

The Book of Ruth – Chapter 1

Love's resolve...

Introduction to the Book of Ruth

Ruth is one of the most dramatic prophetic books in the Bible, introducing us to the 'kinsman-redeemer', the nation Israel and the Church. At a literary level it is the ultimate love story; at the prophetic and personal level, Ruth is a very significant book, both for Israel and for the Church. In Jewish liturgy, the scroll of Ruth is read on *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost.

The story begins "in the days when the Judges ruled" (v 1), a period of anarchy and oppression when Israel was not ruled by kings, but by deliverers whom God raised up when the nation sought him. Notable among the Judges were Gideon, Samson, and Deborah, who were raised up to lead Israel through a particular crisis. These were dark days for Israel, characterized by the phrase: "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (e.g. Judges 17 v 6). Because of this book, the House of David is linked to **Bethlehem** (Micah 5 v 2).

The famine

God specifically promised there would always be plenty in the land if Israel was obedient. Therefore, a famine in the land meant that Israel as a nation was not obedient to the Lord (e.g. Deuteronomy 11 v 13 to 17). Famines took place during the lifetimes of Abraham (Genesis 12 v 10), David (2 Samuel 21 v 1) and Elijah (1 Kings 17 v 1); the famine in this story may have been associated with the period of Gideon, when the Midianites oppressed Israel for seven years, including destruction of the produce of the land, which caused famine (see Judges 6 v 1 to 6).

This particular famine extended over the whole land of Israel; otherwise, Elimelech and his family could have simply stayed in another part of Israel. But the drought did not affect **Moab**, which is close to Israel, separated only by the Dead Sea. So this famine was confined to Israel, which points to this being a divine judgment... See Map, after main text.

Moab

'Moab' was a son of Lot, from the incestuous relations of Lot with one of his daughters (Genesis 19 v 36, 37). The Moabites hired Balaam to curse Israel during their pilgrimage to Canaan (Numbers 22 v 4 to 6). Moabites were barred from participation in the corporate life of Israel. However, there were friendly relations between some individual Israelites and Moabites: when fleeing the wrath of Saul, David found a friend in the king of Moab (1 Samuel 22 v 3, 4).

Names and marriages

Elimelech: 'God is my king'; Naomi: 'pleasant'; Mahlon: from the Hebrew root word 'to be sickly, unhealthy'; Chilion: 'wasting' or 'pining'. Mahlon married Ruth (Ruth 4 v 10), and Chilion married Orpah, even though Jews were forbidden to marry Gentile women, especially from Ammon and Moab (Deuteronomy 23 v 3 to 6).

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Naomi widowed (Ruth 1 v 1 to 5)

“Went to sojourn” (v 1) means to leave with the intention of returning. But verses 2 to 5 tell us that Elimelech’s intended short visit turned into ten tragic years – and Elimelech never returned to Israel.

When Elimelech left Bethlehem, he lost all of his property; part of the story in the Book of Ruth will deal with ‘redeeming the land’.

Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi (Ruth 1 v 6 to 18)

From distant Moab, Naomi heard that God was doing good things back in Israel, and she wanted to be a part of it...

- How does Naomi describe marriage in v 9?
- What does this tell us about God’s ideal for marriage?
- Put yourself in Ruth’s place, and consider the cost of her decision to follow Naomi into the land of Israel. Orpah too had been a good daughter-in-law (v 8), but what differences were there between her attitude and Ruth’s?
- What lessons can Ruth teach us about following Jesus (Luke 9 v 23, 57 to 62)?

Note Ruth’s sevenfold statement of faith:

1. “For where you go I will go;
2. and where you lodge I will lodge;
3. your people shall be my people;
4. and your God my God;
5. where you die I will die;
6. and there will I be buried;
7. may the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you” (v 16, 17).

Ruth invoked the name of ‘Jehovah’ God in her promise, rather than the name of the national Moabite god Chemosh (Numbers 21 v 29).

Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem (Ruth 1 v 19 to 22)

- Naomi means ‘pleasant’, but Mara means ‘bitter’ – how does Naomi’s proposed ‘name change’ (v 20, 21) and speech show her realism and honesty, and yet her recognition of God’s hand in her calamities?
- Do you think she felt guilty – if so, why?
- Do you think she was embittered against God?

Naomi returned to Bethlehem repentant and honest. She felt that God (“the Almighty”) had afflicted her. But in the coming chapters, it will become clear that the Almighty will bless her, if only she could see it!

It had been so easy for Naomi to focus on what she had lost – her husband, two sons, a daughter-in-law, and all her material possessions. All she had left was one daughter-in-law, Ruth. But through Ruth, God was going to bring unbelievable blessings into Naomi’s life...