

RUTH 1

Introduction

The book of Ruth takes place during the reign of the judges in Israel sometime between 1200 and 1020 BC. Most scholars believe this story was passed down orally for generations before it was written down. It is still retold by observant Jews during the Feast of Weeks, which is the second of the three sacred festivals observed by the ancient Israelites and Jews today (see Leviticus 23). Since this feast takes place fifty days, or seven weeks, after Passover, it is sometimes called Pentecost, which means “fifty.” This feast celebrates the first fruits of the wheat harvest. To the Jews, this celebration is known as *Shavuot*, which is Hebrew for “weeks.” Anciently, like the other two feasts, this celebration required ritual and offerings made at the temple.

The book of Ruth is extraordinarily about ordinary people. Rather than depicting royalty, wars, teachings of the prophets, or the history of the people, the book of Ruth is about ordinary people living in difficult times. It is usually told as a story of love and loyalty, but more than that, it is a story of hope. Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth encountered many trials and devastating experiences that tested their faith, but in the end, God prepared a way for their happiness and welfare just as He has promised all of us who trust in Him. “For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11 New International Version). Redemption is also an important theme in the book of Ruth. Various forms of the Hebrew word for *redemption* occur twenty-three times in the book.

The books of Ruth and Esther are the only books of the Bible named after women. While this book is named after Ruth, it is as much about Naomi as it is about Ruth.

Ruth was the great-grandmother of King David and was one of only four women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus Christ (see Matthew 1:5). Her inclusion seems to illustrate that participation in the house of Israel is not about blood and genetics (Ruth was a non-Israelite by birth) but about trust in and obedience to the will of God.

Ruth 1:1–4

The journey from Bethlehem to Moab is roughly fifty miles, traveling west beyond the Dead Sea over rugged and steep terrain. Moab (now known as Jordan) was the territory east of the Jordan River. The Moabites were descendants of Lot and his oldest daughter and were worshippers of pagan gods. The Moabites often warred against the Israelites, but the fact that Naomi's husband, Elimelech, took his Israelite family to Moab indicates this was a time of peace between the two nations.

Biblical names often help us understand the symbolic meanings in an account because they denote the purpose of a character, describe the character's traits, or demonstrate that the parents gave the child a name that honors God and were thus faithful observers of the covenant.

Elimelech means "my God is king." Naomi means "my delight." Mahlon means "sick," and Chilion means "pining." Ruth means "friend," and Orpah means "gazelle." Not all these names are significant to the story, but the meaning "friend" is especially significant in Ruth's role as a friend to Naomi and to the Lord.

Ephrathites were people of the tribe of Judah living in Ephrathah, which was an area around Bethlehem.

Ruth and Orpah were both Moabites, but we do not know if they were converted before the marriage or not. Ruth was the wife of Mahlon, and Orpah was the wife of Chilion.

Ruth 1:5–9

In the ancient world of the Bible, women had few rights and even fewer ways to provide for themselves. Three childless widows living without a male relative to care for them would quickly become destitute. By saying Naomi's two sons and husband had died and left her alone, the writer begins a theme that continues throughout the story of Naomi's being "empty."

When Naomi heard that the famine was over in Judah, she decided to return to her homeland, perhaps thinking that there she could find relatives who would provide for her. The Hebrew text emphasizes the fact that the Lord's grace had once more returned to Judah.

At first Orpah and Ruth decided to accompany Naomi. Naomi praised them for the love, fidelity, and care they had given her and her sons, but she worried about how they would find husbands. She may have also been worried about how these foreign women would be accepted in Judah and how they would find enough sustenance for the three of them. Thus, she begged them to return to their families where they could find new husbands to care for them.

Ruth 1:10–13

The Mosaic law required that a brother or near male relative of a deceased man marry his widow in order to save or redeem the woman from the devastating consequences of widowhood. By marrying her, the kinsman agreed to protect her, provide progeny for the deceased man, and ensure property remained in the family. This was called the levirate law of marriage. The relative who married the widow was considered a “kinsman-redeemer,” or in Hebrew, a *go‘el* (see Deuteronomy 25:5–10.) This word is also sometimes translated as “avenger.”

Naomi explained that she had no husband and even if she did, she was too old to bear more sons for Ruth and Orpah to marry under the levirate law. And even if she could bear sons, it would be a long time before they were of marriageable age. Naomi asserted that even the Lord’s grace had left her—again emphasizing the fact that she had been emptied or that she felt left alone and abandoned.

Ruth 1:14–18

At first Orpah and Ruth resisted Naomi’s pleadings, but finally Orpah agreed to return to her family. Ruth, however, swore her allegiance to Naomi in the name of Israel’s God and bore a strong testimony of her desire to remain with Naomi and live forever as a covenant Israelite. When Naomi saw how steadfast and selfless Ruth was, she allowed her to return to the lands of Judah with her.

Bethlehem means “house of bread,” and Naomi, having left the land of promise while there was famine, returned to the house of bread when God’s favor returned bread to the land.

Ruth 1:19–22

When Naomi returned to Bethlehem she was warmly welcomed. She declared that she was no longer Naomi, meaning “my delight,” but should be called Mara, which means “bitterness,” because God had made her life bitter.

Naomi complained that when she left Bethlehem she had been full, but she was now returning empty. The rest of the story shows how the empty Naomi became full once more and that the Lord had not abandoned her but was preparing blessings for her even though she thought He had “dealt very bitterly” with her.

In ancient Israel, the barley harvest took place in April and May. The wheat harvest occurred a few weeks later. The fact that the women arrived at harvesttime reinforces the theme of Naomi’s coming at a time when she could be filled once more.

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