

# RUTH 1:6 – 2:23

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## II. The Return to Bethlehem (1:6-22)

A. Naomi and her daughters-in-law set out (1:6-7) – Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, with Orpah and Ruth following, because she had heard that the Lord had brought an end to the famine that had driven her family to Moab in the first place. God had acted to bless his people, the report of which serves as a kind of turning point in the family's story. The three of them actually begin the journey in v. 7.

### B. Conversations en route (1:8-18)

#### 1. First exchange (1:8-10)

a. At some point on the road, Naomi urges Orpah and Ruth to each return to her mother's house.

(1) This conversation presumably happened at some kind of "point of no return," where it was time to turn back if one was going to do so. Perhaps it was customary to accompany someone out of town for a certain distance (see Gen. 18:16) and this took place at that boundary. Hubbard (p. 102) speculates that Naomi may have waited to say farewell to Orpah and Ruth on the journey because doing so at their Moabite home would have added to the force of their appeals to stay and subjected her to additional stress.

(2) In urging them to return to their "mother's house" rather than to their "father's house," Naomi may have been referring to a custom that associated the arrangement of marriages with the mother's house. The phrase "mother's house" occurs in contexts having to do with love and marriage, and v. 9 expresses Naomi's desire for Orpah and Ruth to have fulfilling second marriages (see Hubbard, 102-103). It could be, as Block says (p. 632), that "by sending each of her daughters-in-law to her 'mother's house' Naomi is releasing them to remarry." Then again, the expression may be designed simply to contrast their mothers with her position as a mother-in-law (Bush, 75).

(3) In urging them to turn back Naomi is doing what she thinks is best for them given her sense of her disfavor with God. Perceiving that God's hand is against her, she at this point has no hope regarding the future of any who cast their lot with her. Better to return to Moab than to follow this aging widow who, without God on her side, offers no hope of a new husband for her daughters-in-law and thus no hope for the blessing of family.

b. She prays for the Lord to demonstrate *hesed* toward them – a devotion to their welfare – as they had demonstrated *hesed* toward her and toward her

sons when they were alive, one expression of which would be his granting to them a fulfilling second marriage. She recognizes that Yahweh is Lord of all, including Moab, and is willing to ask for his blessing *of others* despite her sense of his hostility toward *her*.

c. Bush remarks (p. 86):

To have Orpah and Ruth return to Moab means that she must journey home utterly alone and desolate, having lost all. But to have them return to Judah with her means asking them to renounce all hope of the life she now implores Yahweh to give them. Faced with this dilemma, she has no real choice. To the calamity of losing home, husband, and sons, she must now add another, inflicted this time by herself (Campbell, 82). She must return home alone.

d. Naomi then kisses Orpah and Ruth goodbye, and they all begin sobbing aloud over the prospect of not seeing one another again. The pain is too much, and Orpah and Ruth protest through the tears saying to Naomi, "No, we will return with you to your people."

2. Second exchange (1:11-14)

a. Naomi again insists that they turn back and asks a rhetorical question ("Why will you go with me?") the point of which is that it is foolish for them to come with her because they would be better off in their own country.

b. She makes clear through a rhetorical question that she is too old to have children and thus too old to provide any future husbands for them. (Recall how the widow Tamar in Genesis 38 was waiting for her deceased husband's brother Shelah to grow up so that he could become her husband.) She then adds by way of another rhetorical question (or two) that even if she somehow had a husband and conceived a child that very night they would not wait for that child to grow up.

c. In v. 13b she emphatically states, "No," meaning (as NET puts it) "No, my daughters, you must not return with me." The reason they must not return with her is given in the last two clauses, the first of which can be translated in a number of different ways. Following Bush (p. 80-81), I favor the translation "For things are too bitter for me for you [to share]," which is then followed by the further explanation, "for the hand of the Lord has gone out against me."

(1) Hubbard comments (p. 113):

Thus, Naomi made her most crucial point. If even God was after her, to follow her home was to court personal disaster. Her earlier tragedies – famine, exile, bereavement, childlessness – might be only the beginning.

One ought to shun such a person to escape the maelstrom of her misfortune. What better argument to make return to Moab attractive!

(2) I think it is important to appreciate how deeply Naomi's outlook for the future was darkened by her perception that God was afflicting her.

(a) I think that accounts for her initial lack of hope that her emptiness might be reversed. Her belief in God's willingness to bless her life, to demonstrate *hesed* toward her, had been gutted by her pain. She still knows he is God, but she feels he has turned against her.

(b) But again, I do not see her charge that God was afflicting her as an expression of rebellion but as the utterance of a wounded soul that has suffered grievously with no understanding of why. Yes, she should have trusted God's commitment to her welfare despite her suffering, but that is not easy to do when one is being hammered.

(c) In the midst of his terrible suffering, righteous Job said that God multiplies his wounds without cause and fills him with bitterness (Job 9:17-18). He was so low that he lamented the fact he was ever born (Job 3:11-12, 10:18-19). He asks God (Job 13:24), "Why do you hide your face and count me as your enemy?" I see Naomi as being somewhere in this same emotional ballpark.

d. In response to this appeal, they again wept together loudly, and then Orpah kissed Naomi goodbye and turned back for home. This signals the end of Naomi and Orpah's relationship, and Orpah is not mentioned again. Orpah's decision is neither condemned nor praised by the author. It simply is reported and serves to highlight Ruth's contrary response, which is introduced in v. 14 with the simple statement "but Ruth clung to her."

### 3. Third exchange (1:15-18)

a. Naomi feels so hopeless about her future, since she believes she has in essence been cursed by God, that she urges Ruth to follow Orpah's lead in turning back to Moab even though she recognizes it will involve a return to her pagan roots. She feels so targeted by God that she apparently believes her daughters-in-law would be better off as pagans in Moab than as members of her family in Judah.

b. That is not true, as the story will reveal, but it seemed that way to Naomi because her perception of Yahweh had been distorted by her suffering. And yet, in the midst of her sense of divine enmity, God is already working to reverse her emptiness through Ruth's demonstration of *hesed*, through the life of an average person who is willing to reflect God's character. Like us, Naomi is oblivious to God's work in its early stages.

c. Ruth's immortal response in vv. 16-17 to Naomi's final urging is an amazing expression of loyalty and commitment to Naomi's welfare. She tells Naomi to stop telling her to turn back. Naomi's effort notwithstanding, Ruth is going to stick with Naomi, identify with the Jews, and serve Yahweh as her God. She says that she will die and be buried where Naomi dies, and then takes an oath to be punished by Yahweh if anything but death separates her from Naomi! You talk about committing yourself to someone!

d. Given Ruth's obvious determination, Naomi relented. Presumably she now felt free from any responsibility for Ruth's unknown fate in Judah. Hubbard says of Ruth (p. 116), "Whatever her motives – deep affection, a sense of loyalty, misguided idealism – she sacrificed her destiny to 'cling to' an aged, hopeless mother-in-law. One may understand Orpah; one must emulate Ruth."

### C. The arrival in Bethlehem (1:19-21)

1. Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, which created quite a buzz. The women ask, "Is this Naomi?" Perhaps this was merely an expression of surprise that she should return after being gone for so long, but it may also indicate how her suffering had worn on her physically. Block remarks (p. 645), "[T]he years of grief and deprivation have surely taken their toll on Naomi's form and visage. The one who had left Bethlehem as *Naomi*, 'the pleasant one,' a robust woman in her prime, had returned as a haggard and destitute old woman."

2. Naomi's state of mind is made clear in her response to those asking the question. She tells them not to call her Naomi, because that name, which means "pleasant" or "lovely," no longer fits her circumstances. Instead, they should call her Mara, which means "bitter," because God Almighty had afflicted her. She left with a husband and two sons and is returning with no husband, no sons, and no grandchildren. Why call her "Pleasant" when the Lord has singled her out for calamity?

D. Narrator's summary (1:22) – The author summarizes the situation in v. 22. Naomi had returned to Bethlehem from Moab with her daughter-in-law, Ruth the Moabite. And he adds that they came there at the beginning of the barley harvest, which was in late April or early May. (The wheat harvest followed in about two weeks.) This chronological note sets the stage for the events of chapter 2.

### III. Ruth Finds Favor with Boaz (2:1-23)

#### A. Introduction of Boaz (2:1)

1. The author mentions that Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man named Boaz. The mention of a relative of Elimelech would cause the ears of those familiar with Israelite family law and custom to perk up.

2. We are told that Boaz was a mighty man of power, wealth, and/or standing in the community. In other words, regardless of the phrase's ambiguity, it is clear that Boaz was no "average Joe" but a man of means and status.

3. Boaz is said to be from the clan of Elimelech, a fact so significant it is repeated in 2:3.

a. Clans were subdivisions of the tribes consisting of groups of extended families that had descended from a common ancestor. So Boaz and Elimelech both were Ephrathites, a subset of the tribe of Judah (see comments on 1:2), the same as King David (1 Sam. 17:12).

b. The land the Israelites conquered was allotted to the twelve tribes *according to their clans* (Joshua 13-19), meaning the "[c]lans enjoyed inalienable ownership of specific lands" (Hubbard, 134). Ownership of land had to remain with the clan to which it had been given (see Leviticus 25), a state the kinsman-redeemer was obliged to protect. Hubbard remarks (p. 134, fn. 14), "The inclusion of an individual's [clan] in his name served as a geographical address (cf. Judg. 10:1 . . .). No one outside the clan, not even other Israelites, could own land within that territory."

#### B. Meeting with Boaz (2:2-17)

1. Ruth politely asks Naomi for permission to go out and gather from the fields being harvested ears of grain that were dropped or left standing by the reapers. Naomi tells her to go ahead.

a. This practice, known as "gleaning," was a right guaranteed by the law (Lev. 19:9-10, 23:22; Deut. 24:19-22). Landowners were required to leave an edge around their fields unharvested and were prohibited from going back over the field to pick up stalks they had missed or dropped in the initial harvesting. These scraps were to be left for the poor and resident aliens.

b. Though it was a right under the law, Ruth intended to ask permission to glean from either the reapers or the landowner. That is the import of her statement that she will "glean among the ears of grain *after him in whose sight I shall find favor*." Her gleaning would depend on her being shown favor or mercy by someone. This is confirmed in 2:7. That suggests that landowners or reapers occasionally, if not frequently, disallowed gleaning, whether by ridicule, tricks, or outright expulsion.

c. The repeating of Ruth's identification as a Moabite in v. 2 after just having identified her that way in 1:22 may be intended to highlight that her gleaning carried added danger. As an unmarried foreign woman, from Moab no less, she would run a greater risk of being abused in the fields, either verbally or physically.

2. Verse 2:3 opens with a summary statement of her outing – she went and came and gleaned in the fields – the details of which are unfolded in v. 2:3b and following.

a. In other words, v. 3 is not a chronological sequence in which she first gleaned in the field after the reapers and then "stumbled" onto Boaz's section. Rather, v. 3b is a concomitant circumstance indicating that it was in the events in Boaz's field that she gleaned behind the reapers (see Bush, 104; Hubbard, 140).

b. It is helpful to note that the fields were outside of the town. They were large tracts of land that had sections apportioned to various owners. Hubbard remarks (p. 138): "One individual might own several such pieces, which need not be adjacent. To take advantage of all available land, no visible fences or boundaries were used. Rather, each field was identified by the name of its owner."

3. The opening of 2:3b is commonly translated as "she *happened* to come" or "As it *turned out*, she found herself." The point is that Ruth ended up in Boaz's portion of the fields without any intent on her part to do so; indeed, she had no idea who Boaz was. But having just mentioned that Boaz was from the clan of Elimelech, the reader is to understand that what was happenstance from Ruth's perspective was in fact the hand of God. Block calls this "one of the key statements in the book" and states (p. 653-654):

The statement is ironical; its purpose is to undermine purely rational explanations for human experiences and to refine the reader's understanding of providence. In reality, he is screaming: "See the hand of God at work here!" The same hand that had sent the famine (1:1) and later provided food (1:6) is the hand that had brought Naomi and Ruth to Bethlehem precisely at the beginning of the harvest (1:22) and has now guided Ruth to that portion of the field belonging specifically to Boaz.

4. In the same vein, v. 4 says "And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem." Now how about that? Right when Ruth just happened to have "stumbled" onto Boaz's portion of the field, Boaz arrives at his field from the town, presumably to inspect the progress of the harvest. We see something of the kind of man he is from the kindness of his greeting to his reapers ("The Lord be with you!") and from their warm response back to him ("The Lord bless you").

5. Ruth "happens" to be where Boaz sees her, and he inquires about her identity by asking about the family to which she belongs, either as a member or as a servant.

a. The servant in charge of the reapers informs Boaz that she is the young Moabite who came back with Naomi from Moab. He adds that she had requested permission to glean and had been hard at it from the early morning.

b. It is very unlikely that Ruth had requested and been given permission "to glean and gather *among the sheaves* behind the reapers," as the verse is commonly translated.

(1) That indicates she is requesting permission to glean among the piles of cut grain the reapers left as they worked their way through the field, piles that later would be bundled. As 2:15 implies, gleaners normally were barred from the area near the piles of already-cut grain, presumably to prevent them from helping themselves to the harvest. This would make Ruth's request quite audacious, which does not fit with her humble and self-effacing character, and it does not fit well with the fact Boaz's instruction to his workers in 2:15 to permit Ruth to glean among the sheaves is presented as a new act of generosity on his part.

(2) With Bush (p. 113-114) and Block (p. 656), the word translated "sheaves" (*ʾōmārīm*) here should be understood in the general sense of "bundles" and the preposition (*bē*, different from 2:15) should be interpreted as "in" or "into." Ruth's request is not to gather *among* the piles of already-cut grain but to glean stalks of grain and to gather those gleanings into bundles behind the reapers.

c. The last clause of v. 7 is notoriously difficult to translate, but it seems to mean that she took only a short rest in some kind of shelter. (ESV, among others, drops *habbayit* [the house] from the text.)

6. Boaz addresses Ruth in vv. 8-9, calling her "my daughter." This reflects the difference in their ages and the fact he intends to extend his protection and care over her.

a. He tells Ruth not to go and glean in any other field but to remain in his field.

b. He tells her to stick with his regular servant girls, keeping an eye on the field they are harvesting and following them (or both them and the male reapers). One needed such inside knowledge to know which section(s) of the large tract belonged to Boaz.

c. He tells her she need not worry about her situation in the field because he has – meaning as of now, in the very act of making the statement – instructed the young men who work for him not to "touch her," here meaning not to trouble, molest, or interfere with her (Bush, 122).

d. And finally, he tells her that she may drink freely of the water that had been brought to the field in containers to provide for his regular field workers.

7. Ruth is blown away by Boaz's kindness and generosity. In a physical gesture of submission and gratitude, Ruth bows before him with her face to the ground, presumably having first dropped to her knees. And she expresses her amazement that

Boaz would express such kindness to her even though she was a foreigner. He was treating her essentially as an equal with his hired, Israelite field workers.

8. Boaz in vv. 11-12 uses Ruth's question as an occasion to dignify her, explaining that he had heard all about the kindness and extraordinary commitment she had shown to Naomi.

a. He thereby suggests that his action was simply a response to her noble conduct, leaving unmentioned the fact Naomi was his relative.

b. Once he was told by his foreman that she was the Moabite who had returned with Naomi, he realized who she was. Ruth apparently was the talk of Bethlehem, and the talk was all good. People were very impressed by what she had done.

c. Boaz invokes Yahweh to intervene on Ruth's behalf. He prays for God to grant her a full reward for her loving kindness to Naomi. This is in line with the principle of texts like Prov. 19:17: Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed.

d. He then notes that Ruth had come to take refuge under Yahweh's wings. The image is that of "a mother bird who offers her wings for protection of her defenseless young" (Block, 663). In offering his protection, Boaz was functioning as the wings of God and honoring God in the process (e.g., Prov. 14:31 - Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him).

9. Ruth responds in v. 13.

a. The meaning of the opening clause of Ruth's response is disputed. With Block (p. 664) and NET, I think it is an expression of gratitude in which the literal statement "I am finding favor with you" carries the sense "You are kind to me." (NASU and ESV translate it as a reference to past action – "I *have found* favor in your sight/eyes" – but Block labels that a "cavalier" rendering of the imperfect verb.)

b. She then notes that Boaz's favor or kindness has been shown to her in that he has eased her mind about her situation and spoken kindly to her, his servant, adding "though I will never be equal to your servants."

(1) The word she uses here for servant (*šiphâ*) probably refers to a female servant of the lowest rank, distinct from a servant who had the potential to advance to the status of a wife (Hubbard, 169-170; Bush, 124; Block, 665). If that is correct, it is an expression of humility.

(2) Ruth then places herself even lower by adding "though I will never be equal to your servants." I here follow Bush (p. 124-125) and Block (p. 665 fn. 70) in understanding the phrase as a future rather than a present.



(3) As Block remarks (p. 665-666), "Ruth is totally amazed that differences in race or class could not stifle Boaz's compassion toward her."

10. In v. 14, which occurs some time later, Boaz invites Ruth to share in the midday meal he has provided for his workers. What is translated "wine" or "vinegar" or "wine vinegar" is probably some kind of sour sauce used as a condiment for the bread. Boaz personally serves her the roasted grain and provided her more than she could eat. He shows this foreigner compassion, generosity, and acceptance.

11. In vv. 15-16 Ruth rises to return to her gleaning, and Boaz instructs his workers not to rebuke her even if she gleans where she should not, i.e., among the sheaves, near the piles of already-cut grain. He further instructs them to pull out some stalks of grain from the handfuls they are cutting and leave them lying on the ground for Ruth.

12. Ruth gleaned in the field until evening and then beat out the grain from the heads of barley, presumably at Boaz's threshing floor. When she measured the grain she had threshed, it was about an ephah, which is probably about 5.8 gallons<sup>1</sup> (though others claim it is 9.6 gallons – Bush, 133). That would weigh around 30 pounds (or 50 pounds if the higher estimate is correct – Bush, 133; Hubbard, 179). That is an amazing amount of grain for one day of gleaning, so clearly Boaz's workers took his instructions to heart.

### C. Ruth reports to Naomi (2:18-23)

1. Ruth lugs her bounty back to town, and when she arrived Naomi saw the large quantity she had gleaned. Ruth also pulled out and gave to Naomi the roasted grain she had leftover from lunch as noted in 2:14.

2. Naomi excitedly asks Ruth where she gleaned, the tone of which was no doubt along the lines of "Where in the world did you glean today?" The redundant double question ("Where did you work?") reflects her amazement at Ruth's success. And knowing that such bounty represented someone's kindness toward her, Naomi adds, "Blessed be the man who took notice of you."

3. Ruth identifies her benefactor as Boaz, whose name she presumably heard in conversations in the fields. At the mention of Boaz, Naomi erupts with a request for Yahweh to bless him and then praises Yahweh as the one "who has not abandoned his *hesed* toward the living and the dead" (Block, 673).

a. With Block (p. 672-673) and most commentators (and against Hubbard and Bush), I take the introductory particle *'āšer* as a relative pronoun (rather than because) and understand Yahweh to be its antecedent.

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael Homan, "Weights and Measures" in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans's Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1374.

b. Naomi realizes that God was at work in Ruth's "stumbling" into contact with Boaz and in his generosity to her, which causes her to recognize that God has maintained his commitment to the well being of her family, both to her and Ruth, the living, and to Elimelech and Mahlon, the dead. With a heart renewed by the hope of God's favor, she seems to realize the potential Boaz poses for Ruth and for the survival of Elimelech's and Mahlon's line. Block states (p. 673-674):

The speech represents a total turnaround from her despairing and accusatory words in 1:20-21. . . .

Specifically, in Naomi's eyes Ruth's coming upon the field of Boaz was a demonstration of God's grace and favor. In 1:8-9 she had prayed that Yahweh would match Ruth's *hesed* to her family by granting her rest in the house of her own husband. There she had in mind a Moabite husband, but now, in remarkable fulfillment of that prayer, she is struck by the potential of Ruth's encounter with Boaz.

c. That Naomi is beginning to hope along these lines is suggested by the fact she exclaims that Boaz is a close relative, one of their "kinsman-redeemers."

(1) "Kinsman-redeemer" (*gō'ēl*) is a term from Israelite family law that "describes not a precise kinship relationship but the near relatives to whom both law and custom gave certain duties toward the clan" (Hubbard, 188). Among other things, the kinsman-redeemer "was responsible for . . . the repurchase of property once owned by clan members but sold from economic necessity (Lev. 25:25-30; cf. Jer. 32:1-15). By restoring the land to its original owner, the [kinsman-redeemer] maintained the clan's inheritance in tact" (Hubbard, 188).

(2) The duties of a kinsman-redeemer seem quite broad, and it is easy to imagine their application in certain atypical situations being unclear.

(a) I suspect this is true of some the kinsman-redeemer duties raised in the Book of Ruth. Specifically, I suspect it was debatable whether a kinsman-redeemer who was not the brother of the deceased male not only had a duty to redeem property of the deceased male that had been sold but also had a duty to perpetuate the existence of the deceased male on that redeemed property by continuing his lineage through a levirate-like marriage to the deceased male's widowed Moabite daughter-in-law where the deceased male's widow was alive but beyond child-bearing age.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hubbard (p. 50-51) comments on the unusualness of the situation in Ruth:

[O]ne must reckon with how complex – indeed, extreme – is the situation told in Ruth compared, for example, to that in Gen. 38 or Deut. 25:5-10. These texts presuppose the relative youth of all parties involved, whereas in Ruth the widow, Naomi, is old. No mention is made of Elimelech's brothers as candidates for levirate marriage; presumably they, like he, are also deceased. Thus, a true levirate marriage is impossible. Even were there a surviving brother, such a marriage would be futile since the text implies that

(b) I think the uncertainty of this duty can explain the discretion with which Naomi, through Ruth, later broaches the subject with Boaz. There was a risk that Boaz would reject the suggestion that he as a kinsman-redeemer was obligated to marry Ruth in connection with redemption of Elimelech's property. In that case, either Naomi and Ruth would be shamed by having their overture not only rejected but perhaps resented as well or Boaz would be shamed by having his resistance determined to be contrary to the law and custom and thus a mark of an ungracious spirit. By raising the matter discreetly, that risk could be contained.

4. Ruth adds that Boaz also told her that she could work in his field, sticking close to his workers, until they finished the entire harvest, meaning the harvest of both barley and wheat. Naomi approves of Boaz's offer. She tells Ruth it is good for her to go out with Boaz's female servants, changing the masculine form for "servants," which referred to all harvesters irrespective of sex, to the feminine form, which referred only to the female servants. She points out that in another field she would run the risk of mistreatment.

5. Verse 23 summarizes what followed. "Ruth kept close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. And she lived with her mother-in-law." This means Ruth would have been in Boaz's fields from late April to early June, some six or seven weeks. No further contacts with Boaz are mentioned, and one is left wondering what will come of Ruth's providential encounter with Boaz.

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Naomi is physically beyond childbearing age (see 1:11-13). Hence, this situation requires stand-ins for *both* Elimelech and Naomi if they are to have an heir.