

# Ruth

## A Biblical Soap Opera

### Chapter One

#### A Letter with no Sender or Receiver

The story of Ruth starts like this “In the days of the judges” (1, 1). But this, however, does not indicate that the book was written during the time of the Judges. (Judges was the period from the death of Moses up to Samuel). It would seem that the author of the book of Ruth used an ancient story from the time of the Judges to reflect on the problems of the time in which he/she lived.

When was the book written? Who wrote it? We simply do not know, as it has neither date nor signature. All we have is the story of two widows. For us, it looks like a letter with no address or signature, but for the readers of the time, it was quite a different story. For them reading the story of Ruth was like looking into a mirror.

The Book of Ruth was not only a nice story, but reflected their situation. The story, from beginning to end was talking about their lives. For them to understand the message of Ruth, they had no need of address, sender or date. But we do! Otherwise each one will just see in it whatever he wants to.

<b>1800</b>	<b>Abraham</b>		
<b>1250</b>	<b>Moses</b>	<b>538</b>	<b>Return from Captivity</b>
	<b>Period of the Judges</b>	<b>520</b>	<b>Zerubbabel</b>
<b>1000</b>	<b>Samuel</b>	<b>458</b>	<b>Ezra</b>
<b>1050</b>	<b>David</b>		<b>Book of Ruth</b>
<b>930</b>	<b>Solomon</b>		
	<b>Two kingdoms</b>		
	<i>Israel End in 720</i>	<b>445</b>	<b>Nehemiah</b>
	<i>Judah End in 587</i>		
	<i>With Captivity</i>		

## **When was it written?**

Specialists tell us that Ruth was written around the year 450 B.C. or in other words about 100 years after the return from the Babylonian Captivity. The king of Babylon, Nab, had destroyed Jerusalem and killed many people in the process. Some of the survivors were taken to Babylon, and lived in slavery for about 50 years, when Cyrus, king of the Persians, having defeated the king of Babylon, allowed them to return to Jerusalem. A section of those who returned home, set about reorganizing the people, but without much success. From the time of the return until the time of the book of Ruth was written, (100 years, little or nothing had been done. Instead of getting better, things only got worse. The seeds for the Book of Ruth lie in the life and suffering of this group that returned from the Captivity.

## **The situation of the People as in the Book of Ruth**

To understand what was going on at the time, let us simulate an interview with Naomi. All the answers are taken either from the book of Ruth or from other biblical books written around the same period.

- *Naomi, tell us about the situation of your people*

There is a lot of poverty and hunger, famine, humiliation “we have to barter our sons and daughters to get enough corn to stay alive” (Ne 5,2; cf. Ne 1,3, Rt 1,1). We have to borrow money to pay the king’s taxes, and we have to sell our sons and daughters into slavery. Some of our daughters are being raped. There is nothing we can do since our fields and vineyards are the property of others (Ne 5,5). Those of us who still have land, vineyards or houses have to mortgage or sell them to get something to eat due to famine (Ne 5,3-4; Rt 4,3).

- *But is there nothing that can be done?*

Do what? The Law says that the leftovers in the cornfields belong to the poor (Lv 19,9-10), but we can only go in there if the owner lets us (Rt 2,2). Our rights have become privileges. Another example, the Law also says that if, out of necessity, a family is forced to sell what they have, and the next to kin is obliged to redeem or buy it, for the property to continue in the hands of the original owner (Lv 25, 25). However, what is happening is that the better off relatives ignore their poor relations, do not follow the law, and the poor are permanently in debt (Rt 4,5-6; Ne 5,5). When the poor man has to sell his bit of land, there is no one to buy it back for him. We are far removed from the time of the Judges, when family was family.

- *Are you saying then that the problem is a family one?*

When I use the word family, I am referring to the community, others use the word clan. Our families are big open ones. In other words, many smaller families living together in one big family more like a village than anything else. During the time of the Judges helping the other members of the clan was a sacred obligation, nobody allowed his brother to go hungry (Dt 15,7-8). Nowadays, there is no more of that. Poverty has changed everything for us. Some are being forced to emigrate, and live in isolation (Rt1,1). The community is weak and divided (Ne 7,4). We even have those who let their relatives die from hunger, with a greedy eye on the poor man’s property, increase their wealth (Ne 1,1-5; Rt 4,4-6).

- *Do you have any idea of how all this is going to end-up?*

All I can do is tell you what happened to me and mine, to give you some idea of what is going on with the majority of my people. Because of the famine, we were forced to emigrate to Moab, the four of us – myself, my husband and our two sons (Rt1,1). There was no one to help us. Ten long years passed, without being able to come home, during which my husband died (Rt1,3), the two lads got married to foreigners, if you don't mind!. There were those among us who took exception to that (Ez 9,2; 10,2.10; Ne 13,23-27). But there was nothing else they could do. Anyway, they ended up dying as well. There I was, all alone in a foreign country, left with two foreign daughter-in-laws - three widows, with no husband, no children and no property. But I suppose we were no better or no worse than the majority

- *Naomi, what, in your opinion are the biggest problems facing the people?*

I have answered that question, more or less. First of all there is the question of hunger, poverty. The people just do not have enough to eat (Rt 1,1; Ag1,6). Then there is the land question. People are not able to hold on to their piece of land. Then the better off ones, take advantage of the hunger, and even the laws themselves, to gobble up the lands of the poor (Nh 5,3-5; Rt 4 3-4). There is one more problem - the family. We, the poor, are no longer able to live near our relatives, and consequently not able to stick together. Necessity has divided us, spread us out, and has even forced us into exile (Rt I,1; Nh 5,1-5). When I say family, I mean community or clan. These families are no longer a source of strength and support. We are not able to defend the rights of the poorer members (Nh 5,8). There is exploitation within the families themselves. In one and the same family there is rich and poor! Can you imagine that? (Nh 5,8). It is a vicious circle.

### **The Different Projects to Solve the Problem**

During the 100-year period following the return from Exile, different projects had been tried to face up to, and find a solution to the problems of the people and, from what we have just heard from Naomi, without much success. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah give us an insight into these various projects.

#### **1. Jeshua, Zerubbabel – Rebuild the Altar (Ez 3,1-13)**

Zerubbabel was a descendent of the king of Judah (1Ch 3,17-19), while Jeshua was a descendent of the high priest (1Ch 5,40-41; Ez 3,2). These two, around the year 520 B.C., 20 years after the return from Babylon, with the support of the prophets Zechariah and Haggai, went about rebuilding the temple and the altar in Jerusalem, which had been destroyed by Nab (Ez 5,1-2). For them, the suffering of the people was punishment for having abandoned the temple in ruins (Hg 1,3-11). This reconstruction project, involved a huge amount of manual labour, as the temple was an enormous construction, and would give a lot of employment. It was the opportunity to organize the working classes, the Levites and the priests (Ez 3,7-10). The idea of Zerubbabel and Jeshua was to rebuild the nation around the altar, the temple and worship. However the Samaritans put a stop to that (Ez 4,1-23), by writing to the king of Persia and convincing him to stop the reconstruction work, which he did.

#### **2. Ezra – Racial Purity and Observance of the Law (Ez 9,1-15; Nh 8,1-18)**

Ezra was a doctor of the Law, a highly qualified scribe, and acted in the name of the king of Persia (Ez 7,11-26). He came to Jerusalem in 458 (Ez 7,7), about 60, years after Zerubbabel. Ezra was also of the opinion that the suffering of the people was the result of their disobedience, because of intermarriage with foreigners, which had introduced pagan customs (Ez 9,1-2; 10,2.10; Nh 13,23-27). He proposed two things: First, expel all foreign women and their children (Ez 10,3.11); second, follow the Law of Yahweh to the letter, as read and explained by Ezra and the Levites (Nh 8,1-8). Ezra's idea was to rebuild the nation around a more strict observance of the Law (Nh 8,13), and a purification of the holy race (Ez 9,2).

### **3. Nehemiah – A New Jubilee Year (Nh 5,1-10)**

Nehemiah was Governor of Judah, nominated by the king of Persia in 445 (Nh 5,14), around the same time as Ezra. He was a good man and sensitive to the problems of his people. He saw how they were being exploited by the authorities and the rich (Nh5,1-5.15). Not being able to stand it any longer, he called a meeting of the administrators and the rich people, and in the name of Yahweh, demanded that they give back all ill gotten property and pardon all debts (Nh 5,7-13). He himself was the first to set the example (Nh5,9-10). He proceeded to try and rebuild the families, the clans (Nh7,4-72), and also the walls around Jerusalem (Nh 2,11-3,38; 5,16). Everything would seem to indicate that his idea was to rebuild the nation using the Jubilee year as the starting point. This law demanded that after every 50 years all debts were to be pardoned, and all sale of property that had taken place during the preceding years was to be undone. This reconstruction project, excellent in itself, came from the top down from those who had stolen from the poor, and in that way had become rich. Nehemiah wanted them to walk in the fear of the Lord (Nh5,9).

## **Chapter Two**

### **Keys to the Reading of the Book of Ruth**

Before going into the project for the rebuilding of the nation as proposed by the Book of Ruth, let us have a closer look at the different keys we can use for a better understanding of the book. There are at least three such keys:

*First Key: Read it through the Eyes of the Poor.*

The situation was this: a starving family without is forced to emigrate because there is no family support. We must constantly keep before us the various attempts made to rebuild the nation, as outlined above – the rebuilding of the temple and the altar, the purification of the race and observance of the law; and the proclamation of a Jubilee year. In spite of all the good will involved these different projects went nowhere towards solving Naomi's problem, because she continued without either bread, land or a future. Put yourself in her place and start to read the book, bearing in mind the following:

1. What is not mentioned, in any story, is very often as important as what is mentioned. In the Book of Ruth no mention is made of either the king or the priests. There are no references to the Temple or the altar. There is no talk of

- Jerusalem or of the sacrifices that take place there. From that alone it is easy to see what the book thinks about Zerubbabel's and Joshua's project.
2. Another thing that immediately catches our attention is the fact that the central figure in the story is a foreigner. Ruth is a Moabite. The book goes as far as asking that she be treated as Rachel and Leah, two leading women in the history of God's people (Rt 4,11; Gn 35,23-26). Ruth, the foreigner, is put alongside the mothers of God's people. So draw your own conclusion about what the book thinks of Ezra's project.
  3. The third interesting element is Boaz's way of solving Naomi and Ruth's problem. Boaz is a member of that social group that had been called upon by Nehemiah to divide up their lands, and pardon all debts. In the Book of Ruth, the initiative does not come from Boaz but from the two poor widows, who plan everything, and Boaz is called upon just to execute their plans. That says enough about the project put forward by Nehemiah.

The Book of Ruth is an extremely well-written, intelligent story, by someone who knew how to pass on a message. Without even mentioning Zerubbabel, Ezra or Nehemiah, it speaks of them all the time.

*Second key: The Meaning of the Names*

Each name in the book has a hidden meaning. It is a kind of a riddle. The name reveals what each one is and does in the story:

1. Elimelech, the husband, which means 'My God is King'.
2. Naomi, the wife, meaning 'grace' or 'my fair one'.
3. Mara, Naomi's other name, which means 'the bitter one' or 'my bitterness'
4. *Mahlon*, the eldest son, means 'sickness'
5. *Chilion*, the younger of the two sons means 'pining away' or 'weakness'
6. *Orpah*, the first daughter-in-law's name, which means 'she who turns away'
7. *Ruth*, the second daughter-in-law, whose name means 'the beloved' or 'friend'
8. *Boaz*, the name of the distant relative, meaning 'force' or 'by the power'
9. *Obed*, meaning *servant* is the name given to the baby.

*Third key: the plan of the Book*

Introduction: 1,1-5: The Situation of the People

- 1<sup>st</sup> Step:** On hearing the good news that God had visited his people, Naomi decides to return home, once again, in search of bread (Rt1,6-22)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> step:** Ruth takes the initiative of going into 'the fields to glean among the corn', and so begins to demand the fulfilment of the rights of the poor (Rt 2,1-35).
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Step:** When asked by Ruth, Boaz commits himself to the fulfilment of the "right of redemption", and by so doing sets in process the solution to the whole problem of the family (3,1-18).
- 4<sup>th</sup> Step:** Boaz himself fulfils the right to redemption, marries Ruth and in that way guarantees the possession of the land and the future of the family (4,1-12).

Last scene: 4,13-17: the new Creation

The story of Ruth is very well put together. It begins with a description of the oppression (Rt 1,1-5), and finishes with the people's dream of a happy ending – all as imagined by the poor (Rt 4,13-27). The period of reconstruction lies between these two references – the reality presented in the beginning and the dream as presented in the end. This period contains four different stages (Rt 1,6-4,12)

The final scene (4,13-17) is the birth of the son, Obed. Through him all the problems of the people begin to find a definitive solution. A new hope is born. The appendix (4,18-22) gives us David's genealogy – the great grandson of Ruth the foreigner.

## Chapter Three

### Ruth 1,1-5: Opening Scene: Setting the Scene.

We have here a mirror that reflects the suffering of the people. On returning from Exile they are a people without food, land, family or future. Now the meaning of the names of the people involved, helps the people to understand better the meaning of their past history, and what exactly had brought them into Exile.

When they said that their God was king, *Elimelech*, they were making a profession of faith. Then when they asked for a man to their king, at the time of Samuel, they no longer wanted Yahweh as their king. God did not refuse their wish, and gave them a king. For them the story of the kings was a disaster, killing in them their faith in Yahweh Elimelech dies (1,3)

The fruit of the faithful love between Yahweh and his people is Naomi, *Grace, the fair one*. While the people see Yahweh as their king and Lord, they continue as the graceful spouse of the Lord.

Israel and Judah, the two sons of the Alliance, forgot that Yahweh was their king and Lord, and went in search of other Gods and Lords. The result was that they became *sick, Mahlon*, and started to *pine away, Chilion*. Both the northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) kingdoms, had both got sick and pined away, and fell into slavery. When they went into exile, they intermarried with foreigners, lost their memory, roots, faith and identity, and ended up dying (1,5). All that is now left is Naomi, now called Mara with neither sons or husband, without God or a future.

This way of presenting and reading the past history reveals to the people that the cause of their disgrace is twofold: From the visible point of view, the kings were a complete disaster for the people of God. Then the other angle is that the people had lost their faith in Yahweh, and had become weak and pined away. Elimelech had died and Naomi had become Mara.

When the book starts off by saying “In the days of the judges”, it establishes a link, a continuity with the judges and awakens in the listeners the hope of a new judge, along the lines of Samson, Gideon, Deborah and so many other heroes.

## Chapter four

### Ruth 1,6-22: First Step: Returning Home in Search of Bread

A text is like a piece of embroidery. When you see it from the distance, you see it as a unit. When you see it from close-up, you can see the divisions, and the seams. Let us now take a closer look at the cloth of chapter one, which describes the first step in the rebuilding of God’s people:

Ruth 1,6-22.

1. 1,6-7	The beginning of the journey home from the land of Moab in search of something to eat.
2. 1,8-14	The dialogue between Naomi and her two daughters-in-law.
* 1,15-18	<b>RUTH DECIDES TO STAY WITH NAOMI AND ACCOMPANY HER WHEREEVER SHE GOES.</b>
2. 1,19-20	The dialogue and lamentation between Naomi and the women of Bethlehem.
1. 1,22	The end of the journey back to the land of Judah at the beginning of the harvest

These divisions reveal the stitching in the interwoven text of the words. It reveals the very special way the people of the Bible had for putting their texts together. From it we can conclude that the centre of the text lies in Ruth’s decision to stay with Naomi. (Rt 1,15-18).

#### **The colours of the Text**

In this first step we have one predominant colour, one predominant word. The word is *return*, go home. The word is repeated twelve times, which in itself is a sign that it is the key word. However, not always does it have the same meaning.

GOING HOME means returning to the point of departure. In the case of Orpah and Ruth, to go home meant going back and staying in Moab. For Naomi it meant going back from Moab to her native soil in search of bread. Furthermore, it meant going back to the roots, the ancient customs of her people, to the ideal situation at the time of the judges. It meant returning to the God who had freed them from the clutches of the Pharaoh. In the case of Naomi, going back was not just an expression of fear to face up to the future, but rather a type of conversion, a change in outlook, beginning to see things differently, anew.

#### **Going home**

The first move is to *get-up!* Get up and go back home in search of bread! Set out from where you are; get on the road and start walking! You just cannot stand there doing nothing. For ten years, Naomi just stood there, paralysed, far from home (Rt 1,4). Now, at last, she gets up and starts to go. What brought about this change was the news about God's visit: God had visited his people, and given them bread! Faith in God and the need for food - these are the two things that, when brought together, force the people to get up and start out on the journey.

Who begins the journey? The three women: Naomi, Ruth and Orpah; one a member of the people of God, the other two from a different nation, a different religion; a mixture of religions and races. People with no say whatsoever in the society of the time – because they were poor, widows, foreigners and women. What unites them is their poverty and hunger, the need for something to eat, their bonds of friendship and the desire to be back there where God had visited his people. It is hard to imagine a weaker or less expressive trio. Who would have the courage to start a reconstruction campaign with a group like that? Yeah! The mustard seed! Something that only God would do!

### **Finding out as you go (Rt 1.8-14)**

Many people start out, but not all persevere to the end. As yet things are not so clear. It is the journey itself that helps the people define better their ideas.

1. Naomi does not hide from the two daughters-in-law the difficulties involved in the journey. She tells them: if they continue with her, they have no chance of ever getting a husband (Rt 1,11-13). Quite the contrary, “the hand of YHWH has been raised against me” (1,13). If they give up the idea of going with her, they will have a home, a husband, tranquillity (Rt 1,8-9). But it is up to them to decide and make the choice! When faced with this decision, *Orpah* decides to turn her *back* and move away (Rt 1,14). Now there are only two left: Naomi and Ruth.
2. In spite of being so clear about things when talking to the daughters-in-law, Naomi herself is rather confused. She considers herself a failure, incapable of finding a solution to the problems of the two daughters-in-law (Rt 1,11-13). She believes that the hand of God has been raised against her, and that it is God himself who is the cause of all her suffering (1,13.20-21). However, in spite of this, she keeps on keeping on. Where does she get her strength? Her hope comes from a faith that sees in the dark. Naomi knows that God, her god, is much greater than all of her problems put together. And so, in spite of everything, she refuses to give up hoping.
3. Naomi possesses the wisdom of the poor. She does not see God as just hers, or even the God of her people. She asks YHWH to be merciful towards the two daughters-in-law, who are from another nation and another religion. She asks a husband and happiness for each of them (Rt 1,8-9). Here lies the lesson from the poor: God is not confined to their personal individual interests. Faith is not a national thing. God is not put at the service of one nation, or one institution. YHWH is seen as the Lord and God of all. Consequently the poor are brother to all!

### **Option for the Poor**

When looking at the embroidery and colours of the text, we saw that the centre point of the first step is when Ruth decides to stay with Naomi and go home with her (Rt 1,15-18). Ruth, the *friend*, does not follow the example of Orpah, the one who *turns* her *back*. Living up to her name, she insists with Naomi and says: “Do not press me to leave you and to turn back from your company, for wherever you go, I will go, wherever you live, I will live. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Wherever you die, I will die and there I will be buried. May Yahweh do this thing and more also, even if death should come between us” (Rt 1,16-17).

In these simple, profound words we have a description of the necessary conditions for those who want to be part of the people of God. These are the conditions of the *option for the poor!* Here we have a description of the new front entrance to the people of God. The door in question is not the door of racial purification, neither is it the door of legal fulfilment, as Ezra wished. Instead, it is the door of a life commitment to the community.

Ruth’s commitment is a radical one! For her there is no turning back, even at the request of Naomi herself: “Do not press me to leave you”. Ruth gives her everything: “not even death shall come between us”. She wants to be part of Naomi’s life: “Wherever you go, I will go with you”. Her commitment with Naomi is also a commitment with the people and with God: “Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God”.

The motivation behind Ruth’s option for Naomi is love. No other reason, there is nothing whatsoever to be gained, at least at first sight, because there is no future in opting for a people totally ruined. On the contrary, the decision forces Ruth to relinquish everything that, for others, brings happiness – a home and a husband (Rt 1,9.13). The only interest Ruth has is to be Naomi’s friend and be faithful to her. This type of commitment can only reach maturity through the everyday living together, where all the ups and downs of the journey are shared.

When she saw that her daughter-in-law was determined to go with her, Naomi gave in (Rt 1,18). Once again, it is a case of building the road as you go. At first Naomi did not want Ruth or Orpah to go back with her (Rt 1,11), but she changed her mind. She gave in when she saw Ruth’s determination. The understanding came from the facts, accepted and understood as signs from God. Consequently, instead of sending her back because of what she was, a foreigner, Naomi welcomed her, brought her in and integrated her into the people of God. She did not see herself as the gatekeeper of the people of God. The gatekeeper is God himself.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Ruth 2,1-23: The second Step: Gleaning in the Cornfields**

Let us have a closer look at the text and see how it is divided:

1.	2,1-2	Boas enters the story; Ruth and Naomi plan their strategy
2.	2,3	Ruth goes to Boas' corn fields to glean the leftovers.
3.	2,4-7	Boas talks to his workman about Ruth.
*	2,8-14	The conversation between Ruth and Boas.
3.	2,15-16	Boas talks to his workmen about Ruth.
2.	2,17	Ruth gleans in Boas' cornfield again.
1.	2,18-23	Ruth and Naomi review the day, and discover ho Boas is.

### Three things worthy of note

1. The two women were back in Bethlehem, in search of bread. It being harvest time, the law guaranteed their right to glean in the cornfields, so this is what they decide to do. They look to the Law for orientation. The word of God gives them the first signs of hope, and out they set in search of their rights.
2. The idea of gleaning in the cornfields comes from Ruth. This was her triple right - as a woman, as a widow and as a foreigner. However she goes with her hat in her hand looking, not for her rights, but for a favour "in the footsteps of someone who will look on me with favour" (2,2). As yet she has no clear awareness of her rights. That only grows with time and events.
3. Before doing anything the two women sit down, talk it over and plan together, as happens at the outset of the other two steps (2,2; 3,1-5). Then at the end of the process they sit down again, reflect on what happened and plan the next step (2,18-22; 3,16-18). They have no readymade plan, but plan as the facts unroll and from the experience gained.

### Gleaning the Leftovers

"When you gather the harvest of your land, you are not to harvest to the very end of the field. You are not to gather the gleanings of the harvest. You are neither to strip your vine bare nor to collect the fruit that has fallen in your vineyard. You must leave them for the poor and the stranger. I am Yahweh your god" (Lv 19,9-10).

"When reaping the harvest in your field, if you have overlooked a sheaf, do not go back for it. Leave it for the foreigner, the orphan, the widow, so that Yahweh your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, you must not go over the branches twice..... Let anything left be for the widow, the orphan and the stranger" (Dt 24,19-22). Cf. Ex 23,11; Lv19,9f; 23,22; Dt 26,12-13; Ps35,9-10

The leftovers are what remain in the field after the harvest, and belonged by right to the poor, and not to the owner of the harvest. In fact, if the plantation owner went back to pick up the leftovers, this was regarded as stealing from the poor. At the time of Ruth and Naomi this right was no longer a right but a privilege.

### Boaz on the Stage

Who is Boaz and what is he doing in the story of the two widows? The name *Boaz* means *by the power*. He is a well off man, property owner (2,3), with many workers (2,9,15). Some Bibles refer to him as a valiant warrior – the same name used when referring to the

judges (Jg 6,12; 11,1). One of the pillars in the temple is also called Boaz, meaning strong (1Kg 7,21)

What is his role on the book? Ruth is representative of all the foreign women that Ezra wanted expelled from the country, while Naomi is representative of all the abandoned members of the people of God. And Boaz, who does he represent? Boaz represents Yahweh himself. He enters the story like one of the judges. Through him, Yahweh saves his people. Through Boaz the problems of the people are gradually solved: he puts bread on the table (2,14-17; 3,15), he assures the possession of the land for Naomi and her posterity (4,9-10) and he is to be the father of the child (4,13).

But even then, he neither leads nor imposes, nor does he have a proposal or a project. He simply carries out the wishes of the two widows (3,11). In the end having done everything, he is left with nothing -without the land that he had bought, or the son that he had brought into the world. He was left with nothing but the satisfaction of knowing that Ruth and Naomi could now live, like Yahweh himself.

“I have been told all you have done for your mother-in-law since your husband’s death, and how you left your own father and mother and the land where you were born to come among a people whom you knew nothing about before you came here. May Yahweh reward you for what you have done. May rich recompense be made to you by Yahweh, the God of Israel, to whom you have come, to find shelter beneath his wings” (Rt 2,11-12).

What led Boaz to, so readily, accept Ruth and shower so many favours on her was her decision and option to stay with Naomi. He uses two biblical phrases to show the importance of what she had done. “You Left your own father and mother and the land where you were born”. These words call to mind Abraham (Gn 12,1). Ruth by imitating Abraham became a child of Abraham. He also said “You have come to find shelter beneath the wings of Yahweh”. These words brought to mind the liberating action of Yahweh when he brought his people out of Egypt (Ex 19,4; Dt32,11; Ps 17,8; 36,8; 57,2).

In other words, Ruth is accepted as Abraham’s daughter and a member of the people of God, not because she was part of the Jewish race, not because she faithfully followed all the laws to the letter, but because she had made a commitment to Naomi, and through her, to Yahweh and his people. (1,16-17). The result being that she immediately gets a share of his possessions and deserves a rich recompense from Yahweh.

“You have spoken to my heart” (2,13). The phrase means much more than just saying nice things. To speak to the heart was, and still is, to restore and renew life from inside. For example, Yahweh had taken the people out of Egypt to speak to the heart “I am going to lure her and lead her into the wilderness to speak to her heart” (Hosea 2,16). At the end of the Captivity, he announced: “Console my people, console them. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, and call to her that her time of service is ended, that her in is atoned for” (Is 40,1-2). Speaking to the heart meant renewal, liberation. The renewal is already taking

place in the heart and life of Ruth. She feels herself renewed from inside. She feels the consolation promised by the prophet, feels that her heart is being spoken to (2,13).

The Book of Ruth is like a road full of twists and turns with something new every corner. By chance Ruth found herself in the company of Boaz, and from there everything starts to fall into place 1. Gleaning the leftovers in Boaz's cornfields, she reaps his friendship and love, which was eventually to be the solution of all her problems. 2. She, at first expected only a favour, which became nearly a complete sharing – her rights were respected much more than she had imagined. At the end of the day, when the time came to review the proceedings, the two widows discovered that the “by chance” had lead them into the hands of the one who had the obligation to help them. This “by chance” is no by chance, but rather Yahweh in his mercy and fidelity guiding the footsteps of the poor

## Chapter Six

### Ruth 3,1-18: The third Step: Fruitful Harvest Night

Let us first break down the text to see how it is put together and find the pivot point.

1.	3,1-6	Naomi and Ruth plan together the next step.
2.	3,7	Boaz eats and drinks his fill at the threshing.
3.	3,7-8	Boaz goes to sleep and Ruth gets in under the blankets.
*	9-13	Ruth and Boaz talk together about fulfilling the Law of Redemption
3.	3,14	Ruth and Boaz pass the night together.
2.	3,15	Boaz gives abundant food to Ruth as she leaves.
1.	3,16-18	Ruth and Naomi review their actions

Breaking down the chapter in this manner, we can see that the central point of the third step is again the dialogue between Boaz and Ruth. The subject of their conversation is Redemption

In the first step the most recurring word was *go back, go home*. In the second step it was *gleaning the leftovers*. Now in the third step it is *redemption*. The word redemption, or some other synonym, appears seven times here and fourteen times in the next step (4,1-12).

Before going into the third step, we must pause for a moment and take a look at the two laws involved here: The Law of Redemption and the Levirate Law.

#### Law of Redemption

This law established two things. Firstly, when someone, due to poverty, is forced to sell his land, his closest relative had the obligation to redeem it back, that is buy it, not for himself, but for the poor relative who was in danger of losing it (Lv 25, 23-25). Secondly,

when someone, due to poverty is forced to sell himself or a member of his family, into slavery, the nearest relative had the obligation to redeem this person, that is, buy back his liberty (Lv 25,47-49). In both these cases, this relative was referred to as *goelim* or *goël* or “the one who redeems”, the godfather.

The purpose of this Law was to defend the family as the foundation cell of society. Now, the word ‘family’ here means clan, the group of small families, or if you want, the community. A well organized clan, as any community, gave support to the individual members, and to the smaller families (father, mother and children) against the ambitions of the greedy and powerful. This law, when properly observed, guaranteed the continuous possession of the land, and at the same time prevented the accumulation of property in the hands of a few. When properly applied no one would lose his freedom and no one would take advantage of another person’s misfortune. The law promoted co-responsibility for the well being of the members of the family, the community.

As people today have their Godfathers, in those times, they had their Goël. The goël was always someone to fall back on, a very important person, especially for the poor. The word gets a multitude of different translations depending on the Bible translation one is using. He is called saviour, redeemer, liberator, defender, protector, advocate, consoler, or avenger. Goël is the word most used for God in the prophet Isaiah: he saves, redeems, frees, defends, protects, consoles, gives new life (Is 41,14; 43,14; 54,5; 63,16 etc.).

To understand the special interpretation given to the Law of Redemption in the Book of Ruth, we must take into consideration another law, the Levirate Law

### **Levirate Law**

“If brothers live together and one of them dies childless, the dead man’s wife must not marry a stranger outside the family. Her husband’s brother must come to her and, exercising his levirate, make her his wife, and the first son she bears shall assume the dead brother’s name; and so his name will not be blotted out in Israel. But if the man declines to take his brother’s wife, she must go to the elders at the gate and say: ‘I have no levir willing to perpetuate the name of his brother in Israel; he declines to exercise his levirate in my favour’. The elders of the town shall summon the man and talk to him. If he appears before them and says ‘I refuse to take her’, then she to whom he owes levirate shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take the sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and pronounce the following words. ‘this is what we do to the man who does not restore his brother’s house’ (Dt 25,5-10).

Here we are not talking about the ‘larger family’, the clan, but rather, the ‘smaller family’. In other words, the Levirate Law obliges only the brothers, sons of the same parents, and not cousins or other relatives. The Law of Redemption went beyond the boundaries of the ‘small family’, to include all relatives of the larger family, the clan, obliging them to help out the needy brother. The idea behind the Levirate Law was to protect the ‘smaller family’, guarantee the continuity of the family name, the continuity of the family property in the name of the family, and guarantee the future of the widow.

In the specific case of Naomi, the situation was drastic: Mahlon, Ruth's husband had died without leaving an heir. Applying the Levirate Law his brother was obliged to marry her, and give her a son. But there was no brother. Naomi had no other sons and was too old to have any (1,12). Naomi's family had reached the end, it was being threatened with extinction. There was no way to apply the Levirate Law, since there was no brother-in-law. There was, in fact, no law to prevent the family from disappearing. The poor are never protected by the law.

Naomi and her situation is a mirror for the people of the time. The poor of Israel and Judah had disintegrated, totally incapable of defending themselves against the greed of the rich. They were forced to sell what they had, including the children, (Nh 5,1-5). The clan, the 'larger family', the community, was no longer a defence; the laws. The Law, while being good in itself, did nothing to solve the problems of the people. To make things worse, there were those who took advantage of the redemption law to buy up the land of their poor relations and accumulate more and more. They bought the property, they fulfilled the law, they redeemed the land but not the person. The law had been twisted to serve the interests of the greedy, it had become a farce and a lie. The law "has been falsified by the lying hand of the scribe" (Jr 8,8).

Exploitation was rampant. Some were forced to emigrate (1,1), which resulted in mixed marriages with foreigners (1,14), opening the door to other religions, causing still more confusion. Then came Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah and with their projects – rebuild the nation through the rebuilding of the temple and the altar (Nehemiah); rebuild the nation through the strict observation of the Law, and by purifying the race (Ezra); and thirdly, rebuild the nation by the rich giving back what they had stolen from the poor (Nehemiah). The Book of Ruth presents a different project, or better still does not present any project at all. It simply tells a story. It tells of how one family fought and was successful.

### **Getting back to the Third Step**

The harvest is over, so how are the two widows going to survive now? We are not back at square one, because many new factors have come on the scene. They know now that Boaz is a relative so Naomi wants him to fulfil the Law of Redemption. Basing herself on the story of Tamar (Gn 38 6-26) Naomi plans the next step. Tamar passed herself off as a prostitute to force her father-in-law to fulfil his Levirate obligation with her. In the same way Naomi wants Ruth to force Boaz to do the same thing, i.e. be the goêl. She gives the orders and Ruth carries them out.

In Nehemiah 5,8-11, we see the governor, using all his power, demanding that his rich relatives fulfil the right of redemption. Here we find two powerless widows trying to do the same thing: demand that their rich relative, Boaz, fulfil the same right of redemption. Instead of using power and strength, they resort to cleverness, charm and courage to appeal to his conscience

Ruth gets ready, goes to the harvest barn, and waits in Boaz's bed. When he finds her there she appeals to him to fulfil the Law of Redemption. She no longer asks for a favour

as she had done in stage two, because now she is more aware of her rights. After praising her he promises to do everything that she wants him to do, but he then remembers that there is a closer relative who has first claim to the right.

Ruth and Boaz spend the night together, and the next morning she does not return home empty-handed (3,15-17). The book seems to suggest that the child to be born is the result of this fruitful night of love. For the Bible human love is the image of God's love (Hosea 2,16-22). Boaz had done for Ruth what God had done for his people. (Is 54,1.5.6).

## Chapter Seven

### Ruth 4, 1-12: The Fourth Step: Guaranteeing the Possession of the Land

Breaking down the text to find the focal point

1.	4,1-2	The tribunal is formed at the city gates.
2.	4,3-4	The relative with the right, accepts to redeem Naomi's property.
*	4,5-8	<b>BUT DOES NOT ACCEPT TO MARRY RUTH AND PASSES ON HIS RIGHT.</b>
2.	4,9-10	Boaz accepts to marry Ruth and redeem Naomi's property.
1.	4,11-12	The tribunal ratifies the decision taken by Boaz and puts him at ease.

The two words *redemption* (14 times) and *name* (7 times) predominate this fourth step. The reason being that for the people of Israel to preserve the name was to preserve the continuity of the family.

Calling someone to the city gates was the same as bringing him before a court of justice. It was there that rights were defended or problems were solved. Here lies the root of all the problems. In the beginning, there was the problem of bread. Then in the search for bread, the problem of the family appeared. In the effort to find a solution for the family question, the question of property appears.

The crux of the question is this: does the other relative want to fulfil the right of redemption, to acquire more property or is he interested in solving the problem of Naomi's family. It would seem that for him there was no connection between the two. In other words, the right of redemption, a law created to guarantee for the poor the possession of the land, was being used just to increase the property of someone who already had land, and make the poor even poorer still. He was willing to observe the letter of the law, but not its spirit. The right to redemption was merely a cover-up for legal robbery.

When Nehemiah had asked for a land reform, he was leaving the law as it was. The law continued being the same cover-up for corruption. The nearest relative could then say without any qualm of conscience: "I am willing to redeem it". Everything is perfectly legal.

We are now at the central point of the fourth step and also the kernel of the Book of Ruth. Boaz says to the other relative (who incidentally has no name in the book where names are so significant!) "On the day that you purchase the land from Naomi, you purchase Ruth the Moabitess also, the wife of the dead man, and so restore his name to his inheritance" (4,5). Here lies the surprise of the Book of Ruth.

Before going any further, let us remember:

1. The possession of the land and the situation of the family had become two distinct and separate problems.
2. The law governing the right of redemption was out of date and served only as an instrument to further exploit and impoverish the already poor.
3. Nehemiah had forced the rich to give back stolen property, as the law demanded, but without making any changes in the laws that gave cover to their robbery.
4. Ezra had demanded a closer observance of the law, but had done nothing to update the law of the right of redemption.

The new idea being proposed by the Book of Ruth is this: one cannot acquire the poor man's land without taking into consideration his poverty. This means that possession of the land and the situation of the family are two inseparable things. In the case in question whoever acquired possession of Naomi's land, had also to take responsibility for the situation of Naomi's family. This meant marrying Ruth and giving her a child, for the family property to continue in her name, "to restore her name to her inheritance" (4,5).

For this changes had to be made in the laws. More specifically the Law of the right to Redemption and the Levirate Law:

The *first* change: Bring both laws together into just one law: the *right* to acquire the land and the *obligation* to marry the widow. The laws while being very good in themselves, did not solve the problems of the poor. The right to redemption, which referred specifically to the land question, without guaranteeing an heir served only to increase the property of the big landowners. In the same way, the fulfilment of the Levirate Law, without solving the land question, did not guarantee the food for survival. And so the importance of what Boaz said in the tribunal: "On the day that you purchase the land of Naomi" (as demanded by the Redemption Law), "you purchase Ruth, the Moabitess also, the wife of the dead man" (as demanded by the Levirate Law), "and so restore his name to his inheritance" (the new twist now being given: possession of the land and the situation of the family are linked together and cannot be separated).

The *second* change: Widen the application of the Levirate Law. Strictly speaking, no other relative, except the brother-in-law, was obliged to marry Ruth, thus excluding Boaz

(Dt 25,5). As proposed by Boaz (and the Book of Ruth) the law is now extended beyond the ‘smaller family’ to oblige any member of the “larger family”. In this way, the number of people included to defend the poor is widened to include not only the family but also the community, the clan. What was originally a *family* law becomes now a *social* law. It is not enough just to look after the family; the pastoral work must also reach out to include the social causes that are disintegrating the family.

This is the suggestion being put forward by the Book of Ruth, for the problems of the people and the rebuilding of society, a suggestion that comes from the poor themselves. It demands the updating of the Law of Redemption, and the law then becomes an effective instrument to guarantee their rights and rebuild society in keeping with God’s will. If this does not happen (as was the case of the project defended by Nehemiah) the law is nothing more than an instrument of oppression and exploitation.

### **Final victory**

First of all, Naomi’s piece of land remains within the family. Secondly, the son to be born would bear the family name of Naomi’s deceased husband. The goël is left with nothing. He spends his money, and remains without the land that he had bought, the woman that he had adopted or the son that he had brought into this world. The only satisfaction that was to be his was the pleasure of knowing that he had helped Naomi’s family survive and have a future.

The relative (who forever remains without a name!) declined the proposal: “Then I cannot use my right to redemption, without jeopardizing my own inheritance” (4,6). It is this selfish mentality that the Book of Ruth is questioning. He was only capable of thinking of himself and his own “small family”, his own personal patrimony. He had no interest in making any sacrifices in favour of the poor, or even considering the needs of the “greater family”, the community. The consequences of this selfish mentality, the suffering and social disintegration are well outlined in Nehemiah 5,1-5.

His refusal to redeem the land is the first result of the new law. This refusal opens up a new door, because it does not allow the sale of Elimelech’s land. It prevents legal robbery!! Boaz now comes into the picture to exercise the Right of Redemption, and fulfil the Levirate Law saying: “This day I buy from Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech, to Chilion and Mahlon. You are witnesses that I buy Ruth, the Moabitess, Mahlon’s widow, to be my wife, to keep the name of the dead man in his inheritance, so that the name of the dead man may not die out among his brothers and at the gate of his town” (4,10). The people’s tribunal ratifies the decision and by so doing ratifies the new direction being given to things. At last Naomi’s family, threatened with extinction, recovers, survives and has a future. Hope becomes a reality.

As there is no further mention of the Right to Redemption, which in 4,1-8 had appeared 14 times, there still remains one outstanding question: Did Boaz, in fact, succeed in exercising his Right to Redemption? Is he or is he not Naomi and Ruth’s godfather, the goël? This is another of the surprises of the Book of Ruth.

### **Hope springs from the mouths of the people**

Chapter 1,1-5 expressed hope in the hearts of God's people, but showed how this hope was threatened by hunger, emigration, death; no land, no children and no unity. Now, at the end of chapter 4,11-12 things are reversed:

- The people ask that Ruth be like Rachel and Leah, the mothers of the twelve tribes of Israel. The love between Boaz and Ruth is seen as the new beginning, from which the twelve tribes will be rebuilt.
- The people ask that Boaz “grow mighty in Ephrathah, be renowned in Bethlehem” (v 11). This recalls the prophecy of Micah (“But you Bethlehem [Ephrathah], the least of the clans of Judah, out of you will be born for me, the one who is to rule over Israel” Mi 5,1) and suggests that the Messiah is to be born of the love between Boaz and Ruth.
- The people ask that Ruth be considered as another Tamar (Gn 38). The Messianic hope passes through the tribe of Judah. This hope is now to pass through Boaz and Ruth and their progeny.

A sample of how to solve the problems of the people has taken root in the lives of the people. The first fruits are starting to appear. The seed is starting to germinate.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Ruth 4,13-22: the Last Scene: A child is born, the world is renewed**

There are times when it is not easy to see how a text was put together. But at the same time, it is always helpful to try to break it up into its component parts. Anyone that can break down a motor and succeed in putting it back together again, knows how it works. If we go through the same process with a text, we can more easily identify its message. Let us try:

4,13	Boaz takes Ruth as his wife; the child is born.
4,14-15	The neighbouring women congratulate Naomi.
4,16	Naomi takes the child as her son to bring him up.
4,17	The neighbours give him a name: Obed, David's grandfather.

Obed is not just the fruit of a moment of love between Boaz and Ruth, but the incarnation of the long painful love between God and his people: the desire of the two widows to be back home where God had visited his people; the result of their desire to glean in the corn fields and share; the desire to respect, and demand respect for, the rights of the poor; the willingness to take in the foreigners; to legally defend the rights of the people to have possession of the land. He is the fruit of the willingness on the part of Ruth – a foreign woman- to stay with Naomi, a member of the people of god. He is born of the determination to observe the law of God, especially the Law of Redemption and the Levirate Law. He is the fruit of the desire to laws the out of date laws and make them effective instruments in the defence of the rights of the people.

He is born into the “small family”, like any of us but immediately goes beyond its boundaries. He no longer belongs to Boaz and Ruth, but belongs to the community, as he is the incarnation of the hope of the people. Consequently, it is not the family, it is not Boaz or Ruth, it is not Naomi that gives him his name, but rather the people to whom he belongs. He belongs not his parents, Boaz and Ruth, but to Naomi. Naomi is the one who is going to bring him up, she becomes his nurse.

Naomi had gone from grace to bitterness and is now redeemed by the birth of the child. It is not Boaz who redeems her. He merely prepared the way for her redeemer – the child.

The baby’s name is Obed, which means *Servant*. He was born of those who put themselves at the service of the people, and his service is to prepare the way of the messiah, because he is David’s grandfather. Obed is not the new David, but came to prepare the way for the new David. This new David is to be different to all the other kings. He will not oppress or bring disgrace, he will be the son of the Servant. *Service* will be his trademark. The new David is to be the son of the have-nots – the poor, the excluded, the widows and the foreigners.

The mission of Obed is described in the prophecy of the Servant: “I, Yahweh, have called you to serve the cause of the right; I have taken you by the hand and formed you; I have appointed you as covenant of the people and light of the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison, and those who live in darkness from the dungeon” (Is 42, 6-7). By doing this, Obed will help the people to live again as the people of God, and will revalidate in their midst the ancient profession of faith which said: Elimelech, that is, “MY GOD IS KING”