

Sole Mates

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It's not unusual for us to use the term 'soulmates' to describe two people who seem destined to be together. But for most people living in Bible times—and even in some parts of the world today—marriages were arranged and personal attraction had little to do with it. This was especially true when a man's brother died without children; the remaining brother was expected to marry the widow and have a son to be the dead man's heir. (This is mentioned all the way back in Genesis 38:8 and explained in more detail in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. And because such a situation often involved losing property due to hardship—as it does in this story—it overlapped the role of the 'kinsman redeemer' in Leviticus 25:24-28.)

But once God gets involved, even a business arrangement like that can be transformed. The entire book of Ruth is about just such a 'deal,' but this tale focuses on Ruth 4:1-12.

His name was Boaz

and he was one of the wealthiest men in Bethlehem.

He owned large tracts of land where he grew lots of grain,
and he employed many workers to harvest it.

And in accordance with Jewish law

he allowed those who were less fortunate to follow his workers
and gather the grain that his workers missed,
so they wouldn't go hungry.

He was an honorable man and all the people thought well of him.

One day he noticed a young stranger among those gleaners,
a beautiful woman he had never seen before.

He asked his foreman about her, and the man said
that her name was Ruth, she was from Moab and
she was the widowed wife of
the son of a woman named Naomi.

The foreman said she had asked to glean behind their harvesters,
and that she had been hard at work all day
except for a few moments' rest.

The foreman had been impressed by her hard work.

Boaz was impressed also.

but not just because she was working so hard.

Naomi was the widow of Elimelech...
and Elimelech was a relative of Boaz.

Elimelech had taken his wife and sons to Moab more than ten years earlier.

Clearly the boys had married there and died there...

but it was unusual for a Moabite woman to leave Moab
to stay with an Israelite mother-in-law!

This, Boaz realized, was a remarkable young woman!
So he went to her and told her to stay with the women in his fields,
that he would make sure she was protected,
and for her to drink from his wells whenever she was thirsty.
And when Ruth asked him why he was being so kind to her,
he told her that Naomi was his relative and
that she was a rare woman to come live among strangers
simply because she loved her mother-in-law.
And he blessed her and made sure she was safe.

At lunchtime he invited Ruth to eat with his workers
and gave her extra food to take home with her.
Then, when she went back to work,
Boaz told his men to leave extra grain where she could gather it
and not to cause her any problems.

In this way Boaz made sure that both Ruth and Naomi
had plenty to eat all through the harvest.
And as Boaz and Ruth became more attracted to each other
it became apparent that there was a problem:
According to Jewish law
there was one other relative who had the right to marry Ruth.
Boaz knew he was required to offer him that opportunity.

But Boaz intended to BUY that right from him!

Boaz went to the city gate where contracts were negotiated
and, when that relative came by, he called him over:
“Come, my friend. We have business to discuss.”
He also called other men over to witness the transaction.
Then he told them all how Naomi wished to sell Elimelech’s property
and, since this man was first in line to redeem it,
Boaz wished to know if he wanted to do so—
and Boaz made it clear that, if he didn’t,
Boaz himself wished to redeem it.

At first the man said he wanted the land. But then Boaz said,
“Of course, if you redeem the land you must also marry the widow Ruth.
That way she can have children for her dead husband
and keep the land in her family.”
But when the man heard that, he quickly changed his mind.
“If I do that, her son might inherit my own estates as well,” he said.
“I can’t risk that. You may redeem this property.”

But Boaz didn’t care about the risk of losing his wealth;
he just wanted to be with Ruth!

So, as was the custom of businessmen in that day,
Boaz calmly took off one of his sandals
and handed it to the other man.

This made the deal official.

Then he said to the men gathered around them,
“As you can see, today I am exercising my right to redeem Naomi’s land.
And, in the process,

I am taking her daughter-in-law Ruth as my wife.

You are all witnesses that I am doing this in accordance with our law.”

And all the men agreed that he had done everything
in a legal and proper way...

and then they gave their blessing to his and Ruth’s marriage.

I suppose that, at this point, most people would simply say

“And they lived happily ever after”

and let it go at that.

But why, you may ask, do we remember this love story at all?

It’s because, as a result of this deal,

*Ruth and Boaz became the great-grandparents of King David...
and through him, the ancestors of Jesus.*

Now THAT is what I call a happy ending.