**Part 2: The Turning Point**

**Ruth 1:8-18** [New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised](https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Anglicised-NRSVA-Bible/) **(NRSVA)**

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

10They said to her, ‘No, we will return with you to your people.’ 11But 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? 12Turn 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, 13would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.’ 14Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

15So she said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’ 16But 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 shall be my people,  
    and your G-d my G-d.  
17Where you die, I will die—  
    there will I be buried.  
May the Lord do thus and so to me,  
    and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!’

18When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

In this segment, we are following closely the structure of the outline provided in the JPS Commentary which we cited in the annotated bibliography for this study. Today, we will consider chapter 1:8-18, which might be summarized as the turning point on the road to Bethlehem.

We see the three widows at a crossroad in their lives. Naomi tries to get Ruth and Orpah to turn back to Moab. She was very concerned for their welfare, and she wanted to repay them for their kindness *(hesed)* to her. She wanted to release them from any obligations they may have felt toward her but it was also sacrificial on her part to set them free.

However, Jewish commentators also note the silences in the story might suggest that Naomi might have also been embarrassed and had mixed feelings about bringing two foreigners -- Moabite women -- home with her. What would people say? So, the writer of Ruth allows for good to be done even though Naomi’s motives may have been mixed -- less than pure.

Most Rabbinic literature reads their exchanges on the road as reflecting religious conversion. Naomi tried three times to get the younger women to go home, and the Jews today say this is how any prospective convert should be approached – not begging or attempting to persuade them – but to send them back to their own roots. Then, if they stay, it is a true choice, as it was for Ruth.

**Turn back:** The Hebrew is *shovenah*, to return.

**Your mother’s house:** In Hebrew *beit ‘immah*, is a term that occurs only twice in the Hebrew Bible, always referring to connection with a strong female. Rebekah runs back to her mother’s when she reports the servant of Abraham arriving (Genesis 24:28). The woman in Song of Songs takes her beloved to her own mother’s house (Songs 3:4, 8:2). A widow was usually expected to return to her father’s house, so there is a female perspective being offered in this book, unlike any other book in the Bible. It is more like today, ‘going home to mama!’

**May the Lord deal kindly with you:** Literally, in Hebrew *ya’as hesed* – “may Yahweh do *hesed*.” Here, *hesed* suggests a hope for justice in the world, where a good deed is rewarded. It could suggest that where retribution might be expected, *hesed* is given. ‘*Hesed* is yours, oh my Lord, for you repay each person according to his deeds’ (Psalm 62:12). The deliverance from Egypt in Exodus is based on the idea of *hesed* (Exodus 15:13), and *hesed* could also be tied to mutual aid in a covenantal relationship. The main purpose of the Book of Ruth is to teach about *hesed*.

Naomi, when she blesses Ruth and Orpah, gives all the hypothetical arguments about how she may be unable to help them achieve marriage and a stable life; she feared there was no way to achieve the usual way of handling widowhood. Usually, a levirate marriage was arranged where a childless widow and her deceased husband’s brother marry to maintain the man’s lineage.

But there were no surviving sons, and she even raises the ludicrous idea that she is too old to bear more sons if they were to wait for them to grow up to be married! But by insisting that they go on their way, she was also sacrificing her own chances for security, as she then would be entirely alone.

**…if I thought there was hope for me…:** In the Hebrew, *tikvah*, is normally translated as hope, but it is also related to another word meaning “thread.” You may want to read the story in Joshua 2:18 where the prostitute, Rahab, hangs a scarlet thread outside her window, to signal to Joshua to spare her family.

This may be the origin of our term “hanging by a thread.” There are other images of *tikvah* also. A tree could be full of *tikvah*, so even if it is chopped down, new shoots – new threads of life -- will grow from the otherwise dead stump (Job14:7).

**My lot is far more bitter than yours…:** Naomi is bitter, not only because she has been widowed but she has also lost her sons who normally would have provided for her in her old age. She felt that G-d has turned against her.While she continued to anguish about her own situation, she pressed the young women to go back. She felt that G-d has turned against her.

**…the hand of the Lord…:** *Iggeret shemuel* is a phrase that also appears in other places in the Bible, usually depicting the hand of G-d as doing something which is a blessing for people but sometimes a form of discipline. But the phrase indicates that Naomi is reassuring the women that it was not their fault and she is not blaming them.

A 16th century rabbi wrote: “Do not think that my bitterness is because of you. Definitely not!” Naomi used language similar to that of Job, but in contrast to him who had not sinned, there is a sense that she feels an underlying guilt or believing that she deserves what happened to her.

We may speculate that possibly this related to her family having left Israel and going to Moab in the first place. Naomi ascribed both good and bad outcomes to the Lord; but she released Ruth and Orpah so that they could find new husbands. Orpah kissed her farewell, and there is no condemnation in having chosen to go back home. This would have been the expected choice in their world.

**But Ruth clung to her:** The word ‘But’ can be translated as ‘And’ or ‘But’ – so she is contrasted with what Orpah does, and this is Ruth’s major turning point. ‘Clung to her’ in the Hebrew is *dabhekah bah*, or literally ‘stuck to her,’ meaning a covenantal devotion, a permanent bonding. It is the major term for cleaving or clinging to G-d in Rabbinic literature.

It also refers to the union of man and woman: “Hence, a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife so that they become one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24). It is a single-minded, exclusive attachment. But it is also used in other places in the Book of Ruth without the inference of intimacy, such as where Boaz tells Ruth to “cling” to his handmaids, meaning in that situation to stay close to them for protection or to cling to his lads until the harvest is done [Page 631].

**Food for Thought:**

1. The ancient Hebrew culture was very patriarchal, and the rules were intended to provide for women and not leave them destitute. But we see this was a situation where none of the rules seemed to precisely fit the situation. They had to be more flexible while attempting to adhere to the spirit of the law. Can you think of situations in your own experience where the rules did not work? How were they modified? Would some people view this as too much compromise? How do we best decide what is right?

Can you think of similar situations in our present-day world or the crisis we are experiencing now where people may “fall through the cracks” of governmental, familial, private, or religious support systems? Is there someone you know who has been overlooked for whom you might offer *hesed?*

1. In ancient Hebrew culture – then, as now – women sometimes are on their own without a spouse or family support. In the New Testament, there is a strong idea that widows and orphans should be helped because they were subject to some of these ancient cultural rules where they became alone and destitute.

If we broaden the terms ‘widows and orphans’ a bit, considering those children or adults who are left alone for whatever reason or lack a close bond with anyone, our concept of *hesed* can expand. Thinking on this level, again, is there someone you know for whom you might offer *hesed?*

1. The story of Ruth legitimates close relationships, attachments, bonds, and commitments, including covenantal bonds between two women. Other stories have depicted close relationships between two men in scripture, such as David and Jonathan. This story is unique in describing intimacy between two women, applying the same word used for a man to leave his parents and to cling to his wife.

Thinking about your own life, have you experienced such a bond with another person of either gender, either in marriage, committed relationship, perhaps with an extended family member, a friend, or someone in your faith community? What makes a covenant today? Must it be legal, a religious ceremony, or can it be a private promise?

1. You may have heard the colloquial term, ‘I’ve got your back,’ used to convey the idea that one person is going to make sure the other is protected and aided in a difficult situation. Possibly this term was passed down from Orpah’s story, who turned her back.

Can you think of times that your bond with another person was strong and she or he covered your back? What about yourself, can you think of times you covered the back of someone else important to you? Is this part of *hesed?*

**Personal Notes:**

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