

Rut (Rut) ~ Part 1

Reflect on the choices you make in your life, much like **Rut**'s decision to accompany **Na'omi** back to Beit-Lechem. If you feel stagnant in your spiritual journey at home, ask yourself: what can you change or pursue? This week, dedicate time each day to read and meditate on a passage from the Bible, asking God to guide your understanding. Write down what you learn and share it with your family. Like **Rut**'s commitment to a life of faith, your initiative can inspire those around you to deepen their own relationship with God.

Introduction

Why are **Bible** readers so drawn to the **Book of Rut**? For starters, **Rut** is one of the best short stories ever written. That's why I decided to explore it. It's frankly one of my favorite books in the **Tanakh**. "*Once upon a time*" and "*They all lived happily ever after*" are phrases many cherish. **Rut** possesses all the elements of a well-written story. We are drawn to the characters: grieving **Na'omi**, loyal **Rut**, and compassionate **Boaz**. The setting is also intriguing. It takes place during the time of the judges (**Rut** 1:1); and the locations include **Beit-Lechem**, **Mo'av**, **Boaz's** field, a threshing floor, a city gate, and a bedroom. The plot involves a story of redemption which, as we learn, is part of the grand story of redemption (4:17–20). **Na'omi** stands at the center of the book's conflict as a widow with no son to carry on the family line. At the heart of the resolution is **Boaz**, a figure who shows many similarities to **David's** greatest son, **Yeshua**.

At first glance, the title "**Rut**" may come as a bit of a surprise. She is a **Mo'avite**! This is the only **Tanakh** named after a non-**Israelite**. That she was a **Mo'avite** makes it even more surprising, as **Mo'av** was a long-standing enemy of **Isra'el**. Further, **Rut** speaks less than **Boaz** and **Na'omi**, and her speeches are shorter than those of the other two characters.

Na'omi's Family in Mo'av

1¹ Back in the days when the judges were judging, at a time when there was a famine in the land, a certain man from Beit-Lechem went to live in the territory of Mo'av—he, his wife, and his two sons.

Coming after the book of **Judges**, which shows **Isra'el's** problems on a broader national and local level, **Rut** zooms in on one family's trials and tragedies. It takes place during the time in which "the judges ruled," which was a period of spiritual darkness. We also read of a "famine" in the land, likely a sign of judgment. And things get even worse, as we read of three funerals. Within a few verses we are left with a grieving widow in a foreign land, with her two widowed daughters-in-law (v. 2–5).

2² The man's name was Elimelekh, his wife's name was Na'omi, and his two sons were named Machlon and Kilyon; they were Efratim from Beit-Lechem in Y'hudah. They arrived in the plain of Mo'av and settled there.

Elimelekh means "**My God is king**," which heightens the irony of his behavior in doing "whatever he wanted" because in those days "there was no king in **Isra'el**" (Judges 21:25). His wife's name, **Na'omi**, means "**Pleasant**," which evokes Psalm 16:6: "*The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.*" In contrast, she and her husband were dissatisfied with the boundary lines **God** assigned to them.

3³ Elimelekh, Na'omi's husband, died; and she was left, she and her two sons. 4⁴ They took wives for themselves from the women of Mo'av; the name of the one was "Oprah ; and the name of the other was Rut. They lived there for about ten years. 5⁵ Then Machlon and Kilyon died, both of them; and the woman was left with neither her two sons nor her husband.

In the land of **Mo'av**, **Na'omi's** husband died, and she was left with her two sons. Her sons then took Mo'avite women as their wives, contrary to the law that forbade marrying women from nations that served other gods (D'varim 7:3–4). **Mo'avite** women in particular had a reputation for leading **Israelites** astray after other gods (B'midbar 25). It must have seemed evident that the hand of the **Lord** was against **Na'omi** in judgment.

⁶ So she prepared to return with her daughters-in-law from the plain of Mo'av; for in the plain of Mo'av she had heard how Adonai had paid attention to his people by giving them food. ⁷ She left the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law and took the road leading back to Y'hudah. ⁸ Na'omi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Each of you, go back to your mother's house. May Adonai show grace to you, as you did to those who died and to me. ⁹ May Adonai grant you security in the home of a new husband." Then she kissed them, but they began weeping aloud.

Na'omi had little choice but to leave **Mo'av** and return home, a move encouraged by the news that the **Lord** was providing ... food there. This points to the **Jew's** repentance and restoration. **Na'omi** asked the **Lord's** blessing upon her daughters-in-law in the form of His faithful love (Hb chesed). This is a covenantal term that combines love and faithfulness, mercy and grace - all the positive aspects of a committed relationship. It is a remarkable request that the **Lord's** favor should be shown in this way to covenant outsiders like these foreign women. The women were sad to part. They wept loudly as they embraced.

¹⁰ They said to her, "No; we want to return with you to your people." ¹¹ Na'omi said, "Go back, my daughters. Why do you want to go with me? Do I still have sons? Do I still have sons in my womb who could become your husbands? ¹² Go back, my daughters; go your way; for I'm too old to have a husband. Even if I were to say, 'I still have hope'; even if I had a husband tonight and bore sons; ¹³ would you wait for them until they grew up? Would you refuse to marry, just for them? No, my daughters. On your behalf I feel very bitter that the hand of Adonai has gone out against me." ¹⁴ Again they wept aloud. Then "Oprah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye. But Rut stuck with her.

"**Oprah** and **Rut** repeated their desire to return to **Isra'el** with **Na'omi**. Once again, however, **Na'omi** pressed them both to return, because the best prospect of remarriage lay among their own people. **Na'omi** assumed no other family in **Beit-Lechem** would be interested in marrying **Mo'avite** women, and she emphasized that there would be no other children from her line. She was probably at least 50 years old then. Even if she were to have more children at once, by the time they grew up, '**Oprah** and **Rut** would be too old to have children. Besides, **Na'omi** argued, she was herself under a curse: the LORD's hand had turned against her. **Na'omi** shows no hint of taking personal responsibility or expressing repentance for leaving the promised land. Convinced by **Na'omi's** arguments, '**Oprah** took her leave of **Na'omi**, but **Rut** clung to her - the same word used in Genesis 2:24 to describe the marriage bond.

¹⁵ She said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god; go back, after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ But Rut said, "Don't press me to leave you and stop following you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God. ¹⁷ Where you die, I will die; and there I will be buried. May Adonai bring terrible curses on me, and worse ones as well, if anything but death separates you and me." ¹⁸ When Na'omi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

The intensity of **Na'omi's** attempts to dissuade her Mo'avite daughters-in-law from accompanying her back to **Beit-Lechem** suggests she was not motivated solely by concern for their well-being. Their presence would

have been a constant and embarrassing reminder of her tragic sojourn in **Mo'av**. Yet **Rut** was not so easily dissuaded. In a crescendo of commitment, she bound herself to go with **Na'omi** and to live with her. In fact, she would even die and be buried where **Na'omi** was - the greatest possible commitment in the ancient world. She sealed her commitment with a self-imprecatory oath, taken in the personal name of **Na'omi's God, Yahweh**. **Na'omi's** response to this moving speech was remarkably curt. Literally, the Hebrew in verse 18 says, "*She stopped talking to her.*"

¹⁹ So the two of them went on until they came to Beit-Lechem. When they arrived in Beit-Lechem, the whole city was stirred with excitement over them. The women asked, "Can this be Na'omi?"²⁰ "Don't call me Na'omi [pleasant]," she answered them; "call me Marah [bitter], because Shaddai has made my life very bitter. ²¹ I went out full, and Adonai has brought me back empty. Why call me Na'omi? Adonai has testified against me, Shaddai has afflicted me."²² This is how Na'omi returned, with Rut the woman from Mo'av, her daughter-in-law, accompanying her from the plain of Mo'av. They arrived in Beit-Lechem at the beginning of the barley harvest. ¹

The townswomen's question, Can this be **Na'omi**? pointedly and deliberately ignored **Rut's** presence. In response, **Na'omi** urged them to rename her **Mara** since the **Lord** had made her bitter rather than "pleasant," which is the meaning of "**Na'omi**." At **Marah**, the **Israelites** found only bitter water to drink on their way out of **Egypt**, and they grumbled against the **Lord** (Ex 15:23–24). **Na'omi's** heart was similarly turned against the **Lord**, yet the connection also raised hope that the **Lord** would heal her bitterness and bring her to rest, just as He did for **Isra'el**. **Na'omi** had returned physically to **Beit-Lechem** from **Mo'av**, but would she similarly return to the **Lord** in repentance?

In our next post, we will continue to explore **Rut**.

¹ Rut 1:1-22