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DAVID ATKINSON

The Message of **Ruth**

Revised Edition

THE OLD TESTAMENT SERIES EDITOR: J. A. MOTYER



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Ruth 1:1–7

1. Going away

1. Concern with the ordinary (1:1)

In a world dominated – if we are to believe the media – by ‘crisis’ and ‘challenge’, in which every small event can be turned into a headline provided there is a ‘newsworthy story’ in it – and even in a church in which the unusual and the spectacular are hailed by some as more authentic than the humdrum and the routine – it is a relief to open the book of Ruth. We have already described the pleasing homeliness of its concerns: its village life, its joys and sorrows, its ‘kindly virtues’, and especially its concentration on the characters around whom the story is woven. This stands out all the more pointedly by contrast with the book of Judges, with which the opening words forge a connection. Judges ends with a reference to the social chaos and personal misery resulting from lack of righteous authority among the people: ‘In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes’ (Judg. 21:25). The book of Judges is painted on a broad canvas. Although individual people feature in the book, they do so in the context of civil strife, of national up-heavals, of international concerns. The book of Ruth, however, although not ultimately unmindful of the national – even global – significance of its characters, nevertheless homes in on *a certain man*, his family and their fortunes. It reminds us that the God of the nations is also concerned about the ordinariness of ‘a certain man’.

Our Lord, who taught us to pray to ‘our Father in heaven’, and to lift our hearts and minds to the global vision of the coming of his kingdom – for his is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever – taught us also to pray for our daily bread. God, who knows when a sparrow falls to the

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ground, and who notices the gift of a cup of cold water to someone in need (Matt. 10:29, 42), is concerned about our ordinariness. As Helmut Thielicke pointedly puts it:

Tell me how lofty God is for you, and I'll tell you how little he means to you. That could be a theological axiom. The lofty God has been lofted right out of my private life . . . If God has no significance for the tiny mosaic pieces of my little life, and for the things that concern *me*, then he doesn't concern me *at all*.¹

God's interest in the fortunes of *a certain man* in the days when the judges ruled should remind us that even *our* small ordinariness is not insignificant to God, and falls within his almighty care.

2. The famine (1:1)

Moving house is not a task most people undertake lightly. It is costly and unsettling. It means pulling up roots, leaving friends and neighbours. It often leads to the hunt for a new home, finding one's way in a new neighbourhood, getting to know new people. For a family it is a major upheaval. Although Elimelech would not have had the same amount of domestic gadgetry to carry with him as many a modern-day house-owner, it was not for him any less of a major decision. He decided to leave Bethlehem because of the *famine*.

Bethlehem in Judah was a large town about 5 miles south of present-day Jerusalem. Its name means 'House of Bread', a name which points to the unusual fertility of that area for grain harvesting (as chapter 2 of the book of Ruth makes clear). It points also to the unusualness of famine. Some commentators believe that the local famine in the Bethlehem area – apparently there was no such difficulty 50 miles to the south-east in Moab, across what we now call the Dead Sea – was due in part to the ravages associated with the chaotic times of the judges. The Midianite invasion about the time of Gideon, for example (Judg. 6:3f.), destroyed produce as well as cattle.

Because of the famine, Elimelech decided that he and his family should go and live for a while as resident foreigners in the land of Moab.

¹ H. Thielicke, *I Believe* (ET, Collins, 1969), pp. 33f.

It is not clear what prompted Elimelech to go. Whereas Canaanite religion sought to control the processes of nature with their fertility rites, the people of Yahweh were taught to trust him for blessing in prosperity on the land. Was the famine, in Elimelech's mind, a mark of God's displeasure?² We do not know. We do know that other Bethlehemites stayed to see the famine through and, it would seem, fared much better than Elimelech (verse 6). In the light of subsequent events, we may well wonder whether the author does not wish us to understand that Elimelech was unwise to move! Certainly, the journey did not achieve its goal – to escape death. All three men of the family died in Moab. Further, by moving, they died in a foreign land, leaving Naomi the widow far more bereft and isolated than if they had remained in the fellowship of their home town.

And of all places, why go to *Moab*!

Centred on the high plateau east of the Dead Sea, Moab was populated by the descendants of Lot (Gen. 19:37). Though the Moabites were not attacked by the Israelites on their return to the Promised Land after the exodus, despite their characteristic unfriendliness, Moabites were not to be admitted to the congregation of Israel.³ Why? They were worshippers of Chemosh, a god to whom human sacrifice was apparently made. The Moabites were sometimes referred to as 'the people of Chemosh' (Num. 21:29; 2 Kgs 3:27). Furthermore, during the early period of the times of the judges, Eglon, the king of Moab, had invaded the land of the Israelites and pressed the people of Israel into servitude for eighteen years (Judg. 3:12–30). It was therefore a very curious place for the worshipper of Yahweh from Bethlehem to choose for his sojourn. Why did they not go somewhere where Yahweh was worshipped? Was this distrust in the providence of God? While commending Elimelech's desire, as he assumes, to care for his family in their hunger, Matthew Henry asks how the move to Moab could possibly have been justified. 'It is evidence of a discontented, distrustful, unstable spirit to be weary of the place in which God has set us, and to be leaving it immediately, whenever we meet with any uneasiness or inconvenience in it.'⁴

We are not told enough to know whether Elimelech's action justified Matthew Henry's comment. But whatever lack of faith or expression of discontent with Yahweh Elimelech's action implies, the rest of the book

² Sometimes famine is associated in the Old Testament with a specific judgment of God; cf. Lev. 26:14–20.

³ Deut. 2:9; Judg. 11:17, etc.; Deut. 23:3–6.

⁴ *Matthew Henry's Commentary* (1708–10), *ad loc.*

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of Ruth amply demonstrates that God's gracious providence is not bound by a man or a woman's foolishness. The ultimate joy in the family and purpose in their history which derive from the arrival of Ruth on the scene demonstrate the rich lovingkindness of God's providential care. It is evidence of his love that such benefits were reaped as a result of such foolish conduct. Fortunately, God's providence covers even our mistakes!

3. The names (1:2–5)

To our author, *names* are significant. There are some characters in the book whose names we are not told, such as the important 'next-of-kin' who features in Ruth 4:1. So we must assume that when the writer tells us names, they carry a special significance in his purpose. To the Hebrew way of thinking, to know a person's name is to know that person's character, to know him or her. The name is the person. When Abram becomes a new person, he receives a new name (Gen. 17:4–5). When a person's name is destroyed or cut off the person is extinguished from human memory, is as though he or she had never been (Deut. 7:24; Josh. 7:9). It was a terrible thing to be left with neither name nor remnant (2 Sam. 14:7). Supremely, when God tells his name, he tells his character, and shares himself with those to whom he speaks (Exod. 6:2ff.). 'Yahweh' is his personal name, the name of the covenant God.

Elimelech means 'My God is King'. Some commentators, such as Henry whom we quoted earlier, wonder if there is not some rebuke implied in telling us this name. Should such a name not express trust and confidence in God? We may certainly remind ourselves that for all for whom 'My God is King', while there is no promise of a trouble-free life, there is always the promise of daily bread, and the assurance that there is no need to be morbidly anxious about tomorrow (cf. Matt. 6:25–33). Part of the meaning of faith may be expressed by saying that faith is what God gives us to help us cope with uncertainties. Did Elimelech live up to his name?

The name *Naomi* means 'pleasant, lovely, delightful', and the poignant significance of this name comes into prominence after Naomi's later return from Moab with Ruth her daughter-in-law, saddened by the bitter experiences which she believed she had received from the Lord's hand. 'Call me no longer Naomi,' she tells the neighbours, 'call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me' (1:20).

Mahlon and *Chilion*, Naomi's sons, apparently had old Canaanite names, but they are mentioned here because of their significance in setting the scene for the tears and pain of the rest of Ruth 1. *Mahlon* seems to be linked to a root meaning 'to be sick', and *Chilion* signifies something like 'failing', or 'pining', even 'annihilation'.

Orpah and *Ruth* are Moabite names, and their meanings are not too clear. But what is clear is their nationality. The sons of Elimelech are marrying worshippers of Chemosh, and although such marriage was apparently not forbidden,⁵ Moabites were not admitted to the worshipping congregation (Deut. 23:3).

The family, we are told, were *Ephrathites*. Ephrath is a word often associated with Bethlehem, but it is very uncertain what it means. Places where it is used suggest that there was a special dignity or importance linked to being an Ephrathite. Its mention here possibly indicates that we are meeting a well-established family. Certainly, when Naomi returned she was not a nobody (1:19). Maybe, as Leon Morris suggests,⁶ her family were local 'aristocracy', a family which, when they left for Moab, were known as wealthy people ('I went away full', 1:21). But wealth and prestige are no guarantee of material happiness or freedom from personal distress. The family are distressed enough by the famine to forsake their home for Moab. Then to the loss of material comfort and the security of home is added the pain not of one bereavement but three. Naomi, on whom this first chapter of Ruth concentrates our attention, was alone, without home, husband, sons, fellowship, or hope of inheritance. What did the worship of Yahweh mean to her now?

4. The deaths (1:3–5)

Death is in one sense the most natural and yet in another the most unnatural of events. All people are mortal;⁷ our time on earth is limited. Death inescapably reminds us of our frailty and our limits – limits of which (the psalmist tells us) the Lord is not unmindful, and which are part of the meaning of his compassion for his people: 'As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those

⁵ Deut. 7:3 refers only to the prohibition of marriage between Israelites and Canaanites together with other inhabitants of Canaan.

⁶ Morris, p. 249.

⁷ As the writer of Gen. 3:19, 22 affirms.

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who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust' (Ps. 103:13–14). Along with all 'nature', death is part of the course of things. And yet a persistent horror, even revulsion, at death has dominated humanity's thinking from the earliest times. And some contemporary funeral parlours suggest a refusal even to believe that it is real.

What significance, we may wonder, did believers in Yahweh place on death when Naomi *was left without her two sons or her husband*? They were unaware of the transformation in the meaning of death which the New Testament brings. They had much less ground than we do for belief in life beyond the grave. They could not have understood the fullness of meaning in Paul's words about death having lost its 'sting', or in his description of death as merely falling 'asleep' (1 Cor. 15:55; 1 Thess. 4:14, nrv). Yet we must not forget David's confidence that he would be with his dead infant (2 Sam. 12:23), nor the very positive thinking of Psalms 49 and 73. Even for an Old Testament man of faith, to die was to 'sleep with his fathers', to be 'gathered to his people'.⁸ And the despair expressed in passages like Psalm 88 is from one who believed himself alienated from God's compassion and dying under his wrath, not from a believer fully confident of God's grace.

But it is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead which fills out belief into what for the Christian is now a certainty: that for the believer, death brings unending fellowship with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:17). Death for the Christian is 'setting sail for another shore' (cf. 2 Tim. 4:6). Our bodies are resurrected to more complete spiritual bodies, fitted for the life of heaven, with richer heavenly counterparts to the physical bodies which are appropriate for this world of space and time (1 Cor. 15:42ff.). Christian hope looks forward to that 'great multitude that no one could count', whose robes have been made 'white in the blood of the Lamb', standing 'before the throne of God' to serve him 'day and night within his temple' (Rev. 7:9, 14–15).

Some parts of the Old Testament do carry hints pointing towards these affirmations of faith. Isaiah, in a section which may be the basis for belief about personal destiny, as well as for national fortune, speaks of the time when the Lord 'will swallow up death for ever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces.' He then affirms that the

⁸ 1 Kgs 2:10, etc.; Gen. 25:8; Deut. 32:50, etc.

‘dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!’ (Isa. 25:8; 26:19). And in Daniel’s apocalyptic visions, stretching forward in faith to what he could perhaps only dimly grasp: ‘Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt’ (Dan. 12:2).

But for the most part, death in the Old Testament is an ambiguous and shadowy state. On the one hand, the dead are sometimes seen as those who are cut off from Yahweh’s sphere of influence. Death for them means the ending of a conscious relationship with God; Yahweh’s praises are heard no more. Death is ‘the king of terrors’ (Ps. 88:5; Job 18:14). The shadowy underworld of Sheol, the place of the dead, is a place that is defiled and which emphasizes death’s hideousness. Believers in Yahweh are not to attempt to reach those who have died, nor are they, like the surrounding Canaanites, to indulge in death rituals, such as cutting hair or flesh as a recognition of death’s power (Lev. 19:26–28; 21:5). The people of Moab among whom Naomi now sojourned may possibly have had attitudes to death which were intolerable to the believer in Yahweh (indicated, perhaps, by the way Amos was to denounce them for burning ‘to lime the bones of the king of Edom’; Amos 2:1).

On the other hand, there is also in the Old Testament a strong faith that Yahweh is Lord, and Lord of life.⁹ No other sovereign can rule the realm of death. So into this vacuum, faith in Yahweh stretches out feelers of hope. The psalmist at the very edge of death cries to Yahweh to remember him; and elsewhere the poet expresses the certainty that God will receive him through death into another life (Pss 88:12–13; 73:24). Or again, even if he makes his bed in Sheol, ‘you are there’. The Lord will not give him up (Pss 139:8; 16:10). There is a sense in which, at the point of death, Yahweh will ‘snatch away’ believers to fellowship with him (Ps. 49:15). God himself is present to believers in life and in death and will not abandon them to the rule of Sheol.

How much of this growing faith Naomi shared we do not know. Perhaps she had glimpsed something of the truth which is filled out for us fully in the New Testament – that for those who come to faith in God, death in one sense is already behind them. Christian believers are ‘baptized into [Christ’s] death’ (Rom. 6:3; Col. 2:12) and though their bodily death must

⁹ H. A. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (SCM Press, 1974), p. 107.

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still take place because the age of full glory is yet to be revealed,¹⁰ their unending fellowship with their Lord is secure.

But however much or little Naomi herself had come to realize about the meaning of death for believers in Yahweh, there were two aspects to her own circumstances which are clear. First, her husband and sons had *died* before their time. How well we can all identify with the Old Testament's sorrow when faced with what those who remain can only see as premature death. Abraham 'died in a good old age, an old man and full of years'. There is a fulfilment in a life like that, like also that of Job, who sees children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren (Gen. 25:8; Job 42:16). But the death of a young person has a note of tragedy about it: 'In the prime of my life must I go through the gates of death and be robbed of the rest of my years?' (Isa. 38:10, NIV). Hagar, the mother, laments over the impending death of her boy: 'Do not let me look on the death of the child'; and David suffers with his dying son.¹¹ For Mahlon and Chilion certainly, and we may assume for Elimelech also, death has come early in life; they have been 'robbed' of the rest of their years. And Naomi is bereft so early in her life of *her two sons and her husband*.

Second, although the book of Ruth gives only a faint glimpse of faith that death is not the end of fellowship (1:17), there was one certainty. The name of the man must not be forgotten. His name would live on in his inheritance. How important for him, then, that he should have a son (4:5, 10). How devastating, therefore, for Naomi that not only has she lost the three men of her household, but there is no heir by which their names will be continued and their inheritance guaranteed. Her men had died, and so had their names!

The author is here piling up one disaster on another in Naomi's life, giving us his readers a real sense of shock that one person should be called on to suffer so much. Surely it was undeserved; surely unexpected. Are we not introduced here to the dark side of God's providence – that some of our pains seem unbearable; some of our circumstances so unjust; some of our questions stay without answers?

Faith, we are to learn from Naomi, sometimes means a willingness to leave such questions in the mystery of God, in the confidence that in the brighter days he has shown himself trustworthy.

¹⁰ A. Richardson (ed.), *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (SCM Press, 1957), p. 60.

¹¹ Gen. 21:16; 2 Sam. 12:16ff. Cf. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*.

5. The Lord visits (1:6–7)

Our memory keeps alive in the present the significance of past experiences. How often the people of God are urged to ‘remember’ the way God has helped them in the past. After the exodus from Egypt on Passover night, Moses’ first word to the people is ‘Remember this day . . . because the LORD brought you out from there by strength of hand.’ They are to remember their time as slaves in Egypt as an incentive to keep the sabbath holy; they are to remember the Lord their God. In times of fear, they are to remember the Lord’s power. When they rest in his blessings, they are to remember that they have also provoked him to wrath. The basis of much of their ethical concern for their society is rooted in their remembrance of their time as slaves, and God’s rescue. Disaster struck during the days of the judges when, as soon as Gideon died, the people turned again to Baal and did not *remember* the Lord their God.¹²

But Naomi remembered. Lines of communication have been kept open with the people at home. From Ruth’s later testimony we see that Naomi has been a clear witness to Yahweh in Moab. She has kept alive in her consciousness the reality of the Lord’s help to her people in the past. She waited for news of his help in the present. Like the psalmist, when consumed with grief and depression, no doubt Naomi would console herself by calling ‘to mind the deeds of the LORD’. Like Jonah in his unenviable aquatic state, Naomi’s mind was not far from prayer (‘As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to you’; Ps. 77:3, 11; Jon. 2:7). In the hard times, faith will sometimes mean leaving unanswered difficulties in the hands of God. Such faith will be strengthened by keeping in the front of our minds the ways God has helped us in the past. Peter urges his Christian readers to keep in mind the gracious promises and gifts of God, and arouses them by way of reminder (2 Pet. 3:1). And supremely are we bidden to recall, to rest upon and to be nourished by the saving grace of God in Christ every time we eat the bread or drink the cup of the Lord ‘in remembrance’ of him (1 Cor. 11:23ff.). Faith is a journey of trust and growth; it is a moving mobile, not a still life. And when some parts swing for a time in the shadow, we trust that they will again emerge into the light as they have many times before. Part of the spirituality of the men and women of faith of Naomi’s day was to meditate

¹² Exod. 13:3; Deut. 5:15; 7:18; 8:2, 18; 9:7; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22; Judg. 8:34.

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on the great acts of God in the past, and we can learn from them how to keep faith alive in the dark times.

So Naomi's heart has remained in Judah, and she has not allowed herself to forget her God. Indeed, her ears are alert to the news which reaches her in Moab that Yahweh has not abandoned his people: the famine is over, *the LORD has had consideration for his people and given them food.*

The LORD, as we have said, renders the name of God, Yahweh. He is the God whose personal name indicates his character: the God who is the actively existing one, the God who comes to meet his people in need, the God who sets his people free by the action of a redeemer ('goel').¹³ It is by the character of this Lord, revealed to her people generations before, that Naomi now measures the bitterness of her bereavement and her isolation (1:13, 21). It is this Lord who, we are told later, is worshipped by Boaz and his harvesters, and whose blessing is invoked on Ruth (2:4, 12). It is this Lord who is blessed by Naomi for Boaz's gracious generosity, who is seen as the giver of life, and under whose providential care Naomi ultimately finds joy (2:20; 4:13–14). The book of Ruth is rich in its revelation of the sort of God Yahweh is.

Our author is anxious that the character of this Lord will dominate his narrative. It is as if he wants his readers to place the detailed events of his story's pains and joys within the context of the God whose character is described by 'Yahweh'.

What significance there is in the phrase *the LORD had had consideration for* [or 'had visited', rsv] *his people!* The report Naomi had received is not expressed in terms such as 'the weather has broken', or 'there has been an upturn in the economy', or 'the threat of invasion has gone'. All of these could have been part of the chain of causes in the recovery of Bethlehem from the famine. But no, the report comes to Naomi in terms of the Lord's action. Here is a central theme in the Bible: all of life is traced directly to the hand of God. To concentrate primarily on second causes may encourage us to seek to be manipulators of the system. It is concentration on the Great Cause which teaches us to live by faith.

¹³ Cf. Exod. 6:6: 'Say therefore to the Israelites, "I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will *redeem* [g'] you with an outstretched arm"' (emphasis added).

When the Lord ‘visits’ his people, he does so in either judgment¹⁴ or blessing (cf. rsv of Gen. 50:24; Exod. 4:31; 1 Sam. 2:21, etc.). The food now available in Bethlehem is understood by Naomi as God’s gift. The sense of this is caught by the psalmist: ‘I will abundantly bless its provisions; I will satisfy its poor with bread’ (Ps. 132:15); it is caught also by the priest Zechariah centuries later, as he delighted in the birth of Messiah’s messenger: ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them’ (Luke 1:68). With Naomi’s confidence in that God, she can handle, as we shall see, the feelings of anger towards him which her circumstances provoke.

She now sets off with Ruth and Orpah to journey home.

¹⁴ Cf. rsv of Exod. 20:5; 32:34; Lev. 18:25; Deut. 5:9. Cf. also the sense of God’s punishment in Isa. 10:12; 13:11.

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