

Ruth- background

#3 Levirate Marriage Laws

In this background study to the book of Ruth we will explore an aspect of the story of Ruth that has its roots elsewhere in the Old Testament.

In this session we are focused on the relationship between Boaz and Ruth in chapters 2-4 of Ruth.

Ruth 2:19-20 reveals this important development in the story:

19 Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!" Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said.

20 "The LORD bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our **kinsman-redeemers**." (NIV)

The writer of the book of Ruth takes it for granted that the reader is familiar with an important Israelite social law called the law of **levirate marriage**. The word levirate comes from the Latin *levir* for brother-in-law. This law is central to the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 which also has a connection to the story of Ruth.



Levirate Law

Deuteronomy 25:5-6

- a. Who was required to fulfill the levirate law?

- b. What does verse 5 tell us about the legal status of the widow?

Genesis 13:14-17 and 18:18

- c. Why was it imperative for an Israelite man who died childless to be provided with a son through the levirate law?

Deuteronomy 25:7-10

A rite of refusal took place when an Israelite man declined to perform his levirate obligation.

- d. Who initiated the refusal ceremony and why?

- e. Where did the ceremony take place and why?

- f. What did the widow do to the levir who refused to fulfill his duty?

- g. How did the refusal ceremony protect the rights of the widow?

The Role of the Levir in Old Testament times

Donald Leggett, an Old Testament scholar who has studied the institution of levirate marriage comments as follows: “It is important to recognize that the levirate duty entailed a sacrifice of love.”

- a. What sacrifice did the levir make?

- b. What from the refusal ceremony shows that the levirate duty was considered an act of love and not of compulsion?

THE LAW OF REDEMPTION (*go'el*)

Read 1 Kings 21:2-3

Why did Naboth refuse to sell his vineyard to Ahab? What does Naboth's refusal tell us about his attitude to the land? The concept of redemption and the goel, the man who redeems, are of primary importance in the Book of Ruth. One of most important duties of the redeemer was to aid a member of his extended family who had been forced to sell his land due to severe poverty.

Read Leviticus 25:23-27

The text that describes the work of the goel in redeeming land (the NIV translates goel as “nearest relative” in verse 25).

- a. How is the LORD described in relation to the land?

- b. How are the Israelites described in relation to the land?

It is important to remember that Israelites could never sell the land itself because they did not own it—the LORD was the true owner and the Israelites were His tenants. The clans of the various tribes of Israel had received the land from God during the conquest of Canaan as a permanent inheritance that was to be passed from fathers to sons. If driven by extreme financial necessity, an Israelite was permitted to temporarily sell the right to use the land and profit from its produce to someone else. The goel had a duty to perform if a poor Israelite sold his use of the land and was unable to buy it back. John Wilch describes the theological significance of the land like this: “It was [the Israelite’s] duty... to retain his inheritance faithfully, for it was a personal sign to his family of God’s gracious covenant, a down payment on God’s promise of eternal life in the new heavens and new earth.”

Read Hebrews 11:8-16

c. What did the land promised to Abraham and his seed signify?

Another responsibility of the goel was to redeem a relative who had been sold into indentured servitude.

Read Leviticus 25:47-49

d. How could an indentured person be redeemed?

The goel could be called upon to perform another duty besides the redemption of land or persons. Read Numbers 35:16-27 and describe this duty.

God instituted the redemption laws out of love for Israel. When through the loss of land or freedom an Israelite became alienated from God’s covenant promises, he could be fully restored through the work of a goel. This reflected the reality that the LORD Himself had acted as divine goel when He redeemed Israel from bondage in Egypt to be His own people (see Exodus 6:6-8). The redemption laws therefore point forward to the work of Christ. We might consider Christ’s saving work as a goel to the whole world.

Read Galatians 3:13-14. From what has Christ redeemed us? To what end has He redeemed us?
Read 1 Peter 1:18-19. What was the cost of our redemption?