

## RUTH 1:1-5

### Isn't It Ironic?

Hidden in plain sight of the biblical narrative (not to mention the biblical table of contents) lies books that are often ignored but contain beautiful gems of spiritual truth. Ruth is certainly one of them. It is a well written narrative about redemption, love, perseverance, and Christ's saving work.

To begin, the story is well-crafted. Ancient literature is as rich as modern literature even without the advantages of technology and academic credentials. In the opening chapter of Ruth, the unnamed author utilizes irony to draw the reader in. Consider a few examples.

Immediately, the reader is introduced to Elimelech and his family. Elimelech's name means "my God is king," and he dwells in Bethlehem. As we will see, the connection of Bethlehem to David is made clear in the story's conclusion. Thus, not only is "My God is King" from Bethlehem, but generations later, the greatest king of Israel will be from Bethlehem. Ironically, however, Elimelech moves his family away from Bethlehem to Moab. In other words, he moves away from where God was king to the land where God was not king.

To add to the irony, Elimelech leads his family away from Bethlehem due to the famine ravishing the town. "Bethlehem" means "House of Bread." Thus, the Jewish "house of bread" lacked any bread. No wonder they fled.

Elimelech's wife, Naomi, will become one of the three major characters of the story. Her name means "pleasant," yet, as we will see, her story is bitterly tragic. When she returns to Bethlehem (spoiler alert), she is widowed and impoverished. So embittered by her suffering, she changes her name to Mara, meaning "bitter" (Ruth 1:20)

Elimelech and Naomi have two sons: Mahlon and Chilion. Although they do not become central figures in the narrative, their names are prophetic – "sick" and "dying." This is precisely how their story ends. Like these examples, the utilization of irony and other literary tools are used to create an intriguing narrative.

Before exploring the plot in detail, the setting is worth considering. The opening verses explain that Elimelech and his family lived "when the judges governed." Chronologically,

this puts the narrative at some point during the book of Judges. Spiritually, it informs the reader they lived at a time of decay. Judges concludes stating, “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

This helps explain Elimelech’s actions. Although they were children of God’s covenant, they leave the Promised Land. Although they profess faith and even recognize ritual obligations as Hebrews, they are not faithful to the Jewish faith.

As the story opens, we are confronted with a family who are (literally) leaving their faith behind. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. When famine arrived, they did not seek the Lord’s help or repent of sin, but rather fled the land and, metaphorically, left the faith.

This is demonstrated in the choice of wives for Mahlon and Chilion. While living in Moab (distant relatives of Israel whose forefather was Lot, the nephew of Abraham), they married Moabite women. (One woman was named “Orpah.” The billionaire personality, Oprah, is named after Orpah but misspelled.)

The eponymous character, Ruth, is introduced as one of these Moabite wives. Her name means “friendship” or “companion” which is what she becomes for Naomi throughout her arc. Shortly after the wedding, however, both Mahlon and Chilion tragically die. To make matters worse, Elimelech dies. The cause of their deaths is never given. Naomi becomes a widow without the security of her two sons. Orpah and Ruth become widows who must choose between perpetual poverty or remarriage.

The text takes advantage of its use of irony to enhance the sorrow. “And the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband” (vs. 5). The reader knows who this “woman” is. Her name is Naomi and is now alone in a foreign land. She is no longer Naomi. She is no longer “pleasant.”

In this context, Ruth is a tragedy. Although it will move beyond that, it encourages the reader to enter the story in sympathy with the surviving women. They are abandoned by death.

Perhaps that is where our first exploration of the story should pause. The Bible does not shy away from the heartache and ugliness of suffering. Our lives can easily transition from “pleasant” to “bitter” – from Naomi to Mara. Most faiths try to deny suffering, redefine it, or suffer under its weight. The Bible draws us to enter suffering and, while there, see a Savior who himself entered into suffering and conquered it by rising from the grave. Christianity stands alone as the faith conceived in suffering. It was birthed in victory. Once Naomi and Ruth discover that truth, the story transitions from exploring human sorrow to divine redemption.