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Thursday Morning Bible Study

The Book of Ruth

Today, we enter into a couple of history books that portray specific women, and we shall learn about their role in the history of Israel and Judah, but at very different times. Ruth and Esther, are the only two women who have specific histories published in the Tanakh, one during the formation of Israel, and one during the captivity years, centuries later.

Ruth is a Moabitess along with her sister-in-law, Orpha. So, who are the Moabites? If we look back further in Hebrew history, we can begin with Abraham, in Genesis chapter 12 through chapter 25, who was promised by God, that he would be the father of many nations and peoples. We can recall his journey from the Mesopotamian regions with his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot. Eventually Lot separates from Abraham and settles in Sodom, (thought to be located near what is now called the Dead Sea) which was a very morally destitute city along with the city of Gomorrah, and there Abraham is led by God to get Lot out of there because He was going to destroy that whole region, because of their absolutely evil ways. There is a lot of bargaining going on between God and Abraham, and eventually only Lot's family would be spared. As the destruction begins Abraham leads Lot, Lot's wife (no name) and two daughters (neither are named) (They were married but the husbands refused to come), out of the region and begins the demolishing of those cities and the people with fire and brimstone.

Lot, with his wife and two daughters, head out, going up into the mountains and warned not to look back, but Lot's wife just had to turn to see her old home being destroyed. She disobeyed and was turned into a pillar of salt. Lot now being afraid to go anywhere, decides to dwell in the mountains with his daughters. As time passes the girls decide they need to keep their lineage so they devise a scheme to get daddy drunk on wine and go in and lay with him. They get pregnant in the process and each has a son, one named Ben Ammi and the other named Moab. The son, Moab, does become the leader of a tribe called the Moabites which becomes the nation Moab. During the time of the Judges, the nation Moab is due East on the other side of the Jordan below Ammon. By coincidence Ammon

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came from the second grandchild of Lot, Ben Ammi. These two were constantly at war with each other and with Judah and Israel.

A] Ruth 1: 1 through 5; (read)

1] "Now it came to pass. In the days when the Judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the land of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons."

Oh, GOODIE!!! We get to do a quick genealogy here. When did this occur? Well since this story has to ultimately do with Boaz, who was born of Salman (1Chronicles 2:11) and Rahab (Matthew 1:5) this puts us in the early part of the period of the Judges, and since the period of the Judges spans 365 years from Othniel to Samuel, and there are about six generations once the Jews are in the land, so we can guess about one hundred to one hundred twenty years into the period.

There is a severe famine in the land and famines occurred with some regularity, but we read in (Judges 6: 3 & 4) during Gideon's time as Judge, there was a famine in the land when he was appointed, so this might be the famine being talked about. However, during this famine period, as there was an enforced peace with Moab, a certain man, his wife and two sons journey to Moab, because, apparently there was no famine there.

2] "The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the name of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. They went to the country of Moab and remained there."

This means they were either from the tribe of Ephraim or the town of Bethlehem was also known as Ephratha, but lived in the tribal land of Judah, and from there went to Moab, probably around the northern end of the Dead Sea through the tribal land of Reuben south to Moab.

3] "Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died and she was left and her two sons. Now they took wives of the women of Moab: the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so, the woman survived her two sons and her husband."

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One of the first things to note; God did not want His people going off and living in enemy territory, but they did, and wouldn't you know it, they no sooner get there, and soon after Elimelech up and dies, the two sons marry into the local peoples, and they die a few years later. No kids. (Coincidence? Anyone?)

B] Ruth 1: 6 through 10; (read)

1] "Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread."

What we see here is that God ended the famine, Naomi heard about it, and now is without her husband who had gone against God's wishes relating to leaving his land and the two sons who had gone against God by marrying foreign women, and what she did have were two young ladies who were her daughters by marriage, but with this double sin, she needs to go back to her legal residence.

2] "Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah."

A couple of things to observe; one, widows did not fare all that well because for the most part they were not included in any inheritance especially if there were no children to provide for them, and for Naomi being in a foreign land, it would be doubly difficult, and she probably had family back in Ephratha (Bethlehem). As for the daughters-in-law, there had been a kinship developing between the three and therefore, they began the trek back to Judah together.

3] "And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each to her mother's house. The Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband."

At this point I believe Naomi realizes, these girls from a foreign land might not fare too well in Judah. They are from an enemy land, widows with no visible means of support, even though they may have taken their husbands faith and whatever the husbands may have left them, and Naomi urges them to go back to

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their homes and begin again, to let the families find them new husbands. Naomi blesses them for the way they treated her sons and how they have treated her.

4] "So she kissed them and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, "Surely we will return with you to your people."

It seems they have formed an attachment to their mother-in-law, and do not wish to leave her. It is understood that Ruth's father was still alive, but unknown about Orpah's. It is also not clear how the family structure was in the Moabite home and whether or not they would be accepted back after marrying foreigners.

C] Ruth 1: 11 through 18; (read)

1] "But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go—for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, would you wait for them till they are grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.'

This passage is very strong in that Naomi, probably could use good companionship on her journey back to Judah, entreats the girls, that they need a future and it wouldn't necessarily be with her. As was the culture and mores of that day, the young widow having married into a specific family, would want to marry the next available son in line, regardless of age to continue the family lineage. Naomi implores the girls that there would be no more sons from her, and they needed to find their own way and family. She loves the girls that much, that she would sacrifice her own security and well-being for their better future.

Naomi also recognizes that God has not looked favorably on her family of which she is the last, because they traveled outside the borders of their established land, which was a no-no. And she does not want this unfavorable act to fall on the girls.

2] "Then they lifted up their voices and wept again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her."

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Oh, the carrying on these girls do. But I suppose that was the way of folks back then. However, Orpah decides, with a farewell kiss, to head back to her people, but for some reason Ruth just doesn't want to see her family again and wants to stay with Naomi. And remember that the girls, when they married Naomi's sons took on the faith of the boys at marriage forsaking their own gods. So in essence, Orpah, going back home will go back to family and her family gods, Chemosh and Ashtar. There are probably others, too.

Again we recognize the hardships of the journey as well as the hardships the girls will endure as strangers in a strange land. Would they be accepted? Naomi sees the danger for herself in that having left in the first place, would family take her back?

3] "And she said, "Look your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods, return after your sister-in-law."

One more entreaty, one more plea. Does Ruth recognize the dangers that might await her? Naomi sees to see the loneliness Ruth might have to endure, but who can predict the future. Also Naomi, as we shall see, also is having her own pity party, and may feel she has to do it alone.

4] "But, Ruth said, "Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following you, for wherever you go I will go, and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me and more also, if anything but death parts you and me."

What a beautiful counter by Ruth. Heartfelt, caring and meaningful. She will stay with Naomi through the severest trials. She will stand with Naomi, believe with Naomi, cry with Naomi, she will grow old with Naomi and die with her. In other words, she will be the birth daughter Naomi never had.

One other important feature with this passage, is, Ruth accepts the Hebrew God as her God. A full conversion. Because of this, the history of Ruth becomes the reading account brought up at the Shavuot which is the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost. This is the second pilgrimage feast of the Jews for the celebration of the Wheat harvest. Ruth has become a Jew by choice, not by birth and this is then celebrated by all those Jews who are the same thing, Jews by choice. One other

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thing to note is, the Semitic gods also desired human sacrifices and other despicable things and who would want to follow them?

Ruth ends up her little speech with an oath, swearing by God, of her full allegiance to both Naomi and to God. She has bonded herself to Naomi by an oath and her oath is binding.

5] "When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her."

This simply means Naomi quit pushing her away and accepted the fact Ruth was to be her companion for life. That Ruthian oath carried a lot of meaning. How often, friends do we make an oath or promise, and how often do we break that oath or promise? Today promises, even ones made before God, seem to carry little weight any more. But back then a vow was a vow and was honored.

D] Ruth 1: 19 through 22; (read)

1] "Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem."

Gotta stop here a minute, and explain, this is quite a trip, not all that long mind you, depending on where they started from, but say from the border of where Moab was purported to be to Bethlehem, is an estimated distance of about 45 miles, but we are about three thousand feet above sea level, and have to travel across the plains of Moab down the mountain side across the Jordan river (at the mouth of the Dead Sea) and back up the mountain on the other side past Jerusalem which we now know is about two thousand five hundred feet above sea level. This is not a trip for the faint of heart. And apparently, they journeyed alone. I might estimate that the trip took from a week to ten days, and one wonders how they were fed?

2] "And it happened, when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them, and the women said, "Is this Naomi?"

This should be a sign to Naomi, that people were excited to see her again after all these years, and she needn't feel down on herself as she apparently does. But think of this, she had two sons and the family legacy would have been carried on,

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but Elimelech dies, the two sons die and there is no legacy to carry on, no kids, and that, to a mother of that time, might be construed as failure.

3] "But she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full and the Lord brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi since the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has afflicted me."

There is that pity party again. But as we just mentioned she considers herself a failure because she is the bearer of the generations, and there is no one left to carry on the lines of their families. She takes it personally. It was not her fault she went with Elimelech and her sons to a foreign land, but she assumes the responsibility of this act.

4] "So Naomi returned and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

WE have now set the stage for the meaning of this story to become apparent, and how it will impact the whole history of Israel in a few more generation later, and many more generations down the line. We can see, the women of Bethlehem will see to the immediate needs of Naomi and Ruth but truth be told, they will ultimately have to make their own way in life after Elimelech and the boys. Such is the life of widows.

The barley harvest is the clue into the next chapter, we are in spring and the first harvest of the year is the barley harvest, which leads to the first feast and into the Passover season. Passover was the first feast with Bikkurim or Feast of First Fruits, which occurred immediately after. But now it harvest time.

Stay Tuned!

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