



## **Day 4: Reorder Power**

---

### **Ruth 4:13-17**

---

<sup>13</sup> So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. <sup>14</sup> Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! <sup>15</sup> He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." <sup>16</sup> Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. <sup>17</sup> The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

---

We are familiar with the words of Psalm 23:1–3

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

When the Lord restores the soul, a person is made whole. To restore the soul means to restore life, to make whole, to heal. Come, explore how Ruth provides the means to “restore the soul” of Naomi and thereby heal a family in Israel. Or does she achieve even more? As you read keep asking the question, How is a broken family healed?

## Ruth and the refugee family

Before analyzing this text, we need to consider the wider context of the story of Ruth. In the first chapter, Naomi and Elimelech leave their home because of extreme famine; they become refugees in the land of the Moabites. In Deuteronomy the advice is given: “You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live” (Deut 23:6). Yet, it is precisely these despised Moabites who receive the family of Naomi and Elimelech. Ironically, today the distant descendants of the Moabites are Arabs.

What happens to these Israelite refugees in Moab? They are apparently welcomed, marry their two sons to two Moabite women and make Moab their home. It is only when Naomi’s husband and her two sons die that she returns to her original home in Bethlehem.

Naomi is a broken woman. She has no children. There is no future for her or

her family. She is deeply depressed, or in biblical terms, she is bitter. She believes the hand of the Lord is against her. When she returns to Bethlehem she cries, “Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara [bitter], for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me” (Ruth 1:20).

## Two women

One of the features that make this Bible story unusual is that the two main characters are both women. Their relationship is crucial for the future of a family that is central to the hope of Israel.

At the heart of what we call family is attachment or bonding. The child’s attachment to the mother commences in the womb. With that attachment a family is born. In the story of Ruth, Ruth’s extraordinary attachment to Naomi creates a family of two women. Ruth’s attachment to Naomi is total—she declares her commitment to Naomi’s house, people and God. Ruth “cleaves” to her mother-in-law (Ruth 1:14). Ruth begins the process of healing by an attachment that binds her to Naomi as mother. It is the daughter-in-law rather than the mother-in-law who adopts. Ruth’s words are amazing: “where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). How do you think this family of two women would be viewed in a patriarchal society where the father’s house is the normative family? What do you think this author is seeking to emphasize by focusing on this alternative model?

The two women live together in their poverty, the repatriate widow and the alien daughter. Ruth gleans in the field and meets the old man Boaz who shows her special favors, even though she is a foreigner in the field. Naomi, who knows that Boaz is a close relative, monitors the development and proposes a plan to bring Boaz and Ruth even closer together. Then follows the famous thresh-

At this point in the story, how can Naomi be restored to health? Can her broken family be healed? What hope is there for a depressed, poor, childless, repatriate widow in your society?

---

ing floor scene where Boaz wakes after a night of harvest festivities to find a woman at his feet.

## The redeemer

When Boaz awakens in the dark of night and discovers a woman in the straw with him he asks who she is, and she replies: “I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin” (Ruth 3:9).

The outcome of this encounter is that Boaz promises by Yahweh the living God, that he will act as a redeemer for Ruth and Naomi, but must first deal with the problem that there is another closer relative who has priority to perform the role of redeemer.

Is Ruth but a pawn in Naomis plans to find someone to marry Ruth and eventually to have a family? Or is Ruth the daughter who effects healing in a broken family? (cf. Gen 38)

The role of redeemer (*go'el*) is played by the man who is nearest of kin. The redeemer has the right under Israelite law to recover the forfeited property of a kinsman (Lev 25:25), or to purchase his freedom if he has fallen into slavery (Lev 25:47–49). The verb *ga'al* also comes to mean “redeem” in the more general sense of deliver or rescue. God delivers Israel from Egypt (Ex 6:6). The term redeemer is a favorite term for God in Isaiah (Isa 44:24). Yahweh is next-of-kin to the people adopted as Yahweh’s family.

At the city gate, Boaz follows the necessary legal steps to act as redeemer for Naomi, who now makes her land available for purchase. It must be purchased by a next-of-kin to keep it in the family. The only catch is that whoever buys property must also marry Ruth, the wife of the dead relative, and thereby keep the land in the original family inherit-

ance. The closer relative declines, however, and Boaz is free to marry Ruth.

The blessing of the elders highlights further the role that Ruth is to play. They pray that she will be like Rachel and Leah, the two illustrious mothers of Israel. She will “build up” the house of Israel. She is to be the means of making the house of Boaz like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah (Ruth 4:11–12). Ruth, like Tamar (Gen 38), found an unconventional way of redeeming a family and building a house.

Should Ruth, like Tamar (cf. Gen 38:26), be declared “more righteous” than those who took advantage of her?

## Ruth and her child

In the key text for this study (Ruth 4:13–17), Boaz marries Ruth who conceives and has a son. It is at this point that we meet a series of surprises in the text. As soon as the child is born the women of the village pronounce a blessing—not for Ruth but for Naomi! Naomi remains the mother of the family. They bless Yahweh because Yahweh has provided Naomi with a redeemer (next-of-kin). But the redeemer they have in mind is not Boaz who redeemed the land and married Ruth. The redeemer is Ruth’s child. Ruth has provided the redeemer for the family!

The second surprise is that this child will “restore the soul” of Naomi. This gift of Ruth’s means not only a redeemer for the family but the healing of Naomi. Naomi will have her soul restored; she will be healed and become whole again. She will have family, progeny and hope. Her bitterness and depression disappear. The women declare that Ruth is worth more than seven sons precisely because she has given Naomi a son.

The third surprise is that Naomi becomes the mother. Ruth does not nurse the baby on Naomi’s behalf, as Moses’ mother did for Pharaoh’s daughter (Ex

---

2:7–9). Naomi takes the child and nurses it. This action may seem surprising to some of us. In some places in the world, however, women may be found nursing their grandchildren when their daughters die.

The fourth surprise is that the women of the village publicly declare, “A son has been born to Naomi.” The child is publicly identified as Naomi’s son. And the same group of women name the child. The child also belongs to them, not to the foreigner Ruth. The child restores the community and Ruth to the community.

### For further discussion

- Which of Ruth’s actions suggest ways in which she provides a model for healing a family, a community or a relationship?
- How does she achieve restoration in a patriarchal community where the power is with the men?
- Is she but a pawn in the hands of Naomi who eventually gets what she wants, a son rather than a daughter?
- Or, are there indications in this text that the writer is challenging the patriarchal world?
- Is Ruth, the healer, also a model of resistance against a rigid social system?
- A second area of debate relates to the role of Ruth as a foreigner. Is she a model immigrant designed to show how people should convert to Jewish faith and custom? Is she really accepted?
- The story ends with Naomi being restored and Ruth being deprived and silent. Or is she?
- Perhaps we can also ask whether, in spite of all the talk of redeemers—namely, Boaz, another male relative and finally the son—it is really Ruth who is the redeemer?
- Does she not provide the means to redeem, restore, or heal the family line?
- Is Ruth, the Moabite, the true redeemer in Israel?

*Norman Habel*

### References

Brenner, Athalya (ed.) (1999), *Ruth and Esther. A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press).

Pardes, Ilana (1992), *Counter-Traditions in the Bible. A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), chapter 6.

van Wolde, Ellen (1997), *Ruth and Naomi* (London: SCM Press).

Larkin, Katrina (1996), *Ruth and Esther. Old Testament Guides* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press).



## Luke 20:45–21:6

---

<sup>45</sup> In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, <sup>46</sup> “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. <sup>47</sup> They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation <sup>21:1</sup> He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; <sup>2</sup> he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. <sup>3</sup> He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; <sup>4</sup> for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.” <sup>5</sup> When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, <sup>6</sup> “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

---

## The widow's challenge

In the Gospel according to Luke, there is strong and unflinching advocacy for the poor. This occurs primarily by addressing, appealing to and confronting the rich, and calling them to conversion. The story about “the widow’s mite” must be read from this perspective: it is addressed to the rich and not to the poor.

Why should Jesus commend a poor widow for putting in the temple treasury all she had to live on? Does that not reinforce injustice, when the call should be for justice and a fair redistribution of goods?

This brief episode resonates with other stories about widows in Luke, as well as with stories where actions by women serve to correct the established religious leadership. Such women are critical examples over and against those with power and prestige whose acts betray what they pretend to be. The widow who places the whole of her livelihood at the disposal of the temple treasury is such a counter-image.

Some interpreters have wanted to ease the moral dilemma of this story by not reading it in exemplary terms at all. They see the thrust of the story as lament rather than praise of the widow. It is a complaint and accusation against those who have led her astray by false pretensions of piety. According to this interpretation Jesus first attacks the scribes in Luke 20:47 for their economic encroachments upon widows. The narrative in Luke 21:1–4 is a condemnation of the temple authorities, who also deprive a widow of her living, although more subtly. She simply does as she has been wrongly taught. The story provides an illustration of the ills of such official devotion.

Reflect on situations similar to this in your context today.

This is a tempting interpretation. It allocates the blame where it ought to be—on corrupt leaders. It restores the copper coins to the widow who has been seduced to give up what she ought to have kept. She is not exemplary. She is to be pitied as much as her oppressors are to be held responsible. But this interpretation is mistaken because it denies any responsibility of her own. Her whole identity remains that of a victim.

However, Jesus’ denouncement of the scribes in Luke 20:47 is connected with this story about the widow. The present division of the text into chapters, which was not there originally, keeps apart what ought to be kept together. In Luke 20:47 the scribes are reproached for their hypocrisy. Together with the chief priests and the wealthy non-priestly aristocracy, they have replaced the Pharisees as Jesus’ antagonists, now that he is in Jerusalem. Jesus harshly claims that the scribes make the most of their status, dressing to be seen, enjoying respectful greetings as they walk in public, and occupying the front seats at worship and meals. Their greed is so excessive that they “devour widows’ houses.” They also flaunt their long prayers; their piety is an item of display.

If the two actions of which the scribes are accused in Luke 20:47 (devouring widows’ houses and long prayers) are meant to be connected with each other, then more than hypocrisy is at stake. Luke 20:47b is more than merely an accusation of hypocrisy. The scribes are condemned because they extort from the widows under the pretext of performing long, probably well-paid, prayers for them. They pretend to serve those whom they exploit. In the context of Luke, such an accusation assumes a strong note of irony since widows elsewhere are portrayed as models who persevere in prayer. The widow prophet Anna never leaves the temple, but worships there by fasting and praying night and day (Lk 2:36–38). Simi-

---

larly, the parable of the widow and the unjust judge (Lk 18:1–8) is about the need to pray always and never to lose heart.

Widows play a greater role in Luke than in any other New Testament book. “Widow” has the traditional connotations of devastation, poverty and vulnerability. Nevertheless, they are the focus of more than care and compassion. They seem to be a respected group, always portrayed in a positive light. They transcend the roles of victims and receivers and act in such a way that they become prominent examples of faith and piety. The apparently weak and exposed persons, who normally are considered victims, are the ones who act out of full strength of faith.

The story about the widow at the temple treasury is found also in the Gospel of Mark (Mk 12:41–44). Compared to Mark, Luke draws the contrast between the rich and the poor widow with far greater sharpness by omitting the contributions of “the crowd.” Nor does he follow Mark in saying that “many rich people put in large sums.” In Luke’s version the rich are not necessarily generous. Luke does, however, add that the widow was poor.

Thus the widow is contrasted with the hypocritical scribes and their snobbish greed. She also is a counter-image to the rich, who merely give an amount that they will hardly notice. She serves as a critical, devastating critique of the rich, who give

Is the widow at the temple treasury an exception? Or is the irony that the poor widow, victim of the scribes’ mismanagement, is presented as a true paragon of piety? How does she expose the shortcomings of the rich and greedy right in front of the temple?

larger amounts than she does, but in relative terms, far less. The widow acts in an exemplary manner. Through her radical act of abandonment, she exposes their lack of self-sacrificing generosity.

Thus the main point is not in evaluating the widow’s act but in how her act relates to that of others. She serves a critical function in relation to a religious and social leadership that fails to do what it should. Her action makes **their** mismanagement and omissions strikingly clear. The fact that the widow is poor increases the contrast, and gives her example all the more strength. At the same time, her gift of abandonment shows that she courageously and drastically trusts in God alone. The widow exhausts herself and her resources, thereby expressing the strong *kenotic* dimension in Christianity: those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it (Lk 17:33). Life is gained by giving it up. Yes, also the temple, the center of divinely ordained power, will crumble.

*Turid Karlsen Seim*

Why is it harder for those in power (or who are rich) than for those with less prestige (or who are poor) to lose? What reordering of power does it imply? What are its implications for the exercise of power in the Lutheran communion?

