

Women of God Study
Naomi and Ruth

By Linda Wilson

God Uses Ordinary People

The Book

The events in the Book of Ruth cover the same period as the Book of Judges. The last few incidents of idolatry and violence in the Book of Judges begin in Bethlehem in Judah (Judges 17:7-9; 19:1,18). It was written not by an eyewitness but long after the events had occurred; after David had already made "a name in Bethlehem" as Israel's great king (4:11, 17). The editors of the Hebrew Bible grouped the book of Ruth with 5 festal scrolls (megilloth) each of which were read at annual festivals. The Book of Ruth was read at the Festival of Weeks, marking the end of wheat harvest. It is one of two books which are named after women. Ruth was the great grandmother of David and one of the four women named in the Messianic line of Christ. Ruth was a Moabitess (1:4), a descendant of Lot, who had a great love for her mother-in-law (1:16). In the Book there is a focus on Bethlehem - It is believed the focus is to show how important Bethlehem was to God's Plan.

1. The story begins as Naomi's family leaves Bethlehem.
2. Then later, Naomi returns to Bethlehem with Ruth.
3. At the end of the story, the wishes of the people of Bethlehem are that the son to be born to Ruth would bring fame (a name) to Bethlehem which points to David (1 Sam 17:12) and later, to Jesus.

A Type

Many scholars believe that Boaz, as Kinsman, is a type of Christ - our redeemer. The Hebrew word for "kinsman" is "goel" or next of kin. The law of the kinsman is found in Leviticus.25, Numbers 35, Deuteronomy 19,25.

A Kinsman:

1. Must be willing to redeem - Leviticus. 25:25-26; Galatians 4:4-5
2. Must have the right to redeem - Leviticus 25:48-49; Ruth 3:12-13
3. Must have the means (or power) to redeem - Ruth 4:4-6

Just as Boaz became the kinsman to Ruth - Christ our Redeemer paid the price for us!

There are also many who believe that Naomi, "the woman" the sole survivor of her family and the remnant who returned, is symbolic of the remnant whom God will recover from many nations (Isaiah 11:11; Jeremiah 23:3).

Moab

In days of the Judges, Moab was an independent kingdom east of the Dead Sea. It extended from the Brook of Zered, not far from the southern end of the Dead Sea to a few kilometers north of the sea. Running north and south was a narrow strip of well-watered land that produced fine crops of grain.

Negative View of Moab

Moab was considered to be an enemy of Israel (Numbers 22; Deuteronomy 2:29). Moabites were excluded from the assembly of Israel forever (Deuteronomy 23:3-4). The people of Moab were also referred to as "people of Chemosh" because of their idolatry (Chemosh was one of their gods - Numbers 21:29). The prophets of Israel spoke of Moab's pride and arrogance (Isaiah 16:6; Jeremiah 48:29-30; Amos 2:1-2; Zephaniah 2:8-9).

***These attitudes suggest a great risk to Bethlehemites living, even temporarily, in the land of Moab or to the Moabite who chose to live in Israel.

Positive View of Moab

God gave land to the Moabites because they were part of His plan (Deuteronomy 2:9). Moses died and possibly was buried in Moab (Deuteronomy 34:5-6). David, while being pursued by King Saul, placed his mother and father in the care of the king of Moab (1 Samuel 22:3-4). The prophets of Israel lamented over the devastation of Moab by Assyria or Babylon (Isaiah 16:9-11; Jeremiah 48:31-36)

Background History

Many years had passed since the Israelites had crossed the Jordan and taken possession of the Promised Land. They had been a nomadic people but as they established their own settlements they discarded the nomadic way of life and adopted a new way of life - an agricultural way of life. However, all was not well in the land. The northern tribes were almost constantly at war with the cities that were controlled by the various peoples that lived in Canaan, and they frequently had to defend themselves against invasions by people from the East, the Ammonites and Midianites.

The story of Ruth, the Moabitess, occurred "in the days when the judges governed", (after the death of Joshua and in the early days of Samuel) when violence against women, vengeance, idolatry, death and disintegration were widespread. However, this Book shows to us that God's hand was at work. The period of the Judges covered from approximately 1370 BC to around 1041BC when Samuel, serving as the last of the judges, anointed Saul as Israel's king and the reign of the kings began.

The period of the judges was marked by a cycle of disobedience - defeat and distress - crying out by the people - deliverance and peace - then the cycle repeated again. The people did what they wanted, worshiped the way they wanted, made decisions based on their own desires and their own opinions. It was a time when Judges 21:25 states, "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" - letting himself be the judge of right and wrong; doing what they thought - not what God said was right.

While the tribes on the northern end of Canaan fought battles against the people of the land, the tribes on the southern end of the land battled another enemy - the climate. These tribes occupied a rugged part of the land west of the Dead Sea. Normally, the land was fertile enough to sustain fields of wheat and barley, grape vineyards and groves of olive and fig trees. But occasionally the rains failed, the crops withered and there was a famine.

Famines in Israel occurred from time to time throughout the Scriptures. In Deuteronomy 28 there is a description of God's blessings for obedience and His curses for disobedience. One of the curses was that there would be no rain and no crops (Deuteronomy 28:15-20, 24).

God sometimes uses famine as a way to discipline His people. The first recorded famine occurred in the life of Abraham and resulted in his move to Egypt for a short time (Genesis 12:10; 13:1). Isaac experienced a famine and the Lord instructed him not to go to Egypt (Genesis 26:1-6). Famine also occurred in the days of Jacob while Joseph ruled over Egypt and resulted in the move of his father (Jacob) there (Genesis 42:1-5; 47:1-27). They stayed for over 400 years (Exodus 12:40). Famine in the Book of Ruth links this story with the previous stories of the forefathers of Israel. It is believed that the events of the book of Ruth took place during a 10 to 12 year period of time between 1150 and 1100 BC.

The Book of Ruth

Please open your scriptures and read each selection as you go through the commentary.

1:1-2 It was during a famine that a Judean man named Elimelech, who lived in the town of Bethlehem, fled the land with his wife, Naomi, and their sons Mahlon and Chilion. The family traveled to Moab, a kingdom on the eastern borders of the Dead Sea. This was a distance of about 30 or 40 miles.

1:3-4 A Hebrew marriage to a Moabite was not prohibited by law; in Deuteronomy 7:1-3 The Lord prohibited marriage to any of the seven nations found in Canaan (Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Perizites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites).

Who were the Moabites?

The Moabites were descended from the union of Lot and his oldest daughter after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:36-43). The Moabites settled in the land east of the Dead Sea in what is today known as the country of Jordan. Many years after Israel came out of Egypt, Balak king of Moab hired Balaam to pronounce a curse on Israel. But Balaam, obeying God, refused to curse Israel. However, Balaam later influenced Balak in directing the Moabites to intermarry with the Israelites so that the children of Israel might be led to commit idolatry and face the eventual wrath of the Lord (Numbers 31:16; Revelation 2:14). As a result, Moab caused Israel to stumble into immorality and idolatry (Numbers 15:1-8, 31:13-16). The sins of idolatry and immorality caused Israel to draw away from the Lord. When Israel came into the promised land - the land of Canaan, the Lord instructed Israel to leave the Moabites alone (Deuteronomy 2:8-9). Their land was to remain their possession, not the possession of Israel. Also

Deuteronomy 23:3-4 made it clear that no Moabite or Ammonite was to enter the assembly of the Lord unto the tenth generation (around 1200 BC) because of the way they refused to help the Israelites when they came out of Egypt, and for leading Israel into immorality (Numbers 25). The events of Ruth occurred after 1150 BC.

1:5 After 10 years in the land of Moab, the two sons of Naomi died. Remember Elimelech moved his family - trying to take care of them in the midst of a famine. Could it be that the famine and the move put a strain on his family? Elimelech died and in verse 5 we read that Mahlon and Chilion also died. The Hebrews placed great importance on a child's name - they named their babies based on what they desired for the child - something that happened in their family - future or past. The name Moses means "drawn out of the water."

The name Mahlon means "weak" or "sick" and Chilion means "failing" or "pining." Maybe there was a health problem in their families or they were sick babies. This could be a condition within their family that the stress of the famine aggravated. These deaths were devastating, especially devastating to a woman during this time in history. A woman depended on her family for her living. With no husband, a woman would face many hardships unless other family members stepped in to provide for and protect. Naomi, Ruth and Orpah, faced a great dilemma unless someone came along to help them.

1:6-7 It was the right time for Naomi's decision to return to her people. News had come to Naomi that the Lord whom she believed had brought disaster had visited His people and given them food.

1:8-10 On their way back to Israel, Naomi urged her two daughters-in-laws to return to their own homes where they could find security and the opportunity to remarry and raise a family. Their response to her was "Surely we will return with thee unto thy people."

1:11-13 Naomi is referring to a "leviratic marriage", an Israelite custom concerning remarriage after the death of one's husband. In other words, at this time in her life, Naomi could not provide a husband for them. To do this meant that she would have to marry, give birth to two sons, and Orpah and Ruth would have to wait until the sons grew to an adult age before they could marry and have children of their own.

What is a leviratic marriage? Deuteronomy 25:5-6

A leviratic marriage was a family and inheritance custom among the Jewish people. It was not a Jewish law but considered to be an act of love. The custom of this marriage specified that when a male Israelite died without leaving a male heir, his nearest relative should marry the widow in order to continue the family name of the deceased brother. The term "levirate" means "husband's brother." If brothers on the father's side of the same family lived in the same area and one of them died childless, the widow was not to marry a stranger; the surviving brother was to take her as his wife. The firstborn son by her would take the name of the deceased brother, and thus the name was continued in

the family lineage. Another leviratic was written about in Genesis 38:8 and the question asked by the Sadducees to Jesus in Matthew 22:23-28 was about leviratic marriage.

1:14 While Orpah chose to go home - Ruth chose to cleave unto Naomi (cleave is the past tense of cleave which means to stick together like glue).

1:15-18 The reference "unto her gods" refers to the Moabites worship of a god they called Chemosh, and their religion was particularly vile. Worship rites sometimes included child sacrifice (I Kings 11:7, 2 Kings 23:10-11). Naomi now knew that Ruth was indeed determined to stay with her. Many people compare Ruth's decision to leave her home and country with that of Abraham's. However, Abraham was commanded to leave while Ruth's was a decision that she made. She accepted a future of insecurity because of her love for Naomi and her faith in Naomi's God.

1:19-21 From Moab, the two women traveled back to Bethlehem where the people of the town met them. Many of them remembered Naomi but seemed surprised by her appearance. Upon her arrival in Bethlehem, Naomi gave an unpleasant account of the last (approximately) 12 years of her life.

1. Bitterness of soul - The name Naomi means pleasant while the Hebrew name Mara means bitter. Her once pleasant life had become bitter. She speaks of going from full to empty of being afflicted rather than blessed.

2. Affliction - the Lord hath testified against me

3. Calamity - the Lord hath afflicted me

Naomi is wrapped up in her own suffering - there is no mention of Ruth and what she has given up!

1:19-23 Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest in April.

2:1 There is a mention, by the author of this book, of a relative of Naomi's husband, a man named Boaz.

2:2 With no husband to support them, Ruth willingly took upon her the responsibility of Naomi and offered to go and glean in the fields behind the reapers. This shows how poor they were.

What is gleaning?

In the harvesting, men would work in the fields gathering handfuls of the grain and cutting through the stalk with sickles. The bunches of grain were then bound into bundles called sheaves. As the men worked quickly, some of stalks fell to the ground. These stalks were allowed to remain on the ground, where the poor people were allowed to glean or "gather" the stalks. Also the edges of the fields where the sickles could not easily reach were left unharvested and the poor were allowed to gather from that area of the field as well. While it was the poor that were allowed to glean from the fields, the Hebrews believed that there was "grace in gleaning." Leviticus. 19:9-10; 22-23 and

Deuteronomy 14:19-22 make provision for the foreigner, the fatherless, the poor, and the widow to glean in the fields of Israel. This was considered to be a provision of grace because the Israelites had been shown grace by the Lord when He delivered them from Egyptian slavery.

Also gleaning was hard work. Ruth had to bend down for long hours to pick up the stalks of grain left by the reapers. At day's end she had to beat out the heads to separate the kernels from the husks. She would then collect the grain in her shawl and carry it over her shoulders into Bethlehem. No easy task!

Note: Although verse 2 mentions ears of corn, Strong's Hebrew Dictionary defines Biblical corn as "standing grain." Verse 23 tells us Ruth gleaned "unto the end of barley and of wheat harvest." Barley and wheat are both standing grains.

2:3 Coincidence?? The field in which Ruth gleaned from was a field belonging to Boaz - the kinsmen of Naomi's husband Elimelech.

2:4 In this verse, we see a little glimpse of the kind of man that Boaz was. He greeted his men "the Lord be with you." These words during this time in history, when people were living in ungodly ways - show us that Boaz had a belief in God. He also had workers who recognized God in their lives.

2:5-7 In the field, Boaz saw a young woman he had not seen before. But the workers knew who Ruth was, probably Ruth told the overseer who she was when asking permission to glean in the fields.

2:8-9 Again, we see a little more of the character of Boaz. Boaz urged her to stay in his field to reap with his young women - offering her protection. And when she was thirsty - water was available for her to drink.

2:10 Her response was of humility and gratitude. She also acknowledged that as a foreigner she had no rights in the land, but was grateful for the gracious provision and protection that Boaz offered.

2:11-12 Boaz told Ruth what he had heard about her and he used an expression "under whose wings thou art come to trust." This expression conveys a close relationship of protection, provision and blessing. Several times it is used in scriptures as a young bird under the wing of its mother. In Psalms it is used as one seeking refuge in the Lord (Psalm 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4). This one of the characteristics we should have in our relationship with the Lord. The Lord is our refuge and He can cover us with His wings so that we are truly protected.

Boaz knew of the death of her husband, of her servant-like attitude toward Naomi, and of her commitment to Naomi. He knew that she was a Moabite and that in staying with Naomi she had accepted the Hebrew people as her people and their God as her God. Boaz was offering his wish for the Lord's blessings upon her.

2:13-14 The vinegar was used to help quench thirst.

2:15-16 Boaz instructed the young men to allow her to glean among the full sheaves without reproaching her and to purposefully let some of their grain fall that she might pick it up.

2:17-18 She gleaned in the field unto evening and took home about an ephah of barley- which was equal 30 to 40 pounds or between 10 to 14 kg. She carried it home to Naomi along with the parched grain from lunch, showing that she had indeed had a good day.

2:19-20 Seeing the amount that had been gathered, it was evident to Naomi that this was no ordinary day. This would have been enough food for 10 to 14 days for one person or 5 to 6 days for 2 people. A day's wages for the reapers according to documents from this time, would have been about 1 kg. of grain. Naomi saw Boaz's kindness as well as the Lord's blessing.

The meaning of the word kinsman - is redeemer; close relative or kinsman-redeemer. The duties of a kinsman-redeemer could include avenging a murder (Numbers 35:19 - he is called the avenger of blood); marrying his brother's widow to raise up a son in the name of the deceased brother (Deuteronomy 25:5-10); redeeming any family land that had been sold (Leviticus 25:25); redeeming a family member sold into slavery (Leviticus 25:47-49); or caring for any of the family members in need (Leviticus 25:35). Naomi knew that Boaz was one of their kinsmen, who could serve as a redeemer to Ruth and their family.

2:21-23 Ruth told Naomi that Boaz had told her to stay close until the harvest had ended. Naomi agreed that Ruth should stay in the field of Boaz working through the barley harvest (April) and into the wheat harvest (June).

3:1-2 Now that the work had ended in the harvest fields, the time for threshing was at hand. Naomi spoke to Ruth about seeking rest or security for her through Boaz the kinsman. She told Ruth that Boaz would be winnowing barley that night on the threshing floor. Winnowing is the process of removing the chaff from the grain. As the grain is poured or tossed in a current of wind, the light chaff blows away while the heavier grain is retained.

3:3-4 Because Ruth was not familiar with the Hebrew customs, Naomi gave her instructions. Naomi told Ruth to go to the threshing floor where Boaz would spend the night (protecting his grain). She instructed her to follow a Mid-eastern custom of uncovering the man's feet as a way of making known to him that she was available to be married - to be covered or protected by him as her husband (Ezekiel 16:8.)

3:5-9 She followed Naomi's instructions and went to the threshing floor. After Boaz had eaten, he went to sleep next to his grain (this was the way in which they protected their grain from theft). Ruth came in and uncovered his feet and waited. After Ruth identifies herself she asked Boaz to take her under his wing or to marry her.

3:10 Boaz recognized her kindness toward him. Ruth could have sought a younger man to be her husband; instead she came to Boaz who was older, desiring him as her kinsman - the one who would fulfill the levirate marriage. It is this scripture that causes many scholars to believe that Boaz was considerably older than Ruth possibly because he was so flattered. There is no mention if Boaz was a widower (probable) or single all his life (unlikely). Jewish legend speculates that the funeral of his wife coincided with the arrival of Ruth and Naomi from Moab.

3:11-13 Boaz acknowledged that he was a close relative but that there was one closer relative. But if that closer relative chose not to fulfill the role of kinsman, he (Boaz) would fulfill the requirements. Again, Boaz was apparently a Godly man because in making this commitment to Ruth he also made a commitment with the Lord "as the Lord liveth."

3:14-15 Ruth laid at his feet until morning when he gave her barley and she went home. Apparently the threshing floor was no place for a woman to be either by custom or law. ("Six measures" was believed to have been between 20 to 40 kg or 50 to 85 lbs.)

3:16-18 Ruth went home to Naomi and told her all that had happened and the promise that Boaz had made. She also showed her the grain he had given her. Naomi then instructed Ruth to wait patiently on Boaz. Upon her arrival at home, Naomi asks what seems to us as a rather odd question "Who art thou my daughter?" It is believed that this is a phrase meaning the same as "How did things go with you, my daughter."

4:1 Boaz set out to do all he could to redeem the land of Elimelech and the hand of Ruth. He went to the city gate, which was the custom of the land. If you lived in the city and wanted to meet someone or wanted someone to see you, you went to the city gate; if you were in a rural area, you went to the well.

4:2 Boaz then called for 10 elders of the city, men who could witness the transaction between Boaz and the close relative. It was the 10 elders at the gate that made this transaction legal. There were others who witnessed it but the 10 made it legal.

4:3-4 Boaz then presented the matter, whereupon the man agreed to redeem the land. At first the kinsman would redeem it thinking that he could get the profit from the harvest of the land, while also keeping it in the family. In this way, he would be acting honorably according to the family solidarity to "maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance."

4:5 But in order to redeem the land he must also agree to marry Ruth the Moabitess, as was the custom. But the presence of Naomi's daughter-in-law, the widow of her son Mahlon, made this more than a matter of redemption of land. It also meant saving the family of Elimelech (Mahlon's father) from extinction by begetting a son thru the levitarite marriage to Ruth.

4:6 The man refused because of the jeopardy in which it would put his own inheritance. The man then offered his right of redemption to Boaz. The son of this marriage, (kinsman and Ruth) would have the rights to the land, so that later, when grown, the kinsman would have to return the land to its rightful heir, the son. This explains why he changed his mind because it would mar his inheritance.

4:7-10 According to the custom, the near-relative took off his sandal and gave it to Boaz - thus giving him the right of redemption for the land and for Ruth. What he was saying with this gesture was "I give you my right to walk on and possess this land. You may walk on it as yours." With his right to marry Ruth, this man also would be entrusting Boaz with raising up a son in Mahlon's name. Boaz then states the terms of the agreement that the men had entered into.

4:11-12 The elders pronounced a blessing over the couple. In their blessing, they asked the Lord to make Ruth like Rachel and Leah, who built the house of Israel. This was a blessing of great worth. They also wished for Boaz and Ruth wealth or power, and a name of greatness and honor in Bethlehem (Ephratah). They wished for their home to be like the home of Perez, son of Judah, through whom came the tribe of Judah.

4:13 The Lord enabled Ruth to conceive and she bore a son.

4:14-16 The women of Bethlehem praised the Lord for giving Naomi a "redeemer" referring this time to the son born of Boaz and Ruth.

Grandson's Blessing

1. That his name would become great in Israel

Naomi's Blessing

1. Protector - "hath not left thee this day without a kinsman" (redeemer/protector)
2. Restorer - "restorer of thy life" - they longed for Naomi to know the restoration of life that a kinsman could bring.
3. Nourisher - "a nourisher of thine old age" caregiver.

Daughter-in-law's Blessing

1. Love - For thy daughter which loveth thee.
2. Total Support - "which is better to thee than seven sons."

Ruth's son was seen as much a gift to Naomi as he was to Boaz and Ruth. The Hebrew word for nurse means to build up or support, to foster as a parent or nurse.

4:17 A surprising and unique occurrence happens - not the parents but the women of Bethlehem gave the child a name. This possibly suggests that the birth of this child was an event that concerned all the citizens of Bethlehem, as well as the people of Judah and ultimately the world. The name Obed means "one who serves" or "one who worships."

David (Obed's grandson) was referred to as "God's servant" more than 30 times in the Old Testament.

4:18-22 These verses show the lineage to King David which lineage is also Jesus'. The lineage of Jesus is also listed in Matthew chapter 1. Some of the women included in this lineage are:

1. Tamar wife of Judah mother of Pharez (Gen 38)
2. Rahab with Salmon
3. Ruth with Boaz
4. Bathsheba with David

Many scholars feel that Tamar (Thamar in Matthew 1:1) tricked her father-in-law, Judah, and gave birth to Pharez. Others have linked the Rahab (prostitute) of the Old Testament (book of Joshua) to the Rachab (lineage of Jesus) of the New Testament (Matt. 1:1). The scriptures teach us that Ruth was not Jewish by birth (from Moab) while Bathsheba was an unfaithful wife (committing adultery with David).

There is nothing - nothing - recorded in the scriptures that is insignificant. There may be customs or laws that we don't understand but they are significant and important. It is up to us to search and understand. So important were these women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba) that they are the only women listed in the lineage of Jesus as recorded in scriptures (with the exception of Mary).

Why? Could it be that each of these women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba) had something that marred them in some way, and yet God in His grace chose to use them. Could it be that their lives are to be examples to us? That as we see the hand of God in their lives that it should give us hope that our own lives could be changed. That even sinful people, an untruthful person, an adulteress, a prostitute, an idolater are important to God. That God does use ordinary people to fulfill His purposes.