

Explanatory Note on a Difficult Passage -- Ruth 3:6ff

from HARD SAYINGS OF THE BIBLE by Walter Kaiser, Peter Davids, Manfred Brauch

"Some commentators on this text have suggested that Ruth's bold move that night on the threshing floor went beyond the normal boundaries of propriety and included sexual relations with Boaz. Their argument is that harvest time the world over is a time of celebration of the rites of fertility. At these times the ancients allowed themselves more license than usual. During this harvest celebration, then, after Boaz had imbibed enough wine to make himself drunk, Ruth approached him in order to force him into marriage. Others have interpreted Boaz's "feet" as a sexual euphemism for the male reproductive organ. If this were the meaning, then the story would be making a discreet reference to fleshly indulgence. But these suggestions are unnecessary; it seems that the author chose his words carefully so as to avoid any possible innuendo.

To begin with, it is extremely unlikely that Boaz was drunk (cp same word in Ru3:1 and fact that it did not say he was drunk as it did of Noah in Gen 9:21) after the good meal he had eaten. The text simply says that he "was in good spirits." His mood was mellow, and his demeanor was upbeat. And why not?

He had the results of all his hard labor right there on the threshing floor with him. But his feasting brought on drowsiness, so he retired to one side of the pile of grain that had been threshed. It is doubtful that he would have guarded this pile of grain by himself, that there would have been no other workers present who would awaken at the crack of dawn to get back to work alongside him. Later, after Boaz had fallen asleep, Ruth went and carefully uncovered his feet and apparently crawled under his cover, lying perpendicular to his feet. There are no sexual overtones in the reference to his feet, for Boaz was startled at midnight when his feet suddenly touched the woman's body.

Ruth immediately made her objective clear when she requested, "Spread the corner of your garment over me." She was using the accepted idiom meaning "Marry me"—other passages in which the same expression is used are Ezek 16:8, Dt 22:30 and Mal 2:16. No doubt the idiom reflected the custom, still practiced by some Arabs, of a man's throwing a garment over the woman he has decided to take as his wife. The gesture is a symbol of protection as well as a declaration that the man is willing to enter into sexual consummation with his chosen partner.

Boaz had prayed in Ru2:12 that Ruth might be rewarded by the Lord under whose wings she had taken refuge. Ruth now essentially asked Boaz to answer his own prayer, for "garment-cover" and "wing" are the same word in Hebrew. Ruth's reason for this action is expressed in her appeal to Boaz as a "kinsman-redeemer." That is a legal status. Under Jewish law, then, her request was not particularly unusual.

That Boaz handled himself honorably can be seen in his revelation that there was someone who actually had prior claim over Ruth and her inheritance, since he was a closer relative. However, if he should prove unwilling to take responsibility in the matter, then Boaz would marry Ruth.

Remarkably, Ruth seems willing to marry even this other relative sight unseen, again subordinating her own happiness to her duty of raising up an heir to her deceased husband and to Naomi. In doing so she demonstrates again why this book singles her out as a most worthy example of what Pr 31 refers to as a "virtuous woman" or a person "of noble character."

The charges against Ruth and Boaz are false and without foundation. While the couple's encounter did occur in the context of darkness and sleep, the text does not present their behavior as morally questionable or even particularly abnormal within the social and moral conventions of the godly remnant of those days."

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