



"Wisdom is knowing what to do next; virtue is doing it."
—David Starr Jordan

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A Virtuous Woman

Ruth the Moabitess had done everything her mother-in-law, Naomi, had instructed her to do. Waiting until Boaz had eaten and drunk enough to feel relaxed and sleepy, she had noted precisely where he had lain down near the end of a heap of grain. Once the night was pitch black, she had tiptoed over to the place, uncovered his feet to be exposed to the cool night air, and lain down herself ([Ruth 3:1-7](#)). Now all she had to do was wait.

At midnight, Boaz woke suddenly, probably because his feet had become cold, and he immediately knew he was not alone. He was surprised to find, of all things, a woman lying at his feet, putting him in a compromising if not completely scandalous situation! In response to his question about who she was, Ruth identifies herself and essentially proposes marriage to him, all in the same breath.

Most men, befuddled by wine and sleep, would probably sputter and gape at her, eventually saying something like, "Are you crazy?!" Others might say, "What? Me marry you? No way!" or "Can't we talk about this after coffee?" Some, having evil intentions, would have taken advantage of her, deeming her forwardness to be an invitation.

But Boaz is no ordinary man. Chapter 2 implies that he is a man of stature in the community, having "great wealth." His name means "in him is strength." While some commentators believe he was not significantly older than Ruth, tradition says that he was likely twice her age, perhaps as old as or older than Naomi.

So, instead of overreacting as a younger man might, being a mature man, Boaz—now wide awake and all his faculties humming—responds:

Blessed are you of the LORD, my daughter! For you have shown more [kindness](#) at the end than at the beginning, in that you did not go after young men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you request, for all the people of my town know that you are a virtuous woman. ([Ruth 3:10-11](#))

This final piece of information may strike the reader as a bit ironic considering her sexually charged actions of uncovering his feet (which may be an Israelite sexual euphemism) and proposing to him by the dark of the moon! We would not normally consider these virtuous deeds, but Boaz does, praising her kindness for choosing him instead of a younger, more exciting man and remarking that everyone in Bethlehem held her in esteem for her virtue. In her short time among the Israelites, she had made quite a positive impression. If nothing else, her reputation for virtue informed Boaz that her actions that night were nothing but honorable.

The phrase "a virtuous woman" translates the Hebrew words *'ešet hayl*, meaning "woman of worth," "woman of strength," or "woman of noble character." It appears in only two other places in Scripture, [Proverbs 12:4](#) ("an excellent wife") and [Proverbs 31:10](#) ("a virtuous wife"). It is a similar phrase to the one describing Boaz in [Ruth 2:1](#) as "a man of great wealth," which likely implies more than just riches. In general, *'ešet hayl* denotes a woman of skill, aptitude, proficiency, or achievement in one or any number of areas of life. The New King James translation of "virtuous" in [Ruth 3:11](#) is good but limited, while "worthy" or even "excellent" is broader and more appropriate. It would not be wrong even to render it as "an ideal woman."

Based on the three occurrences of this phrase in Scripture, with [Ruth 3:11](#) being its first mention, some students of the Bible have proposed that Ruth the Moabitess is the original model for the virtuous wife of Proverbs 31. Solomon, the author of Proverbs, was Ruth's great-great-grandson, and it would not be unfounded to believe that stories of her many virtues and upright character circulated among her descendants for many generations. Since the author of Ruth is not revealed in the book—or even anywhere in Scripture—it is not beyond the pale to speculate that Solomon may be the author of both Ruth and Proverbs. (Jewish tradition ascribes Ruth's authorship to the prophet Samuel, but there are problems with this supposition.) While scholars posit various dates for the book, a date in the early Israelite monarchy seems likely.

Beyond the fact that *'ešet hayl* appears in both books, a few details in Proverbs 31 could be taken as references to Ruth. The general description of the virtuous wife—"She does [her husband] good and not evil all the days of her life" ([Proverbs 31:12](#))—clearly fits her character, aligning with Ruth's kind treatment of her mother-in-law, always seeking her good. Ruth 2 describes Ruth as working all day in Boaz' field, gleaning grain in the hot sun, and [Proverbs 31:13](#) tells us the virtuous wife "willingly works with her hands." The very next verse says that "she brings her food from afar," reminiscent of both [Ruth 2:17-18](#) and [Ruth 3:15-17](#), which relate Ruth's carrying of grain from the fields and the threshing floor back to the dwelling she shared with Naomi.

Another possible reference—this time to Boaz—is found in [Proverbs 31:23](#): "Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land." Ruth 4 takes place primarily in Bethlehem's city gate, where Boaz redeems Ruth and Elimelech's land. We see there that Boaz was well-versed in the conducting of business and legal matters in the gate, as was the custom in Israel at the time. There may be a second reference to Boaz in [Proverbs 31:28-29](#): "Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: 'Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all.'" Boaz frequently called Ruth "my daughter," and of course, he was the one who originally described her as "a virtuous woman."

Perhaps most significantly, [Proverbs 31:26](#) describes the virtuous wife with these words: "She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness." Ruth's famous words to Naomi, "Entreat me not to leave you. . . . Your people shall be my people, and your [God](#), my God" ([Ruth 1:16](#)

), are her first words in the book, and they are the epitome of wisdom, especially coming from the mouth of a Moabitess! She never misspeaks or says anything foolish in the entire book.

Moreover, Solomon's mention of "kindness" (*hesed*) is the same word Boaz uses in [Ruth 3:10](#), when he tells her that she has "shown more kindness at the end than at the beginning." This kindness or covenant loyalty is a significant theme in the book of Ruth, and Ruth is the one—a Gentile among Israelites—who expresses it best. This virtuous woman was indeed a worthy and excellent ancestress of David and [Jesus Christ](#).

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Christ's Female Ancestors](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The Jews, because of the scepter, the Levitical, and Messianic responsibilities, have been perhaps the most meticulous, careful, and accurate genealogy keepers in the world. No genealogy is more important than Christ's. Matthew (recording Joseph's line) establishes Christ's legal kingly credentials, while Luke (recording Mary's line) establishes Christ's role as Messiah for all of mankind. Luke records four female ancestors, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah (Bath Sheba). Three out of the four were Gentiles and three out of the four had glaring sexual problems, all four demonstrating exemplary qualities: intense loyalty to the covenant: Tamar, reminding Judah of his covenant responsibility, Rahab demonstrating sterling belief and faith, Ruth demonstrating loyalty and faithfulness to a promise, and Bathsheba's loyalty to the Davidic covenant.

From the Archives: Featured Article

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

Ecclesiastes is a book of wisdom. The kind of wisdom that it teaches, however, is not of the purely philosophical variety, but is a spiritual sagacity combined with practical skill in living. John Ritenbaugh explains that this kind of godly wisdom, if applied, will protect a Christian as he experiences the trials and tribulations of life in this world.

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