

A Sacred Place

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A 17-acre plot in Adams County, Pennsylvania, was transformed from a piece of earth to holy ground when Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address there. Land that originally sold for just \$2,500 is now one of the most beloved sites in America.

In the book of Ruth, we encounter part of a larger story in which a piece of earth is transfigured into sacred land—a theme that runs through not only Ruth, but the whole Old Testament. Let's explore the idea of sacred land.

Step 1: Observe the time and place.

The book of Ruth takes place in the turbulent era of the judges (Ruth 1:1–2). Because the people of Israel had disobeyed the Lord by failing to fully possess the land he had given them, they were floundering spiritually (Josh 23:11–13). God judged them by allowing their enemies to plunder them (Judg 2:10–14). They were also experiencing famine in the land of promise (Ruth 1:1)—a consequence God had threatened for disobedience (Deut 28:18, 23–24).

Facing a lack of food in Israel, Elimelech and his family sought provision in Moab (Ruth 1:1). This was a logical choice since, according to *The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, the winter rains of Moab's plateaus allowed for significant cattle production and grain crops (compare 2 Kgs 3:4). While there, however, Elimelech and his two sons died, leaving Naomi a widow. When Naomi learned that the Lord had provided food in Israel (1:6), she decided to return. Could she find hope by returning to the promised land?

Step 2: Learn about the land.


The *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* shows that the promised land was unique among the neighboring nations. Although most of Egypt received less than four inches of rain annually, it was constantly watered by the Nile. Many nations similarly relied on the steady flow of rivers like the Tigris and Euphrates. But the main water feature of Canaan was the Jordan—an unimpressive river for most of the year. While the Canaanites turned to Baal, a storm god, for sustenance, Israel was meant to put its trust in Yahweh. He alone would bring the rains necessary for their survival (Deut 11:11–12). The land God chose for his people was one that nurtured faith in him rather than confidence in a river (see Deut 11:8–17).

Step 3: Reflect on the biblical theology.

The Old Testament authors stress that the land came to Israel as a gift from the Lord for their possession and a test of their obedience (Deut 4:37–40). Often, the land serves as the foundation or reason for a command.

The land not only provided for Israel physically, but it tested them spiritually. Stories like Naomi's show that the land wasn't immune to hardship, but it remained the central place where God provided for his people. Naomi's family was just one of several families in the Bible who undertook journeys to and from the land. For instance, Abraham traveled to Egypt to avoid famine (Gen 12:10), and when he returned to the land, he heard God's voice confirm his promise for Canaan (13:14–18). God commanded Isaac to stay put rather than flee from the land during a famine (26:1–2), and in that time Isaac's crops produced a hundredfold (26:12–14). God encouraged Jacob to go to Egypt to escape famine, promising that he would return to the land of his fathers (46:3–4).

Generations later, as God's promise to Jacob was being fulfilled, Moses warned the people that their obedience would bring prosperity, but unfaithfulness would bring destruction and expulsion from the land (Deut 28:3–21, 63–65). That expulsion was fulfilled in the exile. Yet the Lord mercifully promised to return his exiled people to their home. His plans to prosper them and give them a future centered on returning to the land (Jer 29:10–14). No matter the reason for leaving the land, each prospect of returning held a redemptive hope.

In the book of Ruth, Naomi found provision when she returned to the promised land. Ruth and Naomi's story is part of the grander story of God providing a place in which his people can plant their faith in him. 

Scripture quotations are from the Lexham English Bible (LEB).



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