

## Ruth Introduction

We find the sweet little story of Ruth and her husband Boaz in the midst of the Old Testament histories between Judges and the books of Samuel. Anyone who has ever read through the book of Judges with its horrendously violent stories like the killing of Sisera by driving a tent peg through his temple and then the people's celebration of that grizzly killing in song is ready by the time s/he reaches the end of the book for the blessed peace we find in the story of Ruth and Boaz.

So it is with our little group. After the heavy theological sledding we've pushed through over the last few months, I for one am ready for a brief interlude that doesn't present much of an intellectual challenge, and offers instead a peaceful and hopeful sanctuary in which we can pause a while.

I don't mean to imply that Ruth doesn't offer a rich Biblical learning opportunity for all of us. Quite the contrary. There is much we can glean (nyuk, nyuk, nyuk) from this short story. As with all of God's Word, the story of Ruth is woven deeply into the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and therefore worthy of our close attention.

## Ruth 1

Let's start by reading Ruth 1 together.

## Historical and Geographical Context

*In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.* Ruth 1:1 [ESV]

There is no reference in the book of Judges to the famine mentioned here. Therefore, we have no direct time reference for the story of Ruth tying the story to the rule of any specific judge of Israel. The Judges ruled in Israel for roughly 400 years between about 1400 and 1000BC. Thus the story of Ruth could have taken place anytime during that period. However, we do know that Ruth and her husband Boaz were the great-grandparents of King David whose rule began in 1010BC. Therefore, Ruth's story must have taken place fairly late in the period of the Judges, probably somewhere around 1100BC.

The nation of Moab occupied the land east of the Dead Sea south of the River Arnon and north of Edom in the area of modern day west central Jordan. The Moabites were descended from the son of Lot's eldest daughter. Recall that Moab and his half-brother Ben-ammi were the offspring of incestuous sexual relationships between Lot and his daughters following the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:30-38). Recall also that near the end of the forty-year wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites passed through the land of Moab and some of them fell into idolatrous worship of Baal of Peor while engaging in illicit sexual relations with the daughters of Moab (Numbers 25:1-5).

## Names

Biblical names often have significant, frequently poignant meanings relevant to the context of the stories in which we find them. When studying a Bible passage – particularly in the Old Testament – we may often glean better insight into the passage under consideration by looking into the meanings of the names in their original language. This is true not only of people, but of place names as well. There is also the additional benefit of giving us a mnemonic aid to learning the alphabet and some of the common words of the original languages. For example, from Bethlehem (בֵּית לֶחֶם *bêt lehem* meaning house of bread) we can glean two fundamental Hebrew words - *בַּיִת bayit* meaning house or home and *לֶחֶם*

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**lehem** meaning bread. The significance of name meanings is particularly evident here at the beginning of Ruth.

***<sup>2</sup>The name of the man was Elimelech [אֵלִימֶלֶךְ 'ēlîmelek - my God is king] and the name of his wife Naomi [נָעֳמִי nā'ōmî - my delight], and the names of his two sons were Mahlon [מַחֲלוֹן maḥlôn - sick] and Chilion. [כִּלְיוֹן kilyôn - pining] They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem [בֵּית לֶחֶם bêṯ leḥem - house of bread] in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there <sup>3</sup>But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup>These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah [אֶרְפָּה 'ārpâ - gazelle] and the name of the other Ruth [רוּת rūṯ - friendship]. They lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup>and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Ruth 1:2 [ESV]***

Elimelech and Naomi are called Ephrathites here in Ruth 1:2. This can have two meanings. On the one hand, the word may refer to descendants of Ephraim – the firstborn son of Joseph. In this case though, it probably means simply that they were residents of the town of Bethlehem which is also called Ephrath. Jacob's wife Rachel – died giving birth to Jacob's youngest son Benjamin and was buried on the journey from Beth El to Ephrath (Genesis 35:16-20).

As we can see, the names of these people are intriguing in their relation to the story of Ruth and Boaz, but perhaps most interesting here in this passage is the name **בֵּית לֶחֶם bêṯ leḥem – house of bread**. As we saw in Ruth 1:1, Bethlehem lies within the allocation of the tribe of Judah some 5 miles south of Jerusalem. Bethlehem is also the birthplace and ancestral home of King David – Ruth's great-grandson. This is significant because although Mary the mother of Jesus and her husband Joseph were residents of Nazareth in Galilee, the census decreed by Caesar Augustus that Luke speaks of in Luke 2:1 caused them to need to travel to Bethlehem while Mary was nearing the end of her pregnancy carrying the LORD Jesus. Thus, our LORD – the Lion of Judah – who proclaimed on the day after the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand that He is the Bread of Life (John 6:35) was born in **בֵּית לֶחֶם bêṯ leḥem – house of bread!**

There's also an important life application lesson for prospective parents to be gleaned from the names of the people here in this passage. One couldn't do much better than to name a little girl Naomi or Ruth, but when naming baby boys we might want to stay away from Mahlon and Chilion. This probably also explains why Naomi and Ruth remain popular girls' names, while Mahlon and Chilion aren't so common for little boys.

But I digress...

### Naomi and Ruth Return to Bethlehem

***<sup>6</sup>Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. <sup>7</sup>So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. <sup>8</sup>But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup>The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. Ruth 1:6-9 [ESV]***

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It is tempting to simply skim over Ruth 1:6, but it is quite significant. Everything that happens all around us all the time is the working of God's plan of salvation, conceived by Him before the beginning and set into perfect operation in the instant Jesus – the Word of God – said “*Let there be light.*” As Christians confronted at every turn with the evil and chaos of the world around us, we must cling to the blessed hope and assurance Paul spoke of in his letter to the Romans...

*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* Romans 8:28 [ESV]

The famine we read about in Ruth 1:1 was no coincidence. God allowed the famine for a specific purpose that we with the benefit of hindsight can see clearly. God used it to bring Ruth the Moabitess – a Gentile idolater at her birth and in her upbringing – back from Moab to the land of Israel, to the town of Bethlehem in the tribal allocation of Judah to become the progenitor of King David, and through him the earthly parents of our LORD Jesus! All of this was the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy uttered by Jacob (whom God renamed Israel) in his dying blessing to his son Judah...

*The scepter shall not depart from Judah,  
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,  
until tribute comes to him;  
and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.* Genesis 49:10 [ESV]

When we consider this facet of the seemingly throw-away statement found in Ruth 1:6, it should immediately beg some questions in our minds...

1. Given the instances of perfectly fulfilled prophecy we find in God's Word, should we not then trust wholeheartedly that God will also fulfill the prophecies and promises that still remain temporarily unfulfilled?
2. What other seemingly insignificant Bible passages like Ruth 1:6 regarding God's yet-to-be-fulfilled promises might we find if we diligently search for them?

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*<sup>10</sup>And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” <sup>11</sup>But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? <sup>12</sup>Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, <sup>13</sup>would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.”* Ruth 1:10-13 [ESV]

What in the world is Naomi talking about here? She is referring to the portion of the Law of Moses concerning perpetuation of a widow's husband's family name.

*<sup>5</sup>“If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform*

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*the duty of a husband's brother to her. <sup>6</sup>And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.* Deuteronomy 25:5-6 [ESV]

We'll take up this subject and the next few verses of this part of the Law when we consider Boaz in his role as Ruth's kinsman redeemer. For now though, there are a few things that intrigue me about Naomi's admonition to her daughters-in-law. First of all, it seems that the law isn't really applicable since the dead men Mahlon and Chilion had no other brothers with whom they had "dwelt together." Secondly, it is questionable whether the law even applied to Orpah and Ruth since they were both Gentiles not subject to the law.

Strictly speaking, Mahlon and Chilion had not violated the Law by marrying Orpah and Ruth. Although God strictly forbid the Israelites from intermarrying with any of the peoples of the Land of Promise whom they conquered, there was no such explicit condemnation of intermarriage with other Gentiles like those of Moab nor indeed the Gentiles of Egypt from which Joseph took a wife who became the mother of the progenitors of two tribes of Israel – Ephraim and Manasseh. Thus we must assume that in agreeing to marry Naomi's sons, the two Moabite women had at least tacitly agreed to forsake their heathen gods like Baal of Peor, and to make themselves subject to the lordship of the One True and Living God of the Israelites whom they had married. Furthermore, as the God-ordained leaders of their households, Mahlon and Chilion had taken on the duty to teach their Moabite wives about the Law of Moses. Since we see no indication here that Orpah and Ruth didn't understand what Naomi was saying to them, it's probably safe to assume that Mahlon and Chilion had faithfully discharged their duties to train their wives in the matters of the Law.

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*<sup>14</sup>Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.*

*<sup>15</sup>And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." <sup>16</sup>But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. <sup>17</sup>Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." <sup>18</sup>And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.* Ruth 1:14-18 [ESV]

How tragic and heartbreaking these verses are for Orpah, and how wonderful for Ruth. As Naomi said in verse 15, Orpah returned not only to her people but also to her gods. Thus, she incurred the judgement and wrath of Almighty God which is the lot of all unrepentant idolaters.

*<sup>2</sup>"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*

*<sup>3</sup>"You shall have no other gods before me.*

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*4“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. Exodus 20:2-6 [ESV]*

**ASIDE** – This statement in the first of the ten commandments that our God is a jealous God and utterly intolerant of any false so-called gods before Him is what Oprah Winfrey says turned her away from following God. May she yet come to see the error of her choice and humbly return to Him while she yet can. May Oprah’s eternal state never be the same as Orpah’s!

But tragic as Orpah’s choice was, Ruth chose the better path, and indeed the path that as we have seen God Himself had ordained for her in His magnificent sovereignty.

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*19So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?” 20She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; [נְעֻמִי נָ nā’ōmî - my delight] call me Mara, [מָרָא mārā' - bitterness] for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” Ruth 1:19-21 [ESV]*

Here we see an emphasis upon the meaning of the Hebrew names within the text itself. Naomi’s beautiful name is derived from a root word that means “pleasant” while the new name she claims is derived from a root word associated with bitter taste and pain. No doubt, the town was stirred because they witnessed the change in Naomi’s character wrought by the pain of the loss of her husband and sons – a change so profound that the women of the town who could still remember her as she had been when she departed with her husband for Moab even questioned whether she was actually the same woman they had known. Like the townspeople, we can certainly empathize with her plight and fully understand the bitterness it had worked in her heart. Yet with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that everything Naomi had suffered was part of God’s plan in bringing salvation and redemption to the entire world by the birth, sacrificial death, and resurrection of our LORD Jesus. We yearn to be able to go back to the time of Naomi’s return from Moab to offer her reassurance and encouragement about God’s goodness and trustworthiness.

Yet when we find ourselves in the midst of such circumstances, we still react for the most part in exactly the same manner Naomi did. Trapped in the sequence of events as we are, human beings are incapable of foreseeing with any certainty the final outcomes. At the very best, we can only guess at the probabilities of what few possible results we can imagine. When none of these potential consequences seems at all desirable, we are tempted to despair, and even blame God as Naomi did. This in turn can rob us of the joy brought by the certain knowledge of our salvation in Christ.

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This is of course the very reason that God has placed the story of Ruth in His Word. As she journeyed back from Moab to Bethlehem Naomi hadn't the slightest inkling of the joy that God would soon bring back into her life with the birth of her grandson Obed. Nor could she imagine the overwhelming joy that God would bring to the entire world with the birth of Jesus through Obed's own offspring more than a thousand years later. As the crucified LORD lay dead in the tomb, His disciples hid in sorrow and despair thinking they had seen the end of His power and ministry. They hadn't a clue about the overwhelming joy they would experience within just a few days when our risen LORD appeared among them. But **we** can see and experience these joys because we have the story of God's plan laid out for us in His Word!

Even today, we who remain of His faithful followers, are tempted to the same sort of despair and bitterness into which Naomi fell as we witness the continual apparent triumph of evil over good in the fallen world upon which we find ourselves temporarily stranded. Yet through it all, God has remained steadfast and true in the fulfillment of the plan He set into operation when He first said "**Let there be light.**" We who remain must look to the promises He has already fulfilled with the certain knowledge that He can be trusted to fulfill His remaining promises and let this certainty about God's character fill us with joy that He has called us to be His children and partakers in those very promises.

***3Trust in the LORD, and do good;  
dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.***  
***4Delight yourself in the LORD,  
and he will give you the desires of your heart.***  
***5Commit your way to the LORD;  
trust in him, and he will act.***  
***6He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,  
and your justice as the noonday.***  
***7Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;  
fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way,  
over the man who carries out evil devices!***  
***8Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath!  
Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.***  
***9For the evildoers shall be cut off,  
but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.***  
***10In just a little while, the wicked will be no more;  
though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there.***  
***11But the meek shall inherit the land  
and delight themselves in abundant peace.*** Psalm 37:3-11 [ESV]

### Coming Up

God willing, next time we will continue our detailed study of the sweet story of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. In chapter 2 we will see a glimmer of hope come into Naomi's heart as God continues to work out His plan of redemption and salvation for the entire world through her family.