

### The Book of Ruth

#### Lesson 2 - Chapter 1

Last week we began with an introduction to the book of Ruth and some things to keep in mind as we studied it. Let's very briefly review it.

First, this small 85-verse book is quite complex and deals with several foundational and advanced Torah principles. This is as opposed to the more usual concept that this is a book that is entirely about presenting us with a Messiah-type figure in Boaz framed in a love story. While indeed such a concept is present in the book, that is but a small part of it.

Second, the book was composed several centuries after the actual happenings that are recorded. Ruth lived at around the time of the Judge Gideon but the story (at least as we currently have it) was not written (or at least finalized) until sometime between the end of King Solomon's reign (900 B.C.) and the exile of Judah to Babylon (600 B.C.).

Third, the location in our bibles of the book of Ruth varies according to which ancient manuscripts any particular bible was translated from; if it was from the Greek Septuagint Ruth will be found immediately following Judges. However if it was taken from the Hebrew Tanach then Ruth will be found just following the Song of Solomon.

Fourth, Ruth was a gentile born in the land of Moab. Her ancestors were Lot and his father Haran, brother of Abraham. It is significant that this is one of only two books written in the bible named for gentiles, the other being Job.

And finally, while there is an extensive list of purposes that this book undoubtedly was meant to address the chief one in the mind of its God-inspired anonymous human writer was probably to demonstrate the House of David's permanent right to the throne of Israel. And this was in response to the ongoing undercurrent of dissention among the tribes of Israel stemming from a battle between political factions, one believing that the descendants of King Saul (the first king of Israel) ought to rule and the other that the descendants of King David ought to rule. This had much to do with the civil war and breaking up of Israel (shortly after King Solomon's death) into two separate Kingdoms usually dubbed the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. We find that the North at first preferred Saul's successors and the South David's.

Let's read chapter 1. Last week I was a little more "preachy" than "teachy", but it'll be nearly the opposite this week. So I again warn you with the caveat that while Ruth will be a fascinating study it will also get technical and detailed at times, so stay alert as we move from the basic math of the Holy Scripture to Algebra.

**READ RUTH CHAPTER 1 all**

The book opens by placing the story of Ruth in space and time in a very general way by saying, “when the Judges were judging”. Even a slightly more specific reference to the dating of it being “when there was a famine in the land” is only marginally helpful. We’ve already covered the likelihood that this was during the several-year time period of Gideon when the Midianites were always descending like locusts to steal Israel’s food supply at harvest times and thus throwing the Hebrews into starvation; but by no means can we say that this is certain. This also begs the question, why didn’t the author of Ruth more definitively peg the events to chronology for our benefit? It certainly doesn’t seem like it would be terribly difficult to do nor take much writing time. The answer is that the Hebrew bible doesn’t attach much importance to when something happened, but rather what happened, who was involved, and its effect upon Israel’s development as a set-apart nation for Yehoveh.

That is part of the reason that we have the ongoing (and seemingly unsolvable) Young Earth-Old Earth battles because the first words of Genesis are ambiguous in setting up the time frame of the Creation. Does it mean to inform us that the substance of earth and the heavens was part of the 6-day Creation process, or does it mean that the earth was roughly and incompletely formed at some indeterminate earlier time and then later God began a 6-day process of sculpting it into a place that could sustain life? There are strong opinions on both sides, and I’m not going to debate that issue with you today. The point is that the writer of the first words of Genesis (usually credited to Moses) could have rather easily straightened this whole matter out with but the addition of a handful more words; but he didn’t. Why, just to torment us? No, it was because to the Hebrew mind it was secondary and unimportant. The point and purpose of the opening words of Genesis was not WHEN, but WHOM. When the earth came into being was not the issue, it was who brought it into being. The question of when really only matters to the more modern mind of rational Greek thinkers (us) who want additional PROOF of the existence of a Creator God and the legitimacy of our divine texts in describing that Creation. The ancient Hebrews needed no such proofs so while I’m sure the ambiguity of the first words of Genesis provoked some small amount of curiosity that’s as far as it went. Not because they were small-minded or unintelligent but because for them (and all the rest of the known world) a Creator god was self-evident and what we call the need for “proof” and satisfying the scientific model wasn’t even sought after (so it wasn’t addressed).

Interestingly the opening statement of the book of Ruth is not only unclear regarding precisely WHEN but also WHERE. It says that this famine was occurring in the **eretz**, the “land”. What land? Well, it depends on your point of view. In general the “**eretz**” is the land of Canaan, later called the land of Israel. It was located on the west bank of the Jordan. But does this mean that the famine engulfed all the land of Canaan from the Sinai Peninsula to the Lebanon border? No. Again, defining the precise boundaries of the area affected by famine was not terribly important to the storyline.

If you are of the tribe of Judah, the “land” is where you were living. If you were of the tribe of Manessah, the “land” is where you had settled. Apparently Bethlehem was in the affected region of Canaan, and the lack of food was ongoing and serious enough that it caused some families to seek better prospects outside of their own nation. The use of the term “Beit-Lechem of Judah” is because there were several Beit-Lechems in Canaan and this was because Beit-Lechem simply means “house of bread” (or, more in the sense that it was intended in those

days, “house of food”). A house of food was a granary; a *beit-lechem* was a town where there was a grain storage depot and of course there were several grain storage facilities scattered around the land of Canaan in the various tribal territories; the one this story is concerned with was in Judah, and is the same place where Messiah was born.

One Hebrew family (of many) who moved to a foreign land to weather the famine was headed by a fellow named Elimelech (meaning My God is King); Elimelech had a wife (Na’omi) and 2 sons (Machlon and Chilion). He chose Moab for some untold reason as his family’s place of refuge and survival.

Technically there was no nation of Moab during the time of the Judges; rather it was just an easy and familiar way to refer to this particular territory on the east side of the Jordan, bordering on the Dead Sea. Moab was conquered and taken over by the tribes of Reuben and Gad even before Joshua led Israel across the Jordan into Canaan, probably around 30 or 40 years before the time of Ruth. So saying “Moab” was just kind of a holdover and common way of speaking at that time. However as we found out in our study of Joshua and Judges, while it might seem (as we read the Scriptures and look at a map) that large blocks of land were settled and fully controlled by the various Israelite tribes, in reality when we look closer it was that these 12 allotted Israelite territories had alternating pockets of Canaanite settlements and Hebrew settlements in them and they generally co-existed peacefully. It was the same on the east bank of the Jordan; people who were of Moabite ancestry (like Ruth) continued to live in their own villages side-by-side with other villages inhabited by the relative newcomers, the Reubenites and Gadites.

But as is the case with the whole of the book of Ruth, even another complexity is added when we are told in verse 2 that Elimelech’s family were ***Ephrathites*** of Bethlehem-Judah. What is an ***Ephrathite***? Well, there’s been some disagreement about this, but as of now this matter has mostly been resolved. We will find in a few places in the OT the term Ephrathite and sometimes it is obviously attached to people of Ephraim; at other times it is not. However more and more it seems that what we probably have is a very early copyist error or a translation error when the word Ephrathite is connected to Ephraim and the reason for this is simple: the only difference in spelling between Ephrath and Ephraim is the last letter of the word: either a t or an m. And in Hebrew the last letter is either a ***tav*** ? or a ***mem*** ? and they look almost identical so it is an easy and common copy and/or translation error.

So what we DON’T have here in Ruth is a claim that Elimelech and his family were members of the tribe of Ephraim, but living in Bethlehem. Rather it is that Ephrath was an earlier name for Bethlehem. JB **Genesis 35:19** ***So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Efrat (that is, Beit-Lechem).***

Yet, why would the family of Elimelech be called Ephrathites? How does that distinguish them from OTHER of the Hebrew families living in Bethlehem? To this there is no certain answer, but likely it is that the term Ephrathite was given to a certain clan of Hebrews (likely of the tribe of Judah) living there, and it not a formal but a nickname. Ephrath means something like “fruitfulness” or “abundance”. It was a word that was often applied to a town or a general area because it was unusually fertile and it was known for the quality of its produce and how well

things grew there. And since Hebrew is a language and culture that gives names to people that are usually fairly common words that have a definite meaning (Yeshua, God saves; Elimelech, My god is king, etc.) we'll even find women in the bible who are named Ephrath or some form of that word. And notice the association between Beth-lechem (which means house of food, a granary) and Ephrath (meaning fruitful, abundant). That the place Elimelech was from was very fruitful and therefore formerly called Ephrath and later called Beit-lechem (which is essentially a large warehouse to store the fruitfulness), the change in name from Ephrath to Beit-Lechem is really little more than a simple modification of the nickname that occurred over time.

Probably the clan of Elimelech was known for their wealth (based on farming), thus they were given the nickname **the clan of Ephrath** (the clan of abundance), and thus they were renowned as the fruitful clan living in Bethlehem just as we might look upon a wealthy family in a small town and identify them in that regard. I took you on this little side trip not only to present you with an interesting bit of information but also as one of but many of the evidences of what a very straightforward book the Old Testament actually is, and certainly was to the people of old, and it demonstrates that if we'll only take the time to understand their culture suddenly the seemingly mysterious or redundant or unintelligible OT statements make all kinds of sense to us.

Now, back in verse 1 we're told that this certain man Elimelech took his family to "sojourn" in Moab. In Hebrew the word being translated is **gur**, and it means to go someplace for a while but not with the intent of making it your new home. I only point this out because the narrative makes it clear that this family was not permanently moving to Mo'av, rather they intended to only stay there as long as necessary and then return. They were not changing their nationality or their allegiance; they were just long-term visitors.

However the Rabbis had an interesting twist on this and one we should not so easily dismiss; they asked themselves why (as we find out in the 3rd verse) that this family experienced such devastating loss while in Moab? For there, Na'aomi's husband died as well as both of her children, sons, who had married Moabite women. Such a horror could only be seen as a curse from God (and I'll add to that thought a little later). All 3 males died early deaths, which was considered an indication of divine action. So if it was a punishment from YHWH, what was their sin? Well here is the Jewish mind on that subject:

In Genesis Rabbah 28 (a Jewish commentary) we read this: ***"Our rabbis taught that it is not permitted to go forth from the land of Israel to a foreign country unless one seah is sold for two seahs*** (a seah is a unit of dry measurement equaling about 2 gallons, meaning in this case that prices for food are twice what they should be and thus all but unaffordable)). ***Rabbi Shimshon said, this is permitted only when one cannot find anything to buy. But when one is able to find something to buy, even if one seah costs a selah***(a selah is a very hard Hebrew word to define, but as used here it means an extensive bible teaching or profound religious instruction that one literally pays dearly to obtain), ***one must not depart. And so said Rabbi Shimon Bar Yofai: Elimelech, Machlon and Chilion were among the notables of their generation and they were leaders of their generation. Why then were they punished? Because they left the land of Israel for a foreign country."***

Now there is actually some very good insight here and it dovetails quite neatly with the Scriptures. This is saying that indeed Elimelech's family felt the wrath of God (all the males of the family died) because they left their land too easily; that it was NOT that there was no food available (nothing to buy), but rather its only that the Midianites made their lives difficult by stealing much of their food supply and thus making food more scarce and more expensive. It also meant that this well-to-do farming family (the Ephrath, the abundant clan) had the most to lose because their land holdings were large and they lost so much of their crop incomes to those marauders. So rather than stay in the Promised Land under difficult (but not necessarily unbearable) conditions, as they should, they left for an easier life. They belonged in the Promised Land, not just any place that suited them. They belonged in a land that God had set aside for them, at the cost of millions of Egyptian lives, thousands of Israelite lives, and the loss of land and life of countless Canaanites. Result: God severely punished the family. I think these Rabbis have nailed it, and we're going to shortly see Na'omi adopt this same line of thinking.

Verses 3 and 4 explain that while in Moab Elimelech died; and that his two sons had married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. But during the decade that the family spent in Mo'av these two sons also died (we get no cause of death, but it was probably disease or accident because if their death had been caused at the hands of another the term would have been "killed" and not "died"). As a matter of clarity: the mention of the 10 years was NOT how long the Moabite women had been married to Elimelech's sons before they died; rather it was the total amount of time the family had sojourned in Moab.

But the tragic result of all this was that Na'omi, a relatively old woman, now had no husband and no sons and therefore no means of income; and the rest of the story essentially deals with the very serious problems this causes for Na'omi and how it would be remedied by the ever-faithful Lord whom she steadfastly worshipped even in a foreign place where Chemosh was the chief diety.

Let me say something to you at this point that might be counter-intuitive but it is also something that you need to know before we go any farther as it will put this story in proper perspective. While the book is named for Ruth, in reality the central character is Na'omi. Ruth has lost her husband (as has Orpah) but that can generally be remedied by re-marriage; and if the girls were young and (even better) attractive re-marriage was the most likely outcome. Further it was the custom of the era that young widows would be welcomed back into their father's home and cared for indefinitely just like when they were virgins; so the prospects of a decent life for a young widow were generally good. But for an older woman, beyond childbearing years and probably beyond the ability to work hard and provide needed labor for the family, to become a widow and have no sons to care for you was near a death sentence. At the least it foretold a meager existence of poverty and depravation. So the book of Ruth is essentially a tale of how a major problem for Na'omi was graciously solved by God, through Ruth and Boaz. If you'll keep that in mind as we go, you'll get the most out of this marvelous little book.

Some have taught that Elimelech's and Na'omi's sons were wrong for taking Moabite wives (and thus Elimelech was wrong for allowing it); that's not necessarily so in my view. There was no command of God against this; Deuteronomy 7:3 forbade marriage to Canaanites, but not to



Moabites. One argument against my position is that Deuteronomy 23:3 says that no Moabite may enter “the congregation” of Israel until the 10th generation (which can only mean the 10th generation after Israel has entered the Promised Land) and it’s unlikely that 10 generations had passed by now. However the Hebrew word for congregation is **kahal** and it has a little more nuanced meaning than simply “Israelites at large”, or “the general population of Israel”. Rather **kahal** usually denotes full citizenship without reservation in Israel; it denotes the ability and status to serve as a leader or elder, to participate in the rituals and observances, to assemble on holy occasions on the Tabernacle grounds, etc. Resident aliens were not permitted such things, and apparently some foreign women who married into Israel were also excluded (perhaps because they refused to stop worshipping their former gods and worship only Yehoveh). In any case it does not appear that the taking of foreign wives was the issue for the terrible tragedies of the Elimelech family, it was simply the leaving of the Holy Land for a foreign land when it was not at all necessary for their survival.

There’s been a lot of conjecture over the centuries about the names of the 6 people thus far identified in this story. Na’omi plainly means delightful or pleasant, and of course Elimelech is “my god is king”; these are both good, standard recognizable Hebrew names. However it gets a little dicier regarding the names of the two sons and their Moabite wives. Ruth, which is **Rut** or **Reut** in Hebrew, was probably not a Hebrew name but rather it was Moabite. Because Ruth became so highly regarded by the Hebrews it also became an adopted name used among Israelite females, but the meaning is not entirely certain. Most often it is said to mean friendship, and there is no reason to think otherwise as it is generally undisputed and it fits well with the theme of the story. Orpah, the other daughter-in-law, is often said by Jewish sages to mean “stiff-necked” or firmness. The idea being she takes a strong position and can’t be swayed or that she is not comfortable with change. However just as we’ll see regarding the two sons’ names, very probably these were NOT their real names but rather epithets that became nicknames for them, because these names identify their roles in the story. Understand, this does not mean the story is contrived or a fairy tale; it’s just a common ancient literary device used especially when stories are meant to be handed down word of mouth.

The one son is named **Machlon**, which is said to mean “weak”, and the other is **Chilion** that is said to mean “failing”. No one would name their children with such derogatory names, which is all the more evidence that these were descriptions used as names by the writer to achieve a desired effect and to make the story memorable. He may not even have known the given names of any of the characters but Elimelech and Na’omi, and probably Boaz, too.

So the widow Na’omi, who now also has no sons, hears that the famine in her homeland has ended and determines it’s time to return. It is interesting how her viewpoint is that Yehoveh had “visited” the **eretz**, the Promised Land, and given them **lechem**, bread (remember, this is just a common expression that actually means food). What this shows us that in Na’omi’s mind the famine that forced Na’omi’s family to leave the land was divinely brought about, and thus the ending of the famine was also due to God’s intervention. Saying that she arose with her daughters-in-law is an expression that means to start a journey. So it was expressly Na’omi’s initiative to return home to Bethlehem at this time, and the two girls were merely tagging along.

Now the story gains speed: Na'omi insists that her daughters-in-law go home to their biological mothers (Moabite mothers of course). The wording of the statement is unusual, because it is not normal to refer to the family home as "the mother's"; rather it is always "the father's". It is thought that the idea is that they are to go home to be comforted by their mothers (who better to comfort a daughter?) and it will be temporary until they get new husbands. I can't disagree with this assessment, but I also think that there is a simpler solution that plays at least as big a role: this is a story that revolves around women and is told from a woman's point of view. It deals with women's issues of that day (in a male dominated society), and it shows the value of women in the eyes of God, and how their value should be regarded in Hebrew society, and it shows the important nurturing aspect of mothers and women in general. Thus it is appropriate to speak of the mother's home and not the father's in this case. Goodness knows that if there is a favorite bible story of the modern day Judeo-Christian woman it must be Ruth because it has so many elements of love and romance coupled with a tender and thoughtful male who rides to the rescue with the woman's best interests at heart.

But verse 8 also throws us another interesting statement whereby Na'omi blesses the two girls by saying, "May YHWH deal kindly with you in like manner that they (the daughters-in-law) dealt with their dead husbands." What does that mean? Well what it decidedly does NOT mean is that they have shown respect and kindness to their husbands' memories. We've talked about ancient burial practices and beliefs concerning what happened after death. And even among the Hebrews ancestor worship still played a major role in their thinking. The thought that someone died and went to heaven didn't exist. Rather it was that the dead existed in some other form under the ground, in the place of the dead, and they needed tending (Abraham's Bosom and the Place of Torments were both underground chambers). So it was up to the children or the wife (or some other close family member) to bring food to the burial site to sustain the spirit of the dead person, to say prayers on behalf of the deceased, and especially to continue speaking the deceased's name so that it didn't disappear. If a name stopped being spoken it essentially ended the afterlife of that person. Apparently Ruth and Orpah were diligently doing all the customary things to TEND to the dead; they are showing direct kindness TO the dead men themselves.

Further it was going to be important for the two dead husbands that Ruth and Orpah get remarried since they were childless; because by custom the essence of the deceased male lived on in his firstborn son; thus if he never had sons during his life, his essence had no place to live on. Since these two fathers died childless, it was customary among Hebrews that when these women remarried the first son born to them would be dedicated in the name of the deceased husband, thus the dead man's line was rescued and it continued. The complication here, of course, is that these were Moabite women who (if they did what Na'omi admonished them to do) would go home to Moabite families and likely would marry Moabite men, and live in Moabite territory so how would this all work? And the answer is that we don't know. The concept of Levirate marriage (a brother being responsible to marry his deceased brother's wife and then to father a child with her) was uniquely Hebrew. However these two dead sons had no brothers to perform Levirate marriage with the widows, so now what? But this difficult situation also helps to explain what comes next.

When Na'omi told her daughters-in-law to depart from her and go home to their mothers and find new husbands, we see a very sad scene where all 3 women begin to cry and weep loudly (a typical Middle Eastern reaction). It is obvious that Na'omi was at the center of a great attachment between them.

But in this same sentence a Hebrew word is used that is a powerful one; a word that gentiles need to get to know a little bit because Holy Scripture uses it often. The word is **chesed**, and in this passage it is used in verse 8 where it says that "Yehoveh deal kindly (do **chesed**) with you, as you have done with the dead (Na'omi's two sons)".

**Chesed** is a lot like the Hebrew word **shalom** in that it is not a word that has a direct one or two word translation because it is speaking of a complex concept rather than merely a word, like a verb or a noun. **Chesed** is often translated in our English bibles as loving-kindness; and while it is not incorrect it is much too shallow. It is a word that often means ironclad loyalty, and at other times something very much like active love. In the Old Testament it is almost always covenant related, so **chesed** implies the mutual and reciprocal rights and duties between parties of a relationship. **Chesed** is a kind of faithfulness, and it related in this story as the action and attitude of the two girls towards their dead husbands and so Na'omi prays to Yehoveh that because these women have been so faithful to her deceased sons that He would be faithful to them.

And finally her blessing upon them is that they would eventually have rest in the house of a new husband. The Hebrew word used here for rest is **menuchah**; and **menuchah** more accurately means a "PLACE of rest" and includes in it the nuance of warmth and comforting. Na'omi is praying for them to have a husband to comfort them and provide for them. Kissing in the Middle East is generally either a welcome greeting or a good-bye; so when Na'omi kissed them it wasn't a kiss of affection or comfort it was her saying good-bye to these daughters-in-law, and knowing it was farewell they all broke down into tears.

Na'omi was doing what best for these girls; but what of herself? Her prospects were bleak to say the least.

We'll continue this story next week.