

# **1. DEPARTURE & RETURN**

**RUTH 1:1-22**

**<sup>1</sup>It happened, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons.**

**<sup>2</sup>The name of the man was Elimelek and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.**

**<sup>3</sup>But Elimelek, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup>These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup>both Mahlon and Kilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.**

It is a relatively short distance from Bethlehem to Moab (see map page 44). The Book of Numbers claims that the Israelites captured the area north of the Arnon River from Sihon, king of the Amorites (see Numbers 21). It was allotted to Reuben (see Numbers 32). Numbers is a post-exilic text. It is not claiming to give an accurate historical record. The first reliable data we have is from the ninth century BC. It appears that at that time the area was disputed between Moab and the northern kingdom, Israel. The authors of 1Samuel 22:2-3 felt at home having David entrust his parents to the safety of the care of the Moabite king, so there is no problem in the author of Ruth having Elimelek and Naomi travelling to Moab to escape from a famine in Judah.

‘Elimelek’ [אֱלִמֶלֶךְ] means ‘my God is king’. ‘Naomi’ [נָעֻמִי] derives from the root n‘m. The verb means ‘to be pleasant’, ‘to be dear to someone’; and the noun translates as ‘kindness’. It is possible that ‘Mahlon’ [מַחֲלֹן] derives from the root mħl and could mean ‘to be sickly’. ‘Kilion’ [כִּלְיֹן] may derive from the root klh and mean ‘to perish’. The names of the two sons rhyme, which is a common feature in stories (think of Eldad and Medad in Numbers 11:26-27, and Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal in Genesis 4:20-22).

According to 1Samuel 17:12, ‘David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah’. The prophet Micah, writing at a time when Judah was weak and was being pressured by Israel to join in an anti-Assyrian alliance, looks forward to a repetition of the time when the great David emerged from ‘one of the little clans of Judah, Bethlehem Ephrathah’ (Micah 5:1). ‘Ephrathah’ may be the name of a clan.

The name ‘Orpah’ [עֹרְפָה] may be linked with ‘orep’ (‘back of the neck’ – she goes back home rather than go to Judah with Naomi). ‘Ruth’ [רֹוּת] may derive from the root rwy and mean ‘refreshing’.

A series of tragedies leaves us with three widows, two young Moabite women and their Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi, who has been a resident alien in Moab for about ten years.

The word ‘return’ (verse 6) appears 12 times in chapter 1. In verse 6, the verb translated ‘visit’ is פָּקַד [pāqad], a word closely associated with the covenant. It speaks of God’s blessing or punishment according to how faithful or unfaithful his people have been to the covenant.

It is rare for the Book of Ruth to focus directly on God’s action. Normally, the covenant is seen in the relationship of the characters to each other within the story. An example of this is the use of ḥesed (covenant love) in verses 8-9, and of dābaq (cling to) in verse 14. By her actions, Ruth shows how a true Israelite should live out the covenant that binds them to YHWH. She practises covenant love in the way she treats Naomi: she clings to God by clinging to Naomi.

‘Mother’s house’ (verse 8) is unusual. In the context, these two young widows are in their mother-in-law’s house. Speaking of the home from which they came as their ‘mother’s house’ is, perhaps, a way of saying that the mother who needs to care for them is not Naomi but their own mothers.

Verses 11-13 hint at a complicated custom (called ‘levirate’ from the Latin ‘levir’, ‘one’s husband’s brother’), whereby a male was obliged to take as his wife a woman left childless by his brother, so that he can have a child in his brother’s name, thus ensuring that his brother would not be left without a child (see Genesis 38; Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

**“Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that YHWH had visited his people and given them food. <sup>7</sup>So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they took the road to go back to the land of Judah.**

**<sup>8</sup>But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May YHWH deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup>YHWH grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud.**

**<sup>10</sup>They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.”**

**<sup>11</sup>But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? <sup>12</sup>Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, <sup>13</sup>would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it is far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of YHWH is turned against me.”**

Return to Bethlehem

**<sup>14</sup>Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.**

**<sup>15</sup>So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god; turn back after your sister-in-law."**

**<sup>16</sup>But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God.**

**<sup>17</sup>Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. May YHWH do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"**

**<sup>18</sup>When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. <sup>19</sup>So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem.**

**When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?"**

**<sup>20</sup>She said to them, "Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. <sup>21</sup>I went away full, but YHWH has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when YHWH has testified me, and the Almighty has brought a harsh sentence upon me?"**

**<sup>22</sup>So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.**

In urging the people to remain true to the covenant, Moses directs them to 'cling to YHWH' (see Deuteronomy 10:20, 11:22, 13:4). Ruth does this by clinging to Naomi.

The second part of verse 17 is the formula for a solemn oath, calling down punishment on oneself if a promise is not kept. When accompanied by a ritual slaughter of an animal it was this slaughter that was called down (see Jeremiah 34:18-20). This is the first (and only) time that Ruth calls on YHWH. Naomi's God is already her God!

'Naomi' means 'pleasant/sweet' (see 1:2). Because of what has happened to her she asks in verse 20 to be called by the contrary word 'Mara' [מָרָא, 'bitter']. 'The Almighty' (verses 20 and 21) translates the Hebrew אֱלֹהֵי [šadday], an ancient epithet for 'the God of the mountain'.

The legal terminology of verse 21 echoes the complaints made by Jeremiah (see for example 12:1), Job (throughout), and Jonah.

The story began in Bethlehem (1:1) and Act One concludes by bringing us back there (1:22). It began with a famine. It ends 'at the beginning