

## Background

Given the patriarchal structure of society during the story-telling and authorship of the Bible, it is not surprising that few women are mentioned. It is particularly remarkable, therefore, that an entire book of the Bible would be focused on a female character. This happens only with the Books of Ruth, Esther, and Judith. Note: not all of these can be found in every Bible as there is not total agreement across Christian denominations regarding which texts are part of the Biblical Canon.

The Book Ruth is found across Bible traditions. It is unique in that it is named for a woman, and that it privileges the voice of women building the story through conversations and relationships. This is a story about stories from a particular experience.

While the book is short. There are some incredible themes on which we can reflect and from which we can learn. It is a wonderful opportunity to engage in the story of God's journey with the people of Israel through a feminine lens.

## Invitation

This study is offered for those who would like to explore the Book of Ruth on your own time, at a pace that is meaningful for you. I have broken the text into themes to help facilitate engagement and reflection. With each theme, I offer information about the text and questions for reflection. You are encouraged to navigate these in a way that makes sense for you.

Participants are encouraged to send questions and comments to me via email ([rev.chrisbc@gmail.com](mailto:rev.chrisbc@gmail.com)), messenger or text (519-965-7086) and I will happily respond. I look forward to hearing what folks say about this incredible book. I hope those who choose to engage find this study meaningful.

## **Part 1: Elimelech's line (Ruth 1:1-6)**

*In the time of judges* – this is a reference to the point in history after the Israelites had come to the Promised Land but before they had monarchs (like King David) to rule over the people. Highlights of this time can be found in the Book of Judges immediately preceding Ruth. This detail helps to establish a timeframe for this story and cultural context.

*Famine* – a prevailing theme in history is the need for migration during famine. When families don't have the resources they need where they live, some feel compelled to seek them elsewhere. This reminds us that, at least part of this story, would take place outside of the familiar territory of the Israelites.

*Bethlehem in Judah* – this is an ancient settlement situated 5 miles south of Jerusalem.

*Moab* – this would be a foreign land for this family. They would not have full rights as citizens.

### Names and their meanings:

*Elimelech* – “my God is King”;

*Naomi* – may be the feminine form of Naaman a name sometimes applied to the god of fertility in Canaanite literature. Its root expresses delight, pleasurable. In English “sweetheart”.

NOTE: The author may have taken liberty with the names of the sons given their meaning and what happens.

*Mahlon* – sterility or sickness

*Chilion* – a tiny vessel or consumption

### Tragedy strikes

Elimelech dies. This leaves Naomi a widow with two sons who she marries Moabite women. These marriages which bring together individuals from different cultures, countries and religions is not mentioned with derision but more as a matter of fact and an opportunity to hope that Naomi’s plight will turn around.

Things seem fine for 10 years and then the two sons die leaving Naomi without a male to protect and keep her. Such a situation would leave Naomi particularly vulnerable, so Naomi decides to return to her country of birth having heard that the famine was over.

**Reflection:** What strikes you in these first six verses? How do you imagine the story? What concerns would you have for Naomi? Where is God in the tragedy that befalls her? How are the lives of widows today similar to and different from that of Naomi? In what ways do widows support one another? How can/does the Church support widows?

### **Part 2: Returning (Ruth 1:7-22)**

By returning to Judah, Naomi would be surrounded by family and friends. As Elimelech owned a small plot of land, she could sell this to provide some resources for a time. Her homeland would offer the most she could expect of life without a man to care for her. It would, however, offer little to Orpah and Ruth as they would be foreigners, away from their families and friends.

Naomi is accompanied by the two women for a time. She then releases them of their obligation to her and their deceased husbands and gives them permission to return to their mother’s home. It is suggested that Naomi pointed to the maternal home in recognition that mothers had a particular care for daughters even while they were all under the care of the father or male head of the household.

They both resist initially so Naomi appeals to practicality. Practice would have allowed for other sons to marry the wives of their brothers. But, in this case there were no more sons to marry and none were likely to arrive any time soon.

Orpah listens to reason and returns. In doing so, she offers a praiseworthy example of common sense. She is the one who will continue the sacred traditions of her people (the Moabites). Her story helps to contrast the commitment and sacrifice of Ruth, while she, herself, will fade into the background.

Ruth resists even Naomi's third attempt to set her free and now we hear Ruth speak. Her words take on a prophetic style as she proclaims an eternal commitment to Naomi. She will not leave Naomi even in death. Ruth is committing herself, her life to Naomi and, through her commitment to Naomi, to the God of Israel.

When the two women arrive in Bethlehem, they are the talk of the town. For Naomi, however, the return is bitter, and she professes this by inviting a name change. Mara means 'bitter'. She pronounces God's public judgment on her almost as a matter of fact.

The barley harvest would take place in April and May.

**Reflection:**

What strikes you in these verses? What are your thoughts about Naomi, Ruth and Orpah? How easy would it be to think less of Orpah because she returned? Why should we resist this urge? Are there times when you feel your choices have been regarded negatively even though you feel they are justified? How do you reconcile this struggle?

The first words of Ruth are powerful and poetic (see Ruth 1:16-18). What message do you hear in her proclamation? What stands out in what she says? What does this tell you about her character? Has there been someone in your life to whom you would say these words? Has there been someone to whom you would say these words? What is that relationship like?

As Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem notice Naomi's comments (see Ruth 1:20-21). What does this say about how she feels? Do her feelings align with her treatment by the community? How often do feelings overshadow the realities around us? How can we accept the welcome of others even if we may not be ready to do so?

**Part 3: Encountering Elimelech's Kin (Ruth 2:1-23)**

Enter Boaz. He is wealthy and a relative of Elimelech. This establishes a particular relationship between Naomi and Boaz and, subsequently, between Boaz and Ruth. There are expectations that will come with this relationship especially given that Naomi's husband and sons are dead.

It was a general expectation that, as produce was harvested, some would be left to provide for those in need. Specifically included here were the alien, orphan, and widow. As such Ruth had a right to glean what was left and didn't need to ask permission. What does it say about her character that she asks anyway and is noted as being particularly hard working?

Boaz's greeting and the response are not necessarily a reflection of piety. Rather, this was a common way of greeting others not unlike our 'hi, how are you?'

In harvesting, first would come the reapers who would cut barley stalks by the handful. Next would be those who bound 8-10 handfuls into sheaves. When the sheaves were carted off, the poor could glean.

While there is a duty to allow vulnerable people to glean from the fields, Boaz is particularly generous towards Ruth and instructs those who work for him to care for her. He also allows

her to eat with them. Bread dipped in a light vinegar can be particularly refreshing after a long day. Think about fancy restaurants where fresh bread is offered with an oil and vinegar dip. Boaz's generosity enables Ruth to bring home a whole ephah of grain (about two-thirds of a bushel).

Naomi realises right away that Ruth has found favour with someone. Notice the excitement in her comments. When she realises this is a relative, she expresses a sense that divine providence is at play. Naomi realises that this is someone who would have obligations to her and Ruth by virtue of their kinship. He could be the answer to a prayer, providing the possibility of protecting the land she holds in trust and even creating an opportunity for providing offspring.

Ruth continues to benefit from Boaz's generosity by gleaning from the fields through the end of the barley and wheat harvest, i.e. into June. Naomi is left waiting.

### **Reflection:**

This story is told as series of encounters with conversations. As you 'listen' to their words, how do you envision each of these characters? What mental image is painted in your mind of the various encounters? How are these conversations a mirror of the kinds of relationships you have had?

The ability to glean from a field illustrates the importance of caring for the vulnerable within the community. This was an expectation, a duty that was imbedded in their understanding of how faith is lived. We too are called to respond to human need with loving service as a mark of mission. Our Baptismal Covenant challenges us to respect the dignity of every being. In what ways do we respond by enabling others to glean from our work? How would someone like Ruth be received today?

Ruth is humbled by the generosity Boaz shows her. When she inquires, he admits he has heard all about the generosity she has shown Naomi. What does this say about the conversations that happened in the community regarding Naomi and Ruth? How do similar conversations affect our opinions of people today?

Naomi gets her hopes up when she hears Ruth's story. You can almost hear her belief that her fortunes may have turned. When have you experienced a similar glimmer of hope? In what ways have you attributed this to God? To what extent do we praise God when good things happen?

### **Part 5 The Widow's Demand and the Dilemma (Ruth 3:1-18)**

Winnowing: farmers separated barley from the chaff by tossing it in the wind. The chaff would blow away. Favourable winds often began about 2pm and continued through the night. As a result, work would begin mid afternoon and continue until nightfall. Workers would sleep on the thrashing floor to prevent theft.

Naomi decides it is time for Ruth to take things one step further. She tells Ruth to do everything she can to make herself appealing and wait until Boaz is most content. While some

might see the invitation to uncover and lay at his feet as a kind of seduction, taken at face value, and in line with characteristics of the women involved, this is more of a symbolic act that is a kind of mimed invitation to marriage and nothing more.

As kin to Elimelech and Mahlon, Boaz has an obligation to help preserve their family by providing offspring in their name. This would help ensure the immortality of these kinsmen. By her actions, Ruth shows that she respects these traditions and expectations. She is not focused on her own wellbeing by chasing after younger men. This impresses Boaz.

Right of action, however, falls to someone else first. Boaz wants to make sure that everything is done properly. He agrees to arrange to have a conversation with this individual.

He also continues to care for Ruth by ensuring her safety. She is not expected to walk home at night but is allowed to stay with him. The understanding is that he did not take advantage of this. She leaves early in the morning to preserve her reputation and she does not leave empty handed. By these actions, Naomi trusts Boaz to do what is right quickly.

### **Reflection:**

Historically, women didn't have a lot of authority and power. They often needed to use other means to gain what they needed or wanted. In what ways do women continue to use similar means to gain what is needed or wanted? How can this be done respectfully? Why is it important to not get too carried away with the image of seduction in this instance? How might such assumptions distract from the meaning-making of this story?

There is a great deal of respect placed on cultural and religious traditions in this passage. Naomi encourages Ruth to act in ways that would benefit them both. Ruth follows the instructions of Naomi. Boaz recognises what Ruth is doing and remains respectful towards her. What message is conveyed through these interactions? What might we learn about respect? Why is it important to respect traditions, our own and others?

Our Baptismal Covenant calls us to '...respect the dignity of every human being.' How do Naomi, Ruth and Boaz illustrate this kind of respect? To what extent does the fact that Naomi and Ruth are widows and thus vulnerable impact our understanding of what is happening here? To what extent does the fact that Ruth is a foreigner impact what we can learn from these interactions? How can/do we model a similar level of respect for others in society today?

### **Part 5: Following tradition (Ruth 4:1-12)**

Boaz goes to the town gate, through which many people will pass through, under the assumption that he will bump into his kin there. Notice the kin is never formally named. This keeps the narrative focused on Boaz. The elders are present to provide as witness to the conversation and its eventual resolution.

Boaz begins the conversation by acknowledging that Naomi, wife of their kin, Elimelech, is selling a parcel of land. Boaz acknowledges that the unnamed kin has first right of purchase

because he is a closer relation to Elimelech than Boaz. This action would ensure the land of Elimelech stays within the family. The unnamed kin agrees to the purchase.

At that point, Boaz clarifies that Ruth, the young widow of Elimelech's son would also be a part of the transaction. It would have been anticipated that the purchaser of the land would also have responsibility for Naomi. It is also true that, by this point, Naomi is too old to have children. With Ruth, however, the responsibility of taking on a wife and being open to children that would be heirs to Elimelech is made clear. We don't know the details of this man's life. He may have already had a wife and children to inherit his wealth. Realising that he would have two more mouths to feed plus children that would be heirs to his property and carry on the name of Elimelech seems to have gone beyond what he was ready to take on. As a result, he declines.

The sandal becomes a sign of this transaction. Some suggest this is related to the understanding that only those who own a property have a right to step foot on it. Offering the sandal provides a metaphorical illustration that he is passing on that right to Boaz. This would be assumed by the elders and others of that time. Thus, it is possible that the explanation was provided later in the text so that future generations might understand the meaning of this action.

The elders liken Ruth to Leah and Rachel, the matriarchs of Israel and to Tamar who ensured the future of Judah's line. In doing so, they suggest that Boaz and Ruth may be equally important to the history of Israel.

### **Reflection:**

Boaz shrewdly navigates the situation in the hopes of getting the outcome he desires. He meets the kin in a crowded place to offer multiple witnesses and takes it one step further by inviting elders to formally act as witnesses. He acts humbly, acknowledging their shared relationship and its implications. At first, he focuses solely on the property, something which could offer a financial benefit to a family. It is only after discussing the property that he mentions Ruth and the obligation to carry on Elimelech and Mahlon's names. This proves to be the deal breaker for the unnamed kin. What do think about Boaz's actions? What do these say about him? What steps have you taken in the hopes of getting some outcome you desire? How might others interpret your actions?

What does it say about the unnamed kin that he declined the opportunity once it was made clear that he would also have to take Ruth as a wife and raise children for Elimelech and Mahlon? Are we to take from this that he is selfish? Or can we see something more in this action? By declining the option, does this unnamed kin highlight the generosity of Boaz towards Naomi and Ruth just as Orpah turning back highlight the commitment of Ruth?

### **Part 6: The Revival of Elimelech's Line (Ruth 4:13-22)**

Boaz and Ruth marry, and she bears a son. Elimelech's line finds its continuation in this child. Ruth's fidelity to Naomi has renewed the meaning of her life and she embraces the child ('laid

him in her bosom, and became his nurse') as a grandmother would do. She probably spoiled him too.

It is unlikely that the women of the neighbourhood named the child but rather called out, celebrating the child that was born.

The child is named Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David (as in the great King David). This highlights the value of a faith like Ruth's. She became an instrument through which a family line was preserved and important characters in the life of the community came to be.

It is likely the genealogy of verses 18-22 was a later addition to the text. By focusing on Boaz as the father of Obed, these verses wipe away the significance of this book in following the cultural practice of widows marrying kin to enable a continuation of the dead husband's line. Instead, the genealogy focuses on connecting David to the divinely sustained line of Perez, Judah, and Jacob.

### **Reflection:**

Throughout this text, Naomi's attitudes and actions are founded in the understanding of the importance of family lines. Individuals are remembered and sustained through heirs. Her husband and sons have none. This leaves her destitute with limited possibilities. Ruth becomes her salvation.

To what extent do people continue to prioritise heirs as a way to be remembered? How important is it today to pass along our 'namesake'? What lengths do people go through to have children of their own?

Through her fidelity to Naomi, Ruth becomes the grandmother to David, the future king of Israel. How does this impact our understanding of this story? What meaning can we take from this relationship? To what extent does this relationship highlight the reason this book, named after a woman, is included in the Bible?

Read Matthew 1:1-6. Notice in this genealogy, a few women, including Ruth, are named. What does the inclusion of these names in this genealogy say about the significance of these women in the history of Israel? What does it say about the significance of these women in the history of Christianity that they are listed as part of the genealogy of Jesus? To what extent do these connections impact your understanding of the story of Ruth?