

Ruth

Chapter 1

Naomi Widowed

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. 3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, 5 and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

1:1 *when the judges ruled.* Probably from c. 1380 to c. 1050 B.C. By mentioning the judges, the author calls to mind that period of Israel's apostasy, moral degradation and oppression. (CSB)

The events took place within an 11-year period during the time of the judges. Ruth was likely written during David's reign (c 1009–970 BC). (TLSB)

According to the book of Judges, this period of Israel's history was marked by religious and moral degeneracy, chaos, national disunity, and oppression by foreigners. But in contrast to the accounts there of tribes and the nation, defeats and victories, the book of Ruth deals with one family. As Ruth 1:1–5 portrays one tragedy after another, the essence of drama confronts the readers and hearers. Drawn into the story's tension of a family faced with extinction, we find ourselves asking, Can they possibly survive? Will God come to their aid? (CC)

famine. Not mentioned in Judges. (CSB)

An affliction threatened by the Lord, Deut. 28, 22-24, and sent from time to time as a punishment of Israel's iniquity in committing idolatry. (Kretzmann)

Recorded famines were comparatively seldom in the account of Israel's history, but certainly they were not unusual. For the rains that came in the three winter months have always been uncertain and often insufficient. Bethlehem had fruitful land for wheat, barley, olives, almonds, and grapes, and usually received sufficient rainfall. Its name means "house of bread (food)," that is, "granary." But, being situated on the eastern slope of the watershed of the Judean hills, it may receive less rainfall than elsewhere. The higher plateau of Moab can receive rain from clouds that fail to water the hills of Judah. Thus, drought and famine might occur in Israel without affecting Moab (or Philistia, Gen 26:1; 2 Ki 8:1–2). Ironically, in Ruth 1:1 an Israelite family is forced to leave Bethlehem ("house of bread/food"), which had no food for them, and travel for food to the land of the Moabites, who had refused to offer food to the Israelites on their way to Canaan (Deut 23:3-4). (CC)

Israelite farmers lived very near the level of subsistence, so a few harvest failures could bring them to ruin. If a drought lasted for several years, a famine would result, as happened for three and a half years in the time of Elijah (1 Ki 17:1; 18:1–2; Lk 4:25; James 5:17) and seven years in the days of Elisha (2 Ki 8:1–2). However, it is possible that the famine in Ruth, which lasted for at least ten years (Ruth 1:4), may have been instigated by the devastation of all crops and cattle during the seven-year oppression of Israel by the Midianites (Judg 6:1–6; 8:28) ca. 1210–1190 B.C. Other less likely situations for the events of Ruth

are during the judgeship of Ehud after he had led the defeat of the oppressing Moabites and the subjection of Moab (Judg 3:12–30) ca. 1330–1310, or during the oppression of the Ammonites and Philistines (Judg 10:6–9) ca. 1125–1100. (CC)

That the famine “occurred ... in the land” (Ruth 1:1) is an implication in Scripture that it took place with God’s permission and to advance his plan for his people. What good might God be able to bring out of the misfortune (see Gen 50:20) of this famine? (CC)

Bethlehem in Judah. David’s hometown (1Sa 16:18). Bethlehem (the name suggests “house of food”) is empty. (CSB)

Means “the house of bread”; ironic in a time of famine. (TLSB)

The original Israelite audience hearing the story of Ruth would have remembered the immorality and deaths in the account of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 and also the idolatry, immorality, and violence of two other accounts concerning Bethlehemites: the idolatrous Levite (Judges 17–18) and a Levite whose harlotrous concubine is raped and dies after the homosexual rape of the Levite is foiled (Judges 19), provoking civil war against the tribe of Benjamin (Judges 20). In the era of the judges “there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in one’s own eyes” (Judg 17:6; 21:25). Beginning as Ruth does, would this account be another tragic story of lawlessness and godlessness? (CC)

Moab – Moab was at times an enemy of Israel, but at this time it seems to have been open for the family of Elimelech. In stark contrast to the gracious God of Israel was Chemosh, the “abominable god of Moab” (1 Kg 17:7; 2 Kgs 23:13; Jer 48:7, 14; Num 21:29).. Chemosh was also associated with the neighboring Ammonites (Jud 11:25) and likely was related Ammonite god Molech, to whom children were sacrificed. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 5, Part 4)

During a famine, Elimelech led his family to more inviting agricultural prospects. There is nothing wrong in his move to Moab. To escape famine, Abraham went to Egypt, Isaac went to Gerar of the Philistines, and Jacob went to Egypt at God’s command (Gn 46:1–7). To avoid Saul’s rampage, David hid his parents in Moab (1Sm 22:3–5). (TLSB)

Why should Elimelech have wanted to go to Moab? For the Moabites were descended from Lot through an incestuous relationship (Gen 19:30–38). Further, Moab became an enemy of Israel, for their King Balak attempted to have Israel cursed (Numbers 22–24); their women enticed Israelite men into immorality and idolatry (Num 25:1–3); and they oppressed Israel for eighteen years (Judg 3:12–14). There is an inversion of normalcy here: the “House of Bread” (Bethlehem) is struck by famine while the enemy Moab becomes an asylum. Similarly, David later sent his parents to Moab for refuge from King Saul (1 Sam 22:3–4). (CC)

Naomi, upon her return to Bethlehem, may appear to allow that her tragic experience in Moab was punishment from God for having forsaken his land to avoid his discipline (Ruth 1:20–21; see also 1:13). However, the author nowhere implies any judgment upon Elimelech and his family. Instead, he seems intentionally to compare this experience with that of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who left the promised land under duress as refugees because of a famine: Abraham and Jacob went to Egypt and Isaac to Philistine Gerar (Gen 12:10; 26:1; 41:56–42:2; 47:1–6). Indeed, the LORD encouraged Isaac to stay in Gerar (Gen 26:2–6) and Jacob to travel to Egypt (Gen 46:3–4), and all three were specially blessed in the land of their sojourn. The intention was always to sojourn only for the duration of the famine (cf. NIV: “went to live for a while,” Ruth 1:1). And a husband and father has a primary duty to provide for his family (see Gen 42:1–2). (CC)

Literally, "in the fields"; for the entire territory was conceived to have been divided into fields for agricultural purposes. (Kretzmann)

It may well have been that importations of grain from Egypt were cut off by the hostility of the Philistines, and that the inhabitants of Judah, therefore, were almost obliged to turn to the country east of the Dead Sea, although the Moabites belonged to the ancient enemies of Israel. (Kretzmann)

1:2 Elimelech. Means "(My) God is King." (CSB)

Although not explicitly developed in the narrative, the name Elimelech ("my God is King") could have pricked the ears of the astute Israelite listener who knew that Bethlehem was the hometown of David, Israel's greatest king, who is the goal and last word at the end of the story (4:17, 22). Some two centuries after David, in the eighth century B.C., God revealed that Bethlehem would become the hometown of the Messiah/Christ, the "Ruler" whose origins are from eternity (Micah 5:2). It appears ironic that a man named Elimelech ("my God is King"), with a wife (Naomi, *Naomi*) whose name means "pleasant," must flee the land that is "pleasant" (*Naomi*, Gen 49:15) and where his God is King (Judg 8:23). (CC)

Ephrathites. Ephrathah was a name for the area around Bethlehem (see 4:11; Ge 35:19; 1Sa 17:12; Mic 5:2). (CSB)

David was an Ephrathite from Bethlehem (1Sm 17:12). (TLSB)

In Micah 5:2 (Matthew 2:6) "Bethlehem Ephrathah" is described as one of the "clans of Judah." (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 5, Part 4)

1:3 Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died. Naomi's emptying begins (see v. 21). (CSB)

Lit, "my God is King." The true God and King, the protector of widows (Ps 68:5), will provide for Naomi. (TLSB)

1:4 Took wives. Prospect of continuing the family line remained. (CSB)

Moabite wives. See Ge 19:36–37. Marriage with Moabite women was not forbidden, though no Moabite—or his sons to the tenth generation—was allowed to "enter the assembly of the LORD" (Dt 23:3). (CSB)

Intermarriage with Moabites was not prohibited as it was with the seven dispossessed peoples of Canaan: Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites (Dt 7:1–3). The Moabites and the Ammonites were the descendants of the incestuous union of Lot with his daughters (Gn 19:36–38). Moabites were not to enter the assembly of worshipers "even to the tenth generation" (Dt 23:3; Ne 13:1). (TLSB)

Ruth. The name sounds like the Hebrew for "friendship." Ruth is one of four women in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. The others are Tamar, Rahab and Bathsheba (Mt 1:3, 5–6). (CSB)

Tradition has linked "Ruth" with the Hbr word for "friend." (TLSB)

ten years – That was the total length of the sojourn of Naomi. Although the sojourn of this Jewish family in the Moabite country did not prove productive of the blessings which they had anticipated, as the undertaking evidently was not in accordance with the will of God, yet the result was one highly beneficial

to at least one of the Moabite women, so that, by God's merciful kindness, it served a great end. (Kretzmann)

1:5 Mahlon and Chilion – Mahlon is related to common words for “sickness and disease.” Chilion connects with “annihilation and end.” (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 5, Part 4)

Mahlon. † Ruth's husband (4:10). (CSB)

both died. Naomi's emptiness is complete: She has neither husband nor sons. She has only two young daughters-in-law, both of them foreigners and childless. (CSB)

Orpah and Ruth were probably no older than teenagers, for youthful marriages were common. It is a repeated theme in Scripture that what was intended as a short-term visit in a foreign land becomes a long-term sojourn (Jacob in Haran, Jacob's family and the subsequent generations of Israelites in Egypt, Moses in Midian, the Israelites in the wilderness). (CC)

God often lays a cross upon His children and chastises them severely, in order to bind them more securely to Himself. (Kretzmann)

1:1–5 Elimelech and his sons struggle during a famine and move to Moab to preserve their family. You, too, may struggle against unexpected changes in the economy or in your family. God gives you freedom in making family and business decisions, but He also gives you the blessings and guidance of His Holy Word. Whether you are prospering or struggling, look to the Word, wherein lies wisdom for this life and the promise of eternal life through Jesus. • Make my heart, Lord Jesus, captive to Your Word, which guides my family, my work, and my future. Amen. (TLSB)

Ruth's Loyalty to Naomi

6 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. 7 So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. 8 But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. 9 The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. 10 And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” 11 But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, 13 would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” 14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 15 And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” 16 But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” 18 And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

1:6 *the LORD had visited his people.* At several points in the account, God’s sovereign control of events is acknowledged (here; vv. 13, 21; 2:20; 4:12–15). (CSB)

God’s people see His providence in everything. God had remembered to give food, particularly to Bethlehem, “the house of bread.” (TLSB)

food. Bethlehem (“house of food”) again has food. (CSB)

The end of the famine in Judah promised the return to normal life (1:6). The LORD must have sent sufficient “early rain” in autumn to enable the planting of barley and wheat, and the crops would have grown well with the aid of the “latter rain” in spring (Deut 11:14), anticipating a good harvest (Ruth 1:22). (CC)

she arose with her daughter-in-law. Empty Naomi returns to the newly filled land of promise. (CSB)

For it was understood that the younger women were merely to accompany her for some distance, perhaps to the boundary of the country. (Kretzmann)

1:7 *return to the land of Judah* – As God provides sustenance for their livelihood, He will provide for Naomi’s future as well. Formerly, when Israelites left the Promised Land (e.g, Abraham and Isaac), they returned because of God’s promises. Ultimately, God’s promises regarding the land are fulfilled in Jesus, who gives all believers an eternal inheritance, “a better country, that is a heavenly one” (Heb 11:13-16). (TLSB)

1:8 *return.* Desolate Naomi repeatedly urges her daughters-in-law to return to their original homes in Moab (here; vv. 11–12, 15); she has nothing to offer them. (CSB)

Formula used in two other OT contexts (2Sm 2:6; 15:20). Naomi uses the personal name Yahweh, which refers to God’s involvement in human affairs. (TLSB)

deal kindly. Hbr *chesed*, which may be translated “in faithfulness.” The theme of faithfulness or kindness is central to the story and its application (cf 3:10). In showing kindness, the Lord’s ultimate aim is that His people repent and turn to Him. (TLSB)

1:9 *rest* – Humanly speaking, opportunity for this was bleak. (TLSB)

1:10 *will return with you* – They found the parting so hard that they preferred to stay with Naomi on her solitary walk through life. (Kretzmann)

The faith of Naomi and her sons inspired her foreign daughters-in-law to have faith in the God of Israel. (TLSB)

1:11-12 *Have I yet sons in my womb.* Hyperbole. Naomi was referring to levirate marriage (Lat *levir*, “brother-in-law”). Elimelech’s brother would be legally obligated to marry Naomi to perpetuate Elimelech’s name and posterity (vv 12–13). Naomi ironically described a legal and logical possibility that would never be fulfilled: following Dt 25:5–6, Naomi’s brother-in-law would marry her so that she could give birth to sons, who in due time would marry the two older widows Ruth and Orpah. (TLSB)

1:11 *sons...they may become your husbands.* Naomi alludes to the Israelite law (Dt 25:5–6) regarding levirate marriage (see also Mk 12:18–23), which was given to protect the widow and guarantee continuance of the family line. (CSB)

She was not pregnant with possible sons, who would then be able to perform the duty of levirs toward Ruth and Orpah, Deut. 25, 5; Gen. 38, 8. (Kretzmann)

By law (Genesis 38 and Deuteronomy 25:5) the Orpah and Ruth would have been entitled to marry other sons that Naomi might have borne. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 5, Part 4)

1:12 *I am too old.* Naomi can have no more sons; even her womb is empty. (CSB)

1:13 *exceedingly bitter to me* – Or, “much more bitter for me than for you.” Cf v. 20) (TLSB)

hand of the LORD HAS against me. Naomi affirmed God’s participation in the events. Her statement is a confession of faith and sorrowful resolve much like Job’s (Jb 1:21). (TLSB)

1:14 Orpah’s departure highlights the loyalty and selfless devotion of Ruth to her desolate mother-in-law. (CSB)

Naomi’s words convinced Orpah to seek security through her own efforts. Ruth was willing to face a life of poverty, lack of marriage, childlessness, and prejudice in Israel. She could not live without Naomi and the God of Israel, even if she was to be treated as a second-class citizen in the Promised Land. (TLSB)

1:15 *her gods.* The chief god of the Moabites was Chemosh. (CSB)

Orpah had believed and worshiped as her husband did. She now renounced her faith in the God of Israel, thinking she could better care for herself than could the Lord. (TLSB)

1:16 This classic expression of loyalty and love discloses the true character of Ruth. Her commitment to Naomi is complete, even though it holds no prospect for her but to share in Naomi’s desolation. For a similar declaration of devotion see 2Sa 15:21. (CSB)

where you go I will go – She was willing to promise her faithfulness for the future despite its uncertainty and lack of tangible hope. She committed herself to Naomi’s home, people, God and even her place of death and burial. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 5, Part 4)

1:17 *May the LORD do so to me.* Ruth, a Gentile, swears her commitment to Naomi in the name of Israel’s God, thus acknowledging him as her God (see v. 16). (CSB)

Common oath formula calling the Lord as witness (1Sm 14:44; 2Ki 6:31) (TLSB)

She even pledges her faithfulness with an invocation of the Lord (Yahweh), the God of Israel – not Chemosh, her own people’s god. Ruth had no idea what the future held, but the Lord had a plan which included a place for her among the ancestors of David and ultimately of Christ. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 5, Part 4)

She will not be swerved from her intention to cast her lot with that of Naomi. It was not the affection of a daughter to her natural mother nor that of a wife to the husband of her choice, but it was her love toward Naomi which had knit their hearts together. And the highest stage of the devotion which she yielded to Naomi for life was reached in the confession that she had found the God of Israel to be the true God, a fact which implied the highest unity of spirit. (Kretzmann)

1:18 Much like a present-day confirmand, Ruth satisfactorily confessed her faith in the Lord. Observing the faithfulness of Elimelech, Naomi, and Mahlon to the Lord and His covenant, Ruth was drawn to the God of Israel, forsaking her gods and people. (TLSB)

1:6–18 Ruth refuses to stay in Moab when Naomi determines to go back to Bethlehem, even though her sister-in-law stays in Moab. Ruth boldly confesses her faith in the Lord and her commitment to her family. What an incredible example of godly priorities: the Lord and family come first! • Thanks be to God that He put us first and made us family through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who crossed heaven and earth to save us. Amen. (TLSB)

Naomi and Ruth Return

19 So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?” 20 She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” 22 So Naomi 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.

1:19 *whole town was stirred* – More than 10 years had passed since Naomi had left in far better circumstances than when she returned (v 4). (TLSB)

1:20–21 Some scholars regard these verses as poetry. (TLSB)

1:20 *Naomi ... Mara*. In the ancient Near East a person’s name was often descriptive. (CSB)

Naomi is ashamed to return to Bethlehem without husband or sons. This shame is multiplied, for she knows she will remain childless, unable to provide sons for her daughters-in-law. (TLSB)

Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. Or, “has made me very bitter.” Naomi compares her experience in Moab to the Israelites’ bitter slavery in Egypt. (TLSB)

1:21 *full ... empty*. These words highlight the central theme of the story—how the empty Naomi becomes full again. (CSB)

testified against me. As with Job, there is no sin charged against Naomi in all her actions. At times, it appears that God is hidden and uncaring in a believer’s suffering (Is 45:15). But God is surely present to bring relief in His time. (TLSB)

1:22 *Ruth the Moabitess*. Several times the author reminds the reader that Ruth is a foreigner from a despised people (2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10; see 2:10). (CSB)

harvest. Harvesting grain in ancient Canaan took place in April and May (barley first, wheat a few weeks later; see 2:23). It involved the following steps: (1) cutting the ripened standing grain with hand sickles (Dt 16:9; 23:25; Jer 50:16; Joel 3:13)—usually done by men; (2) binding the grain into sheaves—usually done by women; (3) gleaning, i.e., gathering stalks of grain left behind (2:7); (4) transporting the sheaves to the threshing floor—often by donkey, sometimes by cart (Am 2:13); (5) threshing, i.e., loosening the grain from the straw—usually done by the treading of cattle (Dt 25:4; Hos 10:11), but sometimes by toothed threshing sledges (Isa 41:15; Am 1:3) or the wheels of carts (Isa 28:28); (6) winnowing—done by tossing the grain into the air with winnowing forks (Jer 15:7) so that the wind,

which usually came up for a few hours in the afternoon, blew away the straw and chaff (Ps 1:4), leaving the grain at the winnowing's feet; (7) sifting the grain (Am 9:9) to remove any residual foreign matter; (8) bagging for transportation and storage (Ge 42–44). Threshing floors, where both threshing and winnowing occurred, were hard, smooth, open places, prepared on either rock or clay and carefully chosen for favorable exposure to the prevailing winds. They were usually on the east side—i.e., downwind—of the village. (CSB)

Mar/Apr. Spring rains had passed. (TLSB)

at the beginning. Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem just as the renewed fullness of the land is beginning to be harvested—an early hint that Naomi will be full again. Reference to the barley harvest also prepares the reader for the next major scene in the harvest fields. (CSB)

1:19–22 Naomi confesses the bitterness she feels on returning to Bethlehem without her husband and sons. Yet Ruth is with her still. Like Naomi, Christians today seek to do their best when caring for loved ones. Intermittent times of suffering are used by God to humble us. In due time, God raises us up to see His mercy and to care more dearly. • Lord Jesus, when You act in ways we do not understand, direct us to our Baptism. There, You bound Yourself to us in forgiveness and love so that, like Naomi and Ruth, we will see Your deliverance in Your time. Amen. (TLSB)