

The Book of Ruth - Act 1

Today we're going to begin a journey through the Book of Ruth.

It has a similar number of words to Paul's letter to the Philippians that we have recently completed studying, it takes about 15 minutes to read from start to finish.

But there the similarity ends.

The letter to the Philippians is, the clue is in the title, a *letter*, originally written in Greek, to a small community of Christians living in the Roman Empire about 30 years after Jesus's death and resurrection.

It addresses specific situations and people, with the apostle Paul advising them on how to live out their Christian faith.

The Book of Ruth is a historical *story* centred around a Jewish woman, her Moabite daughter-in-law and a Jewish land owner who lived over a thousand years before Philippians was written, and *three thousand* years before today's message was composed.

But as we will see, humans haven't changed as much as we might think. As we travel through the Book of Ruth we will read about people who have the same needs, emotions and failings as we do.

In the Bible stories God often seems hidden, even hostile. And there may be times when this is true in our lives. It might be that some of us are going through it right now. To such people, the story of Ruth might be a comfort and an encouragement.

My hope is that as we study this book we will see how the God the Bible portrays does not always work in ways that we might expect, or desire.

That he is a God who works in and through our daily lives, and through the lives of the people around us, in ways that we often can't detect.

The Book of Ruth has a similar format to the kinds of stories we've read since we were children.

It has a beginning, and a middle, and an end.

It starts with a problem, this problem is addressed and then resolved.

But it is a very old story, from a different culture to ours. And because of this there are significant differences to the way it has been written compared to most modern stories.

I'm going to take some time listing some of these, if you remember them, great, but if you don't, I'll be highlighting their use throughout the talks.

The Book of Ruth subtly (and sometimes less subtly) interacts with other Bible books, including Deuteronomy, Judges, Samuel, Job, Proverbs and Genesis.

The Book of Ruth is carefully *structured*. It has a plot that moves from problem to resolution through a select group of characters.

The main story of the book is revealed in four 'acts', each conveniently corresponding to the four chapters in our modern Bible translations.

The authors of the Hebrew Bible *love repetition*, and they use it in a wide variety of ways to shape and frame their stories.

When I first began reading the Bible, I found the repetitive bits irritating. But I have gradually learned to appreciate and pay attention to them. To look for why they are there.

Another difference from most modern stories is that there isn't much *explanatory detail*. We are rarely told much about the style of people's clothes, what the buildings look like, or given descriptions of people's facial expressions.

Another thing to be looking out for in Bible is *allusion*. We all use allusion, even if we don't know what the word means. If I were to say to you, 'my daughter is a real Einstein', I would be using allusion. You would be aware that my daughter isn't the famous (dead) theoretical physicist. You *would* know that I was saying she was clever.

As I've already mentioned, the Book of Ruth interacts with other Bible books, and one of the ways it does this is by using allusion to phrases, characters, events and plot lines that are found in other parts of the Bible. It provides explanatory detail in a relational way.

First, as in most Hebrew literature, the meaning of people's names are often significant, as are words that rhyme or pun (which often gets obscured when translated from Hebrew into English).

Again, don't worry about trying to memorise this stuff. I'll be pointing out examples of this as we go through the story.

So, let's roll our sleeves up and get started on the first act.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

Ruth 1:1-5

The opening lines of the Book of Ruth reassure us that we are in the hands of a master story teller.

- It introduces the main characters.
- It sets out the challenges they are going to face.
- It introduces the relationship between the main characters.
- It sets up one of the story's major plot-twists.

The story is set in the time when the Israelites had settled in Canaan, what we now know as Israel. It is often labelled ‘the time of the judges’, a time when Israel had (once again) drifted away from the worship of the God who had rescued them from slavery in Egypt.

Elimelek and his family lived in Bethlehem (yes, *that* Bethlehem) a town situated just south of what is now called Jerusalem.

Remember how I told you that names are important.

Bethlehem means ‘house of bread’, but as the story opens, a famine has struck the area, meaning there is no food in the ‘house of bread’.

As a result, Elimelek and his family decide to move to Moab, a country bordering Israel on the other side of the Red Sea.

Things do not go well.

In brief phrases we are told that Elimelek dies. That his two sons Mahlon (the word sounds like ‘sickly’ in Hebrew) and Kilion (the Hebrew sounds like ‘failing’) marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. And then, after about ten years, the two sons die, leaving Naomi with her two childless daughters-in-law.

And so the scene is set. Three widows, with no means of support face a very uncertain future.

When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

Ruth 1:6-7

News reaches Moab that the famine in Israel has ended. Naomi decides to return to her home town. Her daughters-in-law go with her, which is strange because widows would usually return to live with their parents.

We are not told the reason why they went with Naomi, but we do know that three unaccompanied female widows trekking 60 miles over the mountainous trails from Moab to Bethlehem would have been extremely vulnerable to both wild animals and bandits.

Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, ‘Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.’

Ruth 1:8-9a

‘Out of the blue’, Naomi tells Orpah and Ruth to return to their parents.

Maybe she has come to her senses, realising how dangerous the journey is going to be, and how much more difficult it will be for these two Moabite widows to find a husband in Israel.

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud and said to her, ‘We will go back with you to your people.’

But Naomi said, ‘Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me – even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons – would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me!’

Ruth 1:9b-13

The first response of Orpah and Ruth is to insist that they will stay with Naomi. This is the expected ‘polite response’, even if both of them really did want to return to Moab.

Naomi responds with a two-pronged argument.

The first one might seem strange to us. Naomi is probably referring to the book of Deuteronomy, which makes arrangements for what to do when a woman is widowed.

If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

Deuteronomy 25:5-6

If a man died without having produced a male heir, his brother was expected to marry the widow, ensuring both her security and that if she has children by the brother, they will inherit the family name and land.

Naomi is being deliberately ridiculous, demonstrating to Orpah and Ruth just how stupid it is for them to stay with her, and how much better it will be for them to return to their Moabite homes.

Then Naomi clinches the argument by pointing out that she is not the kind of person that Orpah and Ruth need to be with. That Naomi's God has turned against her.

At this they wept aloud again.

Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. 'Look,' said Naomi, 'your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.'

Ruth 1:14-15

Naomi's words persuade Orpah, she kisses her mother-in-law, and returns to her home town.

But Ruth clings to Naomi.

Naomi insists that Ruth joins Orpah.

But Ruth has made her decision, and in what has become one of the most famous passages in the Bible, she says...

‘Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.’

Ruth 1:16b-17

The layout of the text in most Bible translations obscures that Ruth is speaking in verse...

*Don’t urge me to leave you
or to turn back from you.
Where you go I will go,
and where you stay I will stay.
Your people will be my people
and your God my God.
Where you die I will die,
and there I will be buried.
May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely,
if even death separates you and me.*

each pair of lines reinforces the other,

*Don’t urge me to **leave you**
or to **turn back from you**.
Where you go I will go,
and **where you stay I will stay**.
Your people will be my people
and **your God my God**.
Where you die I will die,
and **there I will be buried**.*

And this is more than just beautiful verse, this is Ruth making a solemn promise to Naomi, Naomi's people, and Naomi's peoples' God.

Each part of Ruth's vow is carefully chosen.

- The vow to stay with Naomi.
- The vow to join her people.
- The vow to adopt Naomi's God.
- The vow for this to be forever.

And it closes with

*May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely,
if even death separates you and me.*

In the absence of human witnesses, Ruth calls on Naomi's God to seal and enforce her promise. She does not ask Naomi to make any commitments to her, and Naomi doesn't offer any.

Many of the original hearers of this story would recognise the kind of promise that Ruth is making. Ruth is making a *covenant*. A solemn promise to commit herself to Naomi, Naomi's God and Naomi's people.

Remember I talked about how the Old Testament authors use allusion, and connect what they're writing to other Bible stories, well here we see both happening.

In the book of 1 Kings Ahab made a covenant with Jehoshaphat...

So Ahab asked Jehoshaphat, 'Will you go with me to fight against Ramoth Gilead?'

Jehoshaphat replied to the king of Israel, 'I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses.'

1 Kings 22:4

Note the phrase, *'I am as you are, my people as your people'*

The parallel with the Book of Ruth is striking...

‘where you stay I will stay, your people will be my people.’

Ruth is making a personal, legal commitment to Naomi, a covenant like the ones that are made in many other parts of the scriptures. A more serious version of when a child says ‘cross my heart and hope to die’.

Ruth is here committing her life to Naomi, to Naomi’s God and Naomi’s people, for the rest of her life.

Earlier I said that the Bible stories don’t always give us the fine details.

We are not told whether Naomi is impressed by this. More likely she is frustrated that Ruth is not going to do what she asked her to, and that she is going to be stuck with looking after this Moabite woman.

And so Naomi and Ruth trudge the 60 miles to Bethlehem.

So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, ‘Can this be Naomi?’

Ruth 1:19

Their arrival causes quite a stir. There are people who remember Naomi from when she lived in the Bethlehem, but they are surprised that she has returned, and just how much she has aged.

Exhausted from the journey, worn down by all the tragedies in her life, Naomi is in no mood to engage in pleasant conversation. You can imagine the sadness and anger in her voice as she spits out the words...

‘Don’t call me Naomi... call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.’

Ruth 1:20-21

Naomi’s name means ‘pleasantness’, but she sees very little that is pleasant in her life right now.

And having returned to Bethlehem, the people she remembers seem to be doing a lot of gawping at her and talking about her, rather than offering to help her in any way.

To Naomi, it seems that God has cursed her life. So she chooses a different name, 'Mara', which means bitterness.

As I said earlier, in the Bible stories, names often have significance. Naomi's sons were called Mahlon and Kilion which, as we discovered at the beginning of the talk, mean 'sickly' and 'failing'... names which turned out to be sadly appropriate.

Here we are being asked, 'will Naomi or Mara prove to be the appropriate name for this woman?'.

Naomi's speech carries four accusations.

- the Almighty has made my life very bitter
- I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty
- The LORD has afflicted me
- The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me

Mic drop.

As we travel through the Book of Ruth, let's ask God the Holy Spirit to help us to get involved in the story, not just reading the words but putting ourselves in the place of the characters.

Imagine yourself as Naomi. You have lost everything. All your dreams are shattered. It seems as if God has turned his back on you. Your life is bitter and empty, your future is precarious.

The first chapter ends with the two women walking into Bethlehem.

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

Ruth 1:22

Think of yourself staring down the shocked crowd, too angry and tired for tears, before grabbing Ruth's arm and walking into the town, not even sure of where you're going to stay.

The Book of Ruth, like so many Bible books, is not just a list of dos and don'ts, it is a story about real people facing real situations.

And often God seems at best hidden, and in Naomi's case, actively hostile towards her.

And there may be times when this will be true in our lives. It might be that some of us are going through it right now.

And so the first act ends on a cliff hanger. Naomi and Ruth have returned to Bethlehem, the 'house of bread', just as the barley harvest has begun.

What will the second act reveal?