

Ruth- background

#2 Wheat & Barley

THE LAW OF GLEANING

The law of gleaning is one of many social laws prominently featured in the book of Ruth. It helps us appreciate the significance of the context of the Book of Ruth by knowing the broader environment of agriculture in the ancient Near East and its connection to the religious practices of the Israelites. It also has significance for our understanding of New Testament images describing the benefits of Christ's salvation offered to us.

Read Deuteronomy 24:19-22

- What did God command in these verses?
- For whose benefit did God institute the law of gleaning?
- Read Leviticus 19:9-10. What additional provision to the law of gleaning does this passage stipulate?
- In addition to providing a source of food for the destitute, what other benefits resulted from the law of gleaning?
- Although the law of gleaning was a characteristic of the culture of ancient Israel, what can it teach us 21st century Christians?



THE BARLEY HARVEST

The barley fields of Boaz are the setting of chapter 2 of the book of Ruth. Barley was the first of the crops sown the previous winter to be harvested (see Exodus 9:31).

Bread made from this grain was an essential food of the inhabitants of the ancient Near East, particularly the poor (see 2 Kings 4:42 and John 6:9).

Barley was also used as feed for horses (see 1 Kings 4:28). The ancient Egyptians are known to have brewed barley beer in large quantities. It is likely that the Israelites were introduced to this drink during their time in Egypt. Fermented beverages are mentioned many times in the Bible and it is clear that these are different from wine (see Deuteronomy 14:6 and Luke 1:14). Many scholars think these are references to barley beer.

The barley harvest was celebrated by a religious festival known as First Fruits.

Read Leviticus 23:9-14

a. What were the people to do at the beginning of the barley harvest?

ii. On what day were they to do it?

iii. What were they forbidden to do?

b. What did the festival of First Fruits celebrate in Old Testament Israel?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-23

c. How does this passage explain the significance of First Fruits in the New Testament era?

Read Leviticus 23:4-8

d. What two festivals were observed just before and in conjunction with First Fruits?

THE WHEAT HARVEST

While the action of Ruth 2 is set during the barley harvest, the chapter ends with the mention of a different harvest—the wheat harvest (see Ruth 2:23).

Wheat was the second essential cereal crop of the ancient Near East (see Deuteronomy 8:8 and Joel 1:11). Israel exported this grain to neighboring countries (see 1 Kings 5:11 and Ezekiel 27:17).

Wheat was sown at the same time as barley but it matured more slowly (see Exodus 9:31) and was therefore not ready for cutting until a couple of weeks into the barley harvest.

Although the two crops are similar in nutritional content, wheat was more expensive than barley and was often considered to produce the superior bread flour.

Read Leviticus 23:15-21

- a. How long after First Fruits did the festival of Weeks take place?
- b. How was the observance of Weeks similar to that of First Fruits?

Read Acts 2, verses 1-4, 22-24, and 41.

- c. What is the festival of Weeks known as in the Christian church?
- d. What happened to the disciples in Jerusalem during this festival?
- e. What did Peter preach at this time and what was the result of his sermon?
- f. How did the festival of Weeks serve as a foretaste of Acts 2:41?

THRESHING AND WINNOWING

The setting for much of Ruth 3 is the threshing floor of Boaz. A threshing floor is a flat stone or hard-packed earthen surface on which sheaves of harvested grain are scattered and threshed.

A common method of threshing in ancient Israel employed an implement called a threshing sledge, a heavy wooden slab with teeth made of stone, metal, or potsherds fastened to the underside (see Isaiah 41:15 and Amos 1:3). Oxen or mules dragged the sledge back and forth over the sheaves to allow the teeth to break down the stalks into husks, straw, and grain kernels. Wooden pitch forks were used to lift away the straw. The kernels were then separated from the husks by winnowing, tossing the pile of threshed grain into the air with a winnowing fork (see Jeremiah 15:7).

Wind, whether caused by a natural breeze or artificially generated by winnowing fans, blew away the lighter chaff (see Psalm 1:4 and Hosea 13:3) while the heavier heads of grain fell down to the threshing floor. The kernels were then sifted with a sieve (see Amos 9:9 and Luke 22:31) and collected for storage. The chaff was burned as fuel (see Matthew 13:12) and the straw became animal fodder (see Genesis 24:32).

Read Joel 2:23-24.

- a. What agricultural images are associated with the threshing floor in this text? What does the threshing floor represent?

Read Hosea 9:1

- b. What sinful practice is linked to the threshing floor? How might this be significant to our reading of the Book of Ruth?

Read Matthew 3:11-12

- c. What do the threshing floor and winnowing fork (or fan) symbolize?
- d. How might the images of threshing and winnowing be helpful metaphors for understanding our worship of God today?