

# The Oppression of Naomi

## Introduction

### a. objectives

1. subject – Naomi loses her husband and sons while living in a foreign land
2. aim – to cause us to eschew bitterness as the Lord ordains difficult times for us to endure
3. passage – Ruth 1:1-14

### b. outline

1. The Family of Naomi (Ruth 1:1-2)
2. The Oppression of Naomi (Ruth 1:3-7)
3. The Bitterness of Naomi (Ruth 1:8-14)

### c. opening

1. the **rate** of moving through this book
  - a. because this is a short and *compact* narrative, we will work through it at a “fair” pace (?)
  - b. so, I decided (this morning) to deal with just the “opening” – what sets the story “in motion”
2. the **main character** of the book
  - a. contrary to the title of the book, the main character is actually *Naomi* – she is the initial focus, who is widowed in Moab, who returns to Israel (with Ruth “clinging” to her), who has relatives to help, who suggests Boaz as a mate for Ruth (and a redeemer for herself), praised by the local women after the birth (and naming!) of Obed for having been redeemed, etc.
  - b. true, Ruth is *crucial* – she is the one of great faith in the God of Naomi, she is the one who seeks out Boaz, she is (ultimately) the great-grandmother of David through Boaz
3. the **oppression** in the book
  - a. the book begins rather “darkly,” with a great oppression that comes upon Naomi
  - b. as I suggested last week: an oppression that comes from sinful choices on the part of others
    1. part of *The Cycle of Sin and Oppression* that marks the times, but also the outline of the story
  - c. **this oppression marks the opening of the book, but it is also what makes the story glorious in the end – the redemption of Naomi and the birth of Obed are the climax of God bringing forth good out of evil, according to his purposes and plans**

## I. The Family of Naomi (Ruth 1:1-2)

### Content

#### a. the family of Naomi

1. her husband Elimelech, her sons Mahlon and Chilion
2. from the tribe of Ephraim (**i.e.** as Ephrathites)
  - a. Ephraim was allotted territory in central Canaan, in the hill country, surrounded by Dan to the W, ½ Manasseh to the N and E (towards the Jordan river), and Benjamin to the S
3. living near Bethlehem in Judah (**i.e.** the home of David and birthplace of Jesus)
  - a. located just S of the border between Judah and Benjamin, ~10 miles S of Jerusalem (Jebus)
  - b. a well-known village during the period of the Judges
    1. **e.g.** the burial location of Jacob’s wife, Rachel (**Genesis 35**)
    2. **e.g.** Micah the thieving apostate established a personal shrine there (**Judges 17**)
    3. **e.g.** a Levite and his concubine tarried there (**Judges 19**), her death in Gibeah eventually leading to the Benjamite war (**Judges 20-21**)
  - c. Elimelech and his family are living *in Judah*, although they belong to the tribe of Ephraim
    1. based on the outcome of the story, it would appear that Elimelech had some sort of family connection to this area; **e.g.** maybe an ancestor married to someone of this location

#### b. the sojourning of the family of Naomi

1. the writer indicates that a “*famine*” in the area caused Elimelech to move his family to **Moab**
  - a. Moab was located E of the Dead Sea, to the S of Reuben, along the S ½ of the Dead Sea
    1. about a 50-mile journey from Bethlehem along the E side of the Dead Sea
  - b. Moab was one of the original and most significant enemies of Israel
    1. they opposed Israel as it approached to enter Canaan (**i.e.** cursed by Balaam; **Num. 22-25**)
    2. they were prohibited from the assembly of the Lord *to the tenth generation* (**Deut. 23:3-6**)

3. they are mentioned as one of the nations that (ultimately) produced the exile (**Ezra 9**)
- c. thus, Elimelech moves his family to a land *and a people* that are **dangerous** to them
  1. it would appear that the original trip was designed to be *temporary* (note “sojourn”; **v. 1**)
    - a. to be a “resident alien” for a respite from famine (**e.g.** Joseph; **Genesis 47:4**)
    - b. Israelite law was specific about being kind to sojourners (**Deut. 24:17**)
  2. however, it went from “sojourn” to “remained there” (**v. 2b**) to “lived there” (**v. 4b**) – **10 years**
  3. although **v. 6** seems to indicate that they returned when the famine ended, it is more likely that the phrase simply indicates the season when food was most plentiful (**i.e.** at harvest)
- d. **LOW**: they went for respite *amongst their enemies*, but stayed there after the famine was over

## II. The Oppression of Naomi (Ruth 1:3-7)

### Content

#### a. the death of Elimelech (vv. 3-4)

1. no reason is given for Elimelech’s death – as with *every man*, Elimelech’s natural fate is recounted
2. however, *after his death*, the two sons are now left as the “patriarchs” of the family
3. thus, they marry – now being “men,” they seek the reasonable course of continuing the family line
4. however, they marry *Moabite* women – Chilion marries Orpah, and Mahlon marries Ruth (**see 4:10**)
  - a. there is no *specific* prohibition in the law against marrying Moabites – however:
  - b. although they are not listed in **Deut. 7:1-4**, their status as pagans would certainly imply the same
    1. the prohibition against marrying foreigners was to prevent such paganism from entering Israel
    2. and, **Ezra 9** certainly seems to bear out that this is *precisely* what happened with Moab
    3. thus, it is reasonable to assume that these marriages are “against” the wishes of God
5. **principle: the Lord, in his sovereignty over the affairs of human beings, allows actions that are against his expressed (or implied) desires, generally for the purpose of working through them to further his larger purposes and plans (Romans 8:28)**

#### b. the death of Naomi’s sons (v. 5)

1. no reason is given for the death of these two sons – but ... their deaths “seem” suspicious
  - a. **i.e.** two sons die *before* their mother, shortly after *each* marries, *both* leaving behind *no children*
  - b. **certainly**: it could be that this was completely “natural” – nothing specifically “divine” in it
  - c. **however**: whether or not this was *directly* “God’s hand” in some way, the result is the same ...

#### c. the oppression upon Naomi (vv. 6-7)

1. Naomi and her two daughters-in-law are now left as widows
  - a. for Naomi, she is a *foreigner* in a foreign land, she has no *financial* support (although Ruth and Orpah are clearly *emotional* and *spiritual* support; **see below**); she has no *prospects* for gaining such financial support (**see v. 12**); and the *social structure* of the time places her “at the bottom”
2. **IMO**: the story *best unfolds* if we see this situation as an **oppression** – a providential act of God to “oppress” Naomi through circumstances (indirectly caused by poor or sinful choices) *driving her* to the only recourse left to her: return to Israel and seek help from a relative
  - a. providential = the working of God in the course of normal events to accomplish his plans
  - b. **in this case**: God orchestrating the events of Naomi’s life *forcing her* back to Israel (with Ruth!) where God will, in his sovereignty, use her return (and Ruth!) to accomplish a *greater goal*
  - c. **note**: even *Naomi* acknowledges that this is all from “*the hand of the Lord*” against her (**v. 13**) ...

## III. The Bitterness of Naomi (Ruth 1:8-14)

### Content

#### a. her instructions to her daughters-in-law (vv. 8-9, 11-13)

1. Naomi *insists* that Orpah and Ruth remain in Moab, for the following reasons:
  - a. it would be better for them to return to their “*mother’s house*” than to follow her to Israel (**v. 8**)
    1. **i.e.** now widowed, they could easily find help amongst their own family for survival
  - b. since they were still young, to stay would be to find husbands in Moab (**v. 9**)
    1. **i.e.** their future still held the possibility of marriage and children in their native land
    2. **note**: in each of these reasons, Naomi recognizes the *leading of the Lord* – she believed that God *could* provide for the girls here in Moab (**i.e.** God can work *outside* of Israel)
  - c. since Naomi was old, there was no reason for them to follow her back to Israel (**vv. 11-13a**)
    1. she was now an elderly widow; there was no possibility of her marrying again and having sons
    2. and, even if she was to marry and have sons, it would be silly for Orpah and Ruth to wait for those sons to grow up to become their husbands (**i.e.** years into the future)

3. **i.e.** to follow Naomi thinking that she could still give them husbands was foolish
  2. Naomi is convinced that the best course of action is for her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab
    - a. she does not foresee any real *value* in these Moabite girls following her to Israel
    - b. she cannot make the connection between the circumstances and the *plan of God* (**see below**)
- b. the response of her daughters-in-law (vv. 10, 14)**
1. at first, both girls “cling” to Naomi (**v. 10**)
    - a. they believe that going with her to Israel is better than staying in Moab, or just staying with *her* (regardless of where) is the best course of action for their future
  2. in the end, Orpah stays in Moab, but Ruth has a “larger agenda” (**v. 14; see v. 16 below**)
    - a. as we will discover, Ruth's reasoning is to stay with Naomi's **God**, not just with Naomi
    - b. a point that Naomi *herself* has not yet come to see (**i.e.** her attitude is ...)
- c. the bitterness of Naomi**
1. Naomi's response to her circumstances is **bitterness**, rather than hope, *both for herself and them*
    - a. she has become so *self-centered* over what the Lord has inflicted upon her that she *cannot* see what the Lord might be leading her (and the girls!) towards
  2. **principle: it is easy to allow ourselves to become bitter over our circumstances such that we fail to recognize the value in what we are experiencing – we become so self-centered that we don't recognize the sovereign hand of Christ over us (read Hebrews 12:7-15)**
    - a. **the Spirit will use all kinds of circumstances in the life of the true follower of Christ to mold us into holiness, to train us in righteousness – we must never become bitter through it**
    - b. **irony:** the “*root of bitterness*” in **v. 15** harkens back to **Deut. 29:16-18:**

*“You know how we lived in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed. And you have seen their detestable things, their idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold, which were among them. Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit,”*

      1. bitterness and self-centeredness are what lead *away from God* to idolatry, *as in Naomi*
      2. she failed to see that the girls coming with her to Israel *would bring them into the presence of Yahweh and the proper knowledge and worship of him amongst the people of God*