**Part 1: What’s in a Name?**

**Ruth 1:1-7** [New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised](https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Anglicised-NRSVA-Bible/) **(NRSVA)**

### Elimelech’s Family Goes to Moab

1 In the days when the judges ruled, 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. 2The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.

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

### Naomi and Her Moabite Daughters-in-Law

6Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had had consideration for his people and given them food. 7So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah.

***What can we learn about the story of Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi in their names?***

This is a powerful story, depicting what happened after a crisis, and coming to a decisive stage in the life of Naomi, whose husband died. And then, Naomi’s two daughters-in-law lost their husbands as well, and they were both childless. One daughter-in-law, Orpah, after urging by Naomi, opts to remain in her familiar, safe, predictable life in Moab while Ruth risks a completely unknown future, choosing to follow and to maintain her close bond with her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth shared love of YHWH with Naomi and chose to settle in Judah. She left everything familiar to her.

It is important to understand that in the ancient Hebrew culture, a widow with no surviving male relatives was often destitute. This is a story of crossing boundaries of geography and culture, and choosing a relationship that was not bound by gender or blood; here, the loyalty is between women – unusual in the Hebrew Testament – where Ruth tells Naomi that your people will be my people and your G-d my G-d.

The story has been compared to Abraham leaving his homeland when the Lord calls on him to leave his family and go to a place that the Lord would lead him. In the ancient Hebrew culture, blood relationships were everything, and for both Abraham and Ruth, the separation from the familiar required depending on the Lord. As noted in our Introduction, Abraham left his homeland with all of his wealth, and his wife and nephew. He believed he was called out by the Lord and was promised a multitude of progeny. Ruth left everything, promised nothing, with no assurance that things would be better.

Let us trace Naomi and Ruth’s history. Their story is narrated in the Book of Ruth, thought by most scholars to be about the 4th to 5th century BCE and written in postexilic Hebrew. The stories go that centuries earlier, a huge family rift occurred between their forebears, Abraham and Lot, with further “bad blood” resulting when the Moabites did not give the Israelites food and water during their exile out of Egypt.

**Lot:** His name is related to the word “to separate” (Genesis 13:9, 11, 14) and he is contrasted with Ruth’s pledge never to separate from Naomi (1:17). Lot’s name in the Hebrew means “covering, veiling, hidden, concealed, secret.” You may recall the story that his daughters got him intoxicated and he had offspring by his own daughter.

In leaving Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot’s wife, who was not named, looked backward, and turned into a pillar of salt. Is this symbolic of her still being tied to the security that the culture offered her? Metaphorically, salt is a preservative, suggesting memory of the pleasure of one’s senses which she did not renounce. Today, we would reframe this as an ambivalence she did not resolve, and she could not have it both ways: she had to make a decision -- because not to decide -- is to decide.

Ruth and Boaz brought reconciliation and healing, redeeming the breach in the family line after the rupture with Lot – as the story was told in Genesis of the separation of Abraham and Lot. Then, their descendants are reunited in the persons of Ruth and Boaz and King David was their great-grandson who was also in the lineage of Jesus.

**Naomi (na-o’-mi):** We begin with the older woman, Naomi. In the Hebrew, her name means “my sweetness, my beloved, my delight, pleasantness.”

She was the wife of Elimelech and they were Israelites who immigrated to Moab. With her husband and sons, they left their homeland of Judah because of a famine. She was the mother of two sons, one of whom was Mahlon, who married Ruth, a Moabite.

Then, all of the men died. We are not told how they died. Naomi was left only with her two Moabite daughters-in-law. Naomi then returned to Judah as a widow -- back to her original starting point. From being a victim of calamity, with the help of Ruth, she then challenged and changed her place in the world. In the last scene in the book, although she does not speak, her name appears six times.

Her status had changed. Boaz mentioned her as the owner of property. The women in Bethlehem invoked YHWH’s blessing upon Naomi through Ruth who loved her, who was “more to you than seven sons…” (4:14-15). Naomi becomes her grandchild’s nurse and even though there is no blood relationship, the local women then declare that the child was Naomi’s son, replacing her two deceased sons.

**Orpah (or’-pah):** In the Hebrew, her name means “youthful freshness, pulled, mane, nape of the neck, back of the neck.” The root of her name may suggest a posture of turning back toward home. She was one of the two daughters-in-law of Naomi, the widow of her son, Chilion.

She ultimately stayed in Moab instead of going with Naomi and Ruth to Judah. She was loyal to her familiar life, and Naomi wished her well in her aspiration to find the security of a second husband in her homeland. There was risk in going forward and risk in returning, because as the widow of a foreigner, she could have experienced rejection by her own people at home, but she also would have been a stranger and outsider in Judah.

It was a hard choice, one that faces many people in their spiritual path – are we better off to stay put and hold back or will we move forward? Metaphorically, it is suggested that she was a graceful, natural young woman, with more zeal for security and her here-and-now concerns rather than exploring or searching for things of the spirit. Lowering one’s risk might require abandoning pursuit of change.

**Ruth (rut):** Her name in the Hebrew means “satiation, refreshment,” from the Hebrew root meaning to drink one’s fill. She was from Moab and married a Judean named Mahlon, Naomi’s son. Upon his death, Ruth was a widow and childless who chose to return with her mother-in-law to Judah.

While Naomi protested, believing their well-being would be easier to attain at home, Ruth persevered while Orpah turned back. Ruth’s return to Judah is compared to Abraham’s journey where both left their familiar worlds and following G-d’s leading, going to a place where they did not know anyone (Genesis 12:1, Ruth 2:11).

Ruth ultimately became the wife of Boaz, an Israelite. Boaz refers to her as “a worthy woman” or a woman of valor *(eset hyil),* the same phrase used in Proverbs 31:10 referring to a “capable wife” or a “fine woman.” At the end of her story, she is exalted above women’s expected role of producing male children (the main purpose for women in that culture). She was exalted because she was loyal to Naomi through whom she swore allegiance to YHWH.

We can compare Orpah and Ruth. Orpah opted to maintain what was familiar to her and secure. Instead of going with Naomi, she turned her back and went back – reminiscent of Lot’s wife who also looked back and turned into a pillar of salt. But Lot’s wife was explicitly told not to look back while Naomi begged Orpah to return home.

Ruth went forward, despite the older woman entreating both young women to remain in Moab. She found love with Boaz, was then secure (in the “house of bread”, i.e. Bethlehem). And their relationship repaired a ruptured family history, bringing reconciliation and transformation. Let us go together and follow her on that path….

Let us consider the departure of Naomi and her husband and two sons who left Bethlehem (Ruth 1:1-7). Because of famine, Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, moved to Moab with their two sons. To gain perspective of distances, it was probably a 50 mile walk from Bethlehem. A lot of history is quickly told in these few verses. Aside from text of Ruth, and we also have links to other books in the Hebrew Bible that will help us more fully understand the story. In addition, we will sometime refer to Jewish commentaries over the centuries.

The first chapter might be summarized as a story of departure and return: the journey from loss to redemption begins. We see that the story bears similarities to Abram and Sarai (Genesis 12:10) as well as Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 26:1) who were also driven to leave their homes due to famine.

At this time, the chieftains ruled Judah, and this was said in the Book of Judges to be an unstable time. Although the timeframe has been argued as in the time prior to the Hebrew monarchy (1200-1000 BCE), most sources say the Book of Ruth probably was written down in about the 5th century BCE.

The Book of Judges describes this era as unstable because there were cycles of religious apostasy and punishment. “There was no king in Israel”…”Everyone did as he pleased.” (Judges 21:25). It was apparently a time of every person for themselves without regard for others. Ruth answers this quandary, where the people struggle with, persevere and achieve righteous outcomes.

The chaotic time in Israel was then contrasted with the *hesed* – great kindness – that is present in the Book of Ruth, where *hesed* leads to powerful transformation. Let’s again look at some more names in these verses which give us a more complete understanding.

**Elimelech:** Naomi’s husband is only found in the Book of Ruth, but the name was found in non-biblical ancient texts going back to the 14th century BCE. It means ‘My G-d is King.’ He and his family fled to Moab, but they did not intend to live there permanently. Nevertheless, they were away from Bethlehem for ten years and he died. The text then refers to him as ‘Naomi’s husband’ which means the story is now focused on her.

**Mahlon and Chilion:** Naomi’s sons also died. Mahlon’s name is related to a Hebrew root word meaning “illness, to forgive, petitioning G-d for help” as Moses did in Exodus 32:11. Chilion’s name is derived from the Hebrew meaning “an end, a completion:” ‘The heaven and earth were finished’ (Genesis 2:1) or ‘annihilation’ (Ezekiel 11:13). It seems that together, their names symbolize a traumatic, unexpected ending of a phase of life, and looking back regretfully. Naomi then longed to return to her home where her G-d was known and honored.

**Moab:** This name refers to a place in the southern part of modern-day Jordan, an area of plains and part of a valley across the Jordan from Jericho. The Moabites and Israelites had a lot in common. The two nations arose about the same time. Moabites descended from Abraham’s nephew, Lot, from an incestuous encounter with his older daughter.

The story of the breach widened: later, Moabites refused to provide water and food after the Israelites fled Egypt (Nehemiah13:1-3); subsequently, the Israelites forbade Moabites from being “admitted into the congregation of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 23:4) and also forbade marriages between them. This breach was ultimately healed as seen in the story of Ruth.

Starting out (v. 6)…they left the place (v.7): Naomi started out with Ruth and Orpah. In ancient Israelite tradition, she had now become head of the household – now in charge of her own future and that of others. Her family had intended to return to Israel after the famine, but time passed. They likely had settled in where thoughts of an arduous return faded.

The three widows set out to go to Bethlehem. The departing is emphasized, as it underscores the change and transformation as a result of *hesed.* The idea of a mutual relationship between humanity and G-d is emerging.

‘The Lord had taken note of His people and given them food’ (verse 6): Twice in the Book of Ruth, G-d intervenes, in this verse and also verse 13. Otherwise, G-d’s name appears in blessings or oaths. The theology of this book is based on *hesed*, where blessings are gifts that even the poor can give. We see the power of blessings and *hesed* describes a mutual relationship between man and G-d to turn futility into fertility and hope after despair.

G-d offers *hesed* and brings abundance and well-being. And, finally, when human beings act with *hesed*, we see that G-d is acting through them. Ruth is the most significant and detailed biblical story about the plight of widows. In the ancient world, with no men left, their situation was precarious.

**Redemption:** In the Bible, redemption has several levels. It refers to the obligation to help destitute relatives, to restore property or people to their original condition. It has a both a practical and spiritual aspect. The Hebrew root for ‘redeem’ occurs 21 times, always referring to *people* as redeemers, but the root is also connected with G-d, the redeemer of Israel. An implication that follows is that we are called to serve as redeemers of those around us.

**Food for Thought:**

1) Did you notice the possibilities in Chilion’s name – making an ending, a completion, or annihilation? Can you think of a time in your own life where an experience felt like annihilation at the time you were going through it but from a later perspective, you realized it to have been a major turning point, perhaps even a necessary loss?

2) Think about what a big decision it was for Naomi to leave her place in Moab to sojourn back to Judah. She had been away for ten years. When she left, her family was established in Moab. To leave their comfort there, would be a big change. Recall a time that you faced a big decision where you didn’t know which direction to go – to stick with one which would be more familiar or one which would be more risk?

3) How can we offer *hesed* today? What does this idea of mean for you personally today? How can *hesed* help heal the breaches that occur in many families or faith communities?

**Personal Notes:**

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