

Study Notes for Ruth Chapter 1



The meeting of Ruth and Boaz, Jean Franoise Millet

OK. Let’s assume that you are riding on a bus in downtown Tel Aviv. There’s a guy sitting next to you reading the Old Testament. You suddenly have an overwhelming desire to read *Ruth* Chapter 1. If you ask him whether you can borrow his Bible for a moment, he probably won’t understand you.

But, if you ask him whether you can look at his “*Tanakh*,” he will probably be so impressed that you know the Jewish word for the Holy Scriptures that he’ll not only lend you his Bible but maybe even invite you over to his family’s house next Friday evening to celebrate the *Shabat*’!

The Jewish Bible is composed of three parts: the Law, called the “*Torah*,” the Prophets called the “*Nevi-im*,” and the Writings called the “*Ketuvim*.” Now, if you take the first consonants of those three words (T, N, and K) and slurr them all together as if you’ve had one too-many glasses of *ya-in*, then you get the Hebrew word for “Bible” which is, you guessed it, “*Tanakh*’.”

We see from the opening of Chapter 1 that *Ruth* is set in the time of Judges. This period, between Joshua’s death in about 1375 BC and Saul’s anointing by Samuel in about 1050 BC (see timeline) represents a particularly violent and corrupt period in the history of Canaan. The first judge, Othniel was pretty upstanding. But the successive judges and the people they ruled were progressively more wayward. By the time we get to Judges 19, things were so bad that you can’t even read about it near mealtimes!

This, of-course, brings back into focus the importance of the main theme in the book, that of “*hesed*.” And to reinforce this major theme, the story is actually set in Bethlehem. Any reader in the pre-exilic or exilic Jewish world would have associated this with the city of King David. As such, he would have thought about faithfulness, justice, and majesty. And of-course, we Christians would think of Bethlehem in even greater terms of justice and majesty as the city of THE King (no, not Elvis – that would be Nashville).

Right away the problem of famine presents itself. That’s why Naomi and her husband migrate to Moab. Now, famine is used over and over again in the Old Testament to represent God’s judgment. We get it for the first time right after The Fall in the Garden of Eden when God curses the land (see Gen 3:17). It becomes a major part of God’s retribution for disobedience to the Covenant with Israel (see Deut 28:12-19). It figures very prominently in the retribution prophesied by Moses for Israel’s future disobedience to Yahweh (see Deut 32:22-24a), and it is one of the three curses from which David must pick at the end of his life to atone for his sin of dependence not on God but upon his own worldly might (2 Sam 24:10-14).

But, rather than facing-up to God’s judgment, Elimelech and Naomi decide to run away from God into Moab. Of-course, once again, the avid reader of around 600 BC is going to associate this with seeking the help of Chemosh, the pagan god of Moab. And in fact, we know that during the reigns of the Kings of Judah leading up to Josiah, this is exactly what a lot of people did; they turned away from God and worshiped pagan deities (remember what Josiah did in 2 Kings 23:12-14).

This makes Chapter 1 a natural setting for another important theme in *Ruth*, that of returning to God. In fact, if you count the times that “return” and its variations like “come back,” “go back,” and “bring back” are used in this chapter alone (these are all based on the Hebrew root-verb “*shuv*”), you come up with something like 10 repetitions. The message is clear: return to the God of your fathers. Return to being a faithful Jew (OK, I’ll admit that Elvis and “*Return to Sender*” kind of fit-in with this analogy).

Of-course, the Christian might well hear in this a foreshadowing (is there such a thing as a “fore-echoing”?) of John the Baptist’s call of repentance (see Matt 3:2, Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). By the way, I want to settle right now a dispute that has marred many a children’s Sunday-school class about John the Baptist. It has become common for people who are squeamish about food to tell their students that the “locusts and wild honey” which John the Baptist consumed meant that John ate “honey and the fruit of the locust tree.” Well, he didn’t. The word in the original Greek text of Matthew 3:4 is pronounced “*ahkreedehs*,” and is defined as “an insect similar to a grasshopper.” And it was perfectly permissible for Kosher Jews to eat this bug, since Leviticus 11:20-22 states: “All flying insects that walk on all fours are to be detestable to you. There are, however, some winged creatures that walk on all fours that you may eat: those that have jointed legs for hopping on the ground. Of these you may eat any kind of locust, katydid, cricket or grasshopper.”

So that settles it. And all you picky eaters out there can just get over it.

John the Baptist ate grasshoppers!!!

Of-course, the decision to emigrate from a particular land is certainly not sinful in itself. Moving to a new place had been established as one of the things God directs His people to do. In Gen. 12.1, God instructs Abraham to go to “a land that I will show you.” In Exodus 12:11 the Israelites are told not only to leave Egypt, but to actually “eat and run.” In Matt 2:13 God tells Joseph to take Mary and the Baby Jesus and emigrate to Egypt (although in Matt. 2-19-20 we find out He’s given them a round trip ticket).

But Elimelech and Naomi are “emigrating” to escape the will of God. How many times do we do that in our own lives, even if the “emigration” may be momentary or metaphoric. And I can’t even begin to tell you the number of students in my Seminary class (including yours truly) who spent lots of time – even years – trying to “emigrate” away from God’s call to the ministry, before these same men and women finally realized that it didn’t really make any difference. No matter where they moved, He was always going to be right next door insistently nudging them in the same direction.

Of course, Naomi’s choice here is disastrous. She loses not only her husband, but her two sons too. How great the price for defying God’s will!

The turning point in *Ruth* Chapter 1 is Ruth’s promise in 1:16-18. And the verbiage which Ruth uses is interesting. She says, “Your people will be my people and your God my God.” Ruth has a perfect understanding of the deliverance that God promised Moses in Ex 6:6-8. Ruth’s refusal to leave Naomi, though faced with continued entreats is also reminiscent of Elisha’s refusal to leave Elijah in 2 Kings 2:1-14. It is no wonder that this scene between Naomi and Ruth is recalled in so many marriage ceremonies. This woman is serious! She’s offering up not only everything she has. She’s actually pledging all she is, will be, and everything she believes!

The “resting-place” which Naomi envisions for her daughters-in-law in *Ruth* 1:9 comes from the Hebrew root “*mûnûHâ*.” For the Jewish readers of the day, this was a word associated with the Kingdom of Israel. You can see this usage in Joshua 21:43-44, Psalm 132:13-14, and Isaiah 65:10-11¹. And it’s the very first question that the

¹ This last one is actually a slightly different Hebrew root, but the meaning is very similar
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disciples ask the resurrected Jesus in the Book of Acts (see Acts 1.6). But now, read Isaiah 66:1. Here we see the change. Isaiah, who is wonderfully messianic, hints that the promised Kingdom is something more than the restored Kingdom of Israel. For Christians, here “*mûnûHâ*” represents nothing less than the Kingdom of God!