

Ruth: Overview and Chapter 1

Overview

As we turn from the Revelation to Ruth, we enter a different world:

- culturally, from a few believers in a pagan culture to Israel in its own land under its own laws
- linguistically, from Greek to Hebrew
- literarily, from a complex symbolic vision with cyclical time to a simple linear narrative
- morally, from a focus on the forces of evil to a display of people behaving as they ought.

But in both of them God is faithfully caring for his people, often in ways that are not obvious. In the Revelation, a slain lamb conquers a raging dragon. In Ruth, “accidents” happen at just the right time to continue the line that will lead to King David, and ultimately to the Messiah.

As always, we should pay attention to the larger structure of the text to understand the context of the individual verses. Narrative is built up of a series of *scenes*, each defined by consistent location, characters, and time. If any of these changes, we have a new scene. Based on this insight, we can list the scenes in the book (Table 1).¹ This simple survey reveals three large blocks of text. Chapter divisions do not always correspond to thought breaks in the Bible, but in Ruth they are quite appropriate.

Chapter 1 brings Naomi from Bethlehem to Moab, where her husband and sons die, and then (with Ruth) back to Bethlehem.

Chapters 2 and 3 alternate between conversations between Ruth and Naomi, in their home, and Ruth and Boaz, in the field on on the threshing floor.

Chapter 4 balances the deaths of chapter 1 with the birth of Naomi’s grandson, leading to the line of King David (and eventually to the Messiah).

Ref	Location	Characters	Time
1:1-2	Bethlehem → Moab	Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, Chilion	During the Judges
1:3-6	Moab	Naomi, Orpah, Ruth	Ten years
1:7-19a	Moab → Bethlehem	Naomi, Orpah, Ruth	
1:19b-22	Bethlehem (Gate)	Naomi, townswomen (Ruth)	Start of barley harvest (April-May)
2:1-2	Home	Naomi, Ruth	
2:3-17	Field of Boaz	Ruth, Boaz	
2:18-23	Home and field	Ruth, Boaz	To end of wheat harvest, early June
3:1-5	Home	Ruth, Naomi	End of harvest
3:6-15	Threshing floor	Ruth, Boaz	
3:16-18	Home	Ruth, Naomi	
4:1-12	Gate	Boaz, elders	
4:13-17	Home of Boaz	Boaz, Ruth, Naomi, townswomen	
4:18-22	Bethlehem	Following generations	

Table 1: Scenes in the Book of Ruth

¹ Our study may lead us to adjust some of the boundaries based on structural details.

Peter Lau (NICOT 2023) has suggested a chiasmic structure for the book (Figure 1, chart), which we will tentatively adopt, with modifications.

1:1-22, Death and Emptiness

1-7, End of a Family

1:1 Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, —The book begins by taking us back to a period of time when Israel first returned to Canaan from Egypt, and before the rise of the monarchy. As the book of Judges describes, God raised up local leaders in the various tribes to deal with adversaries who came against the land.

“The days when the judges ruled” is a long period, about 300 years (Figure 2, chart). Can we be more precise?

Boaz, a leading figure in the book, is known from 1 Chr 2:11 as the son of Salma, and the book looks forward to his descendants: Obed, Jesse, and David. David took the throne about 40 years after the end of the judges, following the reign of Saul, and was probably born sometime early in that reign. This sequence of people appears in our Lord’s genealogy:

Mat 1:5 And Salmon begat Booz of Rachab; and Booz begat Obed of Ruth; and Obed begat Jesse; 6 And Jesse begat David the king; ...

Rachab is Rahab the harlot, who sheltered the spies in Joshua 2. Salmon would have married her soon after the conquest, a generation before the judges began (Judg 2:7), or about 350 years before David. Perhaps the book happens very early in Judges.

But let’s look closer. This list suggests that the lives of Boaz, Obed, and Jesse up to the birth of David total 350 years, more than 100 years each! Boaz is certainly depicted as an old man, but this would be extraordinary.

In our study of Matthew 1,² we showed that genealogies often list only the most prominent people, leaving out some names. “Bekat” can mean “descended from,” not just “was the immediate father of.” There is no question that Obed is clearly the immediate son of Boaz, and David is the immediate son of Jesse, but there must be multiple generations between either Salmon and Boaz, or Obed and Jesse. We cannot use the genealogy to narrow down the time.³

2 <https://cyber-chapel.org/sermons/matt/notes/Matt1.pdf>

3 As Steve Rudd attempts to do, <https://www.bible.ca/archeology/bible-archeology-timeline-date-chronology-of-ruth-1300bc.htm>

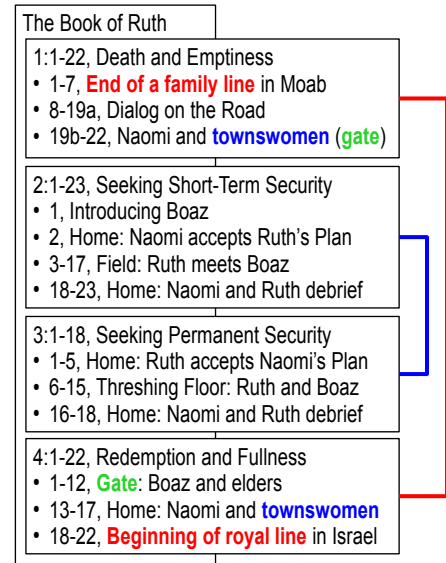


Figure 1: Lau's Analysis of Ruth (modified)

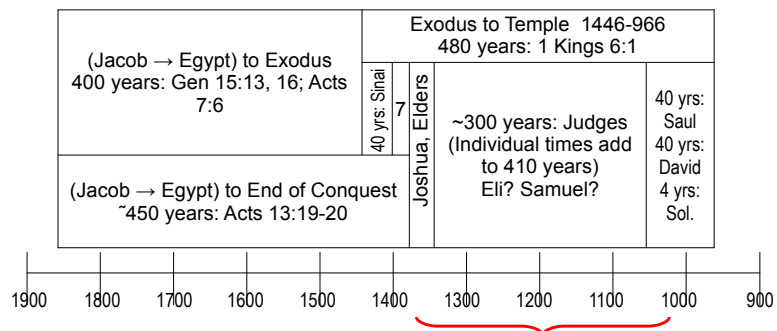


Figure 2: The Days of the Judges

However, the next verse may help.

that there was a famine in the land.—The book of Judges does mention an event that caused famine in the land: the Midianite incursions in Judges 6 (chart).

Jdg 6:3 And so it was, when Israel had sown, that the Midianites came up, and the Amalekites, and the children of the east, even they came up against them; 4 And they encamped against them, and **destroyed the increase of the earth**, till thou come unto **Gaza**, and **left no sustenance for Israel**, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass. 5 For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came as **grasshoppers** for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number: and they entered into the land **to destroy it**. 6 And **Israel was greatly impoverished** because of the Midianites; and the children of Israel cried unto the LORD.

God raised up Gideon about 1180 BC to defeat the Midianites, bringing an end to this disaster. Though the main action of Gideon’s history is in the northern part of the country, the influence of the Midianite invasion extended as far south as Gaza (Jdg 6:4), well south of Bethlehem (Figure 3). We can tentatively assign the history to this period.

And a certain man of Bethlehemjudah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons.—Throughout history, famines have led to migrations. A famine led Abraham to Egypt (Gen 12:10), Isaac to the land of the Philistines (Gen 26:1), and Jacob to Egypt (Gen 43-46). So the move has precedent. But it is ironic. In Hebrew, the name “Bethlehem” means “house of bread,”⁴ but at this point the pantry was empty.

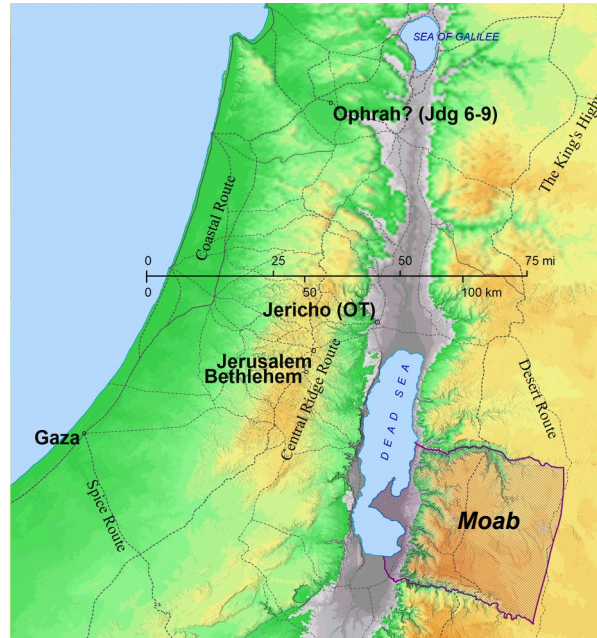


Figure 3: The Geography of the Book of Ruth

“Sojourn” גור *gūr* H1481 means “to live as a stranger.” This family originally intended to stay in Moab only for a short period.

The word “country” in 1:1, 2, 6, 22 is literally “fields *sadeh* H7704.” In famine, this family seeks fruitful fields to feed them. But in Ruth, the term is loaded (Figure 4). It peaks three times: in chapter 1 (plural) to describe “the fields of Moab,” then in chapter 2 to describe the field of Boaz, which actually sustains them, and finally in chapter 4, the field of Elimelech, which Boaz restores to the family.

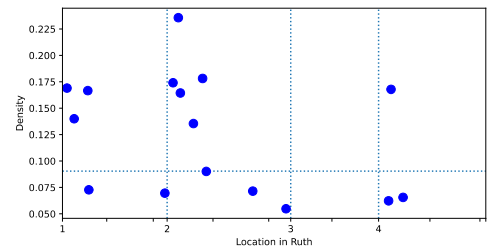


Figure 4: “Field” in Ruth

They sought fields in Moab, but the Lord had better fields for them back home.

Moab is about 25 miles as the crow flies from Bethlehem, across the Jordan (Figure 3), not very far away. On a clear day, you can see the hills of Transjordan from Jerusalem or Bethlehem (Figure 5, Figure 6, chart). The Moabites were cousins to Israel, descended from Lot by his first daughter (Gen 19:37). When Israel returned from Egypt, they did not attack Moab, but skirted it

4 The original Canaanite etymology is uncertain. Place names in *beth-* “house of” typically refer to a cultic site, but no deity *Lahmu* has been identified. See Cazelles in the Anchor Bible Dictionary.

(Jdg 11:18). Nevertheless, Balak king of Moab feared them, and hired Balaam to curse them (Numbers 22-24). Early in the book of Judges, Eglon king of Moab smote Israel and occupied Jericho for 18 years, but the judge Ehud killed him, leading to 80 years of rest (Jdg 3:12-30). When David was fleeing Saul, he sent his parents to Moab for safety (1 Sam 22:3-4).

2 And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehemjudah.—Hebrew

names have meanings, and these meanings are relevant to the story. Naomi means “pleasant.” She emphasizes the meaning when she returns to Bethlehem, and tells her old friends,

Rut 1:20 And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.

Elimelech means “my God is king,” and we will see throughout the book how God is in control, overriding what seem to be disasters. Mahlon means “sickly,” and Chilion means “failing” (Deut 28:65) or “annihilation” (Isa 10:22), anticipating their early deaths. (We should be cautious about reading too much into the names of people in biblical stories, but in Ruth the narrator appears to emphasize them.)

And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there.—1:1 said that Elimelech and his family went to “sojourn” in Moab, implying a short stay. But they became comfortable in their new home, and forgot about returning to the land of promise.

It is easy to let the world seduce us away from God’s blessings. 1 Corinthians warns that things not absolutely wrong in themselves may still hold us back spiritually, (chart)

1Co 6:12 All things are lawful unto me, but **all things are not expedient**: all things are lawful for me, but **I will not be brought under** the power of any. ... 10:23 all things are lawful for me, but **all things edify not**.



Figure 5: Transjordan from Jerusalem (top) and Bethlehem (bottom). Van and Anita Parunak, 1975



Figure 6: Moab from Keren Hayesod Street in Jerusalem, looking SE. Van and Anita Parunak, 1975

3 And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons.—Then disaster strikes. Elimelech dies. Perhaps Naomi will take her sons back to Bethlehem so that they can build lives among the covenant people. But they have “gone native” in Moab, forgetting the land that God had given to their fathers.

4 And they took them wives of the women of Moab;—The sons have developed social connections among the Moabites, and they marry some nice Moabite girls.

The status of these marriages is ambiguous. Israelites were forbidden to marry the nations whom they drove out from Canaan.

Deu 7:1 When the LORD thy God shall bring thee into the land whither thou goest to possess it, and hath cast out many nations before thee, **the Hittites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites,** seven nations greater and mightier than thou; 2 And when the LORD thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them: 3 **Neither shalt thou make marriages with them;** thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son.

But the Moabites, living on the other side of Jordan, were not among those nations. They were after all Israel’s cousins, descended from Lot, Abraham’s nephew. In spite of that relationship, they and the Ammonites, from Lot’s other son, were excluded from the congregation:

Deu 23:3 An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the LORD **for ever:**

Probably, the restrictions of Deuteronomy 7 and 23 do not apply to proselytes; Uriah the *Hittite* is one of David’s 37 “mighty men” (2 Sam 23:8, 39). But Orpah and Ruth are not proselytes. Mahlon and Chilion have settled in Moab, and if anyone has been converted, it is they.

the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth:—The meaning of “Orpah” is uncertain. It might refer to thick black hair, or perfume, or the gazelle, all emphasizing her sensual attractiveness to Chilion.⁵ Or it might be understood in terms of the Hebrew word for back of the neck, indicating her decision to turn back from Naomi. Ruth probably means “refreshment, satiation,” anticipating the joy that she will bring to Naomi.

We are not to forget that it was women of Moab who led Israel into idolatry when they first arrived at the plains of Moab, on their way to the promised land:

Num 25:1 And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit **whoredom** with the **daughters of Moab.** 2 And they called the people unto the sacrifices of **their gods:** and the people did eat, and bowed down to **their gods.**

and they dwelled יָשָׁב *yashab* H3427 there about ten years.—First the family came “to sojourn,” to visit as aliens (1:1). Then they “continued” (1:2). Now they settle down, literally, “sit down.” The little family appears to have forgotten their Israelite identity entirely. With two men to support their widowed mother, everything is stable.

5 And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband.—But again disaster strikes. Both of the sons perish, fulfilling their ominous names. Now all three women are destitute, though the narrator focuses on Naomi. Without a

5 4:10 will reveal that Ruth was Mahlon’s wife.

source of support, her only hope is that someone back in Bethlehem might give them charity.

6 Then she arose with her daughters in law,—The verbs of motion in 1:1-7 form an ABC-CBA chiasm, and this verse turns the corner. “Arise” קָוַם *qūm* H6965 is the opposite of “dwell, sit down,” the verb that described their final condition in 1:4, after “sojourning” (1:1) and “continuing” (1:2).

that she might return שׁוּב *shūb* H7725 from the country of Moab:—This verb and הלך *halak* H1980 “to go” dominate the rest of the chapter (Figure 8). The long period of complacency is over, and Naomi is leading the remnant of her family back where they should be.

for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the LORD had visited his people in giving them bread.—We will trace the Lord’s acts as we read through the book. This is the first time he is mentioned (Figure 9). But he is working behind the scenes. He sends Elimelech into Moab to get a wife for Boaz, who will be in the line of the Messiah. He takes away Elimelech and his sons, to prompt Naomi to return to Bethlehem. Over and over we will see him working in mysterious ways, to achieve his purposes.

7 Wherefore she went forth יצא *ytsa* out of the place where she was, and her two daughters in law with her; and they went הלך *halak* on the way to return שׁוּב *shūb* unto the land of Judah.—As “arose” in v. 6 reverses “dwelled” in v. 4, “went forth” reverses “continue” in v. 2, and “went” and “return” reverse

“went to sojourn” in v. 1. This verse repeats the main elements of 6a (she with her daughters in law, arose → went forth, Moab → the place where she was, return → return unto the land of Judah).

This first paragraph is a beautiful chiasm, AB-C-D-C’-B’A’B” (Figure 10, chart).⁶ The correspondences highlight the main points of the introduction.

A: The judges cannot protect the people from famine, but the Lord gives them bread. Our confidence must be in him, not in human rulers.

1:1 a certain man ... **went to sojourn**
 1:2 they ... **continued there**
 1:4 they **dwelled [sat] there**
 1:6 she **arose to return**
 1:7a she **went forth**
 1:7b they **went to return**

Figure 7: Motion verbs in 1:1-7

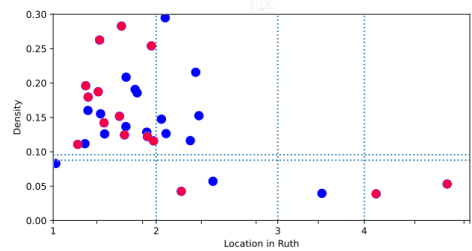


Figure 8: Return and Go in Ruth

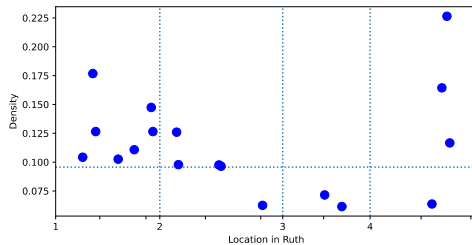


Figure 9: LORD (YHWH) in Ruth

<p>A: 1:1 Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land.</p>	<p>A': for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the LORD had visited his people in giving them bread.</p>
<p>B: And a certain man of Bethlehemjudah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons. 2 And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehemjudah. [external inclusio] And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there.</p>	<p>B'': 6 Then she arose with her daughters in law, that she might return from the country of Moab: B'': 7 Wherefore she went forth out of the place where she was, and her two daughters in law with her; and they went on the way to return unto the land of Judah.</p>
<p>C: 3 And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons.</p>	<p>C': 5 And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband.</p>
<p>D: 4 And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelled there about ten years.</p>	

Figure 10: Chiasm in Ruth 1:1-7

6 Based on Murray D. Gow, “The Significance Of Literary Structure For The Translation Of The Book Of Ruth.” *The Bible Translator* 35:3, 309-320.

B: Elimelech journeys to Moab, ostensibly for a short time, but neglects to return. Finally, under pressure from the death of her husband and sons, Naomi comes back with Ruth.

Two technical details are worth noting here.

- 1:1b and 2a mention the trip to Moab twice, forming an *external inclusio* around the names of Elimelech and his family. This marks the list of names as a footnote, preserved perhaps for their symbolic value.
- The elements AB in 1:1-2 are *unfolded* into BAB in 6-7.⁷ The effect is to emphasize the return journey, and leave the last clause as a parallel to 1:19:

19 So they two went הלך until they came בוא to Bethlehem.

C: The men die, first Elimelech, then the sons, and in both cases Naomi is left.

D: The center element is the marriage, introducing Ruth to the story. The central element in a chiasm with an unmatched center is the point of emphasis, suggesting here that the purpose of the famine is to send someone to Moab to get Ruth.

8-19a, Dialog on the Road

The next section is a dialog between Naomi and her daughters in law (Figure 11, chart). Naomi speaks twice at length, urging the girls to return home to Moab. They respond briefly to each speech, and Orpah goes back. Naomi then briefly exhorts Ruth to return to Moab, but Ruth closes with a beautiful, longer statement of her resolve to follow Naomi. The relative lengths of the sections shows the shift in emphasis from Naomi to Ruth.

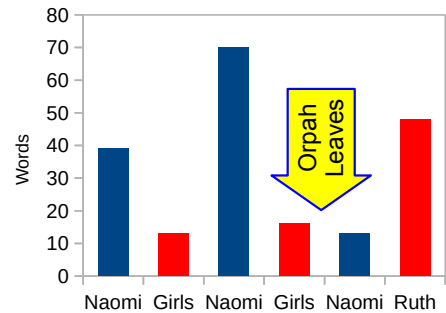


Figure 11: Dialog between Naomi and the Girls

8-9a, Naomi’s Proposal: Go Back and Get Married

8 And Naomi said unto her two daughters in law, **Go** הלך *halach* H1980, **return** שוב *shūb* H7725—Naomi repeats the two verbs from 1:7, but changes the destination. She “goes” and “returns” to Bethlehem, but she urges the girls to “go” and “return” to Moab. This whole paragraph plays with these two opposite directions of “return.”

Through the death of her husband and sons, the Lord has finally taught her that her place is in Bethlehem. But she generalizes this lesson to her daughters in law. If her place is where she was born, their place must be where they were born.

When the Lord has finally taught us a difficult lesson, we often try to extend it to other people. Compare Peter’s attitude when the Lord revealed that he would die under persecution:

Jhn 21:21 Peter seeing [John] saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? 22 Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.

Paul emphasizes that each of us must stand or fall before God individually:

Rom 14:4 Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.

⁷ I discuss this mechanism in my dissertation on Ezekiel, pp. 105-108, which identifies many instances.

Naomi has overgeneralized the lesson. The Lord's message to her is not that each person should stay where she is born, but that the land of promise and the people of God are special. Naomi and her family have not valued Bethlehem as they ought. Going home there is not the same as going home to a Moabite village. Ruth is the only one among the three women who realizes this.

each to her mother's house:—This is an unusual expression. 149X in the OT we read of the “father's house,” but only three other times of the mother's house. Two are in Canticles (3:4; 8:2), where the girl invites the beloved into her mother's house to enjoy her intimacy. The other is in describing Rebekah's reaction to Elimelech's visit, seeking her as a bride for Isaac:

Gen. 24:28 And the damsel ran, and told them of **her mother's house** these things.

Compare Isaac's behavior when he marries her:

Gen. 24:67 And Isaac brought her into **his mother Sarah's tent**, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

The parallels with Canticles suggest that this is an encouragement to seek other husbands. The mother's house or tent is the place to arrange nuptials.

Now she prays two prayers for them, a general one and a specific request.

the LORD deal kindly עֲשֵׂה חֶסֶד with you,—“Kindly” here is חֶסֶד *chesed* H2617, the word that describes loyal love, usually translated “mercy” or “lovingkindness.” It is the crowning facet of the Lord's description of his love for his people in Exodus 34:

Exo 34:6 And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in **goodness** and truth, 7 Keeping **mercy** for thousands, ...

The word appears 250x in the OT, mostly (129x) in Psalms, as a motive for Israel's praise, e.g.,

Psa 118:1, 29; 136:1; etc. O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: because his **mercy** endureth for ever. [last clause 5x in Ps 118; 26x in Psalm 136, 41x in the OT]

Ex 34:6 makes this a core article of faith for believers. This is God's name, and if we call ourselves his people we must acknowledge this as his character. Naomi prays that the Lord would bestow this loyal love on Ruth and Orpah. But we will see that her prayer is hollow, for she does not believe that the Lord has shown this love to her.

Later, she will recognize that in Ruth's case, the Lord answered her prayer. When Ruth “hops to light” on the field of Boaz and returns to Naomi with bountiful gleanings, Naomi comments,

Ruth 2:20 And Naomi said unto her daughter in law, Blessed be he of the LORD, who hath not left off his **kindness** to the living and to the dead.

as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.—God is not the only one who exhibits loyal love. Both Ruth and Orpah have demonstrated חֶסֶד in their conduct toward Naomi, her sons, and her husband. This was a happy family.

The story does not condemn Orpah. Naomi describes her, as well as Ruth, as showing loyal love. In returning to Moab she is simply doing what Naomi has urged her to do. Both girls are loyal daughters in law, but Ruth excels.

The word appears once more in the book, again applied to Ruth. When she goes to Boaz on the threshing floor and asks his protection, he replies,

Ruth 3:10 And he said, Blessed be thou of the LORD, my daughter: for thou hast shewed more **kindness** in the latter end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou followedst not young men, whether poor or rich.

Now Naomi makes a specific request.

9 The LORD grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband.—

She asks the Lord provide them with husbands.

This continues to be Naomi’s concern for Ruth, even after they return to Bethlehem.

Ruth 3:1 Then Naomi her mother in law said unto her, My daughter, shall I not seek **rest** for thee, that it may be well with thee?

9b-10, The Girls’ First Responses

Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept.—The girls respond to each of Naomi’s long speeches. The beginnings of the responses are chiasmic (Table 2, chart), suggesting that this is all that they have to say to her detailed exhortations.

Their first response states their commitment to join themselves to Naomi’s people:

10 And they said unto her, Surely we will return **שוב with thee unto thy people.**—“Return” changes direction again. They both want to return to her people, but something is missing. In 1:16, Naomi will recognize that their decision must involve not only people, but also gods, when she says to Ruth,

Ruth 1:15 Behold, thy sister in law is gone back **unto her people, and unto her gods:** and Ruth’s response will include both,

Ruth 1:16: thy **people** shall be my **people**, and thy **God** my **God**.

But at this point their focus is on the cultural shift, not the spiritual one.

11-13, Naomi’s Reasons for her Proposal

11 And Naomi said, Turn again **שוב, my daughters: why will ye go **הלך** with me?**—Naomi reverses the direction yet again. “Don’t return with me to Bethlehem; return to your country.” She gives two reasons, both based on the need for the girls to get husbands, the only source of a woman’s security in that culture.

Her first reason is that the usual resource for providing for a childless widow, the levirate⁸ marriage, is no longer possible.

are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? 12 Turn again **שוב, my daughters, go **הלך** your way; for I am too old to have an husband.**—In levirate marriage, the brother of a husband who dies childless marries his wife. Genesis 38 gives an example of the custom, and Deut 25:5-10 regulates it. It is reflected in the marriage of Ruth and Boaz in ch. 4, though in slightly different circumstances than outlined in Deuteronomy.

9b-10, Girls’ First Response		14, Girls’ Second Response
		14c but Ruth clave unto her.
9b Then she kissed them;	↓ ↑	14b and Orpah kissed her mother in law;
and they lifted up their voice, and wept.		14a And they lifted up their voice, and wept again:
10 And they said unto her, Surely we will return with thee unto thy people.		

Table 2: The Girls’ Responses to Naomi

8 From the Latin word *levir*, meaning “husband’s brother”

The patriarchs recognized this practice. Judah's family furnishes an extreme example that emphasizes the obligation of the husband's family to care for the widow in this way.

Gen 38:6 And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, whose name was Tamar. 7 And Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD slew him. 8 And Judah said unto Onan, Go in unto thy brother's wife, and **marry her, and raise up seed** to thy brother. . . . 10 And the thing which he did displeased the LORD: wherefore he slew him also. 11 Then said Judah to Tamar his daughter in law, Remain a widow at thy father's house,⁹ till Shelah my son be grown: for he said, Lest peradventure he die also, as his brethren did. And Tamar went and dwelt in her father's house. . . . 26 And Judah acknowledged them, and said, She hath been **more righteous than I**; because that **I gave her not to Shelah** my son.

Later, God included the practice in the law he gave to Israel through Moses:

Deu 25:5 If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her. 6 And it shall be, that the firstborn which she beareth shall succeed in the name of his brother which is dead, that his name be not put out of Israel.

Naomi acknowledges this provision for the girls, but observes that in her case, it is biologically infeasible, since she has no other sons, and she is past the age of childbearing.

If I should say, I have hope, if I should have an husband also to night, and should also bear sons; 13 Would ye tarry for them till they were grown? would ye stay for them from having husbands?—Her second reason is the time involved, even if she could conceive. By the time these new husbands were ready, the girls themselves would have passed the age of marriage.

ay, my daughters; for it grieveth me much מַרְרִי לִי מְאֹד for your sakes that the hand of the LORD is gone out against me.—Literally, “I have great bitterness.” Her language sets the stage for her report to the townswomen in 1:20, asking them to call her “Mara” “bitter” instead of “Naomi” “pleasant.”

Naomi is spiritually defeated. She feels attacked by the Lord. She has prayed that the Lord would show loyal love to the girls, but she accuses him of abandoning that love toward her. We usually think of the book as focused on Ruth and her incorporation into the family that leads to king David, but it is at least as much about the restoration of a crushed saint.

We know from 1:6 that “the Lord had visited his people,” but from Naomi's perspective, he has become their enemy—or at least, hers.

14, The Girls' Response

14 And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law;—These clauses chiasmatically close off the girls' first response in 1:9b-10. We expect that the discussion is over. But then something else happens:

but Ruth clave unto her.—This clause has no counterpart in 9b-10, and is marked in Hebrew as disjunctive, breaking the flow of the story. The narrator is saying, “Wait a minute. Something unexpected is about to happen.” That is, that Ruth **cleaves** to Naomi.

9 Note the contrast with 1:8, the “mother's house” to which Naomi wants Ruth and Orpah to return, in order to seek another husband. Tamar is not available for open marriage, and so she returns simply to her original family, her “father's house.”

“Cleave” דבק *dabaq* H1692 appears for the first time in the Bible in the creation history, when God institutes marriage and thus the family relation (chart):

Gen. 2:24 Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall **cleave** unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

We will see it again in Ruth, but for now, we should recognize the echo of Genesis. By cleaving to Naomi, Ruth declares that her family from now on is with Naomi and the people of the Lord.

15, Naomi

Naomi’s next speech is uncharacteristically brief.

15 And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back שׁוּב unto her people, and unto her gods:—Naomi recognizes that Orpah’s decision is not only social (“her people”), but also theological (“her gods”), which is good. But she encourages Ruth to take the same course, which is bad. Naomi is willing to urge Ruth to go after pagan gods, because she feels that her God has proven himself unreliable. This recommendation reminds us how low Naomi has fallen.

The dominant deity in Moab was a demon named Chemosh, named in Israel’s celebration of victory over Sihon king of the Amorites

Num 21:29 Woe to thee, **Moab!** thou art undone, O **people of Chemosh:** he hath given his sons that escaped, and his daughters, into captivity unto Sihon king of the Amorites.

Chemosh was among the deities of his wives whom Solomon honored in Jerusalem:

1Ki 11:6 And Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and went not fully after the LORD, as did David his father. 7 Then did Solomon build an high place for **Chemosh, the abomination of Moab**, in the hill that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon.

He is called an “abomination,” and his worship included human sacrifice. When the armies of Jehoram of Israel and Jehoshaphat of Judah rout Mesha, king of Moab, in 2 Ki 3, we read,

2Ki 3:27 Then he took his eldest son that should have reigned in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering upon the wall.

This abomination is the chief of the gods to whom Orpah chooses to return.

return thou שׁוּב after thy sister in law.—Naomi will return to Israel; Ruth should return to Moab.

16-17, Ruth

Now Ruth takes the spotlight in the conversation. She expresses her resolve to remain with Naomi by encompassing it within two request. The first (1:16a) is a request to Naomi, not to do something: “intreat me not.” The second (1:17b) is a request to the Lord to hold her accountable: “The LORD do so to me.” Between these two requests is a series of promises.

16 And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return שׁוּב from following after thee:—The first request is to Naomi, that she would stop urging Ruth to leave her.

for whither thou goest הֲלֵךְ, I will go הֲלֵךְ;—She does not simply say, “I will go to Bethlehem with you,” but commits herself wherever the vicissitudes of life may take Naomi. Should

another famine arise and should Naomi move yet again, Ruth will accompany her. Her loyalty is not to a place, whether Moab or Israel, but to a person, her mother-in-law.

and where thou lodgest, I will lodge:—The primary meaning of the verb used here (לִי לָיַל *līn* H3885) is to spend the night. As in the first pair of verbs, she does not require a fixed residence. She would be content to travel every day and sleep in a different bed every night, so long as she can be with Naomi.

These two pairs challenge Naomi’s insistence (1:9) that they should seek “rest, each of you in the house of her husband.”¹⁰

thy people shall be my people,—Orpah shared this desire, 1:10, but Ruth goes one step further:

and thy God my God:—Compare Ruth with the Israelite slave of Naaman the Syrian in 2 Kings 5.

2Ki 5:1 Now Naaman, captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honourable, because by him the LORD had given deliverance unto Syria: he was also a mighty man in valour, but he was a leper. 2 And the Syrians had gone out by companies, and had brought away captive out of the land of Israel a little maid; and she waited on Naaman's wife. 3 And she said unto her mistress, Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy.

In both cases, the socially inferior person is encouraging the socially superior but spiritually impoverished person to look to the Lord.¹¹

In 2 Kings 5, we are not surprised to find an Israelite pointing a Gentile to the Lord. But here Ruth, a Gentile, is encouraging Naomi, an Israelite whose faith has faltered, just as today the gospel comes to the Jews, who think that God has forsaken them, through Gentiles.

17 Where thou diest, will I die,—Her commitment is as long as either of them lives. Certainly she expects Naomi to die before she does, but even then she will not move away from her, but remain to honor her memory.

and there will I be buried:—Even in the grave, she does not want Naomi to be alone.

Ruth concludes with a second request, a conventional Hebrew oath formula, solemnly binding her to all that she has said.

the LORD do so to me, and more also,—As often in such an oath, just what it is that God will do is not specified. The formula is stereotyped, and may have originated with a ceremony in which an animal was slain.¹² The person swearing calls on God to do something bad if he does not satisfy the promise.

This formula appears ten times in the OT. Eight times the divine element is simply “God,”¹³ including oaths by official figures (Eli, Saul, David, Abner, Solomon, Joram). The only two

10 The contrast between “lodge” and “rest” is clear in Josh 4:3, where Joshua command the people to take stones from the bed of Jordan and “leave them נָחָה whee ye shall lodge לַיְלָה this night.”
11 It is interesting that Naaman’s name means “beautiful, pleasantness,” just as does Naomi, both coming from the same Semitic root נָעַם.
12 B. Conklin, *Oath Formulas in Biblical Hebrew*. Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic v. 5. Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, 2011, 22ff.
13 Eli, 1 Sam 3:17; Saul, 1 Sam 14:44; David, 1 Sam 25:22; 2 Sam 3:35; 19:14; Abner, 2 Sam 3:9; Solomon, 1 Kings 2:23; Joram of Israel, 2 Ki 6:31

times LORD (יהוה) is used, it is by private individuals: Jonathan (1 Sam 20:13) and Ruth. She clearly wants to emphasize just which God she is invoking to guarantee her promise.

if ought but death part thee and me.¹⁴—She will be Naomi’s steadfast companion and support as long as they both live.

18-19, Finishing the Journey

18 When she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go הלך with her, then she left speaking unto her.—The solemn oath marks an end to the discussion (chart).

Heb 6:16 For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife.

19 So they two went הלך until they came בוא to Bethlehem.—Picks up the v. 7, emphasized there by folding.

19b-22, Naomi’s Report

19b And it came to pass,¹⁵ when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi?—It has been more than ten years since Naomi left Bethlehem with her husband and sons. Now she returns without the men, and with a strange girl.

The meaning they intend by their question uses “Naomi” simply as an identifier, to distinguish her from other women. But the name has a meaning, “pleasant,” and one could understand their question to mean, “Is this person pleasant?” It is to this meaning that Naomi replies:

20 And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara:—The name “Mara” comes from the Hebrew root meaning “bitter,” the one that Naomi used in v. 13 when she said, “it grieveth me much.”

This woman had prayed for the Lord’s mercy (צדקה *xesed* H2617, loyal love) upon Ruth and Orpah (1:8). But her own testimony views the Lord very differently. In 1:13, she said, “the hand of the Lord is gone out against me” (chart). Now she adds four more accusations, organized chiasmatically by the divine names that they use.

The middle two names (LORD in all capital letters) are God’s covenant name, Jehovah (יהוה *Yahweh* H3068). But Naomi’s accusations show doubts about his covenant faithfulness.

The first and last names in the chiasm accuse God under his name יְשׁוּבָה *shadday* H7706, translated “Almighty” in the KJV (following the dominant LXX translation παντοκράτωρ¹⁶). The name is short for *El Shaddai*, usually translated “Almighty God.” The name is ancient, going back to God’s revelation of himself to Abram:

Gen 17:1 And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the **Almighty God**; walk before me, and be thou perfect.

It is most common in Job, also set in the time of the patriarchs. Its appearances can all be associated with a basic plot: God promises land and offspring to his children, then delivers them

14 Conklin agrees with this translation (p. 49) over the alternative “not even death will separate thee and me.”

15 Marks a section break; “nodalizer”

16 The two instances in Ruth, and three others in Job 21:15; 31:2; 40:2 are translated ικανός *hikanos* G2425, “the sufficient one,” which is slightly more dedicated than παντοκράτωρ. See note.

when this purpose appears to be frustrated.¹⁷ The name is certainly appropriate to the book of Ruth, which fits this storyline. But Naomi accuses this God of promise and progeny of turning against her.

for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me כִּי־הָמַר שָׂדֵי לִי מָאֵד [*mar li meod*].—Picking up on the root מָרַר *marar* H4843 used in 13 and 20a, she accuses God of causing her bitterness. Job makes the same accusation:

Job 27:2 As God liveth, who hath taken away my judgment; and **the Almighty, who hath vexed my soul** וְשָׂדֵי הָמַר נִפְשִׁי;

But we know the back story of Job, how the Lord is using him to discredit Satan. The Lord's promise is that he will tenderly care for his people:

Isa 40:11 He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.

And ultimately he rewards his faithful servant Job.

21 I went out full,—Really? Is she forgetting that her family left Bethlehem because there was no food?

and the LORD hath brought me home again empty:—She has indeed lost her husband and sons, but she seems at this point ignorant of the faithful daughter in law who stands at her side. How must Ruth, whose name means “satiating, fullness,” have felt when she heard this?

In Ruth's exchanges with Boaz, she will bring back abundant food, erasing the famine:

Rut 2:17 So she ... beat out that she had gleaned: and it was about an ephah [more than a bushel, food for ten days] of barley.

Rut 3:17 And she said, These six measures of barley gave he me; for he said to me, Go not **empty** unto thy mother in law.

And by the end of the story, she will restore the missing family line by bearing a son to be the heir of Elimelech and Mahlon.

why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath testified against me,—Testifying is something that a witness does in court.¹⁸ But the Lord is the supreme judge. She imagines the hopeless case of one against whom the judge himself bears witness. There is no hope.

Sometimes the Lord did testify against his people, in the OT. The prophets offer many examples of the covenant lawsuit, or *rib*, in which the Lord accuses his people of breaking his covenant with them. A good example is Isaiah 1,

Isa 1:2 Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me.

Perhaps she feels that the death of her husband and sons is punishment for their settling in Moab. But when the Lord judges his people, it is with an aim of bringing them back into fellowship with himself. If she does feel guilty over the family's extended stay in Moab, she should now rejoice in her return to the land of promise. And in the revelation of the Messiah, God sets us free from any fear of divine vengeance:

17 Lau calls attention to this scheme, which is proposed by T.R. Wardlaw Jr., “Shaddai, Providence, and the Narrative Structure of Ruth,” *JETS* 58/1 (2015) 31-41.

18 The construction עֲנֵה בִּי is the one used in Exod 20:16, forbidding bearing false witness against one's neighbor.

Rom 8:33 Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.

and the Almighty hath afflicted me לִי וְיִשְׁדֵּי הָרַע לִי?—Coming back to God as the one who protects the line and land of his people, she avows that he has resolved to do evil [רעע C *hēra*(H7489)] to her.

Moses brought this same accusation against God. God sent him to tell Pharaoh to let the people go. In response, Pharaoh increased their burden, the people accused Moses of meddling, and Moses complained to the Lord,

Ex. 5:22 And Moses returned unto the LORD, and said, **Lord, wherefore hast thou so evil entreated this people** אֲדֹנָי לָמָּה הִרְעַתָּה לְעַם הַזֶּה?

But in fact, God was preparing to bring great judgments on Pharaoh, in order to lead Israel out of bondage.

Naomi’s depression is an example of focusing on our immediate circumstances rather than the Lord as he has revealed himself to us. This world’s circumstances are always depressing, but God has pledged his love and faithfulness to us, and if we focus on that, we can see life’s irregularities as stepping stones to blessing, as unpleasant to us as they may seem.

22 So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab:—“Which” is feminine singular, and the nearest antecedent is “Ruth the Moabitess.” But how can Ruth be said to “return” to a land that she had never visited? Perhaps¹⁹ the point is that the families of Abraham and Lot, separated in Genesis 13, are now reunited in Ruth and Boaz.

and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.—The barley harvest is the first of the grain harvests (chart):

Exo 9:31 And the flax and the barley was smitten: for the barley was in the ear, and the flax was bolled. 32 But the wheat and the rye were not smitten: for they were not grown up.²⁰

Every spring, a sheaf of first-cut grain was offered at the sanctuary on the first Sabbath after Passover (Figure 12).

Lev 23:5 In the **fourteenth day** of the first month at even is the LORD'S **passover**. 6 And on the **fifteenth day** of the same month is the **feast of unleavened bread** unto the LORD: seven days ye must eat unleavened bread. ... 10... ye shall bring a sheaf of the **firstfruits** of your harvest unto the priest: 11 And he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted for you: **on the morrow after the sabbath** the priest shall wave it.

Nisan						
Sun	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thrs	Fri	Sat
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	12	14 Pass-over	15 Un-leavened	16 bread
17 First Fruits	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

Figure 12: The Spring Festivals

It may help to remember that both Passover and Firstfruits are types of Christ:

1Co 5:7 Christ our **passover** is sacrificed for us:

1Co 15:20 But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the **firstfruits** of them that slept.

19 Fisch, “Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History,” VT 32:4 (1982) 425-437, cited by Hubbard.

20 I am grateful for Dave Nelson for pointing out this intra-biblical summary of the agricultural seasons, also testified in the Gezer calendar (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gezer_calendar). This is an excellent example of how the Bible explains itself.

This means that Naomi and Ruth are returning at Passover time,²¹ just when the town would have been celebrating the return of Israel from Egypt. But the hopefulness of this parallel is lost on Naomi. The city is rejoicing, but she is deeply depressed.

Lessons from Ruth 1

Let's summarize some practical lessons from Ruth 1 (chart).

God works in mysterious ways. The sweep of Scripture shows that he wants a Moabite, Ruth, in the ancestry of the Messiah, and this book shows how he achieves this end.

Rom 11:33 O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! **how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!**

Our liberty must be used cautiously, lest it lead to worldliness. Elimelech had biblical precedent for seeking refuge elsewhere in time of famine. But it was not necessary, as the example of other Bethlehemites shows. And his intent to sojourn in Moab led to growing assimilation with the pagan culture.

1Co 6:12 All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but **I will not be brought under the power of any.**

We should treasure being with the Lord's people. Elimelech and his family do not adequately value the land that God promised their fathers, and the society structured around God's worship that he had established there.

Zec 8:23 Thus saith the LORD of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, **We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you.**

The Lord can use disaster to guide us. To get the family back to Bethlehem, God must remove first Elimelech, then the sons.

Psa 23:4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; **thy rod** and thy staff they comfort me.

We should not confuse God's direction with his wrath. Naomi badly misunderstands the events in her family's life, to the point of accusing the Lord of malice toward her.

Pro 3:11 My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction:
12 For **whom the LORD loveth** he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth.

A socially inferior person can give spiritual help and encouragement to a social superior. Ruth, a foreigner, supports Naomi in her hour of spiritual doubt.

Psa 119:99 I have **more understanding than all my teachers:** for thy testimonies are my meditation.

21 The Targum of 1:22 makes this explicit, reading, "they entered Bethlehem on the eve of Passover."

Notes

End of First Paragraph

1:6 or 1:7? Gow suggests a chiasm here.

Rut 1:6 Then **she arose with her daughters in law**, that she might **return** from the country of **Moab**: for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the LORD had visited his people in giving them bread. 7 Wherefore **she went forth** out of the place where she was, and **her two daughters in law with her**; and they went on the way to **return** unto the land of **Judah**.

Translations of שדי

The rendering ἱκανὸς *hikanos* G2425 used in Ruth is more dedicated (0.11 > 0.08) than the dominant παντοκράτωρ *pantokratōr* G3841 (Table 3).

	שדי		Total
παντοκράτωρ	15 (0.08)		181
ἱκανὸς	5 (0.11)		46
θεός	11		3777
κύριος	10		8298
Total	48		

Parsing of ענה בי in 1:21

MT parses ענה as Qal, and the expression as used in Exod 20:16, “to bear witness against.” But the OG, Syriac, and ? Vg read it as Piel, in the sense “Afflict,”²² a reading that has attracted some loyalty. Moore claims that “In the Hebrew Bible, moreover, the preposition ב never follows ענה when ענה is in the piel.” (Actually, the statement should be, “never governs its patient through ב; the preposition does specify the location case, Ezek. 22:10-11; 102:24; or means, Psa. 35:13; 105:18.) KD note ב ענה (G) in the sense “trouble oneself with” in Eccl 1:13. It seems best to stay with the Massoretes.

Table 3: LXX Translations of שדי

22 M. Moore, “Two Textual Anomalies in Ruth,” *CBQ* 59:2 (1997) 234-243