

How Does the Book of Ruth Provide a Model for Marriage?

An Old Testament KnoWhy¹ relating to the reading assignment for Gospel Doctrine Lesson 20: “All the City ... Doth Know That Thou Art a Virtuous Woman” (Ruth; 1 Samuel 1) (JBOTL20A)



Figure 1. *Ruth and Boaz on the Threshing Floor*²

Question: How does the book of Ruth provide a model for marriage?

Summary: According to an insightful presentation by Catholic Bible scholar Gary A. Anderson included in this week’s article, the book of Ruth establishes a model for marriage in three ways:³ “1. the love of God for Israel as a lens with which to examine the love between a husband and wife; 2. the relationship of the married couple to the larger network of family relations – marriage is not just an arrangement between two individuals; and 3. The necessary and non-negotiable linkage of conjugal love and procreation.” In making his arguments for Ruth as a biblical model of marriage, Anderson goes further, revealing selected temple themes that are key to understanding the role of Boaz as a redeemer. Careful study of Ruth will reveal that its story of redemption concerns not only a family but also all of Israel, past and future.

Introduction

In his timely presentation, Gary A. Anderson provides a biblically based counterpoint to the “romantic love story that contemporary culture offers us [as] one wherein man and woman are united over against all other ties that the world knows.” Such a plot line, he argues, “is not really an option for a biblical love story.” In outlining the alternative model of marriage given us in Ruth, Anderson asks us to consider the impossibility of a Hollywood “love story in which parental reservations about a future spouse would impel a character to reject an unworthy suitor only to find in the end a far better spouse who was favored by the larger family.”

I would refer you directly to Anderson’s presentation for further details of his eloquent probing of marriage themes in Ruth and some of their implications for marriage in our day. Here, however, I would like to highlight and elaborate on the temple themes raised by Anderson, and then to say something about the message of redemption that lies at the heart of the book of Ruth.



Figures 2a, b. Two pillars at the temple gate;⁴ Two cherubim atop the Ark⁵

Anderson mentions two elements of the temple undertone that pervades this deeply spiritual book. First, he explains the significance of the fact that “Boaz, the name of our hero, also happens to be the name of one of two pillars that sat athwart the entranceway of the Temple in Jerusalem.”⁶ Then, he connects this temple allusion to the later incident at the threshing floor where Ruth asks Boaz to spread his robe over her.⁷

In his discussion of Ruth’s request, Anderson points out the importance of the fact that “the word for ‘robe’ in Hebrew happens to be the exact same word as ‘wing.’ This remarkable word play carries us back to Boaz’ blessing in chapter two: ‘May you have a full recompense from the Lord, the God of Israel under whose wings you have sought refuge.’”⁸ Taken together, Anderson’s observations make it clear that the plot line of the story of Ruth takes us on a journey from the gate of the temple where the pillar of Boaz stands to the Holy of Holies where two cherubim “stretch forth their wings on high” to cover the mercy seat.⁹

Of course, the temple allusions in the book of Ruth go far beyond the two examples given

by Anderson. Unfortunately, this subject cannot be given the attention it deserves in the present article.¹⁰ Suffice it to say that what seems to be a veiled message about the prospects of eternal union in likeness of the divine within the book of Ruth echoes the sentiment of the libretto of Mozart's *Magic Flute*: "Husband and wife, and wife and husband, reach to the heights of Godhood."¹¹

God commanded Moses to craft the cherubim on the Ark so that "their faces shall look one to another."¹² Similarly, Boaz and Ruth, as a couple, are described in biblical Hebrew as perfectly self-similar reflections — "a man of worth" and a "worthy woman."¹³ However, I would argue, with Anderson, that the most important result of the individual development of Boaz and Ruth in the story is not their single-minded devotion to one another but rather the achievement of joint purpose in their wholehearted effort to fulfill the terms of their covenant relationship with God and their neighbors. As Antoine de Saint Exupéry expressed it: "Love is not a matter of looking at one another. Rather it is looking, together, in the same direction."¹⁴ Though the faces of the cherubim were turned one to another, they unitedly stretched their touching wings toward the glory of God that dwelled between them.

In his example to people of his day and ours, Boaz is revealed as "an Israelite indeed"¹⁵ — one who is not only steadfast in keeping the commandments of God but also who emulates His Redeemer by redeeming Ruth. Although the theme of redemption is backgrounded in the first two chapters of the book, it becomes front and center in chapters three and four. In Ruth 3:4, "Boaz employs forms of the verb *ga'al* ('redeem') five times. The language of redemption dominates also verse 7 and constitutes the heart of the negotiations" in the scene of Ruth's appeal at the threshing floor:¹⁶

Redemption is what Ruth has requested and what Boaz promised.¹⁷ The question remains, however, as to what or who is to be redeemed: on the threshing floor, Boaz spoke solely about Ruth. Here redemption pertains to the land. As the story unfolds, it becomes evident that negotiations about the land are a means to redeeming Ruth, that is, of securing her social and economic position and rescuing her and Naomi from poverty.



Figure 3. Woman reading at the traditional tomb of Ruth and Jesse, Hebron¹⁸

As we come to the final verses of the book we recognize that the redemption story in Ruth concerns not just a single family but rather all of Israel, past and future. Equally important is the realization that Ruth has played the part of a redeemer herself. The role of this exemplary couple as “redeemers of Israel” becomes evident when we notice how their story completes unfinished business in Genesis, providing, as it were, a happy closing bookend to some of the sad confusions in the early history of the patriarchs:¹⁹

These intertextual connections ... allow the story of Ruth to right wrongs — redeeming, as it were, things gone awry in Genesis: Ruth’s integration into the family of Boaz repairs the breach between Abraham and his nephew Lot (Genesis 13; note especially the repetition of *p-r-d* “separate,” in Genesis 13:9, 11, 14, and in Ruth’s pledge never to separate, *p-r-d*, from Naomi in 1:17); the seduction of Lot by his daughters that leads to the birth of Moab²⁰ finds its antithesis in the chaste midnight encounter between Ruth the Moabite and Boaz, marked by reserve and responsibility; Rachel and Leah,²¹ who compete in Genesis 29–30, find their mirror image in the collaboration between Naomi and Ruth; even the animosity between Sarah and Hagar,²² which climaxes with the expulsion of the young foreign woman by the elderly Israelite insider, finds its resolution when the elderly Naomi and the young foreign woman, Ruth, bond and support each other.

The story of Judah and Tamar²³ finds its complementary opposite in the story of Boaz and Ruth. Both cases reflect a breach in the expected mores. But whereas

Judah transgresses by impetuously having sex with his daughter-in-law, Boaz shows great restraint when confronted by a woman lying at his feet;²⁴ and whereas Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law, accepts the invitation to have illicit sex and only later forces Judah to recognize his responsibilities, Ruth directly calls on Boaz to accept responsibility even in compromising circumstances, without, it appears, consenting to have sex with him. ...

[Harold] Fisch ... sees an interpretive progression within Ruth itself, focused on the theme of redemption. The sequence begins with Boaz's redeeming a parcel of land, then redeeming Ruth from widowhood. Subsequently Ruth's newborn child redeems Naomi from sorrow and emptiness. Yet Fisch goes one step further, pushing back the starting point of this progression to Genesis:

Of whom, we may ask, is Ruth the redeemer? Might it be suggested that she is the redeemer of the unnamed ancestress who lay with her father in Genesis 19? Just as Boaz is the "redeemer" of his ancestor, Judah who, in an only slightly more edifying fashion [than Lot with his frustrated, faithless daughters], "went in" to the supposed prostitute at the crossroads [Tamar] leaving her his seal, his cord and his staff as a pledge. Boaz "redeems" that pledge. ...

For Fisch, this web of relationships linking Genesis and Ruth is the means by which the story of Ruth "is situated at the crossroad of history," even though the text itself seems to confine itself to domestic events.

Chapter 4 makes it clear, of course, that the crossroad of history presented in the book not only looks backward to the redemption of the ancestors in Genesis but also forward to the descendants of Ruth and Boaz, including David, the king of the future united kingdom of Israel — and, for Christians, to his descendant Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the world.

Marriage in the Book of Ruth²⁵

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In 1943 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter from his prison cell in Nazi Germany to a young couple who had just entered the holy state of marriage:²⁶

Marriage is more than your love for each other. It has a higher dignity and power, for it is God's holy ordinance, through which he wills to perpetuate the human race until the end of time. In your love you see only your two selves in the world, but in marriage you are a link in the chain of the generations, which God causes to come and to pass away to his glory, and calls into his kingdom. In your love you see only the heaven of your own happiness, but in marriage you are placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind. Your love is your own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal — it is a status, an office. Just as it is the crown, and not merely the will to rule, that makes the king, so it is marriage, and not merely your love for each other, that joins you together in the sight of God and man.

How strikingly un-modern this sounds. In a world that extols the autonomy of the self as the highest possible value, Bonhoeffer reminds us that in the sacrament of marriage we enter a covenant that presumes our natural affections but at the same time goes far beyond them. In a world that puts a premium on immediacy, on the importance of “feeling it” as an index to what is true, these words call us to consider our commitments in an entirely different register. For Bonhoeffer, these cultural indicators must be reversed. “It is not your love that sustain marriage,” he wrote, “but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.”

I would like to consider the wisdom of these words in light of how the institution of marriage functions in the book of Ruth. In this work we will see how the love that exists between a husband and a wife extends far beyond the immediate world of the couple itself.

I. The Story of Ruth

Let me begin with a brief rehearsal of the narrative itself, which can be broken up into four scenes, each corresponding to a chapter of the book. Scene one opens with the family of Naomi and Elimelech heading into Moab as a result of a famine in the province of Judea. When they arrive there, Naomi's husband tragically dies but her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion find brides among the Moabite women. It would seem that new life will replace what was lost. But both sons remain childless and after the passing of ten years they too die.

Naomi, at this point in the tale, having lost everything dear to her, hears that God has brought the famine in Judea to an end. As Naomi departs for home, both of her daughters-in-law decide to follow her. Though biological children might be expected to

act in this manner, there was no corresponding obligation for daughters-in-law. Naomi, accordingly, urges them to return to their homes where their chances of remarriage are immeasurably better. But only Orpah obeys; Ruth stubbornly persists in her desire to follow Naomi to Judea. Her words are among the most famous in the Bible: “For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried” (1:16).²⁷

These lines are frequently recited in marriage liturgies and not too infrequently friends of mine have observed that this citation is not altogether fitting. For Ruth is not speaking of her attachment to a spouse, but to her mother-in-law. But the incorporation of this quotation into a marriage ceremony seems to me to be quite fitting in spite of this irregularity. For, as we shall see, marriage in the Old Testament is not just an affair between a man and woman, but between two extended families.

When Naomi and Ruth arrive in Judea they are immediately faced with a problem. Being without men in the family who can work the land and earn a wage, they are destitute. Ruth secures food the only way possible for people of this sort — she gleans in the field.²⁸ While gleaning, she is noticed by Boaz who has heard of her remarkable decision to accompany Naomi.

In reward for her noble deed, Boaz demonstrates his own nobility by arranging matters such that Ruth can glean in the field undisturbed by the other male workers and he also provides her with proper food and excellent working conditions. It might be added here that Ruth’s status is very close to what we would call an illegal alien. Being bereft of passport and all other legal protection, she was at considerable risk when she went to glean among the young male harvesters.

When Ruth returns home and tells Naomi of her good fortune, Naomi responds in ecstatic jubilation: “Blessed be he of the Lord who has not failed in His kindness to the living or to the dead! For the man is related to us; he is one of our redeeming kinsman” (2:20).

The next scene opens with Ruth, in obedience to directions Naomi has given her, proceeding boldly to the threshing floor where Boaz has gone to sleep after he had eaten and drunk. Boaz is startled by Ruth’s presence in the middle of the night and asks her what she is doing there. Ruth responds by asking Boaz to play the role of the redeemer-*levir* (the two institutions²⁹ are uniquely combined in this book) and marry her. Boaz agrees but adds that there is a possible fly in the ointment. Another man possesses a greater right to play the role of the redeemer than he. And this man must be accorded his chance.

When the fourth and final scene opens, Boaz has assembled a quorum of witnesses at the city gate to hear the case of Naomi and Ruth. At issue in this meeting is the sale of Naomi’s land and the acquisition of Ruth as a bride. The nearer kinsman, who strikingly goes unnamed in our story, steps forward with great alacrity when he hears that a piece of property is up for sale.

Yet when Boaz adds the important codicil that the acquisition of the land requires the marrying of Ruth, Mr. So and so backs down for he fears that adding a wife to the package will dilute his estate. For according to the laws of levirate marriage he will be required to raise up a child through Ruth who will not be his own but rather the replacement of her deceased husband Mahlon.

Now we learn why Mr. So and so is not dignified in our story with a name. It is a fitting “punishment” for his refusal to raise up a son to preserve the name of his deceased kinsman, Mahlon. Mr. So and so is a man who can do the math: in his view only the expenses of child rearing will accrue to him; the benefits shall belong to others. Boaz does not share these worries about the financial side of the matter; rather, he rushes into the void and takes Ruth as his wife.

Upon being married, Ruth immediately becomes pregnant and the women gather to laud the God who has been so kind to Naomi. For the child who is to be born will not only preserve the name of the deceased but will also provide an income that will sustain her in old age. And here is the nub of the matter: marriage is not only a love affair between a man and a woman but it provides the very means of sustaining the larger household of the family. But let’s put this point on hold for a second. There is another issue which we should discuss first.

II. Israel as the Lord’s Bride

It is well known that a favorite metaphor in the Old Testament for the relationship of God to Israel is that of the love between a husband and wife. It appears already in the 8th-century prophet Hosea and continues to grow in strength in two of the great prophets of the exilic period, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah.³⁰ It is certainly due to this fact that the erotic love poetry of the Song of Songs came to be understood as a description of the love between God and His people.

This interpretive tradition, so favored by the tradition, has a pedigree that reaches back into the biblical period. But as Pope Benedict XVI has reminded us in his encyclical *Deus caritas est*, we should not allow this transfer of meaning to the divine realm cancel out its important unitive role among married couples. “Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love,” the Pope explains, “becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa.” Without the reality of erotic conjugal love, our knowledge of God’s love would be so much the poorer.

There are two texts in the book of Ruth which speak to the relationship of conjugal love to divine love. The first concerns the happy accident of Ruth’s arrival in field of Boaz to glean grain for herself and Naomi. When Boaz learns of Ruth’s presence in his fields, it is clear that he is already aware of the startling bravery of this young woman. He immediately takes measures to assure the safety of Ruth and to provide water for her during her labors. Struck by this unmerited generosity, Ruth falls at his feet and cries out: “Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner?” To this, Boaz quickly replies: “I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the

death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before. May the Lord reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge!" (2:10, 12).

The reference to Ruth's act of leaving kith and kin to return with Naomi to a people she had not known before is a clear intertextual echo of the call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1. Like Abraham, she leaves all which she had previously held dear for a journey of uncertain consequences. But most striking for our purposes are the terms of the blessing that Boaz speaks over her: "May you have a full recompense from the Lord, the God of Israel under whose wings you have sought refuge."

The reference to seeking refuge under the wings of God recalls a favorite image of the Psalter. Compare these examples:

O you who dwell in the shelter of the Most High and abide in the protection of Shaddai –

I say of the Lord, my refuge and stronghold,
my God in whom I trust,
that He will save you from the fowler's trap,
from the destructive plague.
He will cover you with His pinions;
You will find refuge under His wings;
His fidelity is an encircling shield.³¹

How precious is Your faithful care, O God!
Mankind shelters in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the rich fare of Your house;
You let them drink at Your refreshing stream.³²

Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me,
for I seek refuge in You,
I seek refuge in the shadow of Your wings,
until danger passes.³³

This image of taking refuge under the wings of the Almighty derives from the architectural design of the Temple in Jerusalem. In the Holy of Holies, where the God of Israel had audaciously taken up residence among His people, He was said to have assumed His seat upon the Ark of the Covenant which was flanked by winged cherubim.³⁴ Certain texts from the Old Testament speak of individuals seeking refuge beside the altar from the danger threatened by their enemies.³⁵ So one level of meaning to Boaz' blessing is that he compares Ruth to an endangered person who has sought asylum under the protecting wings of the God of Israel.

But perhaps we can say even more. Boaz, the name of our hero, also happens to be the name of one of two pillars that sat athwart the entranceway of the Temple in Jerusalem.³⁶ The names of these two pillars, Yachin and Boaz, have a significant

symbolic function. They are what biblical scholars call sentence names and when set in combination bespeak the world-founding function of the temple. We could translate them thusly: “by his strength (*be-ozzo* – a slight emendation following the Greek) God has established (*yachin*) the temple/world.”³⁷

Temple pillars had a two-fold function in the ancient Near East. They not only held up the lintel over the doorway but they also held the firmament in place over the entire earth. We should note here that the firmament was thought of as a solid surface that rested upon high mountains at the periphery of the world. The two pillars of the temple, on this view, would represent the mountains upon which the firmament was set. If Boaz’ name is an allusion to the pillar of the temple then his blessing points in two directions. On the one hand, Ruth’s remarkable pilgrimage to Israel shall be rewarded by God’s own protective oversight. But on the other hand, the offer of that divine assistance will be mediated in some as of yet undisclosed manner by Boaz.

Strong support for this supposition comes in the third scene of our book when Ruth shows up at the threshing floor of Boaz. Having awoken from his sleep in a startled fashion due to the woman lying at his feet, Boaz asks in surprise: “Who are you?” Ruth, not showing even the slightest fear or even embarrassment, identifies herself and audaciously proposes marriage: “I am your handmaid Ruth. Spread your robe over your handmaid, for you are a redeeming kinsman” (3:9). What is noteworthy about this line is the idiom that is used for marriage, “spread *your robe* over your handmaid.” The word for “robe” in Hebrew happens to be the exact same word as “wing.” This remarkable word play carries us back to Boaz’s blessing in chapter two: “May you have a full recompense from the Lord, the God of Israel under whose wings you have sought refuge.”

The protective wings of God mentioned by Boaz turn out to be more than just a metaphor. God will spread His wings over Ruth through the agency of Boaz’ robe. Grace (God’s election of Ruth) shows itself to be built on the firm bedrock of nature (marriage to Boaz). Ruth does not come to the God of Israel as a disembodied soul; rather her enjoyment of divine protection will be mediated through marriage to a particular Israelite man.

III. On the Inseparability of Marriage and Procreation

The second theme that is worth exploring is the place of marriage in the larger constellation of family life in ancient Israel. Given the high premium put on personal autonomy, the most common sort of romantic love story that contemporary culture offers us is one wherein man and woman are united over against all other ties that the world knows. Let’s consider, for example, the romantic relationship that lies at the heart of the movie, *Titanic*. Here we have a young man of lower class origin who has fallen in love with a young woman of considerably higher stature. The rub in the story is that this young woman is already favored by a young man of equal social standing who has the unqualified approbation of her parents. Our romantic couple must engage in deception and considerable bravery to make sure that the interests of the larger family do not interfere with their love for one another. Indeed, it is precisely the opposition of the

family that provides the traction against which their love will take shape.

This is a very familiar line in Hollywood movies. Can one imagine a love story in which parental reservations about a future spouse would impel a character to reject an unworthy suitor only to find in the end a far better spouse who was favored by the larger family? There may be one or two movies out there that follow this train of thought, but I must confess that I am at a loss to name them. The standard plot line that I am familiar with is the one we find in *Titanic*.

This is not really an option for a biblical love story. For to paraphrase Bonhoeffer, marriage is not about seeking the heaven of one's personal happiness but being placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind. The specific sort of responsibility is spelled out at the end of the book of Ruth. When Boaz and Ruth marry, the Lord immediately intervenes and allows Ruth to conceive a son.³⁸ The women of Bethlehem then assemble to speak words of blessing not to Ruth but to Naomi: "Blessed be the Lord, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today! May his name be perpetuated in Israel! He will renew your life and sustain your old age; for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons" (4:14-15). And if this is not sufficiently surprising consider the next two verses with which our story comes to its end. Naomi takes the child into her arms as though she were the child's own mother and the women of Bethlehem, recognizing the unique relationship between the two, exclaim: "A son is born to Naomi!" (4:17).

Some have concluded from these lines that Naomi actually adopts Ruth's child as her own. And indeed, in the ancient Near East there is a venerable tradition of childless persons adopting children. But the Bible is curiously silent on this matter; we have no provisions in biblical law for the adoption of a child. It seems more likely, and most commentators move in this direction, that Naomi becomes something of a foster mother of the child, that is someone who looks after the child in a most intimate fashion.

But more important than nailing down the type of relationship between Naomi and the child is coming to grips with the specific socio-cultural reasons that propel it forward. And this we learn from the blessing spoken by the women. This child born to Naomi is to have two functions: first, that of perpetuating the name of Mahlon within the community of Israel and second, that of sustaining Naomi in her old age.

It is important to bear in mind that in the ancient world – and indeed much of the undeveloped modern world – children were not simply a "life-style enhancement" that they have become in the contemporary family.³⁹ No one in the ancient world would have asked themselves whether they would like to have children or not, even if artificial birth control devices were available.

Our own situation could not be more different. Indeed the begetting of children is a real and pressing question for modern couples. No longer are there social conventions that make this an unstated obligation; becoming a father or mother has become a matter of choice.

The reason why this was not the case in antiquity is easy to provide: children were absolutely necessary for the preservation of the elderly. Indeed the most frequent reason for adoption in ancient Near Eastern culture is that of providing a means for supporting a childless couple in their old age. Adoption documents frequently detail the parents' obligation to raise the child during its years of vulnerability with the expectation that the child will honor his parents in his old age.

Here honoring one's parents retains its fundamental Semitic meaning: that of providing for mother and father when they are old and infirm. In a culture bereft of retirement plans and Social Security, children played a crucial economic role.⁴⁰ Having children was not a choice; it was a necessity.

Ruth has already distinguished herself in the book by undertaking the role of honoring her mother-in-law by going into the field in chapter two to glean food. In biblical law, gleaning grain is the means by which the poor are sustained. What is surprising in this book is that Ruth extends the obligation of honoring one's parent to her mother-in-law. As Jesus would put the matter in the Sermon on the Mount, Ruth has seen clearly beyond the letter of the law to its very spirit.⁴¹

But Naomi's situation is still one of considerable vulnerability for there is nothing that will guarantee that Ruth will remain obligated to her in the future. This is the reason why Boaz responds with such surprise to Ruth's decision to pursue marriage with him. When Ruth asks him to spread his cloak over her, he exclaims: "Be blessed of the Lord, daughter! Your latest deed of loyalty is greater than the first, in that you have not turned to younger men, whether poor or rich." In other words, Ruth has viewed marriage in terms that addressed her larger adopted family rather than her immediate self-interest.⁴² The contrast to the way in which romantic relationships are portrayed in our day – witness *Titanic* – could not be greater.

The portrayal of Ruth's character is as profound in its moral depth as it is touching to the heart. But it also constitutes a considerable challenge to the manner in which we view marriage. Given the role of children within the larger family, it is crucial that Ruth come to see her opportunities for marriage in light of larger familial circumstances. And in light of these needs, it is simply impossible for our biblical writer to tell a story of human love in the form in which we see it in *Titanic*. For such a story is only possible if we exempt the couple from the larger familial circumstances in which it sits. Of course, the ancients had a considerable advantage over us in pursuing these sorts of moral goods: the necessity of children as the means of sustaining the elderly made it much more difficult to view a love relationship in terms of one's immediate needs for companionship.

IV. Conclusion

So what does the book of Ruth tell us about the sacrament of marriage? First of all, that within the sacred bond of marriage there lies a symbol of the love of God for humanity. Ruth is praised by Boaz for leaving kith and kin to adopt the God of Israel. But strikingly her adoption of this God is inextricably linked to the marriage bond she (!)

will propose. The grand transformation of Song of Songs from a simple love song to a tale about the marriage of God to his people Israel is already in evidence in the book of Ruth. Human marriage truly is an analogical expression of the love of God for His people.

Secondly, the love of a husband and wife is not extolled as an end in and of itself. Marriage is “a status and an office” as Bonhoeffer put it and over the long term it will be the right discernment of that office that will sustain and define the love that holds the couple together.

On this point, however, a great abyss opens up between the world of the Bible and our own day. It was important to biblical writers to see the marriage bond as necessarily linked to children and grandparents. Indeed, the Bible needed to make no argument for this linkage because it was a socio-economic reality of the day.

What makes Ruth particularly virtuous is not her desire to marry and have children. With no retirement programs available for her, the mothering of children was as basic to human survival as the daily tilling of the fields and preparation of meals. What distinguishes Ruth is her willingness to understand her marriage in a way that will favor her adopted mother-*in-law*. In other words, Ruth courageously extends her level of obligation between the bare minimum and by so doing show us that persons within the Old Testament were able to discern what the spirit of the law consisted of.

In our own day, economic and technological developments have allowed young couples to view children as a simple life-style option. The result has been a dramatic limitation of what the office of marriage consists of. The larger family unit has shrunk to the tiny circle of the couple itself. The challenge for contemporary thinkers is how to make sure the “status and office of marriage” that Bonhoeffer spoke of can continue in a culture that no longer sustains the basic social setting of pre-modern and biblical times.

My love and gratitude to my wife Kathleen for her suggestions on this article and for all she has taught me about marriage and family life in the covenant.

Further Study

The First Presidency’s proclamation to the world about the family lays out clearly the doctrine and principles of marriage and family — as well as the priority that should be accorded to these matters by all people (Hinkley, 1995 #258).

For other scripture resources relating to this lesson, see The Interpreter Foundation Old Testament Gospel Doctrine Index (<http://interpreterfoundation.org/gospel-doctrine-resource-index/ot-gospel-doctrine-resource-index/>) and the Book of Mormon Central Old Testament KnoWhy list (<https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/tags/old-testament>).

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bnr.com/ebooks/pdf4/saint_exupery_terre_des_hommes.pdf. (accessed May 15, 2018).

Endnotes

1 Used with permission of Book of Mormon Central. See <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/reference-knowhy>.

2 <http://ibmorumbi.blogspot.com/2015/07/> (accessed May 20, 2018).

3 G. A. Anderson, Marriage in Ruth.

4 <https://www.ribaj.com/culture/brendan-sexton-rising-star-architectural-drawing-communication-virtual-mixed-reality> (accessed May 20, 2018).

5 <http://takeontorah.blogspot.com/2014/01/terumah-face-to-face-with-angel.html> (accessed May 20, 2018).

6 1 Kings 7:21-22.

7 See Ruth 3:9.

8 See Ruth 2:12.

9 Exodus 25:20.

10 I hope to explore temple allegory within the book of Ruth as the subject of my presentation at the Temple Studies Symposium at University of California Santa Barbara currently scheduled for February 2019. The topic of the symposium is tentatively given as “The Divine Family: Of God and gods.”

11 “Love’s exalted purpose clearly indicates that there is nothing more noble than a wife and a husband. Husband and wife, and wife and husband, reach to the heights of Godhood” (*The Magic Flute* 1:14). The German text reads: “*Ihr hoher Zweck zeigt deutlich an, Nichts edlers sey, als Weib und Mann. Mann und Weib, und Weib und Mann, Reichen an die Gottheit an.*”

The libretto of Mozart’s operatic masterpiece, *Die Zauberflöte*, embodies what is perhaps the greatest literary expression of the hope of exaltation coupled with eternal marriage (J. M. Bradshaw, *God’s Image* 1, p. 634; p. 739 n. E-161):

One of Mozart’s last works before his untimely death, *The Magic Flute* has been much maligned by those who judge its libretto shallow, confused, and filled with inexcusable misogyny. However, BYU Professor Alan Keele, who has done much to promote a modern appreciation of supernal idealism in German literature, opera, and cinema, has sought to rehabilitate its status by a more careful reading of this opera, whose central theme is, after all, the human tendency to mistake appearances for reality. Keele shows that, rather than upholding conventional practices that withheld membership in Freemasonry from women, the opera’s brilliantly-crafted deep structure suggests that “Mozart perceived this misogynistic and celibate order—though righteous as far as it goes—should and would be replaced by a new and equal gender-neutral leadership, personified in Tamino and Pamina, deified in Isis and Osiris. Certainly that does not detract from the dignity and holiness of Sarastro (= Zoroaster—presumably modeled on Mozart’s Masonic mentor, Ignaz von Born), who

apparently represents the last celibate high priest, destined to be replaced by the new, married high priest and priestess.... All the apparent confusion of this libretto, all its contradictory claims and behaviors flee as the darkness before the glorious structural clarity of this paradigm: The God-couple Isis-Osiris are to be the model for the new Adam-and-Eve couple Pamina-Tamino, who, if they prove their worthiness, will become like the Gods” (A. Keele, *Zauberflöte*, pp. 109-110; cf. A. Keele, *Magic Flute*, pp. 63-64; cf. M. P. Lyon, *Set Design*). As the “successor and antidote to *Così fan tutte*,” Jacques Chailley notes that *The Magic Flute* restored “the ideal of true love which the society of the period scoffed at so readily; that Ideal Love which we are free to believe that Constanze’s husband [Wolfgang] must often have sought” (J. Chailley, *Unveiled*, p. 295). ...

Paul E. Kerry wrote (P. E. Kerry, *Initiates*, p. 128):

Mozart’s letters to Constanze at the time he was composing *The Magic Flute* are full of affection, at times playfully expressed through the words of the opera’s libretto, and they are often signed *Ewig Dein* (Eternally yours) or use *ewig* in other endearing formulations such as *Dein Dich ewig liebender Mann* (Your eternally loving husband).

12 Exodus 25:20.

13 See R. Alter, *Strong As Death*, Kindle Edition, Locations 1528-1530.

14 « *Aimer ce n'est point nous regarder l'un l'autre mais regarder ensemble dans la même direction* » (A. d. Saint Exupéry, *Terre*. The citation is found on p. 225 in the 1939 first edition published by « *Livre de Poche* »). Cf. Amos 3:3: “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?”

Saint Exupéry’s frequently cited statement is actually taken from a passage that describes not the love of husband and wife but rather the deep bonds of brotherhood that unite all those who have suffered in pursuit of a noble goal:

Linked to our brothers by a common purpose that is greater than ourselves — a purpose that provides the very breath of life to us —we have learned by experience that love is not a matter of looking at one another. Rather it is looking, together, in the same direction. Who are my friends? Only those who are roped together in the same climb, reaching for the same summit, where they meet at last. If this were not so, why, in the century of comfort, would we feel such a fullness of joy in sharing our last supplies in the desert? In light of such experiences, the theories of the sociologists are worthless. To those of us who have known the great joy of escaping life-threatening breakdowns in the Sahara desert, all other pleasures seem trivial.

Liés à nos frères par un but commun et qui se situe en dehors de nous, alors seulement nous respirons et l'expérience nous montre qu'aimer ce n'est point nous regarder l'un l'autre mais regarder ensemble dans la même direction. Il n'est de camarades que s'ils s'unissent dans la même cordée, vers le même sommet en quoi ils se retrouvent. Sinon pourquoi, au siècle même du confort, éprouverions-nous une joie si pleine à partager nos derniers vivres dans le désert ? Que valent là-contre les prévisions des sociologues ? À tous ceux d'entre nous qui ont connu la grande joie des dépannages sahariens, tout autre plaisir a paru futile.

15 John 1:47.

16 T. C. Eshkenazi *et al.*, *Ruth*, p. 74.

17 Ruth 3:9–13.

18 Photograph by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, ID DISCO1427, 12 May 2014.

19 T. C. Eshkenazi *et al.*, *Ruth*, pp. xxi–xxiii.

20 Genesis 19:30–37.

21 Mentioned in Ruth 4:11.

22 Genesis 16; 21:9–11.

23 Genesis 38.

24 Ruth 3:8.

25 G. A. Anderson, *Marriage in Ruth*.

26 This oft-cited quotation is taken from D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters from Prison*, pp. 42-43.

27 All translations are taken from the *New Jewish Publication Society* version.

28 See Leviticus 19:9-10.

29 The redeemer was responsible for purchasing back land that was about to leave the clan whereas the *levir* was supposed to have intercourse with the widow of his brother in the event that the brother died prior to being able to father any children himself. See Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

30 For a good exposition of this theme, see J. D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, pp. 75-80.

31 Psalm 94:1-4.

32 Psalm 36:8-9.

33 Psalm 57:2.

34 1 Kings 6:23-28.

35 Cf. 1 Kings 1:50-53.

36 1 Kings 7:21-22.

37 The building of the temple was often described as analogous to the creation of the world. For further details, see J. Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon*, pp. 56-69.

38 This is an important theme in its own right – for Ruth had been unable to conceive a child during her ten years of marriage to Mahlon. Clearly Ruth, like all the other central matriarchal figures in Genesis [Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel] was sterile until the hand of God intervened. The theological function of this motif is to establish the direct involvement of God in the conception of the child. The child becomes not only the offspring of two human parents but also, in some sense, a son of God. On this point, see J. D. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, pp. 42-43.

39 For an insightful essay from a Protestant perspective on this, see H. D. Baer, *Exception*. It is worth noting that among Torah-observant Jews it is customary for married couples to seek the permission of a Rabbi to use artificial contraceptive devices. There is a presumption against them that must be overruled. Moreover, some medieval thinkers noted that Jewish law requires that a woman abstain from sex during the period of her menstrual flow and seven days afterward. This meant that when this period of sexual abstinence was over this would be the most fertile time during the ovular cycle. Can it be accidental that precisely at the moment the married couple would be most desirous to return to conjugal relations was also the moment that the woman was most fertile?

40 See Ben Sirah 3:1-16, especially 12-13. Jonas Greenfield nicely summarizes the attitude of the ancients in this fashion (J. Greenfield, *Care for the Elderly*):

As is well known, man's universal needs are food, clothing, shelter and, with a bow to our modern perceptions, love. The young and healthy can provide for themselves, but it is the very young and the elderly who need help to see them through hard times and to keep them alive. The aged have an additional burden – they need not only to be sustained, but after death they must be lamented, buried properly and remembered by prayers and rituals. In most societies this was a natural function of children, who thus maintained a link in the chain of being and guaranteed, as it were, by their own actions their own future. The childless would overcome their lack of children by co-opting the children of others. The adopted son or daughter would have to sustain the aged, bury him or her and fulfill other duties in order to qualify as heir.

41 In Judaism the book of Ruth is thought to exemplify the virtue of *gemilut- hasadim* or “unbounded charity toward others.” The fact that this book is read during the liturgical season that celebrates the giving of the law indicates that the Jewish tradition was not ignorant of the deeper understanding of legal obedience that Jesus taught about.

42 This does not mean that Boaz and Ruth did not love one another, it is simply to state that the documentation of those feelings takes second position in this narrative to their desires to do what is best for the family. Ruth, for example, gives away her feelings of endearment when Ruth returns to lie at Boaz' feet after she has proposed marriage. This return to a position of intimacy was not necessary once she had secured his consent, instead it indicates her love for Boaz. And Boaz also demonstrates his love for Ruth when he spontaneously and without a moment's hesitation declares his willingness to marry Ruth. Only when he has revealed these intentions does he mention the problem of the next of kin. Had he been less than sanguine about the matter, he would have first told Ruth of the obstacles and only then indicated his willingness to consent.