

Acquiring Ruth

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The account of Ruth and Boaz is a love story for the ages, and certainly one of the greatest in the Bible. Yet unlike romantic heroes of today, Boaz does not simply woo Ruth and marry her. Instead he must acquire her as property through an ancient legal system. Not only that, but he must give someone else the opportunity to acquire her first. Whichever man acquires Ruth will have full rights to her, including the right to have sex with her (Ruth 4:1-12). And Ruth will have no say in the matter. You don't find that in many modern love stories.

Our thirst for a good love story often causes us to overlook that Ruth was considered property to be acquired. Yet many people—especially women who have been mistreated—find it difficult and disconcerting to read Ruth's story for this very reason. How should we understand this part of Ruth's storyline?

Boaz and Ruth's marriage is an illustration of the levirate law in action. Boaz was a kinsman-redeemer of Ruth, but he was not the closest kinsman-redeemer (3:12). When Boaz decided he wanted to redeem Ruth (3:13), he initiated proceedings with the closest kinsman to acquire the estate of Elimelech, Ruth's father-in-law (4:1-4). At first, the other kinsman chooses to acquire the estate—but then Boaz reminds him (using wording that is ambiguous and difficult to translate) that to get the estate, he must also take Ruth. He cannot acquire one without the other (Ruth 4:5). And by law, acquiring Ruth would require marriage and procreation (Deut 25:5-10). The word "acquire" (*qānâ*, קנה) is used consistently throughout Ruth 4 to describe the sale and acquisition of both Elimelech's field and the woman. The nuance is more legal than financial. Nevertheless, as a part of Elimelech's estate, Ruth does not have the right to object to being acquired by a man not of her choosing.

Ruth's experience is one example of how, historically, women have not enjoyed the same

rights as men. Up until the early 20th century, wives could still be bought and sold on the open market in England. Even today, almost 4.5 million women around the world are held as sex slaves, and far more are in forced servitude.²

We can all agree about two things regarding the treatment of women throughout history: It has never been consistent, and it has never been good enough. In the ancient world, a woman could attain the height of power yet still be treated as the property of a man. Sometimes women had rights; other times they didn't. This tension exists in the book of Ruth: She is tied to Elimelech's estate, which is held and offered by a woman, Elimelech's widow, Naomi (Ruth 4:3).

In all cultures and times, women have been subject to mistreatment. This was as true in ancient Israel as it is today. Sometimes laws are enacted to protect women (Deut 25:5-10), and sometimes people show true compassion for others, as Boaz did for Ruth (Ruth 2:11-12). What is consistent throughout time is that culture—and its treatment of women—is always broken. Human culture is fully fallen (Eph 2:2; 6:12; 1 John 5:19). We cannot rely on it. But we can rely on a God who surpasses culture (1 Cor 15:24), loves women, and wants to redeem them from cultural practices that devalue them, giving them instead places of honor in this life and the next. **B:**

¹ James Bryce, *Studies in History and Jurisprudence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1901), 2:819-820.

² International Labour Office, *ILO Global Estimate of Forced Labour: Results and Methodology* (Geneva: ILO, 2012), 13.



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