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Prologue: Na’omi’s Misery and Emptiness

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Prologue: Na’omi’s misery and emptiness DIG: What is the climate of the times for Na’omi? What personal disasters befall her? What has Na’omi lost during her time in Mo’av?

REFLECT: Can you think of a period in your life when you did “whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted?” What happened to you? Where are you living? In Beit-Lechem or Mo’av? How do you recover from a bad decision? What is an area in your life where you often see nothing but problems? What are some temporary solutions you often toss around in your mind? What “temporary stop” have you made in your life that has become permanent? Explain. What is an area you can see the Adversary trying to create a “permanent stop” in your life? What can you do to prevent it?

The book begins: **Back in the days of the judging of the judges (1:1a CJB). The Rabbis teach this was a lawless generation in which the judges committed more sins than the rest of the people, and a generation that judged its judges.** This gives us the chronological period when the story occurred. It was about a century before the time of David, during the period of **the judges** and is a fitting appendix to the book of **Judges**. **The rabbis teach that this occurred during the period of the judge Ibtzan of Beit-Lechem (Judges 12:8-10). And the reason his name is not mentioned here in verse one is out of respect because another rabbinic tradition says that Ibtzan was a relative of Elimelek.**

At a time when there was a famine in the Land (1:1b CJB). This **famine** may have taken place in connection with the devastation of **the Land** by **the Midianites** in the days of **Gideon**. If that were true, it had to be a very serious one that extended over the whole Land. Otherwise one could just go to another part of the country to survive. Secondly, it had to last for several years to compel **them** to leave **the Land** and go to **Mo’av**. Thirdly, **ten years** passed until **they** would hear

that **the famine** had ended. Fourthly, **the Midianites** oppressed the people for seven years and **they ruined the crops and did not spare a living thing for Isra’el, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys (Judges 6:3-4)**. So it seems likely that the story of **Ruth** took place during the time of **Gideon**. The cause of **the famine** is not stated here, but **drought** and **famine** were among the judgments **YHVH** said would come upon the Land as a result of failure to keep the Torah (**Leviticus 26:18-20; Deuteronomy 28:23-24**). And the book of **Judges** gives us plenty of evidence of the failure to keep the Torah that brought about **the famine** during the days of **Gideon**. Furthermore, in this context the drought did not affect **Mo’av**, which is very close to **Isra’el**, separated only by the Dead Sea. So this was a local **famine** in **Isra’el** only, pointing to divine judgment.¹²

A certain man from Beit-Lechem in Judah went to live in the fields of Mo’av (1:1c CJB). The ultimate irony had occurred: **Beit-Lechem**, whose very name means *house of bread*, was a place with no food. In that situation, **Elimelek** had a choice to make, a road to choose. **He** could stay in **Beit-Lechem**, the empty breadbasket of **Y’hudah**, mourning the sin that surrounded **him** and trusting **God** to provide for **him** and **his wife and two sons**, or **he** could leave **the Promised Land** behind in search for greener fields, in this case **the fields of Mo’av**, where food was more abundant.¹³

The Hebrew word for **went to live** is *ger*, and is used of a resident alien. This shows that **his** purpose was to live in **Mo’av** temporarily, not permanently. The root meaning of the word means *to live among people who are not blood relatives*. The *ger* did not have civil rights but was dependent upon the hospitality of the natives. This played an important role in the culture of the ancient near east. In **Isra’el** the *ger* had certain guaranteed rights, but this was not true in **Mo’av**. The fields of **Mo’av** point to the 4,300 foot plateau of **Mo’av**, good for growing crops, not the rigorous mountainous region along the eastern shore of the Dead Sea.

He (Elimelek), his, wife and his two sons went to live in Mo’av (1:1d CJB). The Jewish reader of **Ruth** would therefore be somewhat shocked and appalled by the fact that **Elimelek** moved his family from **Beit-Lechem** and sought refuge in **Mo’av**. But **he** was a devout Jew, so this showed the severity of the famine. The land of **Isra’el** was evidently both spiritually and physically parched, and times were desperate.

The relationship between the Hebrews and the Moabites was sometimes friendly, but often the reverse (to see link click [Ac](#) - Introduction to the

Book of Ruth: The Historical Background). At the time described in the book of Ruth it may be assumed to have been friendly. Yet it is no wonder that tradition looked with disapproval at Elimelek’s going. Mo’av was not a place filled with people who loved God. They worshiped a false god named Chemosh.

The man’s name was **Elimelek**, which means *my God is king*. It appears, however, that **ADONAI** was no more **King** in **Elimelek’s** heart than **He** was in the hearts of **his** fellow countrymen where there was **no king and everyone did whatever seemed right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25 NLT)**. There was **no king** in **Elimelek’s** life, and therefore, like so many others **in the days of the judging of the judges, he** chose to do what was best **in his own eyes. He** chose a road to **Mo’av**.



His wife’s name was Na’omi, which means *the pleasant one*, **and the names of his two sons were Mahlon**, which means *sickness*, **and Kilion**, meaning *wasting*. So the names imply that **the sons** were not healthy from the time that **they** were born. **They were Ephrathites from Beit-Lechem, Y’hudah, who traced their descent from Ephrath, wife of Caleb (First Chronicles 11:19). And they** were driven from **their home to the fields of Mo’av (1:2a)**. Now, either **they** were the only Jewish family to do this, or the only ones mentioned who did so.

But the journey to Mo’av was wrong for three reasons: First, Na’omi herself recognized that the death of her husband and her two sons was a

judgment of God (1:13). Second, in Deuteronomy 23:3-6, the Moabites were barred from participating in the life of Isra’el and Isra’el was forbidden to seek a treaty of friendship with them. Third, if YHVH had wanted Elimelek to leave Isra’el He would have declared so as He did with the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles.

And they lived there (1:2b). It was to be a temporary solution to a problem **they** had, but **Elimelek** couldn’t have imagined the permanent effect **his** decision would bring. That reality wasn’t immediately apparent, of course. It rarely is. It seemed like **Elimelek** had made a good choice. While **his** kinsmen back home were suffering and hungry, there was food in **Mo’av**. Like the story of the prodigal son that **Yeshua** told (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Hu - The Parable of the Lost Son and His Jealous Brother**), **Elimelek’s** stay in a far country went well at the beginning. **He** was able to support **his wife** and two **sons**. **Having arrived in Mo’av, they initially were only going to stay there temporarily, but unfortunately they continued to live there permanently.** Perhaps there never was a conscious decision to settle there permanently, but after a while **Mo’av** became home, and like Lot (see the commentary on **Genesis Dx - Abram Lived in the Land of Canaan, While Lot Pitched His Tents Near Sodom**) **they** got comfortable in a land where **they** shouldn’t have been. **They** just existed there, drifting through life without a plan.

Husbands and fathers certainly want to provide for their wives and family, but they must not do it at the expense of losing the blessing of **YHVH**. When the Adversary met **Yeshua** in the wilderness, his first temptation was to suggest that **Messiah** satisfy **His** hunger rather than please **His Father (Matthew 4:1-4; John 4:34)**. One of the devil’s favorite lies is, “Well, you do have to live.” But it is in **God** that **we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28)**, and **He** is willing and able to take care of us.

David’s witness is worth considering: **I have been young and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his descendants begging for bread (Psalm 37:25)**. As Rabbi Sha’ul faced a threatening future, he testified: **But I consider my own life of no importance to me whatsoever (Acts 20:24a)**. In difficult times, if we can die to self and put the will of **ADONAI** first (**Mattityahu 6:33**), we can be sure that **He** will either take us out of trouble, or bring us through it.¹⁴

By going fifty miles to the neighboring land of **Mo’av**, **Elimelek** and **his** family

abandoned **God’s Land** and **God’s people** for the land and people of the enemy. Tragedy quickly mounted. **Then Elimelek, Na’omi’s husband died, not from old age or infirmity, but as the result of divine punishment and the sovereignty of YHVH.** How long this happened after entering **Mo’av** we simply don’t know. But however long it was, **she was left with her two sons (1:3).** But that too will soon change.

The Torah did not specifically forbid the marriage to **Moabites** as it did forbid marriage to Canaanite women lest **they** worship other gods (**Deuteronomy 7:1-3**). However, common sense suggests that for similar reasons, marriage to a **Moabite** was just as sinful. So **the sons** sinned even more grievously than **their father** because **they married Moabite women, one named Orpah,** meaning *stubborn*, and **the other Ruth,** meaning *friendship*. No doubt **Na’omi** and **her sons** must have felt trapped by **their** desperate circumstances, and **Na’omi** seems to have graciously accepted **her daughters-in-law. Ruth** married **Mahlon (4:10),** who was apparently the elder of the two **sons. Orpah,** then, would have been the wife of **Kilion.**

Na’omi and her sons lived there about ten years. This fits the situation of **Gideon (Judges 6:2-5).** That is probably the total time **they** spent in **Mo’av** rather than the amount of time that passed after **the young men** were married, because neither of the couples had any children. That would have been very unusual, even in a time of **famine**, and **barrenness** was considered a punishment of **YHVH (Deuteronomy 28:18).**

Meanwhile, circumstances did not appear to be improving for **Na’omi.** In fact, matters took a turn for the worse. **Both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Na’omi was left without her two sons and her husband (1:4-5).** Wow, five verses, two weddings and three funerals! **Elimelek** and **his** family fled **Judah** to escape death, but the three men met death just the same.¹⁵ In that culture, this was a nearly impossible situation. Three widows, with no children and no responsible relatives, in a time of famine, could not hope to survive for long, even if they pooled their meager resources. We’re not told what caused any of the husbands to die, but the fact that all three perished is a measure of how hard life was in the adversity of those days. Both **Mahlon** and **Kilion** seem to have died in quick succession, suggesting **they** perhaps fell victim to disease, very likely related to **the famine.**¹⁶

We can’t run away from our problems. We can’t avoid taking with us the basic cause of most of our problems, which is an unbelieving and disobedient heart. But



this story will show us that **YHVH** is a **God** who restores, rebuilds, and renews . . . all things.