Part 6: We now begin Chapter 2 where Ruth finds favor and harvests food in the field: When Boaz meets Ruth. We continue to follow the JPS Commentary outline for our study for verses 1-10. The women in the town who spoke to Naomi are not around now, and the two women are left to fend for themselves. They are at home and starting over. Naomi had a rich relative, yet no one has come forward to help them. Boaz is related to the family of Elimelech, Naomi’s deceased husband. Ruth first asked Naomi’s permission to go glean. Perhaps Ruth did not want Naomi to glean because she was previously well-to-do and might feel shame because of her change in circumstances.

We don’t know how Ruth found her way to Boaz’ fields. Was it only chance? We see that Naomi attributed both fortunate and unfortunate events to God; she bemoaned being the victim of loss and hardship, losing her husband and her sons. Rabbinic tradition suggested that Boaz was Elimelech’s cousin and Naomi’s nephew. Boaz noticed Ruth in the fields and he knew she was caring for Naomi. Then he made it easier for Ruth to glean in his fields. There was no one else in Naomi’s extended family stepping up to assist her.

Ruth went to the fields to glean so they could eat. Extensive laws and rules developed in their culture to allow access and to prevent abuse. Gleaning posed some risk for the gleaners, especially for unattached women. Some commentators suggest that Naomi was aware of this risk (verse 22). We don’t know for certain but it seems possible that Naomi demonstrated less concern for Ruth’s well-being than Ruth was of hers. Maybe Naomi felt conflicted about bringing a Moabite to her home. Or maybe she was ashamed of being dependent upon Ruth. Or perhaps she was overwhelmed by her own sorrow and bitterness. At that time, the Torah excluded Moabites from Israelite community (Deuteronomy 23:4-7).

Naomi later attributed their good fortune with Boaz extending hesed to them as coming from God. We don’t know why Naomi did not tell Ruth about her extended family. Their circumstances change only after Ruth initiated going to the fields and gathering food for them to eat. Ruth didn’t sit helplessly, waiting for someone to come forward to take care of them.

Boaz, a man of substance: Based on the Hebrew text and culture in their time, we think Boaz was an older man, and the term gibor hayil is applied to him. This was a similar term which was also used for the chieftain Gideon (Judges 6:11) or for David before coming King (I Samuel 16:18). The word can mean a hero or a warrior, or a person who is a higher status economically or socially. In the Targum in Aramaic it means a person who is “strong in Torah.” Power or wealth is not its only meaning. One of the two pillars at the Temple Great Hall (I Kings 7:21) was also named Boaz, so perhaps the implication is that he represents a pillar of society.

He recognized Ruth’s courage and her commitment to Naomi as her sole support. He eased the conditions so that Ruth could more easily glean. She earned the respect of the landowner and was welcomed. Boaz is a benevolent and godly man who was concerned for his workers. God’s presence was seen in his interactions.

‘The Lord be with you!’ Boaz greeted the field hands with this blessing and they responded in kind. These words are still part of the Priestly Blessing used in synagogues today (Numbers 6:24-26). This direct type of blessing was accepted in their era, but later Jewish sources made the blessing less personal as in ‘May the Word of the Lord be at your assistance.’

Ruth, a woman of valor: The text in this chapter continues to refer to her as “the Moabite,” so her status has not changed as a result of her commitment to Naomi. A feminine form of the same term used for Boaz, ‘eshet hayil, is translated as a “woman of valor” or one who is generous and prosperous. It was used in describing the good wife or woman in Proverbs (31:1-31) And here, the same term was used by Boaz in describing Ruth (3:11). Verse 2:3 uses the term ‘as luck would have it’ but the Hebrew term is not simply based on luck: rather, divine providence is at work in making or allowing something to happen. The phrase is used in other OT passes, such as when Abraham’s servant was seeking a wife for Isaac, he prayed, ‘make it happen before me’ (Genesis 24:12).

‘Whose girl is that?’ Three questions were asked to establish her identity, which tied the questions to other biblical stories. We see that Abraham’s servant also asked Rebekah at the well whose daughter she was. Or, Saul asked who David was.

Boaz was asking to what household did Ruth belong. Nowhere was it suggested that his eye is drawn to her because she was physically attractive. It appears that her manner is what attracted him. Her hard work gained his respect. Boaz’ servant tells him that she was on her feet constantly and rested little (2:7). She was placed right behind the reapers so she could get first pickings. Then Boaz told her to stay close to his girls and to follow them. He refers to her as ‘my daughter,’ just as Naomi had done. The term may imply their superior social status as well as their age, but also it conveys concern and protection.

I have ordered… [2:9]: Boaz went beyond providing better gleaning conditions by telling her to stay close to his own girls. He ordered the men not to harass or molest her. The term in Hebrew, naga’ is the same as used when God protects Sarah from Abimelech (Genesis 20:6).

When you are thirsty, go to the jars and drink…” [2:9]: There are other biblical narratives that depict meetings at a well when a man has traveled looking for a wife [Rebekah and Isaac, Genesis 24; Rachel and Jacob, Genesis 29, Moses and Jethro’s daughter, Exodus 2]. The JPS commentary noted the contrast between Ruth, as a woman from Moab, being offered water by an Israelite man – after a history and long tradition of enmity between their two groups. They never forgot when Moabites refused water to Israelites on their exodus (Deuteronomy 23:5).

Isn’t it interesting that all of these women were going about their daily work when they were chosen as wives? And up to this point in time, there is no indication that Boaz saw Ruth as a marital prospect, but the offering of water to her contrasts with the usual pattern where women are the ones to serve and to offer men a drink. And in some sense it was a symbolic reparation between their two groups by reaching out to a Moabite woman. The Moabites’ crime was refusal to provide water and food.

Some Thoughts:

In today’s world, the specifics of what one might look for in a potential spouse are of course different. But the character of such a person can be compared to Boaz or Ruth. Both were responsible, industrious, kind, and charitable. A good man or a good woman is hard to find! If you were advising a young person in your family or church community who is thinking about entering into a committed relationship, how could you use the story of Boaz and Ruth to help them?

Naomi had mixed feelings toward Ruth while Ruth made a covenant and a commitment to care for Naomi. How was Ruth demonstrating her continued commitment? In your own life, can you think of situations in which you had mixed feelings about someone with whom you had some kind of bond of friendship or perhaps a member of your family? How did you deal with the feelings and the commitment that you had? What helped you when you had mixed feelings?

Have you ever been in an unfamiliar situation or place and someone who had no reason to do so reached out and helped you? How did this feel? What did you learn? Have you ever had the opportunity to serve someone who was a stranger or in an unfamiliar situation? What was the response and how did you feel?

Gods blessings on your way, Jetty....