

### The Book of Ruth

#### Lesson 3 - Chapter 1 Continued

Na'omi's husband Elimelech died, and then her 2 sons Machlon and Chilion died, leaving Na'omi in dire straights and her daughters-in-law widows. The ancient world of the Middle East was a man's world, and a woman without a husband or sons to care for her and protect her was extremely vulnerable. Yet Na'omi was as concerned with the fate of her two widowed daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth as she was despondent over her own situation.

Key to taking the book of Ruth in proper perspective is that the book is actually centered on finding a solution for Na'omi's problem. Ruth and Orpah were young and had prospects, so they're plight was quite mild and solvable compared to Na'omi's. And the quickest and best solution for the 2 girls was to stay in their home territory of Moab even as Na'omi set out to return to her home, Bethlehem of Judah.

We've read the entire 1st chapter of Ruth, but let's re-read a small piece and examine it point by point.

#### RE-READ RUTH 1:8 – 15

The first words of this passage are an exhortation by Na'omi for these 2 daughters-in-law of hers (with whom there was obviously a loving bond and close relationship) to leave Na'omi to her fate and for them to return home to their Moabite mothers so that they could be comforted and cared for in their childhood homes until the day came that the Lord provided new husbands for them. Part of this exhortation included a blessing by Na'omi that the God of Israel would show the young widows favor; in fact the blessings specifically calls out Yehoveh's name. Now understand that the invocation of YHWH is of itself interesting because the 3 women are still in the land of Mo'av; a place that although foreign for Na'omi (a Jewish woman) was native for Orpah and Ruth. It was the general mindset of people in that era and culture to see the land attached to the national god or gods. In other words a god usually only had a sphere of influence that extended no further than the territory or nation where he or she was established as the local deity.

Let me elaborate on that thought just a tad more because it will help us to understand so many other passages in the Bible and what huge effect the world and protocol of the gods had upon people's decisions. Chemosh was the chief deity over the land of Mo'av. Ruth and Orpah were born and raised with the understanding that Chemosh held all divine authority over what happened in Moab, thus any vow made within his territory had to invoke his name and authority or it was ineffective and perhaps even invalid.

Yet the situation was not all that cut and dried: during the timeframe of the book of Ruth, Mo'av was not a sovereign nation. Moab had been conquered but a few decades earlier by Israel, and the Israelite tribes of Reuben and Gad now settled the land of Moab. However as

with all the territories conquered and occupied by the 12 tribes, the area of the Trans-Jordan (Israelite territory on the east side of the Jordan River) where the former nation of Moab lay was similar to looking at the pock-marked landscape of the moon; from a distance it looks smooth and even and homogeneous but up close it consists of hundreds of separate craters slightly separated from one another and at other times somewhat overlapping. So like the surface of the moon the Israelite tribal territories east of the Dead Sea consisted of pockets of Moabites living next to Israelites and at times they overlapped and intermingled. That meant that there was ambiguity over WHICH god ruled where; the usual solution was to worship them all, or at the very least show them all respect.

Therefore we should not take it that because the Hebrew Na'omi invoked the God of Israel in her blessing that she didn't believe that Chemosh existed, or should we think that the Moabites Ruth and Orpah had given up on Chemosh and (as a result of marrying Jewish men) worshipped only Yehoveh. Bowing down to or invoking the name of different gods at different times according to different situations and exactly where you were standing at the time was usual and normal for the ancient mind and that generally also included Hebrews.

After blessing her daughters-in-law they both still insisted on following Na'omi back to Judah so Na'omi introduced an argument to dissuade them; and the argument essentially focused on the impossibility of Levirate Marriage occurring in their situation. Let's first reacquaint ourselves with the concept of Levirate Marriage.

Turn your bibles to Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

### **READ DEUT. 25: 5 – 10**

So the idea is that a surviving biological brother (or perhaps a very close relative) of a man who has died is to marry his brother's widow (if this woman had not produced sons) and impregnate her with the intent that the first son she produces will be considered the offspring of the deceased man. Thus his family line will continue and several other vital issues will be resolved including giving the widow a son to care for her in her old age, a fulfillment of her duty as a woman for bringing new life into the world (seen as the ultimate and required duty of a woman else she was practically no woman at all), allowing the essence and character of the deceased man to live on in his son (otherwise that essence would terminate), and providing for the land of the deceased man to be passed along to someone (his son) who was a member of his own clan and tribe thus fulfilling the requirements of the Law of Moses.

The overall concept of Levirate Marriage was not necessarily a Hebrew invention however how it was practiced and why it was practiced by the Israelites was indeed uniquely Hebrew. In fact the custom of Levirate Marriage was so predominant in Middle Eastern society (and also loosely practiced among the early Hebrews) that we see an example of it occurring centuries before God pronounced it as Law and gave it to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

***CJB Genesis 38:8 Y'hudah said to Onan, "Go and sleep with your brother's wife-perform the duty of a husband's brother to her, and preserve your brother's line of descent."***

And despite the similarity between the term Levirate and the name of the priestly tribe (Levi) the two are not related. Levirate is a gentile term, taken from the Latin word “levir” meaning “husband’s brother”; so we certainly won’t find it in the bible.

With that understanding of the nature of Levirate Marriage, we can better understand what Na’omi had in mind in her argument for Ruth and Orpah to go home to their mothers. Thus in verse 11 Na’omi asks rhetorically, “Do I still have sons in my womb who could become your husbands?” In other words is the insistence of these 2 girls that they stick with Na’omi coming from their belief that the next logical step for them is Levirate Marriage since they were childless? Of course the question is absurd since Na’omi has no other sons (no brothers of the deceased men) and she is far past child bearing years; so to emphasize just how silly it would be for these 2 girls to harbor such thoughts she doesn’t actually use the term “womb” as is usually translated; rather she says, “do I still have sons in my *meeh*?” That is, “do I still have sons in my insides?”

Continuing to show Orpah and Ruth the futility of pursuing the tradition of Levirate Marriage Na’omi continues with offering the intentionally absurd argument that even though she is too old to have a husband, suppose by miracle she got one, then in a bigger miracle (even challenging the one of Abraham’s wife Sarah) she became pregnant in her old age, would the 2 girls be willing to wait until that occurred, and then wait even longer for the sons to be born and then grow up to a marriageable age so that they could marry the two widows and then give them children.

Understand that it was NOT unusual for a widow to wait for the younger brother of her deceased husband (a brother that was still a young child) to grow up and marry her and get her pregnant. However the situation in this particular case was in a real gray area; after all Na’omi was also a widow. So whoever might marry Na’omi and father Na’omi’s babies would NOT be a different father than the father of Na’omi’s deceased sons; thus at best Na’omi’s hypothetical children would be only ½ brothers of the deceased husbands and whether that even qualified as proper Levirate Marriage is debatable. So the possibility of employing Levirate Marriage to solve the girls’ problem is out of the question if not irrational.

Bottom line, in verse 13 Na’omi says, “No my daughters. On YOUR behalf I feel very bitter that the hand of Adonai has gone out against me”. Her argument finally hit home and reality broke through all the emotion and so they all started weeping profusely again. Orpah knew what she must do, and kissed Na’omi goodbye. As I mentioned last week, in this era a kiss was not so much a symbol of affection; rather it literally meant either “hello” or “goodbye”. Thus the Hebrew does NOT say that “Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye”, rather it merely says, “Orpah kissed her mother-in-law” (the goodbye being understood as the reason for the kiss).

We also get the first hint in this passage of Na’omi’s attitude about her condition: she is bitter and God intentionally caused her bitterness. A few verses from now this thought is picked up on and we’ll talk about it a little more because it is a challenging notion for modern Christians to be sure.

A hint of another kind is also presented to us and it goes back to what I told you early on: this story is actually all about Na'omi and her plight as an aged, childless widow. In the same statement where she answered her own rhetorical question (with an emphatic "NO my daughters") about whether the girls should wait and hope that Na'omi finds a husband and then miraculously has a couple of boy children who could grow up and marry the daughters-in-law, she says that she feels very bitter that the hand of God has gone out against her. The hint is this: that it is even MORE a disadvantage and serious problem for HER that there is no reasonable chance for Levirate Marriage for these daughters-in-law, than it is for them because these girls do have options: they can go home to be cared for by their families, and in time find new husbands. But for Na'omi the only real hope she has IS for some kind of Levirate Marriage to happen for these 2 girls, because that would give her sons (technically grandsons) to care for her. It wouldn't have been at all out of the realm of possibility for the girls to marry one of Elimelech's brothers (the daughter-in-laws uncles), assuming Elimelech had brothers. And if they did, and they produced sons, then in the ancient Middle Eastern way of thinking these sons would become grandchildren of Na'omi's and as obligated to care for her as they would be for their own parents. This might sound convoluted and complicated to us, but it was well understood and normal for the society of this era. So the thing is that Na'omi was very bitter that all these circumstances lined up to conspire against her having any hope of a decent life whatsoever.

Orpah turns and tearfully leaves to go home to mama back in her Moabite hometown. Did Orpah do something wrong, or selfish or evil in leaving Na'omi and going back? Not at all; it would be unfair and untrue to say that she was disloyal or uncaring or had committed some kind of sin. Not only did she do what Na'omi sincerely insisted she do, she did what was perfectly reasonable in response to her situation. Orpah did NOT make a bad choice, but from the vantage point of history she could have made a better one; she could have followed Na'omi and trusted in a God she knew very little about and attached herself to a people she knew about even less. Instead, she went home to her people (the Moabites). Her people worshipped Chemosh, so essentially she unknowingly put her fate into the hands of a false god.

While I don't want to go too far in drawing a comparison, Orpah's decision affords us a good picture of how it is that people can walk right up to the brink of accepting the commission of the God of Israel and His Son Yeshua, and not take the final step because there is another road to follow and it is the natural if not easier one. It is not an evil road necessarily; it just doesn't lead to the true God and His plan for us. There is an interesting parallel to this narrative about Na'omi, Orpah and Ruth in the New Testament in the book of Matthew.

***CJB Matthew 8:19 A Torah-teacher approached and said to him, "Rabbi, I will follow you wherever you go." 20 Yeshua said to him, "The foxes have holes, and the birds flying about have nests, but the Son of Man has no home of his own." 21 Another of the talmidim said to him, "Sir, first let me go and bury my father." 22 But Yeshua replied, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."***

Now we don't know for certain what choices these two men made when Yeshua told them what they must do and how uncertain life would be for them in following Him. But the point is

that this little episode is so reflective of the Na'omi story. The men (like Ruth and Orpah) insist on following this extremely godly man Yeshua (who IS God), but He warns them off and says He really has no good prospects of comfort and plenty ahead to share with them. The one makes a statement that he WILL follow Yeshua right then and there; the other of them says he'd like to follow Jesus **but** really needs to return home for a while. With no other information given it's probably reasonable to suspect that the first one DID go with Jesus (like Ruth did with Na'omi), but the 2nd returned home to bury his father (choosing Orpah's route). They would NOT have done an evil thing not to follow Messiah as part of His team; they would NOT have done a wrong thing. But the BETTER thing would have been to drop everything and go with Him. And by the way, while we tend to spiritualize this event and make it that the choice of "following" Yeshua was essentially a choice between Salvation and no Salvation that is not what is stated. Rather it was whether they would leave their current life behind and travel with Him and serve Him as itinerate disciples. There is no reason to believe that they did NOT trust Yeshua as Messiah; it was their level of commitment and translating that commitment to action that was at issue. Do you see that? And frankly everyone listening to this needs to ask him or her self if they merely have a passive trust in Yeshua as Messiah, or if in response to that trust they are willing to commit to a whole new path that may not lead them where they think they want to go, or that even improves their earthly lot.

Orpah was like the man who felt he needed to go home to bury his father. Ruth was like the other man who said unconditionally, "I will follow you wherever you go". And so this leads us right into one of the most eloquent, spiritually meaningful, yet elegantly simple series of statements we are likely to find in the Bible. After Orpah kisses Na'omi goodbye, Na'omi tries one last time to get Ruth to follow suit and says, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god; go back, after your sister-in-law". Ruth will have none of it and settles the matter once and for. Let's read Ruth 1:15 – 18.

### **RE-READ RUTH 1:15 - 18**

Ruth makes 6 promises to Na'omi and then seals it with a vow. First is that where Na'omi goes, Ruth will go. Second is that wherever Ruth stays (lives) she will stay. Third, Na'omi's people will become Ruth's people. Fourth, Na'omi's God will become Ruth's God. Fifth, where Na'omi dies Ruth will die and finally wherever Na'omi chooses to be buried Ruth desires to be buried alongside her.

Ruth essentially made a covenant with Na'omi and then bound it with the oath, "May Yehoveh bring terrible curses on me and worse ones as well if anything but death separates you and me." I know the CJB says, "May Adonai bring terrible curses", and most other translations will say, "May the Lord bring terrible curses", but the original Hebrew invokes God's formal name, YHWH. This is significant for Ruth has sworn by the God of the Hebrews, not the God of the Moabites that is the god of her native nationality. This shows in whom Ruth truly believed, and in whom her allegiance was given, and whom she rejected (Chemosh). The phrase "May Yehoveh bring terrible curses on me and more....." is a rather standard formula invoking the punishment of God should the promises be broken and we'll find it used 7 times in the books of Samuel and Kings.

While on the surface (and without doubt as Ruth meant it and Na'omi understood it) Ruth was committing both her social life to the people of Israel, and her religious life to the God of Israel, there is something deeper happening. Using modern terms Ruth converted; she left paganism to become an Israelite. And yet as we move through this short story, there is a certain mystery to it all. An important element of the narrative is how a gentile became an Israelite, and just what that entailed. What fascinates me is that we have here a marvelous picture of how to this day a person forsakes everything to become part of Israel. It is symbolic of every gentile who has ever come to faith through Israel's God. At least one of the keys to understanding this mystery is that Orpah went back to "her people and her god", while Ruth went forward to Na'omi's people and Na'omi's god. A people and their god are connected whether we like it or not, whether we will admit it or not.

Ruth has shown us the way; but unfortunately the largest bulk of the church has chosen to stick to or go back to its Moabitish past. Gentiles want the salvation and nearness of the God of Israel, but we don't want Israel. Of the 6 commitments made by Ruth to Na'omi the modern church agrees with but one: your God will be my God. But the church also says to Israel and to the Jewish people: although I want your God, I will NOT go where you go; I will NOT stay where you stay; you will NOT be my people; I will NOT die where you die and I will NOT be buried where you are buried. How might this story of Ruth worked out had she adopted that theology? Because indeed we (my Brethren) are faced with two entirely opposing and irreconcilable theologies when we compare the one here in the first chapter of Ruth with the most prevalent contemporary church doctrines. One says that gentiles can have the God of Israel for our own outside of Israel's covenants and outside of God's people and under our own gentile terms. The other says that the people and their God are inseparable; you can't have one without the other. The theology of Ruth says that to submit to the God of Israel means also to cleave to the people of Israel. It means our fates are bound together both from a historic past and a prophetic future.

When Ruth came to Israel with Na'omi she willingly left her gentile ways behind and went forward eyes-wide-open into a new reality of which she had little knowledge. The Church has brought its gentile ways along with us, has no interest in knowing or learning the ways of God's people, and has even taken the extreme position that as gentiles we are more God's people than are Moses' Israelites! Can you imagine Ruth following Na'omi into Bethlehem, insisting she wants Israel's God, and then coming with the attitude that her Moabite ways are superior to the ways of God's set-apart people; and in fact she has replaced them in God's eyes? That, my friends, is the predominant position of the modern church towards Israel and the Jewish people and it is nothing less than a catastrophe. And it falls to Believers like you and me to do what we can to right the wrongs, restore the entire Word of God to its rightful place within Christianity, and to bring the Good News of the Jewish Messiah to His Jewish brethren. It falls upon us to comfort His people, join them in spirit, and ask them for forgiveness of our treatment of them.

Let me conclude this thought with one final statement: I've spoken to you on a couple of occasions about the very different, although closely connected, matter of faith versus faithfulness. Of the 6 commitments Ruth made to Na'omi only one was about faith, while the other 5 were about faithfulness. Ruth declaring that, "your God will be my God" is a

declaration of faith; but the other 5 commitments are the expression of that faith. And the expression of that faith in deed and action is called faithfulness. We have millions of Christians today and over the centuries who had faith, but far fewer who lived in faithfulness.

Verse 18 shows that the elderly widow Na'omi simply could no longer deflect such a stunning impassioned covenant that Ruth unilaterally made with her; and how unusual that must have been for those times and in that culture. In a patriarchal society, here we have a woman choosing another woman. When in an era where all hope that a woman has of sustenance, family, prosperity, protection, comfort, and fulfillment rested on the males, here we have a God-inspired story of a woman who preferred to give up such hope in favor of helping an old woman who had no such hope available to her.

Together they journeyed back to Na'omi's home in Beit-Lechem of Judah. It was a very arduous journey of around 75 miles and one must wonder how Na'omi could have survived it without Ruth. The plateaus of Moab where they left from were at an elevation of around 3500 feet, and the hills leading up to Bethlehem over 2500. After descending rugged trails, crossing the Jordan River at probably the best and most known fording spot at Jericho, the next phase of their trek would have been the worst. Anyone who has been to Israel will remember the buses and trucks slowly crawling up the long and winding road that takes one from Jericho (that is more than 800 feet below sea level) to the hills of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. There are few springs, no food, and mostly desert conditions along the way; somehow, by God's grace, they made it.

When the two arrived in Beit-Lechem it caused a rather major stir.

### RE-READ RUTH 1:19 - end

That the "whole city" or town was stirred with excitement over the arrival of Na'omi is a figure of speech and it merely means a great portion of it not "100% all" turned out. But even more the verb used to refer to the reaction of the whole city (*hoom* in Hebrew), which means an excited uproar, is conjugated in the feminine plural; in other words it was the WOMEN of the city who noticed Na'omi and approached her, not so much the men (remember, this is a woman-oriented story). And the women came up to her saying, "Can this be Na'omi?" This is a rhetorical question; they knew full well it was Na'omi and it was merely an expression of surprise. Further it's not that they actually asked this of Na'omi (they didn't ask that she confirm her identity), it was more the tone of their conversation among one another as they saw her approach and could hardly believe their eyes.

But in response to the rather joyful astonishment by the women of Beit-lechem towards her (people who probably never expected to see her again), Na'omi tells them not to call her Na'omi any longer but rather *Mara*. Recalling that her name (Na'omi) means pleasant, she tells them not to refer to her character or countenance as pleasant any longer, for now she is *mara*, bitter. What is more surprising is what the stated CAUSE of her bitterness is: God.

This is where things can get to be a bit dicey for Christians; because Na'omi makes it clear that her understanding is that the God of Israel has with full divine intention caused her

intractable condition of poverty and hopelessness. Very interestingly Na'omi calls God "Shaddai" in this instance, an epithet for God we haven't read in a long time. It is confidently thought, now, that Shaddai means "mountain" and so the earliest name or title or epithet used for God in the Bible of El Shaddai literally meant "God of the Mountain" or even more technically, Chief or Highest "God of the Mountain". Shaddai was undoubtedly just a contraction of El Shaddai that was used in certain circumstances by some in Ruth's era (or maybe in the era of the author of the book of Ruth).

The thing is that just like so often in the English language the sum of the words doesn't necessarily mean what they literally say when they are used as an expression. For instance: "don't let the cat out of the bag" has nothing to do with cats or bags. "Wow, that's very cool" isn't referring to temperature. "Don't cry over spilt milk" doesn't mean to avoid tears if you knock over the milk carton. Shaddai literally meant mountain, but because the chief deity always occupied the highest spot on the highest mountain, to say that Shaddai caused Na'omi's trouble was much like saying the "irresistible God", "the most powerful of all the God's" caused it and thus there was no court of appeals.

Na'omi says that Shaddai made her life bitter; she went out (left Beit-lechem) full, but Yehoveh brought her back empty. That is she switches from the very dramatic "Shaddai" to using God's formal name. And more she says that Yehoveh has testified against her, and then again switches back and says that Shaddai has afflicted her. It's merely a way to get across the fact that she was powerless before the God of the Cosmos and that there is no stopping the curse of emptiness that she bears once Yehoveh has decided to place it upon her.

But here's where we deal with some more theology. We modern Christians tend to be rather schizophrenic over how we see the Lord dealing with our lives. On one hand we say that God controls every aspect of our existence, but when something bad happens we blame the devil. We say that with the advent of Christ that the Lord only afflicts His people with mercy and loving-kindness, so the bad things in our lives are either natural repercussions or demonic or human in source. That is not the theology of the older Testament and I would say with confidence that such is not the theology of Yeshua either. Rather it is doctrine of men who wish only to recognize God's attributes as the most pleasant ones. Na'omi and the characters of the bible had no such delusions.

How often have I heard the statement from the mouths of Pastors that "the Lord giveth and He taketh away"; but they apparently don't mean it or believe it because if something bad happens as a result of one's sin, the standard statement is that God doesn't punish those who are His. That the Lord gives and takes away is really all Na'omi is stating. The Lord gave to her (sent her out full), and then the Lord took it back (brought her back empty). But she says it with no hypocrisy and understands that if God really does control all that whether she has plenty or she has nothing, it is all from His hand.

You see the Old Testament in particular exposes what I would call "a theology of complaint". As a person under God's covenants there was no such thing as luck or happenstance; everything was under God's purview and providence. Many times a biblical character would have terrible things happen to them and thus they fully assigned it to Yehoveh; and often they



complained to one another or directly to God about it. And in general the Lord doesn't seem to see such direct complaint as wrong. That said, it's one thing to complain about your situation and the deep pain you are in, and that you do not understand it, and especially that you don't like it one bit. But its quite another to confront God and tell Him He's wrong, or that He has erred, or has no right to do what He has done. Na'omi of course was expressing the former viewpoint and so was doing nothing wrong, nor had she a bad attitude, nor was she being disobedient or unfaithful to Yehoveh. She was but acknowledging that the source of her troubles was God's decision, and she was suffering under His hand for whatever His reasons. She was in no way challenging God's motives or authority to do so.

Frankly I find that refreshing and theologically dead on. Just as we cannot accept God without accepting His people, neither can we accept the kind part of God without acknowledging the severe.

The chapter concludes with tying up the loose ends that indeed Ruth was with Na'omi when she arrived at Bethlehem and that they arrived at the time of the barley harvest, which would have been around April by our calendars. But it also puts it at the about the time of the Biblical Feast of Shavuot, Christian Pentecost. And this is at the heart of why the book of Ruth is read today in Synagogues as a tradition throughout the world on the occasion of Shavuot.

We'll begin chapter 2 next week.