

Ruth 1

The book of Ruth is about exile and return, land and people. The Book of Ruth does not specifically name its author. The tradition is that the Book of Ruth was written by the Prophet Samuel, and was written to the Israelites. It teaches that genuine love at times may require uncompromising sacrifice. Regardless of our lot in life, we can live according to the precepts of God. Genuine love and kindness will be rewarded.

The Book of Ruth is set in the time of the judges as it attempts to define the rights of widows and aliens within a society fallen upon hard times. The scroll of Ruth is read on Shavuot, the time of the giving of the law. Ruth and Shavuot are linked: harvest time, the Giving of the Torah and its acceptance.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is a familiar one of a family down on its luck. The time when Judges ruled is a period in Israel's history depicted as a state of continuous decline, where people did whatever was right in their own eyes because there was no king in Israel.

The Book of Ruth is a women's story, as is Esther. Women's stories are an important part of the Hebrew Oral Tradition. Passed down from generation to generation, they too came to be included in the Hebrew canon. The voice of the storyteller exposes Naomi's pain in the death of her husband and two sons. Ruth's dedication to mother-in-law has

become a universal example, of women from two different cultures bonding together. It is a family story of destitution, poverty, heartbreak and death. It is a story told in the context of a male dominated culture. Two lone women fight for justice as they are about to fall victim to the greed of a close relative.

Reminiscent of Abraham's migration to Canaan, and Joseph's migration to Egypt, a famine has forced Elimelech (my God is king), his wife, Naomi (my delight), and their sons Mahlon (sick) and Chilion (pining), to leave Bethlehem in Judah for Moab. Bethlehem in Hebrew literally means "house of bread," so it is ironic that there is no food there. They remained in Moab, implying that they had settled in for the duration. Then Elimelech died, leaving Naomi "widowed" with her two sons. The Hebrew term for a woman who has lost her husband, *almanah* (widow) does not mean the same in ancient Israel as it does in our Western society. In ancient Israel a woman is classified as a widow if her husband has died and she has no sons to provide her with economic support. By this definition Ruth was not considered widowed.

We are not given the age of the sons, but the narrator does not refer to her as a widow. Therefore, we can infer that they were of the age where they were able to contribute to Naomi's care. We are also told that Mahlon and Chilion wed Moabite women, which further supports the perspective that the sons were older. The narrator states that the two women were named Orpah (gazelle) and Ruth (friendship or delight), although we are not told which son is married to which woman.

The notice that Naomi's sons took Moabite wives must have been troubling for the ancient audience. It was not enough that the Moabites are reproved by the biblical writer for failing to provide the Israelites with food and water as they departed from Egypt. Deuteronomic law forbade intermarriage for fear that such unions would lead Israel to worship foreign gods, although the Moabites were not among the list of nations the Israelites were prohibited from marrying. So who were the Moabites? Moab was the son of drunken Lot (Abraham's nephew) and his daughter who seduced him. Moab, along with his family was written out of Israel's history.

After they had dwelled in Moab ten years, Mahlon and Chilion died childless. Naomi, who had migrated to Moab with her husband and sons from a land that was lacking, is once again left empty with the loss of her husband and sons.

So, Naomi arose and set out with her daughters-in-law to return from Moab to Bethlehem in Judah. She is leaving Moab for Judah because she heard that God had visited God's people there and given them bread, a reversal of what had sent them to Moab. The question is: what will happen to these women? In ancient Israel women without the supervision of an adult male to care for and protect them were left vulnerable to poverty and exploitation.

The suspense is resolved by an intricately-woven-together series of first-

person dialogues. But Naomi appealed to her two daughters-in-law: ‘Go back,’ an appeal for them to return to their mother’s home where they can find security, support, and perhaps new husbands. They replied, “No, we will return with you to your people.” But Naomi insisted, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me?” Ruth and Orpah have two options: be free of their obligations to her as daughters-in-law and return to their natal families or return to Judah with Naomi.

There is a third implausible option: levirate marriage. Naomi asks rhetorically, “Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?” Levirate marriage was a custom where a childless widow could become the wife of her deceased husband’s brother, who would father an heir to carry on his deceased brother’s name. Naomi says as much when she tells them again to “turn back” because there is no chance of this custom being enforced since she is not likely to remarry and bear sons, nor are the women likely to wait until the sons are of age to cohabit with them and produce heirs for their deceased husbands.

Orpah returns to her people and, presumably, her gods. Rabbinic imagination makes Orpah the ancestor of Goliath who will meet Ruth’s descendant David, in a final confrontation of these branches of the family. Naomi encourages Ruth to do the same. Ruth pleads with Naomi not to force her to return, uttering the famous declaration: *Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.* Ruth has chosen not to return to her people and her culture in Moab; instead she will go with Naomi to Judah where she

will remain with Naomi's people and Naomi's God.

Here we see the experience of dislocation, loss of home, being separate from friends and extended family. Naomi moved from Bethlehem - the house of bread – to Moab where she experienced the marriage and deaths of her two sons as well as her husband. So where does this woman belong? She is alone in a foreign country, where she had a home of sorts. But now? Go back to Bethlehem? Naomi's natal home? Who is she now without a husband? Without sons? Without grandchildren? Who is Naomi? What is to become of her?

Many refugees around the world face similar situations and questions – without home, without country, lost, afraid, facing the dark unknown, as they continue to struggle with these same questions and feelings – feelings of great loss, death or loss of spouse, children, parents and siblings as they flee their homes and countries and face their fears and the great unknown.

In order to understand Ruth in this story, the Bible needs to be appreciated as an integrated whole. The unity of Scripture lies in the central theme running through every book from Genesis to Revelation, which may be summarized in God's word to Jeremiah: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." This promise recapitulates God's covenant with Abraham: "I will establish my covenant ... to be God to you and to your descendants" and with Moses: "I will take you for my people, and I will be your God." In Jesus who spoke of "the new covenant in my

blood,” the promise is fully revealed and available to the whole world. It is finally expressed in the vision of “a new heaven and a new earth” in Revelation, where “they shall be his people, and God himself will be drawn to them.”

Subthemes of the covenant – experiences of pilgrimage and promise, bondage and freedom, duty and blessing, famine and plenty, barrenness and fertility – weave their way through both testaments. Individuals and people are inseparable when joined in God’s covenant relationship. In Ruth, the covenant theme pervades the book and is explicitly evoked in Ruth’s words to Naomi: ...”your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

The covenant – this oneness of God with the people and of God’s people with one another – is the backbone of books written over more than a thousand years, in widely varying political and religious circumstances, and in diverse geographical locations. For believers, the Bible’s unity demonstrates not only that scores of human authors were heirs of a common tradition, but that each of them was guided through life and inspired to write by the same God. In this context, the true significance of Ruth can continue to instruct God’s covenant people today.

The Bible is silent as to what it was within Ruth that impelled her loyalty and courage, her desire to “go out to a place which she was to receive an inheritance.” There must have been some experience of call, as with Abraham: just as “he went out, not knowing where he was to go,” Ruth

“left her father and mother and her native land and came to a people that she did not know before.”

We may surmise that Ruth had learned much about the worship of Yahweh and the blessings of the covenant from living with her late husband in Naomi’s household. When Abram and Sarai were reborn as God’s new people, Abraham and Sarah, they could become fruitful and multiply. Similarly, when Ruth entered the covenant she was blessed with goodness, plenty and fertility. Ruth’s not being Jewish when the story opened, attests to the universal impulse shown in the Old Testament; God created Israel to be a light to the nations.

The Book of Ruth suggests less an outward evangelistic thrust than a quiet and loving ingathering, exhibiting at a personal level the later grand vision of Isaiah, that in “the latter days ... many peoples shall come ... that [God] may teach [them] in God’s ways.” Like Abraham long before, Ruth came as a foreigner and became God’s chosen in the land of promise.

Abraham and Ruth shared the experiences of barrenness and of famine. Abram “went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.” The stage was set for the Book of Ruth when “there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab.”

For a decade, Elimelech and Naomi flourished. But then suddenly

barrenness appeared; when Naomi was past menopause, her husband and her two sons died, and God had granted no children to the two Moabite daughters-in-law. Naomi's decision to return to Bethlehem in Judah was marked by desperation; she was as bitter as Job over God's infraction of the covenant.

It was Ruth, the non-Jew, who, insistent on accompanying Naomi, looked forward with hope. Her decision and her vow established her in the covenant, for Ruth's promise was not only to her mother-in-law but also to her new God and to her new people. The spectacle of the two single, childless women crossing the desert calls up the image of Naomi's biological and Ruth's spiritual ancestors: "So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had." The women's journey took an equal amount of courage, or perhaps even more.

Ruth is an everyday tale about everyday people. It's about harvest and drought, emptiness and fullness. It's about loving your neighbour. We learned about loving God and what love means in the ten commandments. But, here in Ruth, God doesn't speak explicitly.

In this little book, we see how love on the ground looks like for Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. Ruth, neither king nor prophet, but only a widow and a foreigner, is the centre of this domestic tale, a story of God's *hesed*, God's loving faithfulness or loving kindness, God's covenant love, lived out in the lives of everyday, ordinary human beings, much like us. What does love look like with ordinary people? Love is not an abstract

concept. It's about how God's love – God's *hesed*, God's lovingkindness – is fulfilled, lived out, enfleshed in the actions of human beings.

Ruth's story presents a deeply moving context in which this *hesed* of God is to operate in this situation of dislocation, loss and grief. In this first chapter is the most famous passage in Ruth: "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."

This is radical thought because it signals that Ruth is changing her identity in a world where that was almost inconceivable. The ancient world had no mechanism for religious conversion or change of citizenship; the very notion was unthinkable. Religion and peoplehood, defined one's ethnic identity, and this could no more be changed than the colour of one's skin. A Moabite was always a Moabite, wherever he or she lived. And Ruth is referred to throughout the story as the "the Moabite." But from Ruth's point of view, she is becoming an Israelite. She is joining herself to Naomi, not only on the private family level, but also in the national peoplehood level.

Arriving home at the beginning of the barley harvest, Naomi announced to the women of Bethlehem, "call me no longer *Naomi* (my delight or pleasantness), call me *Mara* (bitterness) for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me." She wants to be called Mara because God has dealt harshly with her. Naomi's bitterness is not the whole of the story.

Ruth's loyalty, Ruth's love for her mother-in-law holds the promise of something more, as Naomi realized what a treasure she has in her daughter-in-law who loves her. The chapter ends on a positive note - on a note of promise – not bitterness.

The amazing and even unbelievable action Ruth takes, goes far beyond the call of duty – beyond the commandment to honour one's father and mother. By custom – she should have gone back to her own people – to her father's house – to the Moabites. Ruth goes above and beyond the letter of the law to exhibit *hesed* toward Naomi. The law is supposed to serve *hesed* - and we are expected to follow God's words or commands – but to go beyond the basic expectations as Ruth did – is true-hearted *hesed*.

Naomi was empty, but faithful Ruth was right there beside her. All was not doom and gloom. There was a glimmer of hope here for the two women – a promise of fulness – a harvest was coming. God had a plan for them and a reward for Ruth's *hesed*, her lovingkindness toward her mother-in-law Mara, who was once again able to take on the name Naomi.

Ruth lived up to her promise - she did not abandon her mother-in-law. Naomi's people became her people.

And most important - Naomi's God not only became Ruth's God – but

she fully grasped the meaning of this God's command to love God and to live this love or *hesed* by loving one's neighbour - not with empty words, but by taking action, acting with compassion, humility, and outstretched hand that extends all the way from God.

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of heaven and earth, before the foundation of the universe and the beginning of time you are the triune God: Author of creation, eternal Word of salvation, life-giving spirit of wisdom. Guide us to all truth by your Spirit, that we may proclaim all that Christ has revealed and rejoice in the glory he shares with us. Glory and praise to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever. **Amen.**