

WOMEN OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

**Their Lives,
Our Hope**

PÍA SEPTIÉN



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INTRODUCTION



The book you are holding, as its title indicates, is about women whose names and stories appear in the Old Testament. Some will be quite familiar to you, such as Ruth, Anna, Miriam, and Abigail. Wonderful! And perhaps this will be your chance to meet other women whose stories are not as well-known, such as Leah, Michal, Hagar, Shiphrah, and Puah. All of them have important lessons to teach us.

Although thousands of years have gone by since they were written about, their lives are as current for us as today's news. Why? Because God—with his presence and care, providence and love—was present in their lives then just as he is in ours today. Like them, we live in a world where we face all kinds of good and bad experiences.

Like us, they experienced anger, joy, indignation, happiness. Perhaps they needed to leave their homeland to look for new horizons and opportunities, tried to be faithful to God, served their fellow men, could not have children, took care of their mothers-in-law and unborn babies, prayed, were widowed, or were used and abused. Their story is our story.

The purpose of this book is for us to learn about their lives, reflect about them, delve deeply into them, and assimilate all that they have to teach us.

They resemble us in their times of strength, and their weaknesses consumed them just as they consume us. Thus do their lives become our hope.

The book is divided into ten chapters, each of which is dedicated to the Old Testament women on whom we will be focusing. Within each chapter you will find a brief introduction to the character(s), scriptural citations, the biblical story told at greater length, and the different lessons—both positive and negative—that we learn about the women. We feature teachings from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* related to the topic, questions to foster personal reflection, and group activities to tie up some ideas or possible resolutions to bring what we learned to others and so make our family, community, and world a better place.

I recommend you read it on an individual level or study it as a group. I wrote it this way because the world needs us to reflect, not just to repeat others' ideas. We need to be able to delve deeply into a topic, analyze it, draw conclusions, and act upon the resolutions we set for ourselves.

And now, I leave you in the company of eleven Old Testament women.

**I.
PRO-LIFE
WOMEN**

CHAPTER 1



RUTH

A good daughter-in-law and faithful friend

“A ‘charity that is kind’ not only knows how to ‘see’ the ‘other’ but opens itself to him, seeks him out, reaches out to him. Love gives generously. [...] And how often do we close ourselves within the shell of our ‘I,’ not knowing, not wanting, not trying to open ourselves to the ‘other,’ to give him something of our own ‘I,’ going beyond the limits of our self-centeredness or perhaps selfishness, and striving to become men, women ‘for others,’ like Christ.”

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
PASTORAL VISIT TO THE ROMAN PARISH OF THE ASCENSION
FEBRUARY 3, 1980

Objective

In a society where the elderly and some other social or family relationships are seen as a burden, Ruth presents herself to us as a loving woman able to meet the needs of her mother-in-law, Naomi. At the same time, we see God's loving care for two widows, Ruth and Naomi.

Let us take a deeper look at a Bible story where we see the reality of human life; that is, in human life there are difficult moments, but there are also moments of great joy. Here we touch on themes central to human life: abandonment, solitude, sadness, old age, dependence. At the same time, we see acts of friendship, loyalty, hope, and finally, of salvation.

As we read about Ruth's life at the mercy of circumstances in the company of her mother-in-law, Naomi, and as we learn about her "comings and goings," her sufferings and joys, we will be able to see an image of our own life in hers.

Scripture text: *Ruth 1–4*

Introduction to the character

Who was Ruth?

Ruth was a Moabite woman, which means she came from a territory east of the Dead Sea. Today that territory is Jordan. She married a Hebrew named Mahlon, who had come to Moab with his parents when they fled the famine that swept across Bethlehem of Judah, their native land. With the passage of time, her husband died and she stayed close to her mother-in-law, Naomi, who was also a widow and whose two sons had died.

When Naomi heard there was food again in her native land, she decided to return. Not wanting to leave her alone, Ruth returned with her.

According to Hebrew law, Ruth and Naomi, both childless widows, were to be the responsibility of the nearest relative, known as *goel*. This word means “redeemer.” The redeemer was obligated to help his needy relatives and also had the right to claim the patrimony his relatives may have lost. That is how Ruth came into contact with Boaz, a relative of her husband. Boaz, who appreciated Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi, allowed her to glean barley and wheat in his field and instructed his workers not to trouble her.

The story tells us about the legal arrangements Boaz made to exercise his right to act as Ruth’s *goel*. And—what a surprise—he ended up marrying her. They had a son together named Obed, who would one day be the grandfather of King David.

Development of the Bible story

Ruth’s story begins like many stories of human lives—with the need to leave her own land, the place where she was born and grew up, to seek out a better life. The Book of Ruth tells us how there was a famine in the land of Bethlehem. This famine forced Elimelech to take his wife, Naomi, and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, and leave the land of Moab.

To the tragedy of having to leave their own land, a second was added: the death of Naomi’s husband, Elimelech. The sons married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. This may seem logical and peaceful to the modern reader, but it was not so for the fifth century BC Hebrew culture in which the brothers lived.

The story tells us how the brothers died after ten years, leaving their wives widowed and childless. Things get even more complicated, since now there are three widowed women: Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah, none of whom had children. It is worth noting that in that society, the husband and male children were indispensable for survival, since they took charge of watching over the well-being of their wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters.

The three women form a community to survive in a society in which they have no security, freedom, or certainty. Their future is uncertain, unless one of them should remarry. Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah create a community like those that have been formed throughout the history of humanity. Today we are part of communities in which we are united by bonds or interests like our family, our extended family, our group of friends or neighbors, the community of the Church, etc. In a way, we also seek to survive.

The time of famine had ended in Bethlehem of Judah, so Naomi opts to return to her own land with Ruth and Orpah. Halfway there, Naomi decides it is not fair to ask the two young women to leave their families, their land, and the possibility of remarrying and having children in order to follow her, so she urges them to return home to their mothers.

At first, the response of both women is, “We will go back with you, to your people.” But later, Orpah, in tears, decides to return to her family. Blessed freedom, God’s great gift to humanity, allowed Orpah and Ruth, as well as us, to follow the voice of conscience. Orpah returns home while Ruth stays with Naomi. We could fall into the temptation of judging Orpah as a selfish person. If so, our judgment would be very harsh. Do we know what trials she was going through in her heart? Do we know the difficulties she was facing? Perhaps Orpah was simply seeking the security of what was familiar, her family and ordinary life as she knew it.

And so we find the world has women like Orpah who live an ordinary life, spending their days, months, and years in anonymity, without doing anything that makes it into the newspapers or is recorded in books. Those women are faithful to their daily work; it is hidden, barely noticed by others, and yet so necessary, truly heroic. That constant, quiet work is what builds up the family, society, and—ultimately—the world.

But just as we need many Orpahs in the world, we also need

decisive, brave, and enterprising women like Ruth. These are the women who launch important initiatives, who “put it all on the line,” women who are able to follow the voice of their conscience inviting them to do good, no matter the cost.

Ruth’s story shows us the greatness of an unselfish and generous human love capable of forgetting self so as to give to others, even when “the others” are not of the same age, race, religion, or culture. It is love that overcomes the limitations created by human beings and makes us see how hard suffering, the loss of loved ones, and affliction can be. That is what we see in Ruth when she tells Naomi:

“Do not press me to go back and abandon you! Wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God. Where you die I will die, and there be buried.”

RUTH 1:16–17A

Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem in the midst of their distressing reality. Ruth has lost not only her husband but also her country and her family. Naomi, for her part, has lost her husband, her two sons, and the possibility of having grandchildren. Added to that is the fact that neither of them has a man to take care of them. So great is Naomi’s sorrow that she expresses it openly upon arriving in Bethlehem:

So they went on together until they reached Bethlehem. On their arrival there, the whole town was excited about them, and the women asked: “Can this be Naomi?” But she said to them, “Do not call me Naomi [‘Sweet’]. Call me Mara [‘Bitter’], for the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why should you call me ‘Sweet,’ since the LORD has brought me to trial, and the Almighty has pronounced evil sentence on me.”

RUTH 1:19–21

There is one more lesson in this story: Each person bears pain in a different way. Naomi is open and frank in the way she expresses her pain, while Ruth is more discreet. In fact, the book tells us absolutely nothing about her feelings, even after her husband dies and she leaves her land. We see how one woman shares her sorrow with others and the other keeps it all inside. Let us learn to respect the way others bear their sufferings, although this does not mean we leave them all alone. We must accompany them without overwhelming them.

Once in Bethlehem, the two widowed women have only one option to survive: to glean grain in the fields where the harvest is being collected. The Hebrew law stipulated that part of the harvest should be left behind so that the poor could gather it. Ruth asks her mother-in-law to allow her to glean grain in the field. Was it coincidence or divine providence that Ruth unknowingly went to glean grain in the field of Boaz, a rich relative of her deceased husband?

Boaz asks the young man overseeing his harvesters, “Whose young woman is this?” The young man overseeing the harvesters answers, “She is the young Moabite who came back with Naomi from the plateau of Moab. She said, ‘I would like to gather the gleanings into sheaves after the harvesters.’ Ever since she came this morning she has remained here until now, with scarcely a moment’s rest.” Boaz then speaks to Ruth, “Listen, my daughter. Do not go to glean in anyone else’s field; you are not to leave here. Stay here with my young women. Watch to see which field is to be harvested, and follow them. Have I not commanded the young men to do you no harm? When you are thirsty, go and drink from the vessels the young people have filled” (Ruth 2:5–9).

When Ruth asks Boaz why he has been so generous with her, Boaz answers that he has heard how generous she has been with Naomi. He also tells her that she has reached the land of Bethlehem, the land of the God of Israel, under whose protection she now lives:

“May the LORD reward what you have done! May you receive a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge.”

RUTH 2:12

For her part, Naomi perceives God’s hand in all of these events:

“May he be blessed by the LORD, who never fails to show kindness to the living and to the dead,” Naomi exclaimed to her daughter-in-law. She continued, “This man is a near relative of ours, one of our redeemers.”

RUTH 2:20

Both recognize the presence of God in the midst of the events. Are we able to recognize God’s presence in our lives?

Continuing with the story, Naomi hatches an unusual plan to get Ruth and Boaz to marry! Women certainly have the initiative and capacity to put the wildest plans into action when we think it is necessary:

Naomi said to her, “My daughter, should I not be seeking a pleasing home for you? Now! Is not Boaz, whose young women you were working with, a relative of ours? This very night he will be winnowing barley at the threshing floor. Now, go bathe and anoint yourself; then put on your best attire and go down to the threshing floor. Do not make yourself known to the man before he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, take note of the place where he lies; then go uncover a place at his feet and you lie down. He will then tell you what to do.”

RUTH 3:1-4

We see how the characters plan and act, trusting in the goodness of others. Naomi hopes that Boaz will act like a gentleman and marry Ruth, and Ruth hopes that her mother-in-law is not wrong. The same happens in our lives. A time

comes when things cannot continue the way they are going and we must take action. At those times, we need to make decisions and trust in God and others.

The rest of Ruth's story unfolds within intricate legal complications having to do with the rights that a closer relative had to buy Naomi's field and marry Ruth. In the end, this right falls to Boaz.

Upon seeing that the right is his, Boaz says to all those present:

"You are witnesses today that I have acquired from Naomi all the holdings of Elimelech, Chilion and Mahlon. I also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, as my wife, in order to raise up a family for her late husband on his estate, so that the name of the deceased may not perish from his people and his place. Do you witness this today?"

RUTH 4:9-10

What began as a tragedy ends happily with the wedding of Ruth and Boaz and the birth of Obed. For Naomi, the baby boy is the joy of her old age; for Boaz, he is the son who will allow his lineage to continue; for Elimelech, he is the guarantee that his memory will be immortalized; for the people of Israel, he is the grandfather of their beloved King David. And Obed gives Ruth a place in the genealogy of Jesus, who has us remember her every time we read the Gospel of Matthew:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab. Amminadab became the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz,

whose mother was Rahab. Boaz became the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed became the father of Jesse, Jesse the father of David the king.

MATTHEW 1:1-6A

The story of Ruth ends by showing us what teamwork can do: together, Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz manage to continue the line of descent. And there, behind the scenes, we can see the loving action of God as he watches over his people.

What does Ruth teach us?

The Book of Ruth is made up of only four chapters, but within those short chapters we find many lessons:

- ▶ It tells us a story that begins with a famine, departure from the land where the family lived before, and then the death of a husband. However, the story ends with a marriage, the birth of a son, and the recovery of the land. It proves the saying, “No evil lasts forever.”
- ▶ It depicts the hardships a family had to endure in order to survive in adversity.
- ▶ It shows us how loving dedication comes about when we put others’ needs before our own.
- ▶ It demonstrates that every decision is a new opportunity to do good.
- ▶ It shows us how Ruth and Naomi had to make decisions in difficult circumstances while being hemmed in by situations of poverty, solitude, and abandonment.
- ▶ It confirms something we already know but that we need to remember: No matter how hard the circumstances may be and no matter how hard things may seem, we have to act! We cannot stand around with our arms crossed. Ruth and Naomi acted. There is a common saying, “If life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” They made lemonade with the lemons they had at hand.