

Bible Study June 2020: the Book of Ruth

Christ Church Woodley

Chapter 1: not belonging in the old home or the new.

Naomi Loses Her Husband and Sons

¹ In the days when the judges ruled,^[a] there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ² The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

³ Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

Naomi and Ruth Return to Bethlehem

⁶ When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. ⁷ With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

⁸ Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. ⁹ May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud ¹⁰ and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

¹¹ But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? ¹² Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—¹³ would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has turned against me!"

¹⁴ At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

¹⁶ But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." ¹⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

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¹⁹ So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, “Can this be Naomi?”

²⁰ “Don’t call me Naomi, ^[b]” she told them. “Call me Mara, ^[c] because the Almighty ^[d] has made my life very bitter. ²¹ I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted ^[e] me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

²² So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

1. The setting

- a. Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, has died. His name means ‘God is my King’, and within the story, this may be symbolic.
- b. Naomi’s two sons also die. The family, having attached itself to Moab and perhaps to the religion of Moab, finds itself with all links dissolved. They have no future in Moab, and perhaps no right to call on the God of Israel.
- c. Naomi is in the most miserable of states, and wants to re-name herself ‘Mara’ (bitter), because ‘the Lord has pronounced against me’. In this abject state, she advises her two daughters-in-law to peel off and find their own future, freed from the disaster that surrounds her.
- d. But Ruth is steadfast in support of Naomi and in the process turns towards God.

2. What it means to be an exile

- a. Israel has a lot of memories of being cut off from home: exile in Egypt, in the wilderness, in Babylon. Most of us in the UK have never had this experience, and it is not always easy to relate to it. It involves the end of certitude, of public life¹, and possibly of the idea that God is our guardian².
- b. In the New Testament, this set of memories is overlaid with some parallel concerns: the lot of the disposed amongst us, and the idea of ourselves as foreigners in our own land, because, as Christians, we have a different frame of reference from that of the general population.
- c. The pressures generated by dislocation can corrode the old social values of neighbourliness into selfishness, fear, anger and greed.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Deep Memory, p.60

² See Ruth 1:19-22