

Fulness in Emptiness (Ruth 1:19-22)

1. The Arrival of Naomi in Bethlehem (v.19)

- As Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, the whole town was “stirred.” The “whole” town is a synecdoche (figure of speech) where the whole really means in part (Luke 2:1). In Hebrew, the whole town is really the women (feminine plural) who are stirred up. This “stirring” can mean buzzing, murmuring, surprised, or gossiping.
- Why was there “buzzing”? It may be consternation, curiosity and/or concern. It has been over a decade since Naomi had departed from Bethlehem to live in Moab (v.4). Naomi’s time in Moab was filled with suffering and pain. It was a season of great grief through the loss of her husband, Elimelech, and only children, Mahlon and Chilion. There may be a physical patina about her as well from her grief.
- She had departed Bethlehem as a robust woman, in the prime of her life with a husband and two sons, who culturally would be the poster-child for all Israelite women. Now she returns as an aged widow ten years later with no children and dismal prospects in a world dominated by men.
- Despite the extensive sixty-mile trek from Moab to Bethlehem during the time of judges (v.1), the LORD protected her and Ruth.

2. The Attitude of Naomi in Bethlehem (v.20-21)

Naomi is:

A. self-absorbed:

- her selfishness was not as evident previously (v.8). Her complaint is singular in its orientation. Eight times Naomi refers to herself in the first person (v.20-21). What about Ruth? Naomi is not the only woman arriving in Bethlehem who has experienced loss (v.5).

B. orthodox in her theology of providence:

- she acknowledges that everything which transpired had originated from God’s hand. She has not resigned anything to chance, randomness, or disorder.

C. bitter in her circumstances:

- she does not feel as though the LORD has dealt kindly (hesed) to her. She had petitioned God to do for Ruth and Orpah what He had not done for her (v.8). She changes her name from Naomi (pleasant) to Mara (bitter).

D. not directly charging God with injustice:

- she refers to God in third person as an epithet, or chiasm: A-B-B-A
 - A: Almighty (Shaddai) has dealt very bitterly with me
 - B: the LORD (YHWH) has brought me back empty
 - B: the LORD (YHWH) has testified against me
 - A: Almighty (Shaddai) has brought calamity upon me
- Shaddai is the name attributed to the providential oversight of the LORD over creation (Psalm 91:1), the ancient name of God (Ex. 6:3) although not God’s self-attested name (Ex.3:14). This name is often used when judgment falls on a nation (Isa. 13:6; Joel 1:15) and appears thirty-one times in the book of Job.
- The book of Genesis uses Shaddai multiple times (Gen. 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25). In all six Genesis references to Almighty, it is always in regards to the womb, fertility, and/or children. The Almighty has dealt a barren blow to Naomi. He has made her life bitter. The Almighty has brought about this great tragedy upon her.

- she uses judicial language of “testifying.” This can be metaphoric language taken from the Mosaic legislation (Ex. 20:16; 23:2; Deut. 5:2; 19:16, 18). She portrays herself as a defendant in a court room who has already been found guilty and punished but is unaware of the charges or testimony against her.
 - Naomi may be using the name Almighty because she feels as though the Almighty has exercised his authority capriciously with her: just as God had dealt bitterly with Job, so He is dealing bitterly with her. She may also feel as though she is receiving punishment by the Almighty (Joel 1:15) yet is unaware of the charges. She might possibly be alluding to fertility which accompanies the name Almighty.
- E. transparent:
- while Jeremiah (Jer. 20:7-18), Job (Job 5-6), and the Psalmists (Ps. 13) have similarly been honest before God in their complaint, Naomi never seeks the LORD in humility.
- F. potentially henotheistic: Naomi’s behavior is perplexing. In henotheism, the worshipper believes that many gods exist simultaneously, and that while many or all may govern human existence, an individual or community is governed by a singular member of the pantheon who is perceived as the patron of the community. In Moab, different cities and towns would have different gods. After Orpah’s return to Moab (v. 14), Naomi encouraged Ruth to return to her gods as well (v.15). Naomi’s return to Bethlehem because of God’s provision of food does not speak to her spiritual status necessarily.

3. The Arrangement of God’s Provisions in Bethlehem (v.22)

- Naomi has a greater joy in Orpah’s return to Moab than Ruth’s accompaniment with her to Bethlehem. Ruth is not recorded as saying anything and is never mentioned by Naomi or any of the women in Bethlehem. However, she is noted by the narrator.
- We cannot say for certain that the famine in Bethlehem was God’s punishment towards Israel for idolatry, although it occurs during the time of judges (Judg. 21:25). We do not know the spiritual status of Elimelech, Mahlon, or Chilion. We do not know how they died, or why they died. We also do not know if the LORD is disciplining or punishing Naomi for her henotheism if she is henotheistic. Regardless, the LORD has reversed the famine, and now there is grain in Bethlehem.
- Naomi is convinced that when she departed from Bethlehem, she was full. Now she is empty. She is not speaking of food, but of a husband and progeny.
- Naomi has expressed no joy, appreciation, commitment, gratitude or even acknowledgment of Ruth’s presence. Ruth has demonstrated complete allegiance to Naomi through three elements: she resists all pressures to return to Moab (v.15), she has committed herself to Naomi for life (v.16-17), and publicly entered this covenant to Naomi before the LORD.
- The narrator does not call Naomi by her self-identified name “Mara.” Instead, he calls her “Naomi.”
- Naomi and Ruth arrive during the barley harvest (late May-early June). The LORD is providing for the needs of both widows and arranging a future run-in with a kinsman who owns a field that they just “happen” to stumble upon (2:3).
- Naomi is unaware of how full she will be through God’s future provisions.