

In God's Care: The Book of Ruth



#1 God's hand in our suffering

Ruth ch. 1

Matt. 10:23-33 (and Ps 103)

Intro- Coincidence or Providence

At a London pub during the Olympics a man stumbled up to the only other patron at the bar and asked if he could buy him a drink. "Why of course," came the reply. The first man then asked: "Where are you from?" "I'm from Ireland," replies the second man. The first man responds: "You don't say, I'm from Ireland too! Curious, the first man then asked: "Where in Ireland are you from?" "Dublin," came the reply. "I can't believe it," said the first man. "I'm from Dublin too! Curiosity again struck and the first man asked: "What school did you go to?" "Saint Mary's," replied the second man, "I graduated in '62." "This is unbelievable!", the first man said. "I went to Saint Mary's and I graduated in '62, too!" About that time one of the regulars of this pub sat down at the bar. "What's been going on?" he asked the bartender. "Nothing much," replied the bartender. "The O'Malley twins are at it again. They've been in here every day this week."

Coincidence or providence? That's always an interesting question. Try it during a lunchroom conversation if you really want to divide the room. Some believe that God or the gods have a hand in the curious way things work out in life. Others in the room will argue for probability and chance?

Q. What about you? Do you read the happy coincidences and the annoying misfortunes of life as acts of God, or mere chance? Today's reading from the Book of Ruth interacts with such questions. When there's suffering involved, the stake are very high indeed.

The time of the Judges

Before we tackle these and other questions in the text, let's get familiar with this Old Testament book. The opening verse of chapter 1 of The Book of Ruth in the Old Testament reads: "In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land."

Though probably written much later, this book tells stories from an ancient time when individuals appointed to rule over the tribes as 'judges' governed Israel.¹

What do we know about that period of Israel's history?

¹ Ruth is often published in a different order in Hebrew publications. Five festive scrolls known as 'Megilloth' usually orders Ruth after Prov. 31:10-31 which speaks of a woman of strong character and groups it with Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther. The placement of Ruth after Judges sets a contrast to Judges 19-21 where everything in the ancient tribal patterns is done wrongly. Compared to the chaos and dystopia of that section, Ruth by contrast, tells of customs and ethics and laws that respect grace, mercy and truth.

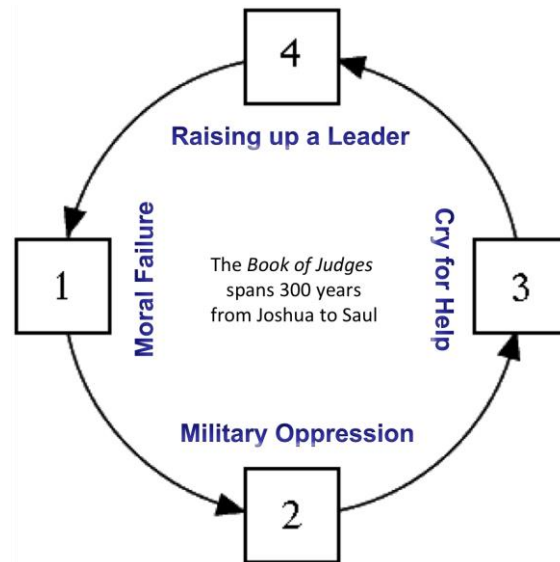
The time of the Judges covers the rollercoaster ride for Israel between Joshua's death and the appointment of King Saul. It's a period of about 300 years. The "judges" were military leaders raised up by God. Twelve of these heroic deliverers are mentioned in the book.²

Over and over, the tribes of Israel would fail to have regard for God's covenant through Moses. As a result, military intervention from various Canaanite peoples would overwhelm them.

The diagram on screen describes the pattern that repeats over and over in the Book of Judges...

(Slide- cycle in the Book of Judges)

The stories begin with the moral failure. What results is military oppression. A call for help follows, and God grants a deliverer. Peace is often achieved but is short-lived. Then the cycle begins again.



The time of Ruth

The story of Ruth appears to the modern reader as a quaint and archaic disaster story or tragedy.

David Mamet, American playwright, once said, 'The popularity of disaster movies expresses a collective perception of a world threatened by irresistible and unforeseen forces which nevertheless are thwarted at the last moment. Their thinly veiled (symbols mean): We are innocent of wrongdoing. We are attacked by unforeseeable forces come to harm us. We are, thus, innocent even of negligence. Though those forces are insuperable, chance will come to our aid and we shall emerge victorious.'

We are conditioned to read tragedies in a certain way. However, those who are more familiar with the Old Testament will instead look for **theological clues and signs of God's hand** at work in the circumstances of his people.

Ruth's story is set somewhere in that Biblical history of the time of the Judges. There are similarities to the cycle of sin, oppression, cry for help and arrival of a saviour. Those who have ears to hear will note the similarities AND the significant differences.

Imagine you're sitting around a meal in a typical ancient Hebrew household and hearing this story read aloud. What significant questions would it raise for you?

"...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

² Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, Samson

sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.” (Ruth 1:1a-5)

Any person familiar with the writings of Moses would make some important mental notes:

- Why is there a famine in Bethlehem and not in Moab? (Judah is a place of God’s promise and Moab is a land of Canaanites)
- Why did Elimelech take his family to live in Moab? Aren’t they long-time enemies of Israel?³ Everyone knows that to move there was considered both shameful and dangerous!
- Why would Elimelech’s sons want to marry Moabite women? Have they no respect for the covenant? No wonder he and his two sons died!

As you sit listening to the story with your Hebrew family you realise:

- Elimelech is perhaps like Gideon in the Book of Judges – an Israelite by name, but not by faith and action.
- Instead of military oppression, perhaps God is using famine as an instrument to call the wayward people of Israel back to his covenant love.
- Although there’s no formal cry for help as in the Book of Judges, Elimelech’s innocent wife and daughter’s-in-law will need a deliverer. You ask yourself, ‘Who will the judge be in this story?’
- You also ask, ‘How will this all end? Will this story turn around to a peaceful outcome? Will prosperity be enduring this time, or will it all turn sour again?’

Cast of Characters

I grew up on Hollywood disaster movies of the 1970’s (Poseidon Adventure, Airport, Towering Inferno, Earthquake and the like). You might recall that there’s a common formula in the first hour of all such movies. The audience is always introduced to the context and the characters before the action really begins. While the Book of Ruth is no disaster movie script, it does involve a pending disaster for its main character, and this story too begins with introductions to the cast.

Bethlehem means ‘House of Bread’.

(Bread & wheat on screen)

Just as the name of the town gives the reader clues to the story (the House of bread is without any bread, pointing to a famine) so too the names of the characters give the reader some other significant clues for the story:

- Elimelech means “My God is King” (yet he acts faithlessly)
- Naomi means “pleasant, lovely, delightful” (yet she will call herself ‘bitter’)
- Mahlon (to be sick)
- Chilion (failing, pining) (The boys were given Canaanite names)
- Orpah and Ruth (This tells the audience the girls are not Hebrew, but Moabites)

³ "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD." (Deut 23:3 NRSV)

Each character is important to understanding the theological/historical context of the drama.

Disaster befalls Naomi

Disaster unfolds: Elimelech dies. The marriages produce no offspring. Then, the two sons die also. One tragedy after another makes innocent Naomi a character like Job.⁴

Without husband and sons in those days she faces misery and loneliness, the prospect of danger and poverty, and the extinction of the family line of Elimelech.

Then in verses 6-9 of chapter 1 the story takes an early turn:

‘When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.'" (Ruth 1:6-9 NIV)

We know that deep down Naomi was deeply sad and angry with God. We see it in verses 20 and 21 when Naomi returns to her hometown.

"Don't call me Naomi," she tells her women friends. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." (Ruth 1:20-21 NIV)

Someone has translated her words, "Don't call me sweetheart, call me sourpuss."

Like many religious and superstitious people throughout history, Naomi assumes God is bringing misfortune and disaster on her for whatever reason. We can sympathise with her.

However, something quite out of the ordinary happened to Naomi on the road back to Bethlehem and **she has not yet realised that God's hand was in it**. Most readers don't see it yet either. They **don't expect God's hand to be at work through a woman** and they certainly don't expect it to come through a **Moabite**.

While Orpah goes back to her people as Naomi had insisted, Ruth does not. At great risk and out of great faithfulness, Ruth cleaves to her mother-in-law and declares in vs. 16 and 17:

“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 God my God. Where 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!”

As I have written on the front of today's bulletin, Ruth's words are (for those who have biblically attuned ears) words like those that God utters many times in the Scriptures to his people.

⁴ Job 1⁶-2¹⁰

A great irony exists in verse 8. Naomi wishes upon both women 'kindness' from the Lord. The Hebrew word is 'hesed' and no English word does it justice. It is used often to describe God's faithful loving-kindness towards people.

This was the great failing of God's people in the period of the judges. The prophet Hosea wrote a few hundred years later:

'There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed.' (Hosea 4:1-2 NRSV).

He was describing the 8th century BC, but he could equally have been describing the days of Elimelech. Moral anarchy, a failure of fidelity in personal relationships. People didn't care for God or each other. They weren't faithful to each other. As a result, famine came to their land. There **was no bread, even in the house of bread.**

Naomi went on to Bethlehem thinking God has shown no such 'hesed' love toward her: 'Call me 'Mara', God does not care.' And yet, right before her eyes was that which she could not see. Ruth, a beautiful and unexpected, unappreciated gift of God has bound herself to Naomi, even till death separates them.

In New Testament times, a carpenter from Nazareth was disregarded as far too 'left of field' to be a sign of God's goodness. Many Jews of that time cried out that God had abandoned them and left them to suffer, yet God's loving-kindness was given to all humankind through a surprising, unexpected and unappreciated avenue.

Providence or Coincidence

The discerning reader is surprised by God's hand of love in Naomi's suffering circumstances. Ancient situations may have been very different to today. Yet, when suffering or tragedy befalls us, the Book of Ruth reminds us that throughout history, God's 'hesed' loving-kindness has been at work for our sake. God's faithful promises are with us, though we often look for a different form of provision and rarely recognise the kindness and love he has provided.

There may be no faithfulness in Israel in this story, but Ruth, who had no link to the Jewish people but by faith (vs. 22 shows her conversion to Naomi's God) demonstrates the kind of covenant love and faithfulness God offers to all people in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And so, we find Ruth and Naomi returning to Bethlehem just as the barley harvest is beginning. Is it providence or mere coincidence? With the return of covenant loyalty and faithfulness in the family of Elimelech, **the house of bread has grain once again.**

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