

*Ruth 1 (CEB)*

During the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. A man with his wife and two sons went from Bethlehem of Judah to dwell in the territory of Moab. <sup>2</sup>The name of that man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the territory of Moab and settled there.

<sup>3</sup>But Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died. Then only she was left, along with her two sons. <sup>4</sup>They took wives for themselves, Moabite women; the name of the first was Orpah and the name of the second was Ruth. And they lived there for about ten years.

<sup>5</sup>But both of the sons, Mahlon and Chilion, also died. Only the woman was left, without her two children and without her husband.

<sup>6</sup>Then she arose along with her daughters-in-law to return from the field of Moab, because while in the territory of Moab she had heard that the LORD had paid attention to his people by providing food for them. <sup>7</sup>She left the place where she had been, and her two daughters-in-law went with her. They went along the road to return to the land of Judah.

<sup>8</sup>Naomi said to her daughters-in-law, "Go, turn back, each of you to the household of your mother. May the LORD deal faithfully with you, just as you have done with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup>May the LORD provide for you so that you may find security, each woman in the household of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.

<sup>10</sup>But they replied to her, "No, instead we will return with you, to your people."

<sup>11</sup>Naomi replied, "Turn back, my daughters. Why would you go with me? Will there again be sons in my womb, that they would be husbands for you? <sup>12</sup>Turn back, my daughters. Go. I am too old for a husband. If I were to say that I have hope, even if I had a husband tonight, and even more, if I were to bear sons—<sup>13</sup>would you wait until they grew up? Would you refrain from having a husband? No, my daughters. This is more bitter for me than for you, since the LORD's will has come out against me."

<sup>14</sup>Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth stayed with her. <sup>15</sup>Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law is returning to her people and to her gods. Turn back after your sister-in-law."

<sup>16</sup>But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. <sup>17</sup>Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you."

<sup>18</sup>When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her about it.

<sup>19</sup>So both of them went along until they arrived at Bethlehem. When they arrived at Bethlehem, the whole town was excited on account of them, and the women of the town asked, "Can this be Naomi?"

<sup>20</sup>She replied to them, "Don't call me Naomi, but call me Mara, for the Almighty has made me very bitter. <sup>21</sup>I went away full, but the LORD has returned me empty. Why would you call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me, and the Almighty has deemed me guilty?"

<sup>22</sup>Thus Naomi returned. And Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, returned with her from the territory of Moab. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

*A Jew and a Gentile become one.*

This series is about tearing down the walls that divide us, for we are all one in Jesus (Galatians 3:28). The story of Naomi and Ruth is a story of overcoming such barriers. Naomi was an Israelite and Ruth was a Moabite. Two people divided by ethnicity, religion, and more. Naomi was a Jew; Ruth, a Gentile. Yet, they became one, mother

and daughter. It is Ruth who takes the all-important first step: “Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you.” Adele Berlin helps us to grasp how big a step this was:

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 color of one’s skin. A Moabite was always a Moabite, wherever he or she lived. And indeed, Ruth is referred to throughout the story as “the Moabitess.” 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 on the national peoplehood level.<sup>1</sup>

### The Time of the Judges

Ruth and Naomi lived more than 3,000 years ago during the period in Israel’s history known as the time of the judges. It was a violent age, as Israel sought to complete its conquest of Canaan, the land promised them by God. The Israelites had no king, for God was to be their king. Instead, the chief administrators were known as judges, and their stories are told in the Old Testament book of Judges. Samson, Gideon, Deborah and others were judges during this time.

The time of the judges was also marked by great faithlessness, as the Israelites descended down a spiral that would lead them further and further from God. The last verse of Judges is a biting indictment of the Israelites: “In those days there was no king of Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

The faithfulness of Ruth and Naomi, to God and to each other, is in stark contrast with the faithlessness of Israel. Perhaps this is partly why the story of their friendship was cherished and passed on.

And Naomi, and later Boaz, accept Ruth into their families and their lives. This is their story.

### *Their story*

Naomi and her husband were living in Israel during the time of the judges (1100-1200BC) when a famine drove them to leave their home and head southeastward to Moab. There they made a new home, where all was well until Naomi’s husband died. Yet even after Elimelech’s death, Naomi was all right. Though a widow, she had two able sons to provide for her and to protect her. Both sons married local women, Orpah<sup>2</sup> and Ruth.

But ten years later, tragedy struck Naomi again. Naomi’s sons died and the three women, now widows, were left alone. In the ancient world, being without a husband or sons was about as big a tragedy as might befall a woman.<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, Naomi decided to head back to Israel, hoping to find family and rebuild her life. Naomi was accompanied by her Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. But, taking pity on them, Naomi urged them to turn around and stay in Moab, among their own families. So Orpah headed home . . . but Ruth did not. Instead, Ruth pledged to follow Naomi, going where Naomi goes, worshiping Naomi’s god as her own. But this was not the end of their story; it was only the beginning.

Upon their arrival in Naomi’s hometown of Bethlehem, these two unlikely friends set about the rebuilding of their lives. Given all she had

<sup>1</sup> Adele Berlin, “Ruth - Big Theme, Little Book,” Biblical Archaeology Society, March 8, 2020

<sup>2</sup> Oprah Winfrey tells the story that she was named after Orpah in the book of Ruth, but that her parents misspelled the name. (Isn’t it amazing the things you learn in these studies.)

<sup>3</sup> In ancient cultures, widowhood was greatly feared. Women simply had to be under the protection of men; a woman’s social standing was derived entirely from her husband’s. One of the remarkable features of ancient Judaism was God’s insistence that his people care for widows and orphans. Even in Jesus’ day, widows didn’t have a much better lot; e.g., we meet Tabitha whose life was devoted to caring for widows (Acts 9:36-43). When Tabitha dies, the widows are devastated and terrified. Who will care for them? God will. Acting through Peter, God restores life to Tabitha.

been through, it is no surprise that Naomi was deeply embittered: “I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty,” she told the women in Bethlehem. Naomi, whose name meant “sweetness,” even wanted to take a new name, Mara, based on the Hebrew word for “bitter.” Naomi needed restoration and renewal – she needed to be redeemed.

Despite Naomi’s despair, Ruth decided to go into the fields, gathering what grain was left by the harvesters, hoping that someone would notice her. Someone did. Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi’s, not only noticed Ruth, he eventually married her. How their union comes about is a touching and somewhat complicated story that consumes much of the book. And it is clear that the union would not have happened without Naomi’s intervention and guidance.

After the marriage, we are told that “when they came together, the LORD made her conceive and she bore a son” (Ruth 4:13). The women of Bethlehem knew that this child, Ruth’s son, would be Naomi’s redeemer, legally bound to look after her in her old age, saving her from the ravages of widowhood. But this was no mere legal matter. We understand this when we are told that “Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse.” This tiny infant, a gift given to Ruth by God, is a gift also given to Naomi, a gift that will make her whole.

But even with this, the story is not complete. The infant, cuddled and hugged by Naomi, would grow to be the grandfather of the great King David, from whose family would come the Messiah, the one who would redeem all God’s people, making them (and us!) whole.

#### Women in the Ancient World

Sure, we all know that the ancient world was comprised of patriarchal cultures; i.e., the men were in charge. But we don’t understand how women were seen by the men and perhaps by themselves. For a biblical example, read Exodus 20:17, where in the last of the Ten Commandments, women and slaves are lumped in with the house, the ox, the donkey, and anything that “belongs to your neighbor,” i.e., property that is not to be coveted.

I once heard a lecture from a professor of ancient history on the role of women and slaves in Greco-Roman society. The title of the lecture was, “Women & Slaves: Less Than Human.” An inspired title that drives home the truth about the status of women in the ancient world, even the supposedly “enlightened” world of the Greek philosophers. In the first centuries AD, many of the pseudo-Christian gnostics believed that women were an incomplete human, needing to pass upward through manhood on their way to heaven.

All this stands in stark contrast to Paul who wrote to the Galatians that, “There is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). And Paul put this unity to work in the many important responsibilities he gave women in the course of his ministry.

#### *Redemption*

The depth of the women’s plight enables us to grasp that this is a story of redemption, particularly for Naomi, who returned home and called herself “bitter.” In the eighty-five verses in the book, “redeem” or “redemption” is used twenty-three times. Reversal is the essence of redemption. It is slavery reversed into freedom. Death into life. Bitterness and fear into sweetness and courage.

Naomi desperately needed redemption. She found it through her daughter-in-law, Ruth, who left her own people and gods and headed for Bethlehem to a new home and a new God. After Ruth married Boaz and gave birth to a son, it is Naomi to whom the

women in the village came, saying, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him” (4:14-15). It is not Ruth who redeemed Naomi, who reversed her life and provided the kinsman she desperately needed. It was God who was her redeemer.

When Naomi told her daughters-in-law to return to their homes rather than accompany her to Bethlehem, she said, “may the Lord show kindness to you . . .” The Hebrew word here is *hesed*, a much richer word than simply “kindness.” Rather, *hesed* conveys an essential part of God’s character, his kind mercy and abundant grace. To extend *hesed* was to extend a lovingkindness and mercy far beyond anything that could be expected. This was God’s response to the women’s crisis and it is God’s response to each of us. God is our redeemer as well.

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