

The Book of Ruth 2 Chapter 1

First of all the meaning of a few of the important names of people and places.

“Naomi” = pleasant and “Mara” = bitter: (see verse 20). “Mahlon” = sickly and “Chilion” = wasting – these names may be given to emphasise the weakness of the young men after a severe famine.

“Ephrathites” - “Ephrath” (Genesis 35, verse 19) was the ancient name for Bethlehem and “Bethlehem Ephrathah” is named in the prophet Micah, chapter 5, verse 2 as the birthplace of the Messiah. The name “Bethlehem” means House of Bread / Food. The name “Ruth” means female companion!

Read Ruth chapter 1 with these names in mind.

The family of Elimelech migrates to Moab - verses 1 - 5:- Rainfall in Palestine is never plentiful and on occasions is insufficient to provide for basic crops. There are famines recorded during the lifetimes of Abraham (Genesis 12, verse 1); David (2 Samuel 21, verse 1) and Elijah (1 Kings 17, verse 1). Moab had fertile land in the valleys and although a traditional enemy of Israel, through trading contacts it was a possibility for “economic refugees”. The marriages of the two sons to Moabite women would have been frowned upon by the orthodox in Israel. Again, compare this to the strict line taken in Ezra 9, verses 1 – 2.

The decision to return to Bethlehem - verses 6 - 7:- The sojourn in Moab lasted “*about ten years*”. The husband of Naomi died first. We do not know for how long the sons had been married before they died but both their marriages were childless. After Naomi heard that the famine had ended she determined to return to Bethlehem where she had friends and relatives. Note the phrase in verse 6 “*the Lord had visited his people and given them food*”. Throughout this book there is the acknowledgement of the sovereignty of the Lord God e.g. in chapter 1, verses 20 – 21 and chapter 4, verses 13 – 14, hopes of a prosperous future.

The two daughters-in-law accompanied her as she set out on her journey – at least 60 miles to Bethlehem round the top of the Dead Sea. I wonder if the girls travelled with Naomi as far as the border between Moab and Judah when the dialogue in verses 8 – 18 took place?

Ruth’s decision to go with her mother-in-law – verses 8 - 18:- Humanly speaking, the best course of action for the two young women was to return to their parents homes. There would be the possibility of new marriages and families among their own countrymen. Naomi asks God’s blessing on them and tells them to leave her. The custom at the time of the Judges was for a young widow to marry the brother of her late husband, see Deuteronomy chapter 25, verses 5 – 6. (note verses 7 - 10 of this chapter of Deuteronomy are the background to Ruth 3, verses 9 – 13 and chapter 4, verses 1 – 13).

There is no condemnation of Orpah for returning to her people. The famous words spoken by Ruth as she makes her decision to accompany Naomi are familiar to most of us! Read verses 16 – 17 again. Remember that Ruth had been a worshipper of the god Baal. We do not know if she had converted at the time of her marriage, but certainly here she makes a commitment to the Lord God of Israel.

The arrival in Bethlehem – verses 19 - 22:- The women of the town remembered how Naomi had lived up to her name of being “pleasant”. She returned weary and downhearted – just call me “Mara” she said “*for the Lord has dealt very bitterly with me*”. (verse 20 - 21). Again the Lord God is acknowledged as sovereign in bad times as well as good.

Verse 22 gives us the time of year when Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem – late April / early May “*at the beginning of the barley harvest*”.

This first chapter of the Book of Ruth is mostly negative! Naomi – a “pleasant” woman, left Bethlehem with a husband and two sons. She returned a destitute widow, as “Mara” a bitter woman. She went away full and the Lord brought her back empty. (chapter 1, verse 21). and yet God is working his purpose out as we shall begin to see next week in chapter 2! Read Romans 8, verse 28.