing back land that was about to leave the clan whereas the levir was supposed to have intercourse with the widow of his brother in the event that the brother died prior to being able to father any children himself. See Deut 25:5-10.

<sup>iv</sup> For a good exposition of this theme, see Jon Levenson, Sinai and Zion (San Francisco: HarperCollins 1985) 75-80.

<sup>v</sup> The building of the temple was often described as analogous to the creation of the world. For further details, see J. Blenkinsopp, Prophecy and Canon (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1977) 56-69.

<sup>vi</sup> This is an important theme in its own right – for Ruth had been unable to conceive a child during her ten years of marriage to Mahlon. Clearly Ruth, like all the other central matriarchal figures in Genesis [Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel] was sterile until the hand of God intervened. The theological function of this motif is to establish the direct involvement of God in the conception of the child. The child becomes not only the offspring of two human parents but also, in some senses, a son of God. On this point, see J. Levenson, Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, (New Haven: Yale, 1993) 42-43.

<sup>vii</sup> For an insightful essay from a Protestant perspective on this, see Helmut D. Baer, "The Exception to the Rule: A Protestant Thinks about Contraception," Pro Ecclesia 11 (2002) 419-34. It is worth noting that among Torah-observant Jews it is customary for married couples to seek the permission of a Rabbi to use artificial contraceptive devices. There is a presumption against them that must be overruled. Moreover, some medieval thinkers noted that Jewish law requires that a woman abstain from sex during the period of her menstrual flow and seven days afterward. This meant that when this period of sexual abstinence was over this would be the most fertile time during the ovular cycle. Can it be accidental that precisely at the moment the married couple

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would be most desirous to return to conjugal relations was also the moment that the woman was most fertile?

<sup>viii</sup> Jonas Greenfield nicely summarizes the attitude of the ancients in this fashion: "As is well known, man's universal needs are food, clothing, shelter and, with a bow to our modern perceptions, love. The young and healthy can provide for themselves, but it is the very young and the elderly who need help to see them through hard times and to keep them alive. The aged have an additional burden – they need not only to be sustained, but after death they must be lamented, buried properly and remembered by prayers and rituals. In most societies this was a natural function of children, who thus maintained a link in the chain of being and guaranteed, as it were, by their own actions their own future. The childless would overcome their lack of children by co-opting the children of others. The adopted son or daughter would have to sustain the aged, bury him or her and fulfill other duties in order to qualify as heir." For further details see his article: "Adi baltu: Care for the Elderly and its Rewards," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 19 (1982) 309-16.

<sup>ix</sup> In Judaism the book of Ruth is thought to exemplify the virtue of gemilut-hasadim or "unbounded charity toward others." The fact that this book is read during the liturgical season that celebrates the giving of the law indicates that the Jewish tradition was not ignorant of the deeper understanding of legal obedience that Jesus taught about.

<sup>x</sup> This does not mean that Boaz and Ruth did not love one another, it is simply to state that the documentation of those feelings takes second position in this narrative to their desires to do what is best for the family. Ruth for example, gives away her feelings of endearment when Ruth returns to lie at Boaz's feet after she has proposed marriage. This return to a position of intimacy was not necessary once she had secured his consent, instead it indicates her love for Boaz. And Boaz also demonstrates his love for Ruth when he spontaneously and without a moment's hesitation declares his willingness to marry Ruth. Only when he has revealed these intentions does he mention the problem of the next of kin. Had he been less than sanguine about the matter, he would have first told Ruth of the obstacles and only then indicated his willingness to consent.