

Taking Off The Shoe **By WB Lee Anderson**



All of us, first as a candidate for the Entered Apprentice Degree and maybe, later as an officer of the lodge, have participated in the work on that degree. As a candidate and being totally in the dark and so many events happening so quickly, much of what had taken place is lost in time. Consequently, many of us have never taken the time to reflect historically where they came from or how it fit in the fabric of our Masonic tradition.

I have for several years now given the historical lecture on the First Degree, and like you, hadn't given it much thought either. In this lecture there is a reference to the Book of Ruth and to a very ancient custom. The Scripture reads "It was the manner in former times that to confirm all things, a man plucked off his shoe and gave it to his neighbor." The significance of this custom, being neither barefoot nor shod, meant to close the deal. How so and where did this come from?

Well I decided to read the story in full and found a lot more than I first thought. With the help of several Old Testament experts, Orthodox Modern or Reformed Jewish and Protestant Christian, I have uncovered what I think is a very important part of our Masonic Journey.

Many of us through the years as members of the Craft have participated in, first all of us as a candidate and later possibly as an officer of the Lodge, many initiations. But - I don't believe many of us have ever taken the time to think about where historically much of this came from.

I have always had an interest in history, and like you, never gave much thought to it either. I have for several years now given the historical lecture on the First Degree. In this lecture, we talk about, as found in the Book of Ruth, the significance of being neither bare foot nor shod, in what is essentially, closing a deal. How odd!

Well I decided to read the story in full and with the help of several Old Testament experts, uncovered a really important part of our Masonic journey. It is also an event that, from a biblical historical prospective, very brief.

The story begins around 1300 BCE, with a man named Elimelek and his wife Naomi. They were both members of the Tribe of Judah and lived in Bethlehem. He was a merchant and a small landowner. There was a drought of major proportions, bad enough to cause them to lease

their land and move the family east, to a neighboring county called Moab. Moab was not Jewish in its religious beliefs, and the relationships between the two countries was much like that of Texas and Mexico today, but the need for food drove them there.

Elimelek and Naomi had two sons and the sojourn in Moab would last about 10 years. About 4 years after they arrived, Elimelek died. The two sons married local women but the sons both died as well, leaving all three women widows. Bad news for all three. Naomi encouraged both her daughter-in-laws to return to their families - maybe to start again. One did, but Ruth would not. It is from this encounter we have the “wither through goest, I will go” passage. Ruth converts to Judaism and in time she and Naomi would return to Bethlehem after the drought abates. About 10 years.

For two women, both widows, life would still not be easy. Even though Elimelek owned land, Naomi was not entitled to it, it could only be redeemed by a male member of the family. They had none! They would have to rely on the charity of others to survive. A part of Jewish law required landowners not to harvest the corners of their fields nor to pick up any grain that fell to the ground. This was to be left for the widows, poor and sojourners. These folks were called gleaners.

Naomi knew that Elimelek had a wealthy relative and landowner named Boaz who would allow them to gather food.

Ruth, saying she was younger, said she would go to Boaz’s fields to gather grain. When Boaz saw Ruth, it was love at first sight. He advised his harvesters to drop extra grain on the ground. Later, he would invite to eat with his harvesters.

In those times in Judea, they lived by what was known as Levirate Law of Marriage, including customs involving childless widows. The law of Eldest Male Birth Right governed the family and society. Naomi had a plan for Ruth which could benefit her as well. The law required, as an obligation of the serving brother, to marry the widow of his brother if they had sired no son. She also had the obligation to marry him and try to conceive a son to carry on the family name and inherit property. If no brother-in-law, then the next closest male relative. At that time the law was designed to protect the widow and to provide for her.

In Ruth’s case there was no brother-in-law. It was also a custom during harvest, for the owner to sleep in the thrashing room until the grain was safely stored to prevent robbery. Naomi told Ruth to slip into the thrashing room at night and to lay down beside Boaz. Recent Biblical records, from the King James Version on, say she lay by his feet, plural, but the ancient Hebrew text say foot, which in Hebrew meant genitals. Our story continues. Later Biblical texts say he covered her with his cloak, which was a symbolic way of saying he would marry her. The early Hebrew text just “he covered her” no symbolism here - you decide.

Boaz was an honorable man and knew there could be a hitch in their plan. He knew there was a closer relative than him to the family. In keeping with tribal and Hebrew law, he had to give this relative the opportunity to fulfill the obligation. He also knew he would pass through the main gate of the city in the morning and that the tribal elders would be at the gate also. When

the relative arrived at the gate, he was asked if he wanted to purchase Elimelech's land. Initially, he was very excited to do so but when Boaz told him he would have to marry Ruth, he recanted. He knew that if she had a son, he would have to give the land back to the son, and he was afraid this arrangement could also cause him to compromise his own inheritance. In the presence of the elders he performed "halitzah," which literally meant "taking off the shoe" instead of performing a Levirate of the Marriage. He gave the shoe to Boaz so he could fulfill the obligation.

Boaz and Ruth were married, and she had a son called Obed, who had a son called Jesse, who fathered David, who fathered Solomon. Spanning a period of about 1200 years.

There were two brazen pillars that stood on the outer porch of King Solomon's temple Jachin and Boaz. Some biblical scholars say that the name "Boaz" was given by what it meant in Hebrew, not for its family association, I think it could be both. Boaz in Hebrew has several meanings including "blood" or slaughter. The most common usage was "strength" or "in strength." Jachin in the old testament appears twice as names of minor priests, one at the time of Moses, and the other being present at the building of the temple.

In reality, the name is a contraction in Hebrew, the letters J and Y are used interchangeably. Phonetically dividing the name "Ja" or "Ya" is a contraction often used for Yewah or Jehovah, both meaning God. "Kin" in Hebrew means to establish or establishment. Hebrew is read going right to left. Thus, the two pillars literally meaning "God Establishes in Strength."

When the first temple was destroyed, both pillar were broken up by the Chaldeans. At the building of the second temple, they were not replaced.

The personage of Ruth and Boaz would, 31 generations later, be rewarded by birth of Jesus.

The Pillar Boaz named for its Hebrew meaning of "in strength," or for the man or both? Another good, unanswered question.