

# The Book of Ruth

## Chapter 1 – 1:1-22

### Outline

Chapter 1: Famine, Moab and death

Introduction: 3 widowed women (1-7)

The action: relationship and return (8-21)  
Moab (6-18)  
Bethlehem (19-22)

Narrative translation (22)



### Basic outline of the book

The introduction to the story (1:1-5) poses the central problem for the characters. The death of Elimelek and his sons, in a foreign land, leaves the family without issue, and the women without protection. The solution of this problem is only completed after several partial or false solutions have been presented:

- Orpah's departure is a partial solution, at least for her, as Naomi indeed suggests (1:8-9).
- The return to Bethlehem suggests a partial solution (1:6).
- Boaz' kindness to Ruth, "his handmaid" and the revelation that he is a close relative (*Go'el*).
- The women's plots (in ch.3), and Boaz' consequent promise to Ruth (though notice how her reputation and position have been placed in jeopardy before this is achieved).
- When he finally succeeds in persuading the other, closer, *Go'el* to desist.

All of these provide the **hope** of (at least partial) resolution. However it is only at the end with the birth of the son that all is finally indeed resolved.

## Character outlines

### Ruth

Her name appears at: 1:4,14,16,22; 2:2,8,21,22; 3:9; 4:5,10,13 (12 times).

At 1:22; 2:2,21; 4:5,10 (5 times) the phrase used is "**Ruth the Moabitess**", in addition at 1:4 the phrase "*Moabite wives*" includes her, also at 2:6 she is called "*the Moabite maiden*", being introduced as a foreign girl who accompanied Naomi on her return from foreign parts.

Clearly one thing the text wants us to understand is that Ruth is a Moabite.

Apart from being a foreigner, who is Ruth (according to the descriptions given in the text)?

We can sum up than saying that Ruth is:-

- **faithful** to Naomi and to the Lord,
- is a woman of recognised **worth**,
- so is **blessed** and becomes
- one of the **Mothers of Israel**.

The use of her name to name the book reflects her central place in the action of the story, if the true "subject" of the story is the family of Elimelek it is nevertheless Ruth who represents and personifies this "subject".

### Naomi

Her name appears at: 1:2,3,8,11,19,20,21,22; 2:1,2,6,20,22; 3:1; 4:3,5,9,14, 16,17; and she is:

- above the person who **guides** the destiny of Ruth and who thus
- **facilitates** the solution of the story's central problem, and in her turn,
- she personifies the "**subject**" of the story, Elimelek's family (4:17).

### Boaz

His name only appears at 2:1 for the first time, but this is followed by references at: 2:3,4,5,8,11,14,15,19,23; 3:2,7; 4:1,5,8,9,13,21 (so his name is the most used in these chapters). He is seen as:

- the **Goel**, redeemer, in name and by his actions,
- **dependable and faithful** - in some ways he is indeed a kind of masculine reflection of Ruth!
- without him the problem of the story would have remained unresolved (4:6).

## Chapter 1 – The Introduction or orientation vv-1-5 (possibly 7)

The first five verses of Ruth form what are called the "orientation". They set the scene, presenting the **family** about whom the story is told and its disastrous history which poses the **problem**. For, although the central characters are Ruth, Naomi and Boaz the story is, in another sense, "about" the family of Elimelek. The problem posed is the lack of descendants for this family, as well as the state of the two women who represent it.

The style is simple and direct, although there are several repetitions. The most cumbersome of which and the only one to attract serious suggestions of pruning only really shows up in an over literal English version: "*it happened in the days when the judges judged, a famine happened in the land*". The first of these phrases is the one that should be removed - for the second simply cannot be done without. However, notice that the phrase in question forms an **inclusion** with the end of the story -

at the start: the judges,  
at the end: David the typical king.

**Verse five** also contains a hint of inclusion with the end, for here Naomi is "*bereft of her two children*" yet at the end of the story in 4:16 Naomi will take "*the child*" and lay him in her bosom.

Notice, too, how at the very start the telling moves slowly: "*In the days when the judges judged*" instead of "*In the time of the judges*" (or "*200 years ago*"), "*there was a famine in the land*" adds a hardly necessary precision at least when we shall be told the man comes "*from Bethlehem in Judah*". The pace of telling will pick up, but as the audience are "warmed up" the pace is slow and deliberate.

If we look at the pattern of information in the text there is an alternation of "**shared**" and "**unshared**" elements. This both provides new information necessary to situating the story, but also builds up a shared world between reader and narrator. Here is one way of viewing how this happens in the first verses of Ruth, whether you agree entirely with the division or not, the narrator builds on shared information to create the new world of Ruth and Naomi for us.

These five verses do not simply present the characters (except Boaz who will appear at the right moment in the action) and the problem of the story. They also begin to point up some of the themes and motifs which will recur. In terms of the story-line Naomi is shown as a woman who "**is left**" (vv. 3 & 5) and the motif of **fullness** (the family is complete in v. 2 with two sons) versus **emptiness** (vv. 1, 3 & 5 - famine, exile and bereavement).

Already too the careful structuring of the story is prepared, for links are made to the conclusion:

- 1:1 "when **judges** ruled" - 4:17b "**David**"
- 1:4 ten years **no child** - 4:13 Marriage, blessing and **birth**
- 1:5 "**left without her two children**" - 4:16 "**Naomi took the child**"

The case of the word "child" which occurs only at these two places in the book, despite the fact that the **absence of children** is precisely the core of the problem, alerts us to one of our narrator's techniques. There are a number of words which recur only two (or a few) times but which carry a strong content of **motif or theme**. Already in this section we have seen "remain", which occurs twice and nowhere else in the story carries the motif of emptiness.

### Relationship and return - vv.8-21

#### a) Moab (6-18)



*Shub* is evident as the key-word for this passage. We can trace the development of the text by looking at this word:

שׁוּב *shub*

This verb has a wide range of meanings. It is widely used, the twelfth most common in the Bible.

The **qal** means: turn back, return, go back, come back, do again (when used with another verb), repent... while the **hiphil** means: bring back, draw back, refrain from, cause to repent...

verse(s) + speaker:	<i>shub</i> :	comment:
6-7 narrator	2	Naomi (N) returns from the country of Moab cf. 22 with her daughters-in-law (D-i-l), towards Judah
8-9 N	1	imperative - to your mother's house
10 D-i-l	1	we will return to your people
11-13 N	2	imperative - <i>repetitions</i>
15 N	2	O has returned (to Moab) imperative sing.
16-17 R	1	"return" = abandon Naomi

Notice how already in the introductory verses *shub* marks the change from singular (v.6) to plural (v.7) as the girls begin to count. **One becomes three**.

It also marks the change from "the country of **Moab**" (v.6) "to the land of **Judah**" (v.7). Nb. the phrase "**from the country of Moab**" forms an inclusion with v.22 - though there have been dramatic (and serious) changes meanwhile:

● in the imperative it marks Naomi's **threefold** repetition of her instruction to "return" home (vv.8, 11 and 12):

- the first command is **refused** by the girls using the same verb ("*we will return with you to your people*" v.10) a phrase which already shows the **reversal** of sense to which the word is being submitted;
- in v.15, however, Naomi still gives it the sense of "*go back to your own place*" as she repeats her imperative command;
- in v.16 Ruth's **revolutionary interpretation** of the word becomes clear - "return" to Moab means "abandon" Naomi and this she will not do;
- in v.21 this hard-worked word is well into overtime as Naomi accuses God: "*I went away full, and the LORD has **brought me back** empty. Why call me Na'omi, when the Lord has afflicted me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?*"

Two (at least) typical elements of this book have already become clear.

**Women** have the central place in this story as they do not in any other.

The author's skilful yet **sparing** use of words to link different parts of the telling,

**chesed** "faithfulness" 1:8; 2:20; 3:10;

"**security**" 1:9; 3:1;

"**kiss**" 1:9,14;

"**cling**" 1:14; 2:8,21,23;

"**pass the night**" 1:16; 3:13;

**God** 1:15,16; 2:12;

"**empty**" 1:21; 3:17;

**shub** in the hiphil 1:21; 4:15.

Another, this time **theological**, has been set up in order to be shown to us later. Naomi trusts God - even while she blames him for her trouble, she asks his blessing on the girls (1:9). However compare 3:1ff. where she will actively seek to realise the blessing for which she has prayed. Naomi in this story joins Job and Jeremiah (and even in the NT, Jesus) among the list of righteous people who suffer yet remain faithful.

## b) Bethlehem (19-22)

### Scene Two: Bethlehem (Ruth 1:19-22)

**1:19** Compare this verse with the beginning of the act. In vv.6-7 the three ("she and her two daughters-in-law") "started to return...to the land of Judah", now "the two of them went on till they came to Bethlehem."

"**When they came to Bethlehem...**" *wayyehi ke-* (cf. 1:1 *wayyehi be-* "When the Judges ruled...") does this phrase mark a new beginning? In a way, yes, for here at the start of a new scene we find an abstract of the story and a repetition of the theme of "emptiness" and of the motif "return" (vv.20-21). However this fact of summing up and the repetition of the motif "**return**" shows clearly that this scene forms part of the first act.

"The whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said" in fact in Hebrew

the "women" are only signalled by the feminine form of the verb "**they said**" which seems to refer back to "**the whole town**" - the narrator frequently adopts the feminine point of view in this story!

**1:20-21 "Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly (*hemar*) with me."** First Naomi puns on her name, or rather gives herself a new name - more like those of her sons. Then she repeats her complaint against the Almighty.

At this point we cannot escape questioning Naomi's faith. Her language is strong and her complaint bitter. Both here and in v.13 she chooses expressions which suggest that she sees the Lord as her adversary. "**The hand of the Lord has gone forth** (turned NRSV) **against me**" cf. "the hand of the Lord was against" Ex 9:3; Dt 2:15; Judg 2:15 etc.) the expression Naomi uses is stronger for "to go out" is used of armies etc.. Even though at v.9 she asked Adonai's blessing for her Moabite daughters-in-law, presumably hoping for his grace to reach even foreigners, her honesty and good theology will not permit her to blame anyone else for her suffering.

Although she does not explicitly say it we can assume that, **like Job and Jeremiah**, she can see no acts of hers which deserve the punishment, despite this it is God's doing. It is interesting too to compare 2:20 where she will speak of his faithfulness to the living and the dead (with no trace of irony). Ruth's faithfulness to her family-by-marriage is impressive, but so is Naomi's to her God. Perhaps it is this which permits Ruth to accept Adonai?

"**Empty**" is another of those key-words which only occur twice (cf. 3:17). As in a way is *shub*, the *leitwort* in this passage. This verb is used frequently in this passage (meaning "return" etc) and as such we shall discuss it below. However apart from this verse *shub* only occurs once more in the "hiphil" (meaning something like "cause to return, bring back") at 4:15:

- here **Naomi** declares that the Lord has brought her back **empty**,
- there the **women** declare that the Lord (through the agency of Obed?) will "**restore** her to life".

This contrast sums up the problem of the story and the fact of its solution.

**1:22** Gives a summary of the first act, and prepares the second. Using few words it:  
repeats the key-word *shub* twice,  
indicates that Naomi and Ruth are alone,  
that Ruth is a foreigner in a strange land and  
sets the scene for Act Two:

"So Na'omi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest."