



Ruth and Esther Bible Study

Session I: Ruth, Chapters 1-2

Chapter One

Immediately after learning that this story takes place during the time of the judges (rather than the later time of the kings), we learn “there was a famine in the land.” Famine in the Bible often caused migration in search of food—think of Jacob (later Israel), for example, and his eleven sons moving to Egypt to be with Joseph following a famine.

Naomi and her family move from Bethlehem, which, ironically for a land experiencing famine, means “house of bread,” to Moab, east of the Dead Sea. The word Moab likely provoked some negative associations for people of the time: Moab was also the name of one of Lot’s sons, as well as the site where Israelites camped before entering the Promised Land in Deuteronomy. After hearing that the family is moving to Moab, we learn more evocative names. The father is Elimelech, which means “My God is king.” Naomi means “pleasant.” The sons’ names, Mahlon and Chilion, mean “sickness” and “destruction,” respectively. We also learn that they are Ephrathites, which means fruitful.

First, Elimelech dies, and then the sons marry Orpah (which means “back of the neck”) and Ruth (which means “friend” or “to saturate”). They dwell in Moab for ten years, and neither couple has children (ironic for fruitful Ephrathites). Then, the two sons die, leaving Naomi bereft from losing her husband and sons.

Naomi and her daughters-in-law begin the journey to Bethlehem because Naomi has heard that the Lord is bringing bread to the people in Bethlehem. Then Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers’ houses for their longtime safety and well-being. At this point, we encounter the first appearance of the word *chesed*, sacred lovingkindness, a theme in the book of Ruth. Naomi sends the daughters-in-law away with a blessing, wishing them the sacred lovingkindness that the two showed her and her sons, their husbands. The younger women protest; Naomi insists they go, and Orpah eventually turns back (living into her name, “back of the neck”). Ruth, however, clings to Naomi, then offers her famous words about going where Naomi will go. She even offers an oath against herself if something should divide them before death. Once the two are back in Bethlehem, people have trouble recognizing Naomi, who says to call her “Mara,” which means “bitter,” instead of Naomi.



Questions

1. The characters are deliberately named. What do you make of the mix of negative and positive associations with the names in this chapter?
2. Have you ever left a place you loved because of an opportunity? If so, how was that for you? Do you remember the “journey” of getting there from the starting place? Alternatively, have you remained in a place? Looking back, was that a positive or negative decision?
3. Orpah sometimes gets a bad rap for doing what her mother-in-law asked. What is your opinion of Orpah? What do you think happened to her after she turned back?
4. Judging from this first chapter only, do you think this should be the Book of Naomi instead of the Book of Ruth?
5. We see how Naomi is greeted when she returns to Bethlehem but not how she and her family are treated when they first go to Moab. What do you imagine they encountered upon arriving in a foreign land as migrants?

Ruth, Chapter Two

The chapter introduces Boaz, one of Naomi’s kinsmen through her late husband. Like that of Elimelech in chapter one, his introduction comes in stages. The name Boaz means “in strength.” Ruth tells Naomi that she is going to glean barley, a practice open to widows and orphans. Owners of fields were supposed to leave corners of their fields for widows to glean (or harvest). Naomi says, “go, my daughter,” which recalls the way she said, “turn back, my daughters” in chapter one.

Ruth happens upon a portion of a field owned by Boaz. He makes a surprise visit, evidenced by the word “Behold!” He greets his workers with “The Lord be with you,” to which they respond, “The Lord bless you.” After Boaz learns who Ruth is and how hard she has been working, he offers her preferential treatment and invites her to a meal with the workers, where she is not only satiated but has some left over. And the end of the day, Ruth has an entire bushel of barley, which she presents to Naomi as well as her leftovers from lunch. When Naomi learns that Boaz is the generous man, Naomi asks for God’s blessing on Boaz and refers to Boaz’s *chesed*.

The book of Ruth started out with a famine, but now in chapter two, we have abundance.

Questions

1. The action of much of this story emerges from a surprise visit from Boaz. Have surprises in your life ever led to a major change?
2. Boaz greets his workers with our Episcopal greeting, “The Lord be with you.” Instead of responding, “And also with you,” their response is, “the Lord bless you.” How are these responses similar? How are they different? What are your associations with the words “bless,” often used as a hashtag on social media (#blessed)? How would you feel if we used the workers’ response instead of “and also with you” in a worship service?
3. Much is made of Ruth’s work ethic—she is said to have hardly rested. Do you feel that hard work is valued in the same way in our current cultural context? Should it be? What about our emphasis on “self-care”?
4. What do you think Naomi is doing while Ruth is gleaning?
5. Has your opinion about whether this should be the book of Naomi instead of the book Ruth changed due to the action in this chapter?



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Session II: Ruth, Chapters 3-4

Chapter Three

Naomi changes from despondent to hopeful when she learns of Boaz's good treatment of Ruth. The chapter opens with Naomi plotting to secure Ruth's future, which is linked to her own. Naomi instructs Ruth to go to the threshing floor and to uncover Boaz's feet after he has gone to sleep, and then "he will tell you what to do." The word *regel* (feet) in biblical Hebrew was sometimes used as a euphemism for genitals. Threshing floors were known to be places where secret sexual encounters took place; for example, check out Hosea 9:1.

Ruth complies with Naomi's directions and goes further, asking Boaz to spread his cloak over his handmaiden because he is next of kin. In Levirate marriage, a brother was encouraged to impregnate the widow of his deceased so that the dead brother's name was continued; see Deuteronomy 25:5-10. This part of the story would have evoked for some listeners the story of Lot's daughters in Genesis 19 when they got their father drunk and had intercourse with him "to preserve the family line." The first of the two children born from this union was Moab, which means "from my father" and was the name of Ruth's native country. In fact, the text continually calls her "Ruth the Moabite" lest the reader forgets her country of origin.

Boaz asks, "Who are you, my daughter?" This allows Ruth to name herself after she had previously been identified by her husband, her mother-in-law, and Moab. After praising Ruth, Boaz informs her that a kinsman nearer to them exists, and Boaz will seek him out to find out if he wants to "redeem" her. In the early morning, Boaz sends her out covertly with six measures of barley in her cloak. Ruth returns to Naomi with seeds for their future.

Questions

1. Ruth is identified by her roles as wife and daughter-in-law and especially as a Moabite. What are roles or other ways you are identified—i.e., by your job, as a parent, maybe as a member of a particular church? How would you like to be identified?
2. Can you think of a place today with a reputation for bringing people together romantically, like a threshing floor? If you have a partner, how did you meet him/her/them?



Ruth, Chapter Four

Ruth and Boaz create a relationship privately in the darkness, then during the day in public, Boaz takes steps to make it legal. Due to Levirate marriage, a closer kinsman than Boaz has the right to buy Elimelech's property and continue his line through Ruth. Initially, this relative is interested in the property until he learns about Ruth, whom Boaz describes as "the Moabite and wife of the dead man." This phrasing demonstrates a craftiness on Boaz's part: emphasizing the widow's foreignness makes her seem less desirable.

The relative officially steps aside via a sandal ceremony similar to one in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. Boaz then declares his intention to marry Ruth to carry on the line of her late husband, Mahlon. The witnesses affirm this and offer a blessing, recalling not only Rachel and Leah, two of Jacob's wives who "together built up the house of Israel," but also Tamar, who tricked Judah into carrying on his line through her.

So Boaz and Ruth marry. In verse 13, Ruth finally quits being referred to as "Ruth the Moabite" and becomes just Ruth. She bears a son. The women bless Naomi and say that Ruth is worth more to her than seven sons. The women of the neighborhood name the child, unusual since a parent would typically name their child. They choose the name "Obed," which means servant. The passage ends with a genealogy showing that Ruth was an ancestor of King David.

Questions

1. Deuteronomy contains specific language about excluding Moabites (Deuteronomy 23:3), yet Deuteronomy also contains laws about caring for widows and orphans (e.g. Deuteronomy 26:12). How does the book of Ruth shed light on this tension?
2. The importance of community is affirmed in this chapter through the witnesses at the gate offering a blessing and the women of the neighborhood giving the new child a name. How involved is your church community, if you have one, in the life of your family?
3. Ruth and Naomi are not related by blood, yet Ruth is passionately loyal to Naomi and offers her a family after Naomi loses her husband and sons. Do you have any experience with "chosen family"?
4. Matthew's genealogy lists Ruth as an ancestor of Jesus through Joseph. Why could it be important for us to know that Jesus is a descendant of this woman?
5. After this study, do you think the book is properly named after Ruth? Why or why not?
6. What is your most important takeaway from this study of Ruth?

Recommended reading

Ruth by Judy Fentress-Williams, Abingdon, 2012.

Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter by Lindsay Hardin-Freeman, Forward Movement, Second Edition, 2023.



Ruth and Esther Bible Study

Session III: Esther, Chapters 1-2

Chapter One

The titular character of Esther does not appear in the first chapter. The book of Esther opens with a description of a lavish, multi-day banquet in the third year of the reign of King Ahasuerus (who is sometimes identified as King Xerxes I) in the Persian capital of Susa. This opening banquet sets the stage for the role banquets will play in this book. Queen Vashti offers a banquet for women, showing that men and women live their lives somewhat separately during this time period, estimated around 482 BCE.

The drunken king orders his eunuchs to bring the queen to him so that the drunk men at the banquet can see how beautiful she is. Queen Vashti refuses—an outright challenge to the king's power and authority. Enraged, the king consults his advisors, who suggest deposing Vashti and not allowing her to ever come before his presence again. A palace official named Memucan points out that her defiance will also affect their own wives, so he advises the king to send a message declaring that every man should be the master in his own house. The king agrees and issues this order throughout the realm.

Questions

1. Do you think we, as readers, are meant to be impressed or repulsed by the opulence described in this chapter?
2. What do you think everyday life was like for the people of God to live in this place? After the Persians defeated Babylon, many Jews returned to their homelands, but some, who had been born in Persia and had never known any other home, remained. Mordecai and Esther were among the Jewish exiles who remained in Persia. Do you think you would have chosen to stay after the Exile or return to your struggling homeland?
3. Queen Vashti's refusal to come before the king is crucial to this story. What do you think of her action? What do you think happened to her for the rest of her life? Where and how did she live?
4. Review verse 1:21: "This advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as Memucan proposed." What does this line say about the king? What is your impression of the king based on this chapter?



Esther, Chapter Two

The last chapter ended with the king being pleased with an idea offered by others—deposing Queen Vashti—and now he is again pleased with an idea presented by others: this time, to compel beautiful young virgins to join his harem and require each spend one night with him so that he can then decide who will become the next queen.

At this point, we finally meet Esther, whom we learn has two names: Hadassah, her Jewish name, and Esther, the name she is called for the rest of the book. Esther was raised by her cousin Mordecai, son of a member of the tribe of Benjamin, who had been exiled to Babylon following the fall of Jerusalem. Mordecai tells Esther not to reveal that she is Jewish. She finds *chesed*—that is, sacred kindness—with Hegai, the eunuch with oversight over the harem. Esther, like the other captives, undergoes twelve months of “cosmetic treatments” before she spends an evening with the king and pleases him so much that he crowns her his new queen.

Mordecai lingers at the king’s gate after Esther is taken into the harem and learns of a plot to kill the king. Mordecai reveals this plan to Esther, who tells the king about the plot and of Mordecai’s help in thwarting the attack. The plotters are executed, and the incident is reported in the book of annals.

Questions

1. Would you describe what happens to the young women compelled to join the harem as sex trafficking? Why or why not?
2. Do you suspect that Mordecai and Esther try to hide when young women are being rounded up, or do you think they (or just Mordecai) believe her presence in the harem could be advantageous? How does Mordecai’s behavior in verse 2:11 affect your opinion?
3. What do you make of the word *chesed* being used regarding Hegai the eunuch? Are you surprised that this sort of serious, sacred word is used in connection to a harem in a book that doesn’t mention God explicitly? What else surprises you about the book so far?
4. What do you think Mordecai’s motivation is to avert the plot to kill the king?
5. Has your impression of the king changed from the first chapter to this one?



Ruth and Esther Bible Study

Session IV: Esther, Chapters 3-4

Chapter Three

This chapter introduces the story's villain, Haman, who is so powerful that the king orders his servants to bow to Haman. Mordecai is among these servants at the gate but does not bow down; the servants report Mordecai's disrespect to Haman, who is furious. Rather than only killing Mordecai, however, Haman decides that the punishment for this disobedience should be the death of all of Mordecai's people—that is, all the Jews. Haman tells the king that a certain people did not obey the king's laws, so they should be destroyed, killed, and annihilated in an upcoming day. Haman offers 10,000 talents—an enormous sum of money—to the king's treasuries in exchange for a decree ordering the genocide. This decree applies to all Jewish people, regardless of age or gender. Then the king and Haman sit down to drink, while the city of Susa is "thrown into confusion."

God is not mentioned in the book of Esther, but a later Greek version adds passages about God and prayer. That later Greek version of Esther is included in the Apocrypha, a collection of books that fall between the Old and New Testaments in some Bibles, including those traditionally used in the Episcopal Church. Other Protestant Bibles do not include the Apocrypha because the books were written later than the canonical Old Testament titles.

In the Greek book of Esther, Mordecai offers this reason for not bowing: "I did this so that I might not set human glory above the glory of God, and I will not bow down to anyone but you, who are my Lord; and I will not do these things in pride." (Esther (Greek) 13:14)

Questions

1. Some have interpreted Mordecai's refusal to bow down as a devout act. Do you? Why or why not? What do you think of the Greek version of his reasoning? Do you prefer such an explicit statement, or do you prefer to come to such conclusions (or other conclusions) yourself when studying the Bible?
2. Do you think Mordecai is brave or foolish, or neither/both, by refusing to bow to Haman? Are there times when you have refused to capitulate to a person or institution in power? If so, what happened?



3. What do you think is the motivation of the king's servants to report Mordecai?
4. This chapter ends with the king and Haman drinking while the city is in chaos. What does this say about their leadership and the role of feasting in these books?

Esther, Chapter Four

Mordecai and other Jews don sackcloth and ashes and lament their fate. Through one of Esther's eunuchs, Mordecai sends a copy of the decree, along with a request that Esther beg the king on behalf of her people.

Esther then sends the eunuch back to Mordecai with a message, letting Mordecai know that no one is to approach the king safely without being first summoned unless the king holds out his golden scepter to the supplicant. Furthermore, the king has not called Esther for thirty days. Mordecai replies that Esther will not be any safer than other Jews in the king's palace, adding the most famous line in this book: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." Esther responds by asking Mordecai to gather all of the Jews in Susa for a three-day fast and says that she and her women will do the same, and then she will go before the king, even though that is against the law: "If I perish, I perish."

Questions

1. Men and women operate in different realms in this story and apparently in this society, but eunuchs seem able to operate in both realms. Similarly, the gate seems to be a liminal place between the king's palace and the rest of the town. What do you make of such in-between people and in-between places? How do they function in the story? Can you think of any parallels in our day?
2. In the Greek version of Esther, she offers a lengthy prayer during her fast and covers her head with ashes and dung. Esther prays that she "abhors the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien" as well as "the sign of my proud position, which is upon my head on days when I appear in public. I abhor it like a filthy rag, and I do not wear it on the days when I am at leisure" (Esther (Greek) 15b, 16). Does this align with your image of Esther from the book so far? Do you consider fasting, such as during Lent, a form of prayer?
3. Esther expresses to Mordecai that going before the king could cost her life, and Mordecai responds that her life is in danger anyway. Do you interpret Esther's concern for her own safety as cowardly? Do you see any connection between her expressing concern or skepticism as similar to "call stories" in the Old Testament, such as the call of Moses, where the one called initially refuses? Do you think Mordecai is right and Esther is in danger anyway?
4. Why do you think the king has not summoned Esther for thirty days? What does this say about their marriage?



Ruth and Esther Bible Study

Session V: Esther, Chapters 5, 6, and 7

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven

In chapter five, Esther approaches the king, and he holds out his golden scepter so she is able to approach him safely. He asks her petition and says it will be granted to her, “even to half of my kingdom, and it will be given to you.” She invites him and Haman to a banquet, which he immediately accepts. While they are drinking wine at the banquet, the king again asks Esther for her request, repeating that it will be granted even if it is to request half of his kingdom. She then invites them to another banquet the next day, promising to make her request then.

On his way home, Haman encounters Mordecai, who again does not bow down, infuriating Haman. Once home, Haman brags to his wife, Zeresh, and friends about his presence at the banquet with the king and queen—and how he will feast again with them the next day. Still, Haman complains none of it does him any good because Mordecai won’t bow down. Haman’s wife suggests that Haman order a large pole to be built and ask the king to hang Mordecai on it. Pleased, Haman has such a pole made.

In chapter six, the king, unable to sleep, has his book of records brought to him. Coincidentally (or providentially), the king hears the account of how Mordecai discovered a plot to save his life. The king inquires how Mordecai was honored for his allegiance. When he discovers Mordecai was not honored, the king asks Haman what should be done for a man whom the king wishes to honor. Thinking that the king intends to honor Haman, Haman responds that such a man should be clothed in robes the king has worn and put on a horse the king has ridden and paraded around with a crown on his head. The king then tells Haman to do precisely this for Mordecai. Haman returns home in mourning; when his wife and friends hear about the conversation, they predict Haman will not prevail against Mordecai.

In chapter seven, Haman and the king go to feast with Esther. The king again asks Esther about her petition, assuring her that it will be granted. She then asks for her life and her people’s lives, saying they will be destroyed, killed, and annihilated. The king demands to know who has planned to do this, and she answers, “A foe and an enemy, this wicked Haman!” The wrathful king retreats to the palace garden while Haman begs for his life from Esther. Haman throws himself on the couch, leading the king to believe Haman is violating Esther in the king’s presence. The eunuch Harbona suggests hanging Haman on the pole prepared for Mordecai, so they do.



Questions

1. In the Greek version of Esther, the part of the chapter about Esther coming to the king and having him hold out his scepter takes eight more verses than in the Old Testament book. The Greek version says Esther's heart is frozen with fear, and the king is so terrifying and looks at her with such fierce anger that she collapses. Then God changes the king's spirit to gentleness. Which version do you prefer, and why? Why do you think the Greek version is edited in this way?
2. The book of Esther has a lot of long feasts. What role does food play in the life of your church? What about your home life? Do you enjoy big gatherings that revolve around food?
3. Do you think Esther invited the king and Haman to two feasts just to draw the story out, or do you think this may have intentionally made Haman more complacent, or do you think there's another reason for two feasts?
4. What do you think about the character of Haman's wife, Zeresh, as well as Haman's friends?
5. In the Greek version of Esther, "the Lord took sleep from the king." Do you think this story might have gone differently had the king not been sleepless before the second feast?
6. Has your opinion of the king changed after these chapters?



Ruth and Esther Bible Study

Session VI: Esther, Chapters 8, 9, and 10

Chapters Eight, Nine, and Ten

Chapter 8 opens with the king giving Haman's house to Esther and her confession that Mordecai is her uncle. The king gives his signet ring, which Haman had previously, to Mordecai. Esther reiterates her plea for the king to spare her people, and the king instructs Mordecai to issue any edict he wishes regarding the Jews and to seal it with the king's ring.

Mordecai then writes edicts allowing Jews throughout the city to destroy, kill, and annihilate any armed force that threatens them—on the day the previous edict marked their demise. Then Mordecai goes out in Susa wearing royal robes, and the Jews rejoice. Some people even pretend to be Jews because they fear this new power.

In chapter nine, the fated day comes, but as the Jews band together to defend themselves against those who had sought to destroy them, no one can stand against them. The officials of the various provinces side with the Jews out of fear of Mordecai's power. The Jews "did as they pleased to those who hated them."

The king informs Esther that the Jews killed 500 people in Susa, including Haman's ten sons, and then asks if Esther has an additional request. She asks that the bodies of Haman's sons be hung on the pole he had built for Mordecai. Chapter 9 says that the Jews killed 75,000 people in other provinces but did not touch the plunder.

The rest of chapter 9 institutes the Feast of Purim to commemorate this day, which Queen Esther's command fixed. The feast was to include gifts of food to one another as well as gifts for the poor.

Chapter 10 is a brief denouement, stating that the king's acts are written in annals and that Mordecai was next in rank to the king and used his power to seek the welfare of his people.



Questions

1. Verse 8:17b states, “many of the peoples of the country professed to be Jews because the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.” Have you ever wished you were part of a minority that you are not a part of? If so, what was your motivation—was it fear, as stated in this verse, or another reason?
2. Chapter 9 is filled with revenge, including the line, “The Jews did as they pleased to those who hated them.” The following verses indicate that at least in provinces outside Susa, they “did not touch the plunder.” Does the line about plunder change how you read that they did as “they pleased”?
3. What do you think of Esther’s gruesome request to hang the bodies of Haman’s sons on the pole? What do you imagine happens to Zeresh, Haman’s wife?
4. Are you surprised this book is in the Bible?
5. Do you think Queen Esther goes on to have children? If so, why aren’t they mentioned in the final chapter?
6. Esther and Mordecai are outsiders who become powerful. What, if anything, does this say to you about God?
7. Has your opinion about this book changed after this study? What about your opinion of the king?
8. Think back to the study of Ruth earlier in Epiphany. What are the similarities and differences between these two books named after women? Which of the two books do you prefer, and why?
9. Has either of these books inspired how you plan to observe the season of Lent?

Recommended reading

Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter by Lindsay Hardin-Freeman, Forward Movement, Second Edition, 2023.

Consider the Women: A Provocative Guide to Three Matriarchs of the Bible by Debbie Blue, Eerdmans, 2019.

More Than a Womb: Childfree Women in the Hebrew Bible as Agents of the Holy by Lisa Davison, Cascade, 2021.

About the Bible Study Author

Elizabeth Felicetti is rector of St. David’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, and author of *Unexpected Abundance: The Fruitful Lives of Women Without Children* (August 2023) and co-author of *Irreverent Prayers: Talking to God When You’re Seriously Sick*, (2024), both forthcoming from Eerdmans. Her writing has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Christian Century*, *Faith and Leadership*, *Connections* sermon commentaries and a dozen other publications. She holds an MFA from the Naslund-Mann School of Writing and an MDiv from Virginia Theological Seminary.

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