



# Redefining Family in the Book of Ruth

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**T**he book of Ruth, more than any other book in the Bible, deals directly and intentionally with the issue of what constitutes family. The book redefines family, centering not on clan or blood relationships but rather on acts of loyalty and love. A modern reader might well ask why defining family as a relationship of love is a surprise, so, in this article, I will address some of the striking consequences that this redefinition brings.

I begin with the assumption that Ruth was probably written and most certainly read in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Family was very much an issue at that time. Many of those who had lived for a generation in exile in Babylon had returned home to reclaim their family property. But the land was now occupied by others—the poorer folks who had never been taken captive and foreigners who had been lifted from their own land and forcibly resettled in Judah. The returnees were facing big questions: Whose property is it? Who is included in God's promises to the people? Who is in the tribe? Who is part of the family? The people were being called by their leaders to rediscover their identity and find answers to their questions both in the sacred story (*haggadah*—the telling or narration) and the sacred law (*hallakah*—the walking or way).

*The book of Ruth daringly redefines the biblical understanding of family, centering not on clan and blood relationships but on acts of loyalty and love. The consequences of this are great. Indeed, without expanding the traditional understanding of family there can be no promised future for Israel, no messianic promise for the world. The salvation of the world depends upon this redefined notion of family.*

## FAMILY AND BIBLICAL LAW

In biblical law, family issues were considered under the category of property. The law carefully controlled issues of sexuality, including viewing women's sexuality as the property of their fathers or husbands, to ensure protection of both family line and property.<sup>1</sup> So if folks wanted to settle issues dealing with family, they would look to the law.

Enter the book of Ruth, which tells a compelling story that calls into question the underlying assumption that family is defined in the realm of property. That Ruth is concerned with family matters is clear from the first chapter, which is marked by a plethora of family terms with multiple repetitions: wife, sons, husband, daughters-in-law, people, mother, daughters, mother-in-law, and sister-in-law. Throughout the story, conversations with laws dealing with family and property abound.<sup>2</sup>

The story begins with a fine traditional family: Papa patriarch, his wife, and his two sons. It also begins with trouble: there was a famine in the land. So the family has to leave their town—ironically called Bethlehem, which literally means “house of food.” The leaving ties our story to other departures from the land, particularly the exodus and the exile. The family become immigrants.

Now the family problems quickly multiply. First, the place to which the family immigrates is Moab, which, like Egypt and Babylon, is a national enemy. We know this from the law:

No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you....You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live. (Deut 23:3–4, 6)

Second, the patriarch dies. The family is now composed of a widow and her two sons, a family in need of connections. The connections they make pose the third problem. They marry Moabite wives, women definitely outside of the tribal family. Then, finally, after ten years of childless marriage, the sons die, which, in that ancient context, might have been perceived by some as judgment for bad travel plans and worse marriages.

Naomi is left alone with her two Moabite daughters-in-law. This hardly qualifies as a legal family unit, either then or now. Naomi's two initial speeches illumine the family complications. First, she compassionately tells them to go back to the houses of their own mothers as the surest way for them to find husbands and

<sup>1</sup>Judith Romney Wegner, “Leviticus,” in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 40–48.

<sup>2</sup>In the recent Book of Faith Adult Bible Study Series volume on Ruth, we recommend that in studying this book one might designate an “Ezra” to read the relevant laws to the gathered people. Diane Levy Jacobson and David Vásquez Levy, *Ruth: Leader Session Guide* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012) 16.

security (Ruth 1:8–9). In her mind, she is not their family and cannot be their surrogate mother. Then, in her next speech (1:11–13), in which she calls them “my daughters,” Naomi makes reference to the only—though clearly impossible—legal solution to their problem if they were her family: the system of levirate marriage described in Deut 25:5–10. According to that custom, living sons marry the widows of dead brothers so that they might beget children to continue the family lineage. The tension is clear. In terms of affection Naomi considers these women her daughters, but in terms of the law she sees no option but rejection and the lonely return as a broken woman. For their own good they cannot be her daughters.

Ruth rejects this conclusion with her own speech that redefines family entirely (1:16–17). In her oath of loyalty and commitment, Ruth in effect says, “No, for better or for worse, I—Moabite though I be—declare myself to be part of your family. I will not leave you. We are bound together and I shall willingly become an immigrant into my own enemy nation for the sake of affection.” Her speech is stirring to be sure, but to become truly effective in redefining family, her conclusions need to be recognized as valid by Naomi, by the wider community of Judah, and ultimately by those of us who take on this story as a defining moment in our own identities as heirs of this tradition.

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Lack of recognition marks the first community response. When Naomi comes home to Bethlehem, the women do not recognize her. More, in her own state of bitterness (in Hebrew, *Mara*), Naomi sees herself as returning empty, not recognizing that beside her stands Ruth.

So who is Ruth? The law sees her as a Moabite, a sojourner or immigrant, and a childless widow, no longer a virgin. Consequently, she might well have been expected to earn her living as a prostitute, like Rahab in the book of Joshua. As such, she would not be breaking the law, since legally she has no family and thus her sexuality is not owned by father or husband. Such an expectation stands behind Boaz’s injunction to his workers not to molest her (2:9). It seems that Boaz begins his understanding of law in a different place than family or sexual considerations. Looking to laws such as Lev 23:22, he sees Ruth more as a sojourner in need of help than a foreign widow who is fair game:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the LORD your God.

Boaz begins with compassion. He recognizes goodness and loyalty even in a Moabite

immigrant (2:11–12). His speech parallels Ruth’s speech in chapter one, recognizing her relationship with her mother-in-law as taking precedence over her relationship with her own mother and father because of her act of devotion. He offers not only charity but also recognition and the sustenance of sharing a meal.

#### FAMILY AND THE NEXT OF KIN

Boaz’s act of recognition and acceptance stirs in Naomi her own recognition of family ties. When Ruth returns home and reports what has transpired in the field, Naomi exclaims in response, “Blessed be he by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead! . . . The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin” (2:20). The word here translated “nearest kin” is the Hebrew word *go’el*. It can also be translated “redeemer,” as in Job 19:25, “I know that my Redeemer lives.” The role of the nearest kin is to redeem the family. In the final two chapters of Ruth, the word occurs as a verb (*g’l* is the root) or a noun (*go’el*) twenty-one times. Clearly, understanding the implications of being or acting as the “nearest kin” is central to understanding family in the book of Ruth. In the law, the role of the *go’el* is quite specific. For example, in Num 35:19–27, the nearest kin becomes an avenger of blood (a *go’el haddam*). This usage is not relevant to the book of Ruth, but two of the legal requirements related to next-of-kin law are relevant indeed. One of those requirements is found in Lev 25:24–25:

Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption (*g’l*) of the land. If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next of kin (*go’el*) shall come and redeem (*g’l*) what the relative has sold.

The *go’el* keeps property in the family. The second relevant legal requirement comes by implication rather than specific use of the word *go’el*. The previously referenced system of the levirate described in Deut 25:5–10 speaks of “brothers residing together” and specifies that when “one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband’s brother to her.” An underlying question for the book of Ruth is how far this law reaches. Who is brother to the now deceased Mahlon, son of Elimelech, husband of Ruth, lately resident of Moab? And who is, in fact, outside of the family? Who is the stranger (also translated “foreigner”)?

In Naomi’s recognition of Boaz as *go’el*, specifically as “a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin,” it is noteworthy that she includes Ruth in this recognition, the operative word being “our.” Naomi includes Ruth as family and must care for her. The manner in which she seeks “security” for Ruth is befitting her age, station, and lack of power or resources. She schemes. She tells Ruth to dress up in her best clothes and go down to the threshing floor where all the men of the village will be gathered, presumably to work, party, and protect the harvest. She says that Boaz will tell her what to do. Some imagination is required to see how this scheme might

be helpful. On the face of it, Naomi is sending Ruth off to sleep with Boaz as any foreign widow with no family might do to earn some extra cash. But as family, Naomi is sending her off with the hope that Boaz might act the part of the brother-in-law, might marry her in order that the family name continue. The plot hinges on how Boaz perceives Ruth. And in the spirit of the book in which Ruth takes the initiative, she does not wait for Boaz's lead but instead names him herself as *go'el* (3:9). We hold our collective breaths!

#### FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Boaz's response is, in fact, breathtaking! He not only accepts his responsibility, he meets her request with blessing, affection, and his own dose of scheming that matches Naomi's one for one. The necessity for his scheme comes as the result of a twist of plot. There is one male member of the family who is a nearer kin, a closer *go'el* than Boaz. This twist adds a new layer to the recognition of family. By the end of the third chapter, Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz are united in their view that they are family. But their recognition is not sufficient. Their recognition is literally cloaked in secrecy (3:15). In the biblical understanding of relationships, family is not a private matter. Family is a public rather than a private institution. Until the community as a whole joins in the recognition of Ruth as part of the family, the story cannot be complete.

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By the final scene of the story, we know we are dealing with law because the scene takes place at the gate. The gate is precisely the place where the elders gather to make decisions and apparently the entire community actively watches the proceedings. The nearer next of kin, never named in the book with a name, saunters by. Boaz gathers the legal ten and then reels him in like a fish on a line. Once again, the underlying issue is the role of kinship and the constitution of family. Boaz begins where he knows most people think the issue begins: property.

He then said to the next-of-kin (*go'el*), "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem (*g'l*) it, redeem (*g'l*) it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem (*g'l*) it, and I come after you." So he said, "I will redeem (*g'l*) it." (4:3–4)

So long as kinship involves only property that he gets for his own family, the guy is in. But then Boaz ups the ante:

Then Boaz said, “The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance.” At this, the next-of-kin (*go’el*) said, “I cannot redeem (*g’l*) it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption (*g’l*) yourself, for I cannot redeem (*g’l*) it.” (4:5–6)

What Boaz does with the law here is astounding. He names how the law works in relationship to Ruth without actually making an argument. Technically the law of the levirate names the responsibility of brothers residing in the same household. But Boaz, accepting the understanding of Naomi and the invitation of Ruth, expands the notion of brotherhood to include within its purview the nearest living male relative, the *go’el*, the redeemer. He takes the meaning of the responsibility far beyond mere blood relationship. In the terminology of baptism, we might say that he is arguing that water is thicker than blood. His knowledge of Ruth as a woman of loyalty, commitment, and value influences his own reading of how the law is to be interpreted. The law serves the larger purpose of covenantal love.

By fiat and acclamation, Boaz wins the oral argument, and the elders and all the people become the witnesses (4:9–12). Their witnessing expands the meaning of family even more. They beseech the Lord’s blessing on Ruth that she, this Moabite woman in their midst, might become like their matriarchs, Rachel and Leah. They include in their blessing remembrance of another foreigner in the family tree, Tamar, the mother of Perez (see Gen 38:1–30). In short, through blessing, they weave Ruth into the sacred family story.

### THE NEW FAMILY STORY

So Boaz marries Ruth, and in short order she bears a son. With this birth comes the final public recognition of family. We are quite used to the birth of a child marking the continuation of family, and so it does here, but several dimensions of how this birth functions tilt this birth toward proclamation of a new family relationship.

First, the child’s primary relationship is with his grandmother, Naomi. Her need, her journey from death to life sets the pattern for the story. When the women bless the Lord for the birth of the child, they address the blessing to Naomi: “Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin (*go’el*); and may his name be renowned in Israel!’” (4:14). The child becomes Naomi’s *go’el*; she is not left bereft. Next, the women declare that the child will be for her “a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age” (4:15), but the reason for the child being described in this way is again remarkable. He will restore and nourish Naomi *because* Ruth, her daughter-in-law “who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him!” (4:15). Ruth is not made worthy by the birth of a son; she is already worthy (3:11). Rather the child is made worthy, is of benefit to Naomi, because of the devoted affection of his mother for his grandmother. The importance of the women with no power or status or official legal function for the

blessing of family sets the story in marked contrast with the subsequent genealogy in which only the men are mentioned.<sup>3</sup> Once again, family is defined by mutual relationships of affection and commitment.

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But the genealogy is hardly without import to this redefining of family. Implied is that this child is *go'el* to more than just Naomi. This mixed-blood child becomes *go'el* for the community. This child is called Obed (“servant”). He becomes the father of Jesse who becomes the father of David. The implications are clear. Without family redefined, there can be no promised future for the nation, no messianic promise for the world. The salvation of the world depends upon this redefined notion of family that celebrates the inclusion of a foreign enemy, an immigrant widow, as daughter-in-law, wife, and finally mother. Because family is taken out of the categories of property law and firmly ensconced in the category of covenant and commitment, promise is possible. The recognition of family, newly defined as growing out of acts of love and devotion and inclusive of persons whom the law might be apt to exclude, marks the book of Ruth as a crucial witness to the often overlooked radical nature of the biblical view of family. ⊕

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<sup>3</sup>Notably, the genealogy in Matt1:1–16 does make mention of Ruth, as well as Tamar, and several other women.