

Book of Ruth chapter 1

THE DEPARTURE: 1:1-7

- Book of Judges was written on a national scale, dealing with the people of God as a whole.
- B of Ruth does the opposite. It deals with one family and the ordinariness of everyday life; how the Covenant with God was lived at the micro level— how one family fared in the national crisis.
- Hence, the bible reminds us that He who made the heavens and the earth, the One who governs all things, **also** deals with the affairs of the individual and the family and He governs our lives if we allow Him.
- This is expressed in Jesus' one prayer – which deals with the Kingdom of God on the macro level **and** “give us our daily bread”/ “forgive us” on the individual and family level.
- It amazes us that our small ‘nothings’ and ordinariness mean a lot to Him whose Majesty astonishes the inhabitants of Heaven, and whose Greatness is beyond our comprehension.

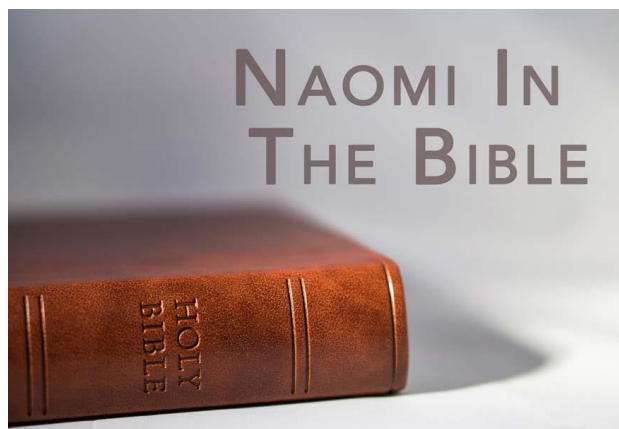
Bethlehem of Judah: is where this story is based.

- B was to be very significant in future times as the Birthplace of the Messiah: Is 7:14
- Bethlehem means ‘the house of bread’ – so if famine is experienced there we are dealing with Divine Chastisement at the time of the Judges, for it was the bread basket of Israel.
- For us, the house of bread is the Church, who feeds us with the Divine foods of God’s Word and Eucharist. If ‘famine’ comes to us it would definitely mean chastisement: Amos 8: 11-12..... **a famine of the word of God...**
- Silence from God is the worst famine, just as non-communication from parents to children is the worst thing for the child. Cf. Luisa Piccarreta on her ‘privations’!

- Elimelech and his family travelled about 50 miles to the east to the kingdom of Moab to find a new life. This means that the famine was very localised and has reference to the troubles in Judges.
- **Example:** Judges 6:3f speaks of the invasions of the Midianites who destroyed crops and cattle....
- E took his wife Naomi and their two sons to live as resident aliens in another kingdom where they stayed for about 10 years.
- He obviously thought that this was the best thing for his family, but did he not trust God’s Divine Providence to take care of them.
- If it **was** a chastisement, did he not know that God would show them mercy when they repented? See verse 6!

- Since Elimelech did not experience the blessings of the Covenant in Moab (Deut chap 28) we may conclude that he took the wrong decision.
- Why? Because the 3 men died before their time **and** childless – which was considered a punishment from God in those days. They also died and were buried away from the Promised Land, far from the Ark of the Covenant at Shiloh.
- Since we have looked a little into the relationship between Israel and Moab it is even more amazing that he took his family **there**.
- Jesus said: **By their fruits you will know them:** Mt 7:15. The result of this adventure was that 3 women were left poor, unhappy, and unable to take care of their affairs. In those days the men looked after the affairs of the family and the woman was only secure if she had either a father, husband or son to take care of her.
- So, Elimelech's decisions actually contradict his name: my God is King!
- Naomi would have had no say in the decision to move. It is only when she has to take the leadership that we see she is of a different spirit. Naomi was a true believer in Yahweh.
- E & N's children must have been born in Moab for they had Moabite names! The names given by the author of this book are very telling!
- Mahlon means 'to be sick', so he must have had poor health from the beginning and the other son was called CHILION which means 'failure' or pining!!
- The two young men eventually married worshippers of CHEMOSH the god of Moab, but neither had children!

Death in the family: 1: 3-5



- While death is normal and visits everyone, yet it is experienced as traumatic. No one can escape death, but looking at it reminds us of our own mortality, frailty, and the eternal consequences of our living on this earth, so the majority react to death with horror and want to evade it. Ps 103:13: **He knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.**
- What did death say to Naomi and her generation? They had no inkling of the NT revelation regarding death/resurrection/forgiveness etc. We don't even know if they believed in life after death, but they **were** aware of the elaborate funerary rites of the Egyptians and their strange beliefs in the journey into the next world.
- The Patriarchs **did know** that they were going back to God, so their descendants viewed death as rejoining their ancestors.... They didn't use coffins: the dead were buried in shrouds; corruption was quick because of the heat.
- Yet burial was essential.....to be left unburied was a curse because the body would be consumed by animals: Deut 28:26, Jer 22:19.

Examples: Abraham **was gathered to his people** dying in ripe old age of 175 years. The important thing for them was that **you lived a full life doing God's will.**

Jacob: Gen 49:29 **I am about to be gathered to my people**

Joseph: Gen 50:24: **I am about to die.... take my bones out of here** to the promised land.

Family Tombs: Ab, Isaac, Jacob and their first wives were all buried in the cave of Macphelah near Hebron. Important and wealthy families buried their dead in family tombs where the old bones would be pushed aside to accommodate new arrivals.

- Everyone wanted to be buried in the promised Land, God's own land, therefore a holy place, not in unholy Egypt or Moab! So, Naomi had a double tragedy in that her husband and two sons were buried in Moab!
- **SHEOL** was seen as a shadowy underworld to be feared. It was the place of the dead. No one knew the relationship anyone in Sheol had with Yahweh, their Covenant God.
- Psalm 88 shows that many thought that in Sheol, the place of the dead, souls were in fact cut off from God, so would do anything to stay on the earth!
- The Prophets in later times received more enlightenment on death. **Isaiah** was their greatest seer. He gave the wonderful revelation about Redemption in
- **Is 25:7-10** where he said that Messiah **will destroy death forever...he will wipe away the tears from every cheek.**
- And in **Is 26:19** he said: **your dead will come to life.... their corpses will rise.....awake and sing for joy!**
- **Daniel** also saw the future of Redemption: Dan 12:2 **of those who lie sleeping in the dust many will awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting disgrace.....**

- Their fear of death was their awareness of having to face God's terrifying justice!
- It was strictly forbidden to contact the dead, yet King Saul made contact with Samuel through the witch of Endor: 1 Sam 28:3-25
- Quite late in Israel's history faith and hope in God **after death** became common and is expressed in the Psalms: Ps 139: 7-8 **Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your Presence? If I ascend to Heaven you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol you are there!**
- Ps 49:15 **God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.**
- **Finally**, close to the time of Christ the Chosen people knew about **resurrection** after death, but we don't know how they came to this knowledge. Maybe it was the teaching of the prophet Daniel?
- **2 Macc 7:1-42** tells the story of the woman and her 7 sons who were martyred declaring their belief in the resurrection after death...see verses 14,20,23,28 and 29.
- Also, **Martha** in Jn 11 was able to declare her faith in the resurrection of the dead to Jesus

What about Naomi? Here is what **would trouble** her:

- Her husband and sons died childless, and this was considered a chastisement from God. They died before their time.....leaving her with a major problem apart from her own personal dilemma for survival.
- It was the fact that their names would be wiped out as if they had never lived! This was considered a disaster, and a definite punishment from God.
- It was understood that a man lived on in his sons who took his name into the future. Ps 128: 3-6 **Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Behold, thus shall a man be blessed who fears the Lord.**
- No wonder then that Naomi goes home a bitter woman!

The Lord Visits His People: 1:6-7

- In the depths of her trouble N received good news from the promised Land: **The Lord has visited His people....AND given them food.** God visits His people either in Justice or in Mercy. This is amply illustrated in the Book of Judges.
- Since food is now available in Bethlehem Naomi realises that God has heard the cry of the poor: **give us today our daily bread (needs).**

Ps 132:15 **I will abundantly bless her provisions; I will satisfy her poor with bread**

Luke 1:68 **Blessed be the Lord God of Israel (Yahweh) for he has visited and redeemed his people.** In doing this he provided the Bread of His Word and the Bread of the Eucharist.

- Because of this Naomi can turn away from her recent disasters of Nation and family and let her heart rise in faith and hope in Yahweh for her future. It will soon be clear that she had kept the lines of communication with Bethlehem alive in her exile.
- It will also be clear that she had testified to her daughters-in-law concerning her relationship with Yahweh while in Moab.... she would have to explain why she didn't turn to Chemosh the Moabite deity in any of her concerns. Cf Ps 77:1-20
- Naomi's faith survived the darkness of exile, trials and sufferings. One of the ways to do this is to remember what God has done for us in the past: Cf Dan ch 3; 2 Pet3:1
- Both in the holy Eucharist and in the Hours of the Passion we constantly remember Also, in the rounds of creation and Redemption.
- Throughout the rest of this book we will see Naomi's relationship with Yahweh - her covenanted God. So, Yahweh is shown as the One who is closely bound to His people, caring for individual needs and very much involved with their lives. In the Book of Judges we were shown only His care for the nation as a whole.
- In fact, it is Yahweh's HESED – His loving-kindness – which dominates this book!

The Journey home: 1:8-9

Ps 126:5 **They that sow in tears will sing when they reap**

- N had no say in the decision to move away from God's chosen land, or from the Chosen People, yet now she must bear the consequences of the decisions and actions of others.
- The status of woman was low in those times, and the plight of the widow was awful. She could be thrown out of her home by the male relative that inherited from her husband.... even her own sons if she had any! Many were!
- As a married woman she shared in her husband's possessions, but when he died the inheritance went to the male children.... or uncles, cousins.... But not to her!
- Book of Numbers tried to change this: Num 27:8 **If a man dies without sons his inheritance is to pass to his daughter(s). If he has no daughter the inheritance is to go to his brothers. If the father has no brothers it is to go to a member of his clan who is most nearly related....**

Therefore, the woman's security rested with her husband. She had little or no rights on her own. Maybe this was why the custom developed of women keening or lamenting at funerals? Cf Mk 5:21-43 esp vs 38, and Lk 8:40-56 esp vs 52

- The plight of the widow was so awful in the OT that widows and orphans are listed together Ex 22:21 **You must not be harsh with the widow or with the orphan; if you are harsh with them they will surely cry to me, and BE SURE that I will hear their cry.**
- **Deut 10:18 It is He (God) who sees justice done to the widow and orphan – who loves the stranger and gives him food and clothing.**
- The prophets also demanded that widows and orphans be properly cared for: Cf Is 1:23; Ezek 22:7, and they threatened judgement on those who misused them: Mal 3:5

NB: The one lasting hope for some social recovery for widows of marriageable age WAS TO MARRY FOR THE SECOND TIME! This is the issue for Ruth in this book.

- In the NT Jesus raised the status of woman in society. He dealt with them the same as he did with men: **examples:** He engaged them in theological debate: Samaritan woman in Jn 4; the Syro-Phoenician woman, and He gave leadership to Martha and Mary so that women disciples were treated the same as men in the early Church. This is clear from Paul's references to church leadership in Roman 16.
- Jesus clarified the rules for Divorce, making both parties responsible for decisions and consequences: Mt 19:1-14
- It is in the context of the social position of widows that Naomi tells her two daughters-in-law who are young enough to marry again to go home and just do that for their own survival. She shows her loving concern for their welfare in doing this.
- Initially they were prepared to go with her to Bethlehem, for she was their nearest relative – even if it was by marriage. They would have to walk from Moab carrying no possessions with them. The most they could take was water – which is very heavy!