** Ruth 1**

The Book of Ruth begins with a simple statement of facts. A man went from Bethlehem in Judah, and taking his wife and two sons, settled in Moab to escape a famine. While he is there he dies. His two sons take two of the local girls as wives. The sons then die without offspring and their mother is left with two daughters -in-law. Not a happy start to a story, for women without men to protect them did not have a good prospect.

***Family Tree***

**Elimelech = Naomi**

**Mahlon and Chilion**

**=Ruth =Orpah**

The opening scene of the story proper is on the road to Bethlehem probably near the border between Moab and Judah. Naomi has heard that the famine is over and there is now food in Judah. She has set off to return to Bethlehem not because she has family there to help her but that she may die with her own people. Ruth and Orpah are attached to Naomi and set out with her. Both are still young enough to find husbands and have a family but as Moabites there will be little prospect of husbands in Bethlehem. Naomi tries to persuade her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers and rebuild their lives. At first, they both resist and want to stay with Naomi, but she is insistent and eventually Orpah does as she is asked and heads off to her childhood home. Naomi tries again with Ruth, but Ruth is adamant that she will stay with Naomi.

Why was Naomi so keen to get the girls to return home? We have already noted that it was the best chance for them to rebuild their lives. However, Elimelech’s wider family have a responsibility for the eldest son’s wife, Ruth. Their responsibility was to find a male relative who could take Ruth and produce a son who would legally be the heir to Mahlon and continue the family line. Naomi has no husband to produce another son for Ruth to marry. The problem is that even though there may be such a person in Bethlehem, Ruth was a Moabite and not a Jew and would probably not be acceptable for marriage. Further, it is suggested that if either of the girls went back to Bethlehem with Naomi it may become clear that her sons had broken the rules by marrying outside of the tribes of Israel. This may make life even more difficult for Naomi.

Naomi relents and allows Ruth to accompany her back to Bethlehem. When they arrive, Ruth appears to drop out of the picture while Naomi deals with the women of Bethlehem. She is recognised by those who knew her before the family left many years earlier. However, Naomi is ‘bitter’ about how her life has turned out. She left with a husband and two sons and now they have gone. All this she sees as God’s doing – but she does not try to understand why or argue against what has happened.

Naomi says little to the women about what happened in Moab.

Those who seek the positive in chapter 1 look to Ruth’s faithfulness to Naomi even in dark times. As was mentioned in the “Background Introduction” we see from the outset the theme of *hesed*. *Hesed* can be used to describe loyalty, compassion, generosity, goodness, kindness, or steadfast love. It is used to describe Ruth’s caring for Naomi. At the beginning (1:8) Naomi asks that God shows *hesed* towards her daughters-in-law. Some writers regard the Book of Ruth as a glimpse of life as God would desire it. Everyone accepting and acting kindly to each other, showing *hesed.*

As in all good storytelling this section is rounded off with a hint of what is to come.

“*They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest*.”

Source

Ruth, Interpretation a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching by Katherine D. Sakenfeld