



Who was Boaz?

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The subject of my talk this evening Brethren is a name that is extremely important to Freemasons throughout the world but as a character only appears briefly in our Masonic Ritual. Indeed, as far as Masonry is concerned this person is not really discussed to at all, and he is only mentioned in his connection to the left hand pillar of King Solomon's Temple... of course I mean Boaz.

So who was he?

In the beginning of the Gospel according to St Matthew the ancestry of Jesus Christ is traced back, showing him to be a descendant of Abraham, David and Solomon. There are fourteen generations from Abraham to David and fourteen more from David to the deportation to Babylon and then another fourteen to the birth of Jesus Christ. At the tenth generation we find Salmon, who married Rahab, and these two were Boaz's father and mother;

Abraham begat Isaac and Isaac begat Jacob and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren

And Judas begat Phares and Zara of Tamar and Phares begat Esrom and Esrom begat Aram.

And Aram begat Aminadab and Aminadab begat Naasson and Nassonn begat Salmon.

And Salmon begat Boaz of Rahab.....

(So there you have it... that who he was! But obviously there is more to it than that!)

Other than genealogically, Boaz is only mentioned in the 1st Book of Kings, and the 1st and 2nd Books of Chronicles, (*when,*

importantly for us, dealing with the building of King Solomon's Temple).

But he also appears in the Book of Ruth. It's this book, (*one of only two books with a female name for a title*) that I'm going to talk about.

It's a charming tale which stands alone in the Bible as an idyllic picture of pastoral manners among the Hebrews. Scholars generally view it as a protest against the narrow racism of the time of Scribes Ezra and Nehemiah, when those Jews who had married foreign wives were compelled to get rid of them. It probably came about shortly after the exile, when the Jewish community was becoming ore exclusive.

There is no real translation of the word Scribe in the context of Ezra or Nehemiah. Originally a scribe had been someone who could read and write. Since, before the invention of printing, everything had to be written by hand, a Scribe's main task had been copying books. As time went by the Scribes not only copied but edited and interpreted. They became experts in the meaning of the Torah, which is the Law of Moses given in the first five books of the Bible.

The Torah in all its details was complicated in the extreme. There were rules about everything from the treatment of skin disease to the preparation of animals for sacrifice. It was a kind of textbook for both the civil and the religious functions of the community.

In the process of time, the scribes had to be experts in knowledge, interpretation and administration. Consequently their position was one of considerable authority, and they tended to become both legalist and theological in outlook.

Anyway, back to Ezra and Nehemiah.

In the Book of Ezra, Chapter Nine, “Ezra mourneth for the affinity of the people with strangers. He tells that:

The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Cannanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Lebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken their daughters and themselves, and for their sons, so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass.

Ezra prayed to God and confessed the sins of his people, and after a period of starvation, gave judgement that all those who had taken foreign wives should get rid of them, and any children, to keep the racial purity.

Scribe Nehemiah was just as bad. He was a Jewish exile who was much trusted by the Persian King Artaxerxes, and allowed by him to go to Jerusalem as governor about 445 BC to accelerate the reconstruction of the nation’s life. Nehemiah and Ezra worked together on the re-establishment of the nation’s religious and economic life. Here’s what Scribe Nehemiah had to say about the behaviour of the priests of the Children of Israel:

In the days also saw Jews that has married wives of Ashod Ammon and of Moab: And their children spake half in the speech of Ashod, and could not speak in the Jew’s language, but according to the language of each people. And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God saying. Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, not take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves

And so he goes on, in the thunder and dignity and beauty of the King James version of the Bible the reader is left with no doubt

as to Scribe Nehemiah's attitude to inter-racial marriage. His authority is such that he has some of the worst offenders beaten up and shamed, and extracts a promise from them that they have no truck with any foreigners – they're brining the whole nation into disrepute.

These ethnic cleansing legislations of Scribes Nehemiah and Ezra may have been popular with the Orthodox Jews at the time, but there were many Jews who were not at all happy with this decision, which must have caused heartbreak to thousands. There is some evidence that the authority of the Scribes was called into question, but without any real success.

The Book of Ruth might have come about as a result of careful propaganda by the politic an underground of the time. It is impossible to say exactly how true it is. But the authenticity of Boaz himself cannot be called into question.

One of the things that make the story read like a work of fiction is the use of names, and I'll just digress once more before telling what the book is about.

The subject of names is too large to be covered in any detail here: suffice it to say that almost all names have meanings. In Biblical times theses meanings were given more significance than nowadays.

You are all familiar with the story of Christ naming Peter for his faith:

Blessed are thou, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood have not revealed it to thee, but my Father, which is heaven. And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock will I build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Simon becomes Peter – a rock or stone, from the Greek work *petras*, from which we have, derives such words as “petrified” – turned to stone, and “petroleum” – literally, oil from the rock.

Our own names generally have meanings:

John: whom the Lord has favoured: Stephen: a crown, etc.

Adam means “man”; Eve means “life”. Names were sort of word pictures, and, then, taken very seriously.

In the Book of Ruth, the names of the characters have significance, and indeed, of the places. For example “Beth” means “house of” – so “Bethlehem” means “house of bread”. But the names of some of the characters in the story suggest that they may have been poetic invention, rather than the names of actual people.

So, having filled in the background, let me remind you of the story of Ruth, and I’ll tell you what the names mean when we get to them. Rather than reading directly from the Volume of the Sacred Law, with which you are undoubtedly already familiar, I have paraphrased the story.

In the very early days, when judges rules over Israel, there was once a serious harvest failure in the countryside around Bethlehem. A great deal of the grain rotted during a wet spring, and what grew was attacked by a white fungus.

Most of the farmers had enough money put by from previous years to manage, and bought supplies in from other parts of the country. But there was one smallholder called Elimech (*his name means “To Whom God is King” which loosely translated as Mr Righteous*). For him the bad harvest was total disaster. He had so little land that one crop failure put him out of business. In a good year, he could only just grow enough to keep his family and cattle. Now winter lay ahead and his barn was empty. Something had to be done if they were not to starve.

So Elimech sold his cattle, left his land and his house, and used what money he had to rent a small cottage in the neighbouring

country of Moab. He and his wife Naomi (*her name means "pleasantness"*) spent a bleak winter there with their sons Mahlon and Chilion. (*Their names translate as Mr Sick and Mr Consumption, so we gather that they did not enjoy the best of health*).

The following year was an eventful one. First, both sons married Moabite women. Mahlon married Orpah (*her name translates as "mane" or "forelock" so she probably had luxurious hair*) and Chilion married Ruth (*her name translates as a "friend"*).

Then, a few months later, Elimech died of a heart attaché, a short time afterwards, the two brothers died within a week of each other- they had both been suffering from tuberculosis.

So the three women found themselves alone.

When the period of mourning was over, Naomi called her daughters-in-law and told them of her decision to return to the old family home in Bethlehem. Moab was not a happy place for her, having lost her husband and her children there. "But as you stay her in Moab", she said. "You are both young enough to marry again".

Orpah agreed with her mother-in-laws and she went back to her parents, and, as far as we know, married a rich young entrepreneur and enjoyed living to a happy old age. But Ruth felt a great concern for Naomi. She knew how it would be for a woman living alone. In the short time that she has been part of the family, she had come to love her mother-in-law.

"Don't ask me to leave you, and don't forbid me to follow you", said Ruth. "Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people and your God will be my God".

Naomi was greatly touched by Ruth's expression of love. The two women left Moab and made their journey to Bethlehem.

When they arrived, round about the middle of March, everyone in the town was saddened by the death of Elimech, Mahlon and Chilion. And Naomi was no longer the happy, smiling woman they had known and loved. "Is this Naomi?" they said. And she said "Call me Mara, for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me". (*"Mara" means "bitterness"*). So Naomi returned to the family home and she and Ruth tried to eke out a poverty-stricken existence.

By the second week in April it was harvest time again, and Ruth joined the other poor women as they gleaned after the reapers in the fields.

The gleaners traditionally collected the neglected or overlooked grain that was left after the sheaves had been gathered. According to Deuteronomy, this was a legal right, but from the context, it seems likely that Ruth had asked permission anyway.

One of Elimech's cousins was a wealthy Bethlehem farmer call Boaz. When Boaz saw Ruth, he asked who she was. "She's the Moabite woman who looks after your cousin's widow", was the reply. So Boaz spoke to Ruth.

Now if this were being shown on film, this is the point where you would hear the sound of shimmering strings playing a romantic melody in the background, because it's pretty obvious that Boaz took a shine to Ruth right from the start. He told her that he had instructed his labourers to treat her with respect and that if she was hungry or thirsty, she should help herself to the provisions laid on for the harvesters.

When Ruth thanked Boaz, I have no doubt that she fluttered her eyelashes very nicely. "Why are you being so kind to me?" she said. "Don't you know that I'm a foreigner here?"

“I’m well impressed with everything you have done for your mother-in-law” said Boaz, “and I’m only too glad to be able to help out of a bit in return”. And all the time she was gleaning, Boaz supplied Ruth with food and drink, and he instructed his harvesters to leave some of the sheaves of barley for her to collect.

The next part of the take is told with extraordinary delicacy, for Naomi persuades Ruth to approach Boaz, and remind him of his duties as a goel – a kinsman with responsibility.

When the harvest had been gathered in, Boaz and his men began the work of threshing. The sheaves of barley were taken to a stone circle on a high piece of ground. All the sheaves were placed in the circle and a yoke of oxen pulled a small threshing machine round and round. The machine had wheels and discs which cut up the straw and shook the grain loose. Then, in the evening when the wind was up, Boaz and his men threw the straw as high as they could into the air. The wind caught the straw and blew it away, leaving the grain to fall to the ground in the stone circle. Threshing was a time of great celebration and the farmwomen brought prodigious quantities of food and wine for the workers.

That night, tired and full of wine, Boaz went to sleep on a pile of grain. He was startled to be woken at midnight by a young woman who lay at his feet. “Who are you?” he whispered. “Ruth came to reply. “I have come to ask a favour of Boaz. I wish to marry”.

Can you hear those violins in the background again?”

“The only man who has a right to marry you”, said Boaz, who knew his law “is Elimech’s nephew. A dead man’s next of kin has the first right to marry the widow, and he is the next of kin to Chilion”.

He sent her away with six measures of barley so that she and Naomi should not be empty handed, and did some hard thinking. Naomi, owing to poverty, had mortgaged what little bit of land she had. The family must come to her rescue.

So the following day, Boaz requested an audience with ten of the leading citizens, or elders, of Bethlehem, this forming a legal court. He and the nephew appeared before them.

“Since you are next of kin”, said Boaz to the nephew, “I wish to know your intentions, Naomi has decided to sell the smallholding. Do you wish to buy it?”

“Yes” said the nephew.

“Then you must marry Ruth, the Moabite woman”, said Boaz “because it is her inheritance you are buying”. This was according to the strict laws governing property ownership at the time.

At that, the nephew changed his mind. But Boaz turned to the elders. “You are my witnesses”, he said, and “that the nephew has renounced his rights in this matter. I will therefore buy Naomi’s property and I will marry Ruth”.

Listen to those violins playing loudly as the nephew seals the deal by passing his shoe to Boaz: the shoe symbolises his right to walk over the land. And so this ancient story has a happy ending. This heroine was not Jewish, but she had become part of God’s chosen people because of her love.

It doesn’t finish quite there, however, because in due time after the wedding, Ruth had a son, called Obed (*Obed means “worshipping” by the way*). Naomi enjoyed being a grandmother, something she’s been looking forward to for quite a long time.

Obed, in turn, has a son called Jesse. And Jesse was father to David, King of Israel, and, of course, David begat Solomon.

So, who was Boaz? He'd been brought up an orthodox Jew by his parents Salmon and Rahab over a thousand years BC.

He became a wealth farmer and landowner in Bethlehem. He was not so conscious of his station that he didn't mind getting his hands dirty and working alongside his men, and as he took the precaution of sleeping out with the grain when it was at its most vulnerable to theft, we may assume he was taught to be cautious.

He was a virile man with an eye for a good-looking woman, and was a quick, logical thinker. He was well versed in the law, capable of making rapid decisions and acting on them. He was very much aware of his obligations as a goel. He was a pillar of society.

Brethren, when King Solomon and Hiram Abif were completing the building of the Temple and the pillars were given their names – you can find it in 1 Kings, Chapter 7:

And he set up the pillars in the porch of the temple: and he set up the right pillar, and called the name thereof Jachin, and he set up the left pillar, and called the name thereof Boaz.

Perhaps the one of the left stood not only for *in strength* – for that is the meaning of the word “Boaz”, but also as a private acknowledgement by King Solomon, perhaps, a quiet “Cheers, great-great granddad”.

Thank You Brethren!