



Ruth - Chapter One

Summary of Chapter One

During the time when the Judges ruled Israel there was a famine and Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their two sons migrated east across the Jordan to the land of Moab where there was food. Whilst there, Elimelech died and his two sons married local women but some time later the two sons died as well leaving Naomi without any men folk in her family.

Naomi and her daughters in law commenced the journey back towards Judah but Naomi realised the two women would have more of a future in their own country and gave them permission to return. One did but Ruth would not leave Naomi, saying that she wanted to stay with her until death. Naomi relented and the two women returned to Bethlehem.

I. Ruth 1:1-5 - Elimelech's Family Goes to Moab

This brief introduction presents Naomi's loss of her family. The similar phrases 'a certain man', 'his wife and his two sons' (v.1) and 'the woman', 'two sons or her husband' (v.5) frame the introduction.

¹ In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons.

Ruth 1:1

In the days when the judges ruled. This period of spiritual, social, and political unrest (Judges 2:6-3:6) engendered the desire for a king who could give rest, like that finally achieved by David: *<<And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest*

from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house>> (2 Samuel 7:11), and: <<But now the Lord my God has given me rest on every side; there is neither adversary nor misfortune>> (1 Kings 5:4).

The days when the judges ruled were actually dark days for Israel; the period was characterised by the repeated phrase: <<*all the people did what was right in his own eyes*>> (Judges 17:6 and 21:25).

A famine was sometimes a divine scourge: <<*I will heap disasters upon them, spend my arrows against them: wasting hunger, burning consumption, bitter pestilence. The teeth of beasts I will send against them, with venom of things crawling in the dust*>> (Deuteronomy 32:24); as confirmed by the promising of blessing in reverse scriptures: <<*If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit*>> (Leviticus 26:3-4) and: <<*If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today – loving the Lord your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul – then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil*>> (Deuteronomy 11:13-14), but it could also advance God’s purposes, as it did for the sons of Israel in Joseph’s time: <<*And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt*>> (Genesis 45:5-8), and: <<*When he summoned famine against the land, and broke every staff of bread, he had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave*>> (Psalm 105:16-17).

Bethlehem is literally ‘house of bread or food’, and is often associated with David in the OT, for example: <<*If your father misses me at all, then say, “David earnestly asked leave of me to run to Bethlehem his city; for there is a yearly sacrifice there for all the family”*>> (1 Samuel 20:6), and with Jesus’ birth in the NT: <<*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem*>> (Matthew 2:1), <<*Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judæa, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David*>> (Luke 2:4), and: <<*Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?*>> (John 7:42). Because of Bethlehem’s location in a fertile region, Rehoboam turned it into a fortress city, as recorded in 2 Chronicles 11:5-12.

To sojourn, Hebrew *gur*, is to be a resident alien, a situation that has rights in God's sight in times of peace: <<*You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge*>> (Deuteronomy 24:17), as in times of famine: <<*Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land*>> (Genesis 12:10), and: <<*Now Elisha had said to the woman whose son he had restored to life, 'Get up and go with your household, and settle wherever you can; for the Lord has called for a famine, and it will come on the land for seven years'*>> (2 Kings 8:1), or during times of war: <<*Now the people of Beeroth had fled to Gittaim and are there as resident aliens to this day*>> (2 Samuel 4:3).

Moab was a pagan country across the Dead Sea from Judah, and one of Israel's traditional enemies; refer to Numbers 22:1-25:9.

² The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.

Ruth 1:2-3

This verse lists the clan (Ephrathites), city (Bethlehem), and tribal territory (Judah) of the family of David; refer to the comment made on 4:11, and is confirmed by: <<*Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons. In the days of Saul the man was already old and advanced in years*>> (1 Samuel 17:12), and the family of the coming Messiah: <<*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days*>> (Micah 5:2).

Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died. When Elimelech and his family came to Moab, they did not find life easier. Elimelech soon died, and his wife Naomi was left to care for their two boys, Mahlon and Chilion. It is hard to say that this was the direct hand of God's judgement against them. It is sometimes difficult to discern why tragic things happen. What is certain is that the change of scenery did not make things better.

According to the medieval French commentator Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki (Rashi), Elimelech was very wealthy and did not want every impoverished person to knock at his door for help as was required by God's law. For this he was punished.

Naomi is mentioned here in conjunction with Elimelech's death because the death of a man is felt by no one as keenly and as deeply as by his wife (Sanhedrin 22b).

⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years,
⁵ both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband.

Ruth 1:4-5

Moabite wives. Ruth's husband was Mahlon (4:10). There was no formal prohibition against marrying Moabites, as confirmed by Canaanites in Deuteronomy 7:1-4. However, marriage to Moabites was discouraged because of their commitment to other gods such as Molech, the Balaam debacle, Israel's debauchery with Moabite women in the wilderness, and the ten generation Moabite male exclusion from the assembly of the Lord; refer to Numbers Chapters 22-25, Deuteronomy 23:3-7, Ezra 9:2, 9:12, and 10:44, and Nehemiah 13:25. There is a progression in the words 'sojourn' (v.1), 'remained' (v.2), and lived there, or settled down there (v.4).

Ten years, and no children, recalls the barren Sarah, who after 10 years gave Abraham her servant to have a son: <<*So, after Abram had lived for ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife*>> (Genesis 16:3); refer also to the comments made on Ruth 4:11, 4:13 and 4:18-22.

Left without her two sons or her husband. She was the last remaining person in her family, refer also to 2 Samuel 14:7; Elimelech had no immediate living brothers who might then marry his wife, refer to the comments made on Ruth 2:20 and 3:12-13. A childless widow was in a precarious position, lacking long-term financial support. Thus she needed community help, as described in Genesis 38:6-11, Deuteronomy 25:5-10, 1 Kings 17:17-20, Luke 7:11-17, and 1 Timothy 5:4-5.

II. Ruth 1:6-22 - Naomi and Her Moabite Daughters-in-Law

This first scene relates Ruth's kindness and love in returning with Naomi to Bethlehem. The scene is framed by the expression 'return' and 'came back from the country of Moab' (v.6 and v.22).

⁶ Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had had consideration for his people and given them food.

Ruth 1:6

The key word return, Hebrew *shub*, is also rendered as ‘turn, go, or bring back’, and recurs twelve times in this chapter; refer also to the comment made on 4:15.

The Lord had had consideration for his people. God sent rains to water the crops; now, in the springtime, there was a long-anticipated harvest and food, or bread, Hebrew *lechem*, a play on words with Bethlehem; refer to the comment made on 1:1.

⁷ So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah.

Ruth 1:7

She set out from the place where she had been living. From distant Moab, Naomi heard what God was doing back in Israel. She wanted to be part of the good things that he was doing. She wanted to be back in her own community, with her own people and with her own God!

The recurring kinship expressions daughters-in-law (vv.6-8) and ‘my daughters’ (vv.11-13) underscore Naomi’s attachment to them.

Land of Judah likely denotes the tribal area, as confirmed by 4:7, referring to the entire people Israel as opposed to the Southern Kingdom as it does elsewhere, for example: <<*Moreover, Josiah did away with the mediums, wizards, teraphim, idols, and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, so that he established the words of the law that were written in the book that the priest Hilkiah had found in the house of the Lord*>> (2 Kings 23:24).

⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, ‘Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹ The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.’ Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰ They said to her, ‘No, we will return with you to your people.’

Ruth 1:8-10

Go back each of you to her mother’s house. Naomi understands the crucial role of a mother in preparing a daughter for marriage and motherhood, as confirmed by: <<*I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother, and into the chamber of the one who bore me*>> (Song 8:2), and: <<*Likewise, tell the older women to be reverent in behaviour, not to be slanderers or slaves to*

drink; they are to teach what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers of the household, kind, being submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited>> (Titus 2:3-5); she hopes that both Ruth and Orpah will remarry and have children. Since Ruth's father is still alive (2:11), Naomi thinks that Ruth can return to his house, a normal cultural practice for widows and divorcees, as confirmed by: <<*Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, 'Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up' – for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went to live in her father's house>>* (Genesis 38:11), <<*but if a priest's daughter is widowed or divorced, without offspring, and returns to her father's house, as in her youth, she may eat of her father's food. No lay person shall eat of it>>* (Leviticus 22:13), <<*But his concubine became angry with him, and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there for some four months>>* (Judges 19:2-3).

That Naomi encouraged the young widows to return to their idolatrous families suggests that they had never converted to Judaism; otherwise, how could she have sent them to, in effect, renounce their Jewish faith? Indeed, according to Rabbi Meir, the Second Century AD sage, they had not converted (Ruth Rabbah 1:4). According to Zohar Chadash, they did convert when they married the brothers. Such conversions, however, involved a degree of coercion, since the parents of the brides had arranged the marriages, and the women of that society would not be free to refuse. Therefore, it would be only future fidelity to Judaism that could prove the conversions to have been sincere. Orpah, by leaving Naomi, showed that her conversion had never been valid. Ruth, however, gave the most eloquent proof that she was a Jewess of the highest order in v.16 and in the subsequent account of her faith and faithfulness.

May the Lord deal kindly with you. Naomi's desire is fulfilled when the Lord provides a family through redemption; refer to the comments made on Ruth 2:20 and 3:10.

Find security in the house of her husband. Naomi wishes for them security and stability in raising a family; refer to the comment made on 4:13.

She kissed them, and they wept aloud. This emotion shown is evidence of the real relationship of love between Naomi and her daughters-in-law.

¹¹ But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?

¹² Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³ would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters,

it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.'

Ruth 1:11-13

Sons in my womb; your husbands. Naomi's question assumes that the widows should marry their dead husbands' brothers, i.e. levirate marriage as described in Deuteronomy 25:5-10; but they would have to wait for such brothers to be born, and she is considered too old to conceive.

It has been far more bitter because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.

This obviously weighed heavily on Naomi's heart and mind. Naomi is interpreting her hard circumstances as coming from God's enmity towards her family. Perhaps she believed they had been disobedient to and untrusting towards God in not staying in Judah during the famine; as the rest of the book will make plain, she is mistaken. Refer also to the comment made on vv.20-21.

¹⁴ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

Ruth 1:14

Orpah kissed Naomi farewell, even though she had promised to return with her (v.10). This lady is now lost to history. However, Ruth clung, Hebrew *dabaq*, to Naomi, an expression of loyalty and devotion, as indicated by God's purposes for marriage recorded in Genesis 2:24.

¹⁵ So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.'

Ruth 1:15

Returning to her people meant returning to her gods, since gods and territory went together: <<*The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, worshipping the Baals and the Astartes, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. Thus they abandoned the Lord, and did not worship him*>> (Judges 10:6). Chemosh was the main god of Moab as indicated in several scriptures. Refer also to the comment made on v.4.

¹⁶ But Ruth said,

 'Do not press me to leave you
 or to turn back from following you!
 Where you go, I will go;

where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

Ruth 1:16

Ruth's decision had far-reaching spiritual implications as later indicated by Jesus: <<Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first>> (Mark 10:29-31). Her confession of faith, your people shall be my people, and your God my God, recalls the central covenant promise: 'I will be your God and you shall be my people', a repetitive promise found in Genesis 17:7-8, Exodus 6:7, Deuteronomy 29:13, Jeremiah 24:7 and 31:33, Hosea 2:23, Zechariah 8:8, 2 Corinthians 6:16 and Revelation 21:7.

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die –
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Ruth 1:17-18

May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well. Ruth binds herself by an oath that invites punishment if she is unfaithful. She swears this oath in the name of Yahweh, thereby owning him as her God. A similar statement is also used elsewhere; for example in 1 Samuel 3:17 and 1 Kings 2:23.

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. From this verse the Talmud (Yevamos 47b) deduces that a convert is neither too overly persuaded to nor overly dissuaded from accepting Judaism.

¹⁹ So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, 'Is this Naomi?'

Ruth 1:19

The two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. It was a long walk from Moab to Bethlehem, and the trip was mostly uphill. It can be imagined that, along the way, Ruth asked her mother-in-law Naomi all about the God, the people, and about the land of Israel.

The whole town was stirred perhaps with excitement, a term translated 'resounded' in: <<*When the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded*>> (1 Samuel 4:5), because of Ruth, but probably in agitation, as indicated by: <<*you that are full of shoutings, tumultuous city, exultant town? Your slain are not slain by the sword, nor are they dead in battle*>> (Isaiah 22:2), where it is translated as 'tumultuous', because of Naomi's arrival without her husband and sons, indicated by their question: Is this Naomi?

²⁰ She said to them,

 'Call me no longer Naomi,
 call me Mara,
 for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.

²¹ I went away full,

 but the Lord has brought me back empty;
 why call me Naomi
 when the Lord has dealt harshly with me,
 and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?'

Ruth 1:20-21

Naomi, Mara. These two names mean 'pleasant' and 'bitter' respectively, as confirmed by v.13.

The Almighty has brought calamity upon me, a sentiment shared by Job: <<*As God lives, who has taken away my right, and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter*>> (Job 27:2). Naomi describes her family situation before her return: I went away full, and after her return: the Lord has brought me back empty. She was part of a wealthy family with all the trappings that offers when she left Bethlehem and she returned a widow, without sons and only what remained of the family estate that she would probably have to sell in order to support herself. Life's trials make it seem that way for many people.

The Lord has dealt harshly with me. He has brought calamity upon her, i.e. destitution, childlessness, widowhood. She sees her suffering as God's testimony,

i.e. as proof that God condemns her for some sin of which she is unaware; refer to the comment made on vv.11-13). However, her troubles will provide the means to God's bounty, as Ruth stays with her and gleans in Boaz' field.

²² So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Ruth 1:22

Ruth the Moabite. Her origins are mentioned several times. The author emphasises how God's kindness (v.8) extends beyond, but through, the Israelites (2:20), and how it abounds to them through a foreigner.

The barley harvest indicates the time of year was April or May, a few weeks before the wheat harvest would begin. Harvesting plays an important part as the story progresses.

They came to Bethlehem. It would have been easy for Naomi to focus on what she had lost. She had lost a husband, two sons, and one daughter-in-law. She had lost all kinds of material possessions. All she had left was one daughter-in-law, Ruth. But through that one thing she had left, God was going to bring unbelievable blessing into her life. All the good that happens in the future chapters begins here with Naomi's godly repentance and honesty. It will make a difference not only in her life, but in the life of her daughter-in-law Ruth and in the destiny of the nation Israel, and ultimately in the eternal salvation of so many people throughout history.