**Part 4: The Return**

**Ruth 1:19-22** [New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised](https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Anglicised-NRSVA-Bible/) **(NRSVA)**

19So 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?’ 20She said to them,

‘Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara,

for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.

21I went away full,  
    but the Lord has brought me back empty;

why call me Naomi  
    when the Lord has dealt harshly withme,  
    and the Almightyhas brought calamity upon me?’

22So 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 this segment, we will consider Naomi and Ruth’s return to Bethlehem, which was Naomi’s home of origin. Tribble notes that the Hebrew word, *sub*, meaning “return” occurs twelve times, in addition to synonyms – go, come, go forth.

The distances from Moab to Bethlehem may sound trivial in our modern world – only 50 miles – but when this was undertaken by walking, it was an arduous journey. Chapter 1:19-22 tells us what happened upon their arrival, Naomi’s talking with local women, and the end of the journey.

The text says the two went on together, which is an emphasis of Ruth accompanying Naomi to her homeland. A famous Jewish commentator, Rashi, says that because Ruth decided to follow Naomi’s G-d, she is now equal to Naomi in the story. The story was told that Boaz’ wife died the day they arrived.

Their arrival created excitement but the conversation that follows only involves Naomi. She was hardly recognizable to them because she had been away so long. Naomi’s name in Hebrew meant ‘pleasant’ but now she asked to be called ‘Mara’ which means ‘bitter,’ reflecting a change in her own identity. But nevertheless, she continued to be called Naomi through the rest of the book.

**For *Shaddai* has made my lot very bitter:** This particular name for G-d is less common in the Bible, used only 48 times whereas JHWH was used 6,800 times. But Naomi also used YHWH as well as Shaddai so commentators think she meant something more specific here. *Shaddai* also means ‘breasts’ so it might have referred to another ancient god who was associated with the mountains who came to be absorbed into the Hebrew names for G-d. The name depicts G-d as a source of nurturance or security.

She tells the town women that she went away full and returned home empty. This emptiness probably refers to having a family or resources in general vs. loss of family and assets. *Shaddai* was also associated with blessings of fertility which Ruth has lost, along with her two sons dying. *Shaddai* is also used in the Book of Job 31 times, and here, she complains that G-d’s hand has been heavy upon her. ‘Bitter’ – *mar* in the Hebrew -- was opposed to ‘sweet,’ or *‘matok,’* which is referred to when Moses turned bitter waters into sweet at Marah (Exodus 18:25).

*Matok* suggests a person infused with joy while *mar* suggests one who is emotionally stressed or in a stressful life situation.

In her return and discussion with the town women, Naomi seems to speak as though she is alone. She fails to acknowledge Ruth’s presence. ‘I came back with nothing and no one’ but we know that she is not alone. Some writers regard this as a clue about her self-focus and self-pity even though Ruth has devoted herself to accompanying Naomi and taking care of her.

In their culture, to be without the support of men, was to be nothing, and so this exclamation of being alone may depict her feeling of having no status as a widow. At the end of the book, this kind of social vulnerability or disadvantage was overcome: the women exclaim that Ruth is worth more to Naomi than seven sons! (Ruth 4:15) So, we see a progression in attitude here, from discounting the support of another woman to a realization of its true value!

Thus Naomi returned…she returned with her daughter-in-law Ruth the Moabite: Now Ruth was returning, and in the Hebrew, the word is *shavah*, which can also mean turning back, the same word used when Naomi begged her two daughters-in-law to turn back to Moab. But, what is meant by Ruth returning? Some see this as indicating *teshuvah*, alluding to repentance, or turning around the conflictual history between Moab and Israel, which began when Lot left Abraham (Genesis 13).

It is interesting that in the New Testament, the word for repentance in the Greek also suggests a knowledge or insight about one’s self and a turning around *(metanoia).* Repentance in scripture does not have the negative implications that we in our times have sometimes associated with such a life change due to distorted teaching: It is a positive awakening, which does not mean there may not be some pain or loss when deciding to turn to a different path!

By Ruth coming to Judah, this may represent a healing of the conflict between their two communities. But it will be seen that in the text, Ruth is continually referred to as a Moabite, and this is a barrier to her being considered a member of the community because in Deuteronomy (23:4) there was a prohibition about mixing with Moabites.

But better times are to come as signaled by their arrival at the beginning of the barley harvest, and this also coincides with the time of Passover. The season is about a month for barley harvest from about mid-March to mid-April at the spring equinox. In the *Targum*, the arrival date was at the eve of Passover.

**Food for Thought:**

1) Can you think of a season of your own life of *matok*, where you were infused with joy? What about a time of *mar*, or bitterness, emotional upset and stressful circumstances? Did you have a feeling that G-d had done this to you or that you had done something wrong which had resulted in this event? How was it resolved? Did you have a change in your perspective later on?

2) Can you recall a time that you were so stuck in your own self-pity that you could not see the reality that there was actually someone who was present and available to you whom you discounted or ignored? Do you remember a period of bitterness? What can we learn about bitterness from Naomi’s journey?

3) Have you personally experienced or had a friend who experienced coming into a culture, a place, a neighborhood, or place of worship that was not their own?

How did you experience this? What did you have to learn or change in order to be included?

4)Even in our own time, women will sometime discount the support of women, and men may discount the support of other men. Has there ever been a time in your life where you or someone important to you ignored available support because of the absence of a man – a husband, boyfriend, brother, father, son (or woman, girlfriend, wife, sister, mother)?

Was the support offered rejected because of the role you had previously had with that person? For example, a person might reject support from someone because it would be experienced as a loss of face.

5) Can you think of a time where you turned back, turned your direction in life? “Repented”? Turned about-face? Was it followed by a “harvest” of good?

**Personal Notes:**

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