

# THE EXPOSITOR.

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## THE BOOK OF RUTH.

### III.—IN THE HARVEST-FIELD.

#### *Chapter ii. verses 1-23.*

“WEeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh with the morning.” We have seen how dark Naomi’s night was, how she came back “empty” to the home from which she went out “full.” And in this Chapter we are pathetically reminded of the utter penury and destitution which were implied in that word “empty.” Once opulent and beloved Naomi was reduced to straits so sore that she was compelled to let her beloved daughter go and glean among the rude reapers, that she might bring home a morsel of bread. Nay, so sore was the need that, even as she ate the parched corn in the harvest-field, Ruth set aside a portion of it to take home with her for Naomi’s use.

Nor was it simply the loss of husband and sons of wealth and consideration, by which the spirit of Naomi was oppressed. To the pangs of hunger and grief and shame there was added the still keener torture of religious despair. To herself and her neighbours she seemed “smitten of God,

and afflicted." And hence she broke into the exceeding bitter cry, "*The Lord* hath testified against me, and *the Almighty* hath afflicted me."

The Lord *had* testified against her and afflicted her. But the judgments of God ever have a purpose of mercy; and we are now to see how his mercy shone through the cloud of judgment, turning night into day.

Among the kinsmen of Elimelech was a certain Boaz, a man who had distinguished himself in war, and who is therefore described, as Gideon and Jephthah are described, as "a valiant hero," *i.e.*, a brave captain or commander, whose military exploits were well known to the men of his generation. It is unfortunate that our Version renders the Hebrew phrase "a mighty man of wealth;" for though Boaz was rich, and was as able in peace as in war, the phrase undoubtedly points to his valour and capacity in the field of battle. His very name means "son of strength;" and, no doubt, his "strength," his vigour of body and of spirit, had been displayed against the enemies of Israel, *i.e.*, the Philistines, with whom there seems to have been almost constant war while Eli was Judge. "None but the brave deserve the fair;" and, considering the time in which they lived, we cannot but be a little glad, for Ruth's sake, that Boaz had proved himself a brave soldier in the stricken field.

But there is a higher courage than that which faces death without fear. This, too, as we shall see, Boaz possessed. He had "the courage of his convictions." When once he saw a course of action to be just and generous, he did not fear to take it, how-

ever unusual it was, and though his neighbours had much to say against it. Above all, he was not ashamed of his *religious* convictions. It was as natural to him to express them as it was to breathe. As often as we see him we see that "the law of the Lord is in his heart," that it influenced the whole round and detail of his life.

How came it to pass, then, that a man so bold and generous and pious left Naomi unhelped and uncomforted in the time of her penury and grief? We cannot altogether tell. He may have been absent on military service when she returned from the Field of Moab, and have only got leave of absence, as soldiers then commonly did, during harvest. He may only just have heard the tale of Naomi's sorrows when he met Ruth in the harvest-field. And, indeed, his words to Ruth, "It hath been fully *shewn* me all that thou hast done," imply that he had only *heard* of what most of the other inhabitants of Bethlehem had seen, that he was absent when "all the city was moved" by the return of Naomi.

Moreover, the word rendered "kinsman" in verse 1 means, literally, "acquaintance;" and though the word "acquaintance" carried more to a Hebrew ear than it does to ours, it implies that Boaz was not a close kinsman of Naomi's husband: it signifies that, while not a near relative, Boaz was *known* to the family as belonging to it: they were acquainted with him as one of themselves. In brief; he was a kinsman, but a distant kinsman; and, before he interfered, he might well wait to see what the nearer kindred would do. As they did

exactly nothing, the opportunity of shewing mercy and doing kindness passed over to him.

Nay, by a special act of Providence—so at least the Sacred Narrative implies—this opportunity was brought to his very door. Ruth goes gleaning, and, as a stranger to Bethlehem and its vicinity, she might of course have lit on the fields of an unfriendly owner. But "*her lot met her* in the field of Boaz;" *i. e.*, she was guided to this field by the hand of Providence. Wandering at her will, going whither-soever she would, God was nevertheless with her and directed her steps.

We may be sure that it was not without some hesitation that the modest and gentle Ruth offered to glean after the reapers, and that it was not without much reluctance that Naomi gave her consent. Then, as now, reapers were apt to be vicious and rude. All through this Chapter we can see that Ruth ran grave risk of deadly insult. Boaz strictly enjoins his young men not to "molest," or maltreat, her. Naomi is overjoyed that she need not go into any other field than that of Boaz, lest, among strangers, she should be insulted or injured. So that we may be sure the cupboard was bare, and that Naomi and Ruth were hard pinched by hunger, before either the one or the other could resolve that the risk should be run. And we must take it as a fresh instance of Ruth's love and fidelity that she would run even this risk rather than sit still while Naomi was in want.

The Chapter gives us, incidentally, a graphic picture of an ancient harvest scene. The field is thick with waving barley. The reapers cut their

way into it with sickles, grasping the ears till their arms are full. Behind them, the women gather up the armfuls and bind them into sheaves. Still farther in the rear follow the widow and the stranger, who, according to the Hebrew law, have a right to glean after the reapers. The Overseer is busily urging on the reapers, and granting or refusing admission to the gleaners. Vessels filled, probably, with the rough local wine are at hand, that the heated and thirsty labourers may refresh themselves at need. The "house," with its barns, threshing-floors, and various out-buildings, stands in, or near, the field; and here the weary may rest when the heat and burden of the day prove too great for their strength. Here, too, under the shade of some spreading tree, men and women gather at meal-time, and are supplied with parched corn, and with bread which they dip in a cool and strengthening mixture of vinegar and oil and water. As the day advances the Master of the Estate comes to see how the work goes on. With grave pious courtesy he salutes his "young men" with the words "Jehovah be with you;" and they reply, "Jehovah bless thee."<sup>1</sup> He is quick to notice the presence of a stranger, and to inquire who she is and whence she comes. He is careful to shield her from insult and wrong, and to help her in her need. His tone to his young men is a fine blending of kindness with authority, and he shews himself even more careful for their good conduct than for their diligence in their work.

It is a charming scene: and one does not wonder that poets have sung of the beauty, purity, and

<sup>1</sup> A somewhat similar scene is suggested in Psalm cxxix. 7, 8.

simplicity of rural life. Nevertheless, one has only to go into country villages, and to wander in the fields where the reapers reap till the sun falls and all the land is dark, to discover that rural life is not so innocent and idyllic as it looks to the poet's eye; that it is marred by at least as much ignorance, vice, and brutal coarseness of speech, manner, and habit, as the life of towns. And even as we gaze on *this* fair harvest scene, and listen to the pious greetings of master and men, we are again and again reminded of the cruel and deadly lusts which lurk under its fair exterior, and can only the more admire a man like Boaz and a woman like Ruth who move, untainted, through a scene by no means pure.

The very fact which would be likely to expose Ruth to the clownish jests and insults of the reapers, the fact that she was an alien, conspicuous perhaps by her foreign garb and ornaments, also drew upon her the attention of Boaz. Naturally, so soon as he sees her, he begins to ask of his Overseer who she is and from whence she came. The Overseer's reply shews that he had caught some touch of his master's generous and considerate spirit. He tells Boaz that Ruth is the Moabitish damsel who had come with Naomi to Bethlehem; that, ignorant perhaps of her legal right to glean in any Hebrew field, she had begged his permission to "gather after the reapers;" and he is forward to commend her diligence. She has been hard at work from morning till now, and had only once rested for a few moments in the shed, or "house," set apart for the weary.

Boaz, struck perhaps by the beauty of Ruth and the modesty of her demeanour, and knowing that she is of kin to him, multiplies marks of favour and kindness upon her. She is to remain on his estate, following the reapers from field to field, till the harvest is over. She need fear no rudeness or insult, for he has strictly charged the young men not to "molest," or offend, her. She is to drink freely from the vessels prepared for the reapers, although, as a gleaner, she could have no claim to share with them.

In her humility, Ruth, who had done so much for Naomi, and made so many sacrifices, expects no grace or help from others. Even the slight kindness of Boaz overwhelms her with gratitude. She flings herself at his feet and pours out her thanks for the kindly notice he has taken of an alien and a stranger.

And, as might have been expected, the generous heart of Boaz opens all the wider as he listens to her thanks and learns how unassuming she is, how grateful even for the easy kindness he has shewn her. He knows who she is, and what she has done. And the piety, as well as the generosity, of the man comes out in his reply. "You have left all," he says, "in your love for Naomi,—father, mother, and the land of your nativity. The Lord recompense you for this good deed. As you have come to take refuge under the wings of Israel's God, may He grant you a full reward." Obviously Boaz had the history of his great ancestor in his mind. Like Ruth, Abraham had left all, and gone out into a strange country. And to him God had said, "*I am thy great reward.*"

May the blessing of faithful Abraham come on faithful Ruth,—this is the wish and prayer of Boaz. He speaks, not as a Hebrew landowner to a Moabitish vagabond and beggar, but, rather, as a Hebrew judge and prophet,—as a prophet who knew that even the stranger who works righteousness and shews kindness is acceptable to God.

The blessing of Boaz fell on the heart of Ruth like showers on the mown grass. Hitherto she had known only sorrow and shame. No Israelite had recognized her, or helped her, or shewn either any appreciation of her noble love for her mother, or any wish to welcome her to the faith and privilege of Israel. To all but Boaz she was simply "*the Moabitess*,"—a stranger to the Covenant, an alien from the Commonwealth. But now the valiant soldier whom all Bethlehem praised, who sat as judge and teacher among his people, blesses her for her goodness, and assures her of the protection and goodwill of the God of Israel. "Thou hast comforted me," she gratefully replies; "thou hast spoken to my very heart, in thus blessing me, the alien, and in naming the Name of thy God upon me."

Ruth utters no reproach against the men of Bethlehem for leaving her in her unprovided loneliness and need; but the very passion of her gratitude for his friendly recognition must have made Boaz aware of the utter isolation in which she had lived, of the unsympathetic and suspicious element through which she had sadly moved. And his heart warms to her more and more. Here are a virtue, a tenderness, a fidelity, such as he had not found, no, not in Israel;



and yet no man seems conscious of it: it meets with no appreciation, enlists no sympathy, wins no response. The noble love noble deeds, and those who do them; and, probably, this brave soldier felt that even his courage was as nothing to that of the gentle woman who stood before him. He, therefore, will help her all he can. As she has come to glean in his fields, he will take care that her gleanings be ample, and that her wants be satisfied. As the reapers gather for their meal, he bids Ruth sit with them. Knowing that they will take their tone from him, he himself hands her the parched corn. When the meal is over, he bids her, instead of following the reapers afar off, glean among the sheaves, — nay, bids the reapers pull out a few ears from those they gather in their arms and let them fall where she will find them. Above all, he charges them not to “shame” her, not to jest or romp in their rude country fashion so as to put her to the blush. In any harvest-field a woman, and especially a comely woman, to whom such extraordinary favour was shewn by the “master,” would only too surely become a mark for evil tongues. And we can, therefore, well understand why Boaz, who shewed his true courtesy by resolving to help Ruth in her own way, laid so stringent a rein on the young men’s lips. Happily, too, the Overseer was her friend, or, despite the strict injunction of Boaz, Ruth might have suffered much and deeply from the men who cut the barley and the women who bound it into sheaves.

Amid this shower of favours Ruth did not cease to be herself. When Boaz hands her an abundance

of parched corn, she eats till she is satisfied—so generous is the supply; but she thinks of Naomi's hunger as she satisfies her own, and lays aside a portion of the food. Nor does she stint her labour because, by the kindness of Boaz, it is now more productive. She works on till evening, and works to such good purpose that, when she beats out her gleanings, she has upwards of fifty pounds of barley to carry home.

When Naomi sees how much Ruth has gleaned she is amazed, and cries, "Where hast thou been? In whose field canst thou have gleaned?" But here once more we are made to feel that we are with those in whom piety is an active and ruling power. Any woman, however selfish or godless, might have been as surprised and glad as Naomi was at this unexpected turn of fortune. But she, before even her question can be answered, and moved simply by the manifest happiness of Ruth in the abundance of her gleanings, "blesses" the man who has given her this happiness. For *this* she does not need to know who he is. Whoever had been kind and bountiful to Ruth must have meant to shew that he appreciated her virtues and felt for her misfortunes. And therefore Naomi exclaims, "Blessed be he, whoever he may be, who has taken friendly note of thee." It had been hard for her to send Ruth out to such work. The man who had treated her beloved daughter so kindly that she came home loaded with a weight of barley, and bright and happy in the issue of her toils, has done a good deed for which she invokes on him the benediction of God.

When the blessing has been pronounced, Ruth tells the story of the day, and names Boaz as the man who had befriended her. She, apparently, did not know how much the sound of this name would convey to Naomi's ears,—knew nothing probably either of the kinsmen of Elimelech or of the obligations which kinship imposed among the Hebrews. But Naomi sees the full significance of her kinsman's kindness at a glance, and breaks into a transport of religious gratitude. She explains, "The man is akin to us, one of our *goelim*" (a term the significance of which I reserve till we reach the next Chapter), and pours forth a song of praise: "Blessed be he of the Lord, who hath not left off his kindness to the living and to the dead."

If we would enter into the force of this outburst of praise, we must remember that Naomi had lost her faith—not in God indeed, but in the goodwill of God for her. She had thought that He was turned to be her foe, and the foe of the husband and sons who had been snatched from her, although she has suffered no hint of this haunting fear to escape her till now. They were dead because they had sinned in forsaking the land of the Covenant. She was bereaved, forsaken, "empty," because she had shared their sin. So, at least, she had conceived. But now, in the wonderful Providence which had led Ruth to find a friend in her valiant and wealthy kinsman, she descries a proof that God had not wholly abandoned her, that He had not left off his kindness whether to her or to the beloved dead. No one who has witnessed such a revulsion from spiritual despair to renewed hope in the Divine goodness and compas-

sion will marvel at the ecstasy which breathes in Naomi's words. Rather, he will be sure that it would be long before she could recover her composure, and listen to what Ruth had still to tell ; he will feel that in this brief exclamation of praise we have, compressed into a single sentence, the substance of many heartfelt thanksgivings.

When we consider how potent our kindness may be in quickening the sense of God's kindness and compassion in a neighbour's heart, and how potent, therefore, our lack of kindness and compassion may be, in inducing or confirming a neighbour's despair, we may well tremble at the responsibility which, at any moment, may fall upon us. It was not till Naomi arrived in Bethlehem, and saw her neighbours indifferent and apathetic, however curious and inquisitive they were, that she concluded herself to be shut out from the mercy of God. It was only when Boaz shewed a little kindness to her daughter—such a kindness as we may shew a neighbour any day—that she felt the door of Mercy was once more thrown open to her. Let us, then, be kindly affectioned one to another. We may not be able to do much,—Boaz did but give a few handfuls of barley and speak a few considerate words,—and yet what we do may suffice to lift the weight from some heavily burdened heart. Our kindness may make way for the kindness of God. Our little may help Him to do much.

S. COX.

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