

Ruth 1:1-22

Introduction

1. **Genre:** historical short story
2. **Author:** we don't know, nor does it really matter
3. **Time Period:**
 - a. Probably written around the same time as Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel
 - b. Events take place during the time of the judges (approx. 300 year period between 1350 and 1050 BC)
4. **Primary Characters:** there are three primary characters, Ruth, Naomi and Boaz
5. **Major Themes:**
 - a. Loyalty/Faithfulness
 - b. Redemption (Hebrew word *ga'al* is used 23 times in the book)
 - c. Divine Providence
6. **Modern Use:** read by Jews during the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) every year
7. **Outline:**
 - a. Chapter 1: Tragedy and loyalty
 - b. Chapter 2: The providence of God and the Godly character of Boaz
 - c. Chapter 3: The faithfulness of Boaz
 - d. Chapter 4: The redemption of Ruth

A. Tragedy Strikes (1:1-5)

1. Our story begins in in Bethlehem at a very difficult time (1-2)
 - a. **“Now it came about in the days when the judges governed...”**:
 - 1) Our recent study of Judges revealed that this was a very dark time in Israel's history
 - 2) It was filled with cycles of apostasy, oppression, and deliverance with Israel constantly doing what was right in its own eyes
 - 3) This sets up a remarkable contrast between the this time in Israel's history and the faithfulness and loyalty we see in the book of Ruth
 - b. **“that there was a famine in the land:”**
 - 1) Famine was common in Palestine
 - 2) The text does not say that this famine was a result of God's judgment, but it is likely:
 - a) Deut 28:4-6, 8, 11-14
 - b) Deut 28:15-19, 24, 38-40
 - c. So, in search of relief, Elimelech relocates his family to the land of Moab (2-3):
 - 1) We are introduced to Elimelech, his wife Naomi (one of the main characters) and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion--Their names may tell us something about them or possibly serve as a bit of foreshadowing:
 - a) Elimelech: “God is my king”
 - b) Naomi: pleasant
 - c) Mahlon: sick

- d) Chilion: pining (e.g. suffering mental or physical decline, especially because of a broken heart)
- 2) Moab:
 - a) Enemies of Israel through much of its history
 - b) East of the dead sea
 - c) Large, fertile area with plenty of rain
 - d) The trip appears temporary as a means of seeking relief from the famine in Judah
- 2. Tragedy strikes, not one but three times (3-5)
 - a. Elimelech dies and leaves Naomi a widow with two boys (3)
 - b. Mahlon and Chilion marry Moabite women (4)—and again their names may reveal something about them or serve as a bit of foreshadowing:
 - 1) Chilion marries Orpah whose name is derived from a word meaning stiff necked, or stubborn
 - 2) Mahlon marries Ruth (4:10), whose name means friendship
 - 3) This poses a question: weren't the Israelites forbidden from marrying Moabites?
 - a) They are not specifically prohibited in the list in DEU 7:1-3
 - b) But, they were to be excluded from the assembly of the Lord (e.g. the worship assembly; DEU 23:3-6)
 - c) In addition, 1KI 11:1-2 does include the Moabites in the prohibition, and states that Moabite wives were partly responsible for Solomon's downfall
 - d) Nehemiah not only chastises, but **physically assaults** the Jews for taking Moabite women as their wives (NEH 13:23-27)
 - e) However, the "rules" above did not apply when a foreigner converted to the LORD and served him (ISA 56:1-8)
 - f) Ruth certainly meets this criteria
 - c. Mahlon and Chilion die (5)
 - 1) "And they lived there about ten years": seems to imply that their deaths came ten years after marrying
 - 2) So, Naomi lost not only her husband, but her only two sons—she was left completely alone with little hope for progeny, care, help, affection, etc.

B. Naomi and Ruth Return to Judah (1:6-22)

- 1. Naomi attempts to return to Judah alone (6-9):
 - a. Word had reached Naomi that God had provided relief from the famine in Judah (6-7)
 - b. It appears she started out for Judah with her daughters-in-law, but then changed her mind and decided to send them home to Moab (8-9):
 - 1) She releases them from any obligation by sending them back home to their families (8): **"And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house."**
 - 2) She prays for God's blessings to be upon them (9):
 - a) She prays for God to be loyal to them, just as they had been to her and her sons: **"May the LORD deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me."**—she uses an interesting word here, hesed, which carries the idea of covenant loyalty

- b) She prays for God’s provision and protection for them: **“May the LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband.”**—finding rest in the house of a new husband refers to finding security and protection
 - 3) She affectionately attempts to send them on their way (9b): **“Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.”**
- c. Ruth and Orpah initially refuse to leave Naomi’s side (10-14): **“And they said to her, “No, but we will surely return with you to your people.”**
 - 1) Based on Naomi’s next words, it may be that they didn’t realize the ramifications of leaving their homeland and going to Judah as foreign widows—there would basically be little hope of them finding security in the home of a new husband
 - 2) Here we learn that Naomi’s primary concern was their security and well-being:
 - a) Naomi had no other sons who would be obligated by the Law to marry them (11)
 - b) Naomi was too old to find another husband (12)
 - c) Even if she did get remarried, and managed to get pregnant and have other sons, would Ruth and Orpah wait for them to grow up and marry them (12-13a)?
 - 3) Orpah heeds Naomi’s wishes and returns to Moab (14): **“And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law,”**
 - a) Some, including Jewish tradition, see Orpah’s actions as selfish and an abandonment of Naomi, but the text doesn’t give any such sense
 - b) In fact, the fact that she weeps indicates it was not an easy decision
 - c) Plus, she honored Naomi’s wishes and did what she told her to do
- d. But, Ruth refused to leave Naomi and this is where we get our first glimpse into Ruth’s character and amazing devotion and loyalty, not just to Naomi but to the LORD (14b-17):
 - 1) The Hebrew is rather interesting here:
 - a) First, the Hebrew word order: normal word order (if you can call it that) places the verb before the subject (like it does with Orpah—lit. “she kissed” followed by “Orpah” followed by “her mother-in-law”), but here the author places “but Ruth” before the verbal phrase “she clung to her”—it’s the author’s way of drawing attention to and emphasizing Ruth’s unusual and unexpected actions
 - b) The verb “to cling”:
 - A word that refers to two things physically sticking together
 - It’s used figuratively to describe how a husband is to cleave to his wife (GEN 2:24) and how Israel was to cleave to the LORD (DEU 10:20)
 - c) There is no better way for the author to have communicated in such a small phrase Ruth’s loyalty and devotion to Naomi
 - 2) We see the depth and breadth of Ruth’s devotion when Naomi tries a second time to convince her to return to her home in Moab (15-18):
 - a) Naomi points to Orpah, Ruth’s sister, as if to say, “It’s okay. Your sister is going home” (15): **“Then she said, “Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”**

- b) But Ruth again refuses (16-17): **“But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. 17 “Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.”**
- This is a PACKED verse!
 - We learn of Ruth’s faithfulness and loyalty to not only Naomi, but Israel and the LORD
 - Most English translations miss the terseness and sheer bluntness of Ruth’s words here, and may even miss something:
 - Most English translations treat Ruth’s words as a commitment to abandon her people and gods in favor of Israel and the LORD
 - They do this by translating the tense as a future tense—“your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.”
 - However, there is no verb so it must be supplied: “Your people, my people; your God, my God.”
 - It could just as easily and appropriately be translated as “Your people are my people, and your God is my God.”
 - This renders it as a confession or profession, rather than a commitment, and says something about Ruth’s current spiritual state
 - Ruth also uses the covenantal name of God, Yahweh (17)

2. Naomi and Ruth return to a bitter sweet reunion in Judah (18-22)

- a. When Naomi realizes she cannot convince Ruth to leave, she relents and the two continue on to Judah (18-19)
- b. Their arrival back in Judah caused a mix of excitement and surprise, likely because Naomi had been gone for over 10 years (19): **“So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, “Is this Naomi?”**
- c. The next few verses have caused some to see Naomi as a bitter old woman (20-21):
 - 1) She asks that they no longer call her Naomi (“pleasant”), but Mara (“bitter”) **because “the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.”**
 - 2) She left Judah “full” (with a husband and two boys), but has returned “empty” (a widow and childless)
 - 3) She puts the cause or blame for this squarely in God’s hands (21): **“but the LORD has brought me back empty...the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me”** (she used legal language which was often used in court when bringing charges against someone).
 - 4) Earlier (we glossed over it) in v. 13 she appears to accuse God of being against her
- d. We have to keep in mind, however, that Naomi was simply reflecting the Jewish world view
 - 1) The OT does state that God blesses the righteous but brings ruin and distress on the unrighteous (DEU 28:1-2, 15)
 - 2) So, in their world view, if one experienced blessing they were under God’s favor, but if they experienced distress they were under His judgment

- 3) We cannot be too hard on Naomi because she had experienced unimaginable loss and we must permit her to question God's role in all of it...just like we might if we were to face such tragedy
- 4) We also have to keep in mind that this glimpse into Naomi's psyche (if you will) actually hints at a major theme that underlies the book—the sovereignty of God—Naomi doesn't see the events of her life as simply chance or happenstance, they are under the direct control of the LORD
- 5) We also learn that Naomi's perception that God is somehow against her is wrong; in fact, he blesses her tremendously through Ruth, Boaz and a grandchild

Conclusion

1. So, how does this historical event related to us?
2. First, and foremost it gives us an amazing picture of faithfulness, loyalty and devotion in the person of Ruth—and one who is an outsider (a Moabite)--this is not only a picture of the kind of devotion we should show to one another as God's people, but it serves as an example of God's loyalty to us
3. Second, and something we haven't talked about yet, is that Ruth is a type—a foreshadowing and representation—of the Church
 - a. In the book of Ruth, Boaz is a type (a representation) of Jesus Christ the redeemer
 - b. Likewise, Ruth is a type (a representation) of the gentile Church
 - c. She is a gentile, excluded from all of God's promises, until she becomes a part of God's people through her commitment to the LORD and redemption through her marriage to Boaz
 - d. The same is true of us, the gentile Church—we are grafted into God's people Israel through our Redeemer, Jesus Christ.
 - e. In other words, the story of Ruth is a foreshadowing and presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ!
 - f. In addition, Ruth's faithfulness is a picture of the faithfulness and loyalty of the Church to Jesus Christ