

Ruth - Week 1

The Story of Orpah

Charlotte Hendy

The book of Ruth features a number of different characters. Some, like Ruth and Naomi, are featured throughout, and some, like Orpah, receive just a small mention. However, they all have something to teach us, for when we put ourselves in somebody else's shoes we always learn something – no matter how minor they may be.

Imaginative Contemplation helps us do just that. Typically used with the gospel accounts, it's a method of looking at the Bible. **It invites you to enter into a biblical story and imagine yourself as one of the characters within it.**

You move from reading the account to participating within it, for example becoming a person in the crowd, a disciple, or the boy with the loaves and fishes. Not only does this method allow you to look at the Bible in a fresh way, but it also reminds us that it's a living text, and always has something new to teach or show us.

One of my favourite things about Imaginative Contemplation is engaging with characters that I so often overlook.

With the book of Ruth, for example this could mean putting myself in Orpah's shoes, imagining what she might be experiencing, and reflecting on how our compassionate God may feel about her.



Approaching the Text

Pray: Focus your mind and ask God to open up the passage to you and teach you new things.

Read: Go through Ruth chapter 1 twice – you might want to read two different translations, for example New International Version and either The Message or The King James Version.

Imagine: Sit quietly for a moment and close your eyes, picturing the scene and everything about it. Put yourself in the shoes of Ruth, Naomi or Orpah. You may find it helpful to go through each of your five senses and think about what you can see, smell, touch, hear and taste as your character.

Pray: Pray that just as this scene has come to life today, you might also become more aware of God's presence in every aspect of your life.

Consider:

- What is your role within the story/scene?
- How you feel?
- Is there anything unique that you learn from this perspective?
- What might reflecting on Jesus' character say about this person's situation?

To **read** an NIV Version of Ruth, Chapter 1, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To **hear** an NIV Version of Ruth, Chapter 1, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To **hear** a Dramatised Version of Ruth, Chapter 1, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To **read** The Message Version of Ruth, Chapter 1, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To **hear** The Message Version of Ruth, Chapter 1, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To **read** The King James Version of Ruth, Chapter 1, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To **hear** The King James Version of Ruth, Chapter 1, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

Commentary by Dr Rachel Starr

Abridged Version

Chapter 1 begins with hunger and ends with harvest. A chapter of contrasts, in the struggle against death, life goes on. At home or abroad, there are always strangers, and the possibility of friendship. Even when the breadbasket is empty, there is still the chance of companions (those with whom bread is shared).

Overturing (Ruth 1:1-15)

The opening sentence of chapter 1 quickly establishes the time and place, what would appear to be the main characters and a crisis. Like others before them famine forces this family to leave their home – Bethlehem, the so-called house of bread – and journey into the unknown. Is this famine a result of the violence and chaos described in Judges?

Such a connection is underlined by the mention of Bethlehem, the home of the woman who is gang-raped and mutilated in the dying chapters of Judges. In contrast to the time of the judges, when ‘the people did what was right in their own eyes’, Ruth would appear to be a book in which each person seeks to do what is right in the eyes of others.

Through their naming, the reader is given a preview of the fate of each character. **Elimelech** is the most straightforward of the names, meaning “my God is king”; but the clue it offers to the reader is less clear. On the surface it suggests Elimelech is someone to be trusted, a faithful husband and father. Yet perhaps it is ironic – how will a loyal subject of God the king fare in the time of judges?

Naomi as a name, and character, is even more ambiguous, but is generally thought to mean “pleasant” (whether Naomi lives up to her name remains to be seen). **Mahlon** and **Chilion** are two names that fit together, both suggesting “demise” (see also the names of Judah’s ill-fated sons Er and Onan, whose deaths introduce a closely related story found in Genesis).

In addition to such inauspicious names, the text gives a further clue that all is not well by emphasizing a point already made in the previous verse: the family journey east to Moab, and, like David, seek refuge there.

In swift succession, the leading men die. While no explanation is offered for their deaths, the fate of the two sons would seem to be sealed by their marriage to Moabite women, who are thought to lead men astray.

The verb “lifted up” in NRSV and translated as “took” elsewhere refers to abduction, suggesting that Malhon and Chilion first raped two Moabite women and then claimed them as their wives.

Perhaps it is not the foreignness of the women, but this act of violence for which the brothers are judged. In the absence of the three male leads, the expected story is overturned, and three women emerge as protagonists.

Twice the text claims Naomi as all alone, yet in the same breath, it introduces her companions: Orpah and Ruth. Over time, Orpah has been portrayed as unfaithful and ungrateful, serving as a foil to Ruth, the very model of a 'good immigrant' and righteous convert. Yet there is no reason to set the women against each other. Although there are many ways in which their names have been understood, one possibility is that both contain a reference to water: **Orpah** meaning "cloud" and **Ruth** meaning "saturation or overflowing". In this way both may be signs of the possibility of new life.

Offering (Ruth 1:6-18)

Even in Moab, God's actions are heard, and the promise of food gives Naomi the strength to start home. Verse 6 is one of only two times that God is said to have acted in Ruth (the other being in Chapter 4 Verse 13).

For the majority of the story, God stands in the wings.

The name for God used here is the divine name, YHWH, but in translation it is covered over by the more functional word LORD. While reverence for holiness is important, the impact of this on readers who are unfamiliar with the Hebrew is to reduce God's identity to 'lord' rather than the full breadth of meaning that YHWH, a play on the verb 'to be', offers.

The word "return" is scattered throughout these verses, prompting the question: To whom will each character turn? Naomi suggests the women should return to their mother's house, a rare term (the standard term is father's house) occurring only in Ruth, the story of Rebekah and Song of Songs, always in relation to hopeful encounters.

Naomi offers hope that the young women will be able to marry again. She acknowledges that both Orpah and Ruth have shown hesed (loving kindness) towards her and her family and calls on God to deal kindly with them.

Kisses and tears soak this section of the narrative. At the end of the first conversation, Naomi kisses Orpah and Ruth and they both weep. In the second, Orpah and Ruth first weep and then Orpah (but not Ruth) kisses Naomi goodbye.



In the third conversation, Ruth journeys on with Naomi, thus removing any need for goodbyes.

In her second attempt to persuade the younger women, Naomi elaborates on the possibility (or lack) of husbands. Naomi does not raise the possibility that Elimelech may have brothers who could act as a levir (a male relative of a man who, after the latter's death, has the right, and the duty, to marry his widow). And she makes clear that she cannot provide any more husbands for her daughters-in-law.

What Naomi avoids saying is what would have been obvious to the original audience: Orpah and Ruth would not be able to find husbands in Judah because their ethnicity made them 'unsuitable' women.

Orpah leaves the story in verse 14, staying longer than is often remembered. She is loving and obedient yet is often overlooked. Like Ruth, she is loyal; the only difference is that Orpah keeps faith with her mother's house, rather than with that of her mother-in-law. Orpah refuses to give up her identity and traditions, and her *hesed* to her people should also be praised.

With the nape of Orpah's neck fading into the distance, Naomi takes up her plea for a third time, instructing Ruth 'to be more like Orpah'. But Ruth refuses and vows to stay with Naomi. Naomi's silent response may suggest resignation, rejection, or perhaps relief.

The words spoken by Ruth have been heard in a variety of ways over the centuries. For some, they are a vow of loyalty. For others, that Ruth clings to Naomi and professes her commitment even if 'death us do part' suggests a deeper relationship.

In this light, Ruth's words reverberate with those spoken by David to Jonathan, on each occasion, a deep friendship becoming the basis of a new family. In this way, Ruth's pledge to Naomi has been used in marriage and partnership services

A less joyful interpretation of Ruth's vow is that it represents a contract she makes with Naomi. In desperation, Ruth enslaves herself to Naomi in exchange for her protection in a foreign land. In this reading, Ruth clings not to Naomi but to a chance of survival, and in turn, Naomi profits off Ruth's work in the fields and on the threshing floor.

Omitting (Ruth 1:19-22)

The two women arrive in Bethlehem (twice noted). Amid the excitement, no one mentions Ruth; indeed, Naomi seems to deny that she is accompanied by the younger woman.

It is not until verse 22 that Ruth is remembered, and what is remembered most is her foreignness – it is this which clings to her. Moreover, Naomi denies herself, refusing her given name and claiming another, **Mara** (meaning bitter).

Third, Naomi denies God’s care of her. Like a female Job, she challenges God to provide for her. Here Naomi addresses God as “**Shadday**”, a name for God, connected to fertility and the hope of new life. The scene ends with mention of what is to come – harvest time.



To read the full “Commentary by Dr Rachel Starr” click [here](#) and go to page 4.