



## Ruth and Esther Bible Study

### *Session I: Ruth, Chapters 1-2*

#### Chapter One

Immediately after learning that this story takes place during the time of the judges (rather than the later time of the kings), we learn “there was a famine in the land.” Famine in the Bible often caused migration in search of food—think of Jacob (later Israel), for example, and his eleven sons moving to Egypt to be with Joseph following a famine.

Naomi and her family move from Bethlehem, which, ironically for a land experiencing famine, means “house of bread,” to Moab, east of the Dead Sea. The word Moab likely provoked some negative associations for people of the time: Moab was also the name of one of Lot’s sons, as well as the site where Israelites camped before entering the Promised Land in Deuteronomy. After hearing that the family is moving to Moab, we learn more evocative names. The father is Elimelech, which means “My God is king.” Naomi means “pleasant.” The sons’ names, Mahlon and Chilion, mean “sickness” and “destruction,” respectively. We also learn that they are Ephrathites, which means fruitful.

First, Elimelech dies, and then the sons marry Orpah (which means “back of the neck”) and Ruth (which means “friend” or “to saturate”). They dwell in Moab for ten years, and neither couple has children (ironic for fruitful Ephrathites). Then, the two sons die, leaving Naomi bereft from losing her husband and sons.

Naomi and her daughters-in-law begin the journey to Bethlehem because Naomi has heard that the Lord is bringing bread to the people in Bethlehem. Then Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers’ houses for their longtime safety and well-being. At this point, we encounter the first appearance of the word *chesed*, sacred lovingkindness, a theme in the book of Ruth. Naomi sends the daughters-in-law away with a blessing, wishing them the sacred lovingkindness that the two showed her and her sons, their husbands. The younger women protest; Naomi insists they go, and Orpah eventually turns back (living into her name, “back of the neck”). Ruth, however, clings to Naomi, then offers her famous words about going where Naomi will go. She even offers an oath against herself if something should divide them before death. Once the two are back in Bethlehem, people have trouble recognizing Naomi, who says to call her “Mara,” which means “bitter,” instead of Naomi.



## Questions

1. The characters are deliberately named. What do you make of the mix of negative and positive associations with the names in this chapter?
2. Have you ever left a place you loved because of an opportunity? If so, how was that for you? Do you remember the “journey” of getting there from the starting place? Alternatively, have you remained in a place? Looking back, was that a positive or negative decision?
3. Orpah sometimes gets a bad rap for doing what her mother-in-law asked. What is your opinion of Orpah? What do you think happened to her after she turned back?
4. Judging from this first chapter only, do you think this should be the Book of Naomi instead of the Book of Ruth?
5. We see how Naomi is greeted when she returns to Bethlehem but not how she and her family are treated when they first go to Moab. What do you imagine they encountered upon arriving in a foreign land as migrants?

## Ruth, Chapter Two

The chapter introduces Boaz, one of Naomi’s kinsmen through her late husband. Like that of Elimelech in chapter one, his introduction comes in stages. The name Boaz means “in strength.” Ruth tells Naomi that she is going to glean barley, a practice open to widows and orphans. Owners of fields were supposed to leave corners of their fields for widows to glean (or harvest). Naomi says, “go, my daughter,” which recalls the way she said, “turn back, my daughters” in chapter one.

Ruth happens upon a portion of a field owned by Boaz. He makes a surprise visit, evidenced by the word “Behold!” He greets his workers with “The Lord be with you,” to which they respond, “The Lord bless you.” After Boaz learns who Ruth is and how hard she has been working, he offers her preferential treatment and invites her to a meal with the workers, where she is not only satiated but has some left over. And the end of the day, Ruth has an entire bushel of barley, which she presents to Naomi as well as her leftovers from lunch. When Naomi learns that Boaz is the generous man, Naomi asks for God’s blessing on Boaz and refers to Boaz’s *chesed*.

The book of Ruth started out with a famine, but now in chapter two, we have abundance.

## Questions

1. The action of much of this story emerges from a surprise visit from Boaz. Have surprises in your life ever led to a major change?
2. Boaz greets his workers with our Episcopal greeting, “The Lord be with you.” Instead of responding, “And also with you,” their response is, “the Lord bless you.” How are these responses similar? How are they different? What are your associations with the words “bless,” often used as a hashtag on social media (#blessed)? How would you feel if we used the workers’ response instead of “and also with you” in a worship service?
3. Much is made of Ruth’s work ethic—she is said to have hardly rested. Do you feel that hard work is valued in the same way in our current cultural context? Should it be? What about our emphasis on “self-care”?
4. What do you think Naomi is doing while Ruth is gleaning?
5. Has your opinion about whether this should be the book of Naomi instead of the book Ruth changed due to the action in this chapter?