

Background

The book of Ruth is a sweet reprieve after the dark days of the last chapters of Judges. Here we read not only a beautiful love story, but we see a glory-tinged shadow of Jesus Christ. This book will both challenge and encourage you. Before digging in to the verse-by-verse study, some of the basic background of Ruth is set forth in the notes below.

Unique qualities

- This is the only Old Testament book named for a Gentile and the first chronologically to bear the name of a woman. Keep in mind, Ruth is not the primary character here, Naomi is.
- At its essence, this is a story of love, marriage, and child-bearing told from a female perspective.
- The people in this narrative have their faith in God integrated deeply into their life. He is mentioned frequently in their conversations and informs their perspective/worldview. However, they are imperfect and struggle with Him at times (e.g. Naomi) and have imperfect theology (e.g. believing Him to be a regional god of sorts and giving legitimacy to other gods).

Timing

The events of Ruth occurred during the time of the Judges, but the specific timing is unknown.

- Bethlehem is a spiritual oasis in the midst of morally-compromised land.
- In the midst of the chaos that is Judges, this good and beautiful thing happens. This is hope for us. **Our culture does not override the power or purposes of Christ!**

Occasion of writing

It was likely written during the days of David, Solomon or one of their heirs (some believe Josiah).

- The purpose was likely to solidify the God-ordained reign of David and silence any resistance due to his Moabite heritage (*Ruth 4:18-22*)
- Why would God inspire such a book? **This established the lineage of Jesus Christ is a preview of the grafting in of the Gentiles on principles of righteousness.**

Author

The Jewish Talmud attributes the authorship to Samuel, which is not likely. Some have suggested Solomon or even David's daughter Tamar. Ultimately, we don't know.

Canonicity

This book was recognized as being divinely inspired from the beginning. Ruth has been found with the oldest complete Old Testament collections (i.e. Dead Sea Scrolls).

Themes of Ruth

- God's providential care (of individuals and of a nation)
- *Hesed* (a Hebrew word translated as kindness) – an expression of all of God's positive attributes.
- The Kinsman-Redeemer concept
- Courtship, love, and virtue

Challenges we will face:

- Familiarity can be bad for us. We have to pray to see this afresh.
- Cultural obstacles
- Ruth is a narrative that tells us what happened without often pronouncing explicit judgments about whether things were good or bad. We will have to use the balance of Scripture to interpret the events.

Ruth 1:1-2 – Fleeing the Famine

A famine in Israel motivated the initial move of Elimelech and his family to Moab. Why was there a famine in Israel? See *Deuteronomy 28:9-11, 15-19*. **The famine was a result of sin in the land. It was a judgment of God promised for Israel's failure to live up to the conditions of their covenant.**

Names are significant in this book, as they provide insight into our characters.

- Elimelech – God is King
- Naomi – Pleasant
- Mahlon – to be sick or ill
- Chilion – frailty, mortality

Moab originated from a drunken, incestuous encounter between Lot and one of his daughters after the destruction of Sodom (*Genesis 19:36*). Because Lot was a nephew of Abraham, the Moabites were distant relatives of the Israelites, but they were not on the same page spiritually.

- *Numbers 22:1-25:9* – The Moabites opposed Israel in their journey to the Promised Land. Their king at the time (Balak) hired Balaam to curse Israel, but God intervened. Their women also proved to be a spiritually (and sometimes physically) fatal attraction for Israelite men.
- *Deuteronomy 7:1-4* – The Moabites were not named among the Canaanite tribes which the Israelites should not intermarry but were idolatrous (worshipping Chemosh) and therefore should be understood as being off limits for intermarriage.
- *Deuteronomy 23:3-6* – There was a 10-generation (perhaps eternal) curse forbidding Moabites from coming into the tabernacle/temple premises because they opposed Israel's entrance into the Promised Land. **The Israelites were forbidden from seeking their peace or prosperity.**
- *Ezra 9:1-2, 14* – Intermarriage with Moabites was later explicitly discouraged because of idolatry and the Jews losing their cultural identity (discontinuing use of Hebrew language).

Because Ruth is a narrative text, it simply tells us what happened without often introducing editorial comments interpreting the actions of the individuals. We must use the balance of scriptures to interpret the events. Based on God's Word, was Elimelech's move consistent with God's revealed will? See *Deuteronomy 30:1-3, 8-10*. **When Israel was under discipline, God's command was "repent", not "flee."** Elimelech's decision to leave Israel was an attempt to flee from God's chastisement upon the nation. He did not seek to be part of the solution but rather to pursue his own interests elsewhere. The move to Moab to pursue a living violated *Deuteronomy 23:3-6* and placed his sons in jeopardy of violating the spirit of *Deuteronomy 7:1-4*. The move clearly appears to be contrary to God's will. The resulting circumstances will certainly be interpreted as judgment from God by Naomi.

Elimelech and his family initially came to "sojourn" (briefly stay) in Moab (verse 1) but we see that they "remained there" (settled down). **This decision was very typical for Judges-era Israelites. They developed a man-made solution to a man-made problem (the famine) rather than seeking God's answers.** The irony of Elimelech's name is that he did not act as if God was king. Elimelech's man-made decision would come at great personal cost to him and his family.

Ruth 1:3-5 – A Cycle of Loss

Based on the text, it appears Elimelech's death occurred early in their long sojourn in Moab. After the loss of her husband, Naomi was "left with" her two sons. The Hebrew word (*sha'ar*) behind this phrase is elsewhere used in Scripture to describe a bereaved remnant, a survivor of God's wrath. Again the text is silent in providing an explicit judgment but the circumstances speak for themselves.

What happened to the body of Elimelech and what does this mean? See *Amos 7:17* and *Genesis 50:5-6, 24-25*. He must have been buried in Moab. He was a Jew who died in an unclean land and his body would remain there. This was a cursed circumstance for any serious Jew. This is another indication that his family was under discipline for their departure.

Rather than returning, Ruth's sons each "took" Moabites wives. "Took" is not the typical verb used to describe marriage in Israel and potentially carries a negative connotation (i.e. the Benjamites "took" wives from the daughters of Shiloh in *Judges 21*). Although this passage does not identify which son took which wife, we learn later that Ruth was the wife of Mahlon (*Ruth 4:10*) and therefore Orpah was the wife of Chilion.

The names of the Moabite wives are more difficult to decisively derive, but Orpah likely means "neck" and Ruth may mean "friend" or "refreshment."

Naomi's family continued to live in Moab for about ten years. What did not happen in their family during those ten years and how do we interpret it? There were no children born to either of Naomi's sons. Ten years without children in two separate families was a likely sign of God's judgment upon their homes (*Deuteronomy 28:15-18*).

This passage ends with the death of both Naomi's sons and again she is "left" (*sha'ar*). In a few short verses, over ten years of Naomi's life is described by horrible loss. **After facing hunger and poverty, she departed family and friends for a foreign land, faced death, the barrenness of her sons, and then death again.** In a culture that placed great emphasis on fertility, she would be considered cursed and judged. As we will see Naomi was acutely aware of her suffering.

Ruth 1:6-18 – Love or Leave

In the midst of her tragedy, Naomi hears news from back home that causes her to gather her daughters-in-law and begin a move back to Bethlehem. What is the context of the news Naomi hears? The news is relayed that the LORD had visited His people and given them food. This news was interpreted spiritually. God showed mercy upon Israel and their circumstances had changed.

Given this news, what kind of Bethlehem should we expect Naomi to return to? See *Deuteronomy 30:1-3, 8-10*. It is possible that this move from the Lord was in response to repentance. Therefore we would expect to see a people that are somewhat humbled, grateful, and spiritually minded.

Naomi reacts to the news by gathering her daughters-in-law and beginning a return trip to Bethlehem. We get the impression that this was a return trip that was planned for a long time. They only left Bethlehem because of the famine and intended to “sojourn” in Moab. Naomi had probably looked forward to this trip for years and imagined coming back with more than she left with... showing off the grandbabies to her family and friends. This wasn’t the return of her dreams... barren, judged by God. They left to get more and she returned alone and empty-handed. She probably had a lot of shame but without a husband and sons, she had little choice. She would fare much better in her homeland than in Moab. **Naomi would likely spend the rest of her days depending upon the kindness of the people she and her family left behind in pursuit of prosperity.**

It is only after Naomi begins the return journey that she starts to think about whether it is wise to bring Ruth and Orpah with her. At some point she decides to send her daughters-in-law back to the homes of their parents rather than return to Bethlehem with her. Why? **There were possibly several reasons that crossed her mind. Naomi would be dependent upon community kindness for her survival. Bringing two other women would mean more mouths to feed. Ruth and Orpah were also painful reminders of the sin of her family and all that she had lost. Based upon normal circumstances, there would not have been a bright future for widowed, barren, Moabites in Israel, especially if their family was considered to be judged by God.**

Naomi sends Ruth and Orpah back to Moab with a blessing from the Lord for each of them, praying that He would show them “kindness” (*hesed*) and in return for the kindness they showed to their husbands and to her and “rest” (meaning security) in the home of a future husband. What did a life of widowhood mean for a woman during this time period? **Because women often did not have an independent source of income or the social opportunities of men, remaining unmarried could mean alienation and poverty. This paradigm continued into New Testament times and was an issue for the early church (see Acts 6:1).**

Initially both Ruth and Orpah protested and insisted they would remain with Naomi. Naomi then begins a more impassioned and insistent plea (verses 11-13) urging the women to return to Moab. What is the basis of Naomi’s insistence that they return? How does Naomi see her situation? **The basis of Naomi’s insistence is pragmatic: she cannot provide them a future. Naomi sees herself as a person without personal hope and she definitely has none to offer anyone else. She recognizes (or perhaps blames) God as the source of her current circumstances and believes her situation and life is more bitter than theirs. At least they could go home to Moab and have a future... Naomi sees no future.**

It is after this impassioned plea that we see the first distinction between Ruth and Orpah. Orpah gives her mother-in-law a final embrace and kiss and then sets out for Moab. Ruth would not let go; she would not leave; she remained.

What do we learn about Naomi from her response to Ruth in verse 15? **For Ruth to go “back to” her gods, indicates that for the 10 years she was married into the household of Elimelech, there had been some separation from idolatry and worship of the true God. This is good. However, Naomi is now urging Ruth to leave the Lord and return to idolatry. This gives us insight into Naomi’s spiritual state.**

In response to Naomi's final insistence, Ruth utters one of the most beautiful expressions of love and commitment in the entire Bible. She begins by asking Naomi to stop requesting for Ruth to "leave" (meaning abandon) Naomi. Ruth then expresses a bond of family commitment to Naomi: they will walk together, lodge together, share fellowship together, worship together, and be buried together. At this point in her life, all that Ruth knows about the Lord was likely learned from Naomi and her family. Although clearly divinely inspired, it is hard to say whether Ruth had a personal relationship with the Lord yet. Why would Ruth do this? **Ruth had a family bond with Naomi forged in her marriage to Mahlon. If he were still alive, Mahlon would have an obligation to Naomi. Even with her husband dead and Naomi freeing her from this commitment, Ruth would not go. She would not abandon Naomi, despite the difficult circumstances.**

Recognize the potential personal sacrifice Ruth is making. There is no clear way out of this situation, a means of providing a future and hope for the endurance of their family. Ruth was willing to risk moving to a land where she would be at the very bottom of the social order (both a widow and a Moabite). Yet Ruth is willing to keep her commitment. **This is a beautiful example of biblical love, a picture of Christ.**

Is it appropriate to use the elements of Ruth's vow to Naomi in a wedding service? **It is a bit out of context, in that this vow is made between two female friends, but the elements of the vow are a sentiment of a family relationship, which is being forged in a marriage ceremony.**

There is an important trend to notice in Naomi's thinking that has been consistent since the first verses of this chapter. What is this trend and how is it countered by Ruth, and thus by the Lord? **Elimelech and his family left the covenant community of Israel when things got difficult rather than remaining, repenting, and trusting in God for deliverance. Naomi now employs the same pragmatic approach to try and convince Ruth to leave. Naomi is encouraging Ruth to renounce her family commitment and go seek a better life in the land of idols because things appear to be bleak for her with God's people. Ruth refuses to adopt this worldly perspective and insists that she will remain with Naomi no matter what. We see the Lord using His personal kindness towards Naomi through Ruth to counter her selfish tendencies. Truly the Lord uses His goodness to guide us to repentance!**

What is Naomi's response to this supreme act of love? **She backed off and quit insisting that Ruth return. She also didn't seem to grasp what had just happened. In the midst of her focus on her loss, she couldn't see the beautiful gift that Ruth (and thus the Lord) had given her. It will take a while for her eyes to open, but they will.**

Ruth 1:19-22 – Back in Bethlehem

Upon hearing of Naomi and Ruth's arrival and seeing them, the women of the town exclaimed, "Is this Naomi"? Why? **Naomi's appearance and demeanor had likely changed dramatically over the past 10 years. She left as a middle-aged woman with aspirations and returned as a haggard and hopeless old woman just ten years later. Her appearance was a far cry from their recollection.**

What is Naomi (Mara) spiritually right now? She is bitter, angry with God. She levels four accusations against Him in this short text, referring to Him by His name Jehovah (translated Lord) and as Almighty. Her description of God's actions center around one theme: He has brought His covenantal curses against their family. **She left "full" (by her description) and returned barren and bitter.**

What is missing from Naomi's recounting of events? There is no indication of personal responsibility, repentance, or recognition of the good the Lord has showed her through Ruth's faithfulness. **Her loss consumes her and she can see neither her fault nor God's goodness through the midst of her despair.**

What is going on with Ruth in the midst of this? We hear nothing from her here. She isn't acknowledged by Naomi, who is soaking up all the sympathy of her friends and family. Naomi's failure to acknowledge or appreciate Ruth was inappropriate, but Ruth endures this slight and remains faithful to her vow of friendship. **This is another picture of Christ's love, which routinely endures the pain of our neglect.**

Knowing where this book is headed (a happy ending), how do we use what we are reading here to help someone trapped in bitterness and loss? **You need to run towards God and His people (the covenant community), not away from them.** Although Naomi is in a spiritually dark place, she is heading in the right direction by going back to Bethlehem, even if it is only because God has hemmed her in.