**Learn to Read the Bible** **3b – Women of the Bible 2**

*Back cover: This book tells about the lives of Ruth and Esther.*

*Text modified from the Good News Translation (1994)*

**Ruth**

## Elimelech and his family move to a neighbouring country

Ruth 1:1-5

Long ago, there was a famine in the land. So, a man named Elimelech, went with his wife Naomi and their two sons to live for a while in a neighbouring country.

While they were living there, Elimelech died, and Naomi was left alone with her two sons. They married women from that country, called Orpah and Ruth. About ten years later the sons also died. Naomi was left all alone, without husband or sons.

## Naomi returns to her home country with Ruth

*Ruth 1:6-22*

Some time later Naomi heard that the LORD had blessed his people by giving them a good harvest. So, she got ready to return to her home country with her daughters-in-law.

They started out together. On the way she said to them, “Go back home and stay with your mothers. May the LORD be as good to you as you have been to me and to those who have died. And may the LORD make it possible for each of you to marry again and have a home.”

So, Naomi kissed them goodbye. But they started crying and said to her, “No! We will go with you to your people.”

Naomi answered, “You must go back, my daughters. Why do you want to come with me? Do you think I could have sons again for you to marry? No, my daughters, you know that is impossible. The LORD has turned against me, and I feel very sorry for you.”

Again they started crying. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye and went back home.

But Ruth held on to her. Naomi said to her, “Ruth, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god. Go back home with her.”

But Ruth answered, “Don't ask me to leave you! Let me go with you. Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die. And that is where I will be buried. May nothing but death separate me from you!”

When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said nothing more.

They went on until they came to Naomi’s hometown. When they arrived, the whole town got excited. The women there exclaimed, “Is this really Naomi?”

She answered, “Yes, I am Naomi. The Almighty God has made my life bitter. When I left here, I had plenty, but the LORD has brought me back without a thing.”

This was how Naomi came back to her hometown with Ruth, her daughter-in-law. It was the season for harvesting barley.

## Ruth works in the field of Boaz

Ruth 2:1-23

Naomi had a relative named Boaz, a rich man. He belonged to the family of her husband Elimelech. One day Ruth said to Naomi, “Let me go to the fields to gather the corn that the harvest workers leave. I am sure to find someone who will let me work with him.”

Naomi answered, “Go ahead, my daughter.”

So, Ruth went out to the fields and walked behind the workers, picking up the corn which they left. It so happened that she was in a field that belonged to Boaz.

Some time later Boaz himself arrived and greeted the workers. He said, “The LORD be with you!” They answered, “The LORD bless you!”

Boaz asked the man in charge, “Who is that young woman?”

The man answered, “She is the young woman who came back with Naomi from the neighbouring country. She asked me to let her follow the workers and pick up the left-over corn. She has been working since early morning and has just now stopped to rest for a while.”

Then Boaz said to Ruth, “Let me give you some advice. Don't pick up corn anywhere except in this field. Work with the women here. Watch them to see where they are reaping and stay with them. I have ordered my men not to cause you any trouble. And whenever you are thirsty, go and drink from the water jars that they have filled.”

Ruth bowed down with her face touching the ground, and said to Boaz, “Why should you be so concerned about me? Why should you be so kind to a foreigner?”

Boaz answered, “I have heard about everything that you have done for your mother-in-law since your husband died. I know how you left your father and mother and your own country. And I know how you came to live among a people you had never known before. May the LORD reward you for what you have done!”

Ruth answered, “You are very kind to me, sir. You have made me feel better by speaking gently to me, even though I am not the equal of one of your servants.”

At mealtime Boaz said to Ruth, “Come and have something to eat.” So she sat with the workers, and Boaz passed some food to her. She ate until she was satisfied, and she still had some food left over.

After she had left to go on picking up corn, Boaz ordered the workers, “Let her pick it up even where the bundles are lying. Do not say anything to stop her. Even pull out some corn from the bundles and leave it for her to pick up.”

So, Ruth went on gathering corn in the field until evening. When she had beaten it out, she found she had nearly ten kilogrammes. She took the corn back into town and showed her mother-in-law how much she had gathered. She also gave her the food left over from the meal.

Naomi asked her, “Where did you gather all this? Whose field have you been working in? May God bless the man who helped you!”

So, Ruth told Naomi that she had been working in a field belonging to a man named Boaz.

Naomi exclaimed, “May the LORD bless Boaz! The LORD always keeps his promises. That man is a close relative of ours, one of those responsible for taking care of us.”

Then Ruth said, “Best of all, he told me to keep picking up corn with his workers until they finish the harvest.”

Naomi said to Ruth, “Yes, my daughter, it will be better for you to work with the women in Boaz' field. You might be harmed if you went to someone else's field.”

So, Ruth worked with them and gathered corn until all the barley and wheat had been harvested. And she continued to live with her mother-in-law.

## Ruth finds a husband

Ruth 3:1-18

Some time later Naomi said to Ruth, “I must find a husband for you, so that you will have a home of your own. Remember that this man Boaz, whose women you have been working with, is our relative.

“This evening Boaz will be threshing the barley. So, wash yourself, put on some perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go where he is threshing. Do not let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking.

“Be sure to notice where he lies down. After he falls asleep, go and lift the covers and lie down at his feet. He will tell you what to do.”

Ruth answered, “I will do everything you say.”

So, Ruth went to the threshing place and did what her mother-in-law had told her. When Boaz had finished eating and drinking, he was in a good mood. He went to the pile of barley and lay down to sleep. Ruth slipped over quietly, lifted the covers and lay down at his feet.

During the night he woke up suddenly. When he turned over, he was surprised to find a woman lying at his feet.

“Who are you?” he asked.

She said, “It's Ruth, sir. Because you are a close relative, you are responsible for taking care of me. So, please marry me.”

He said, “The LORD bless you. You might have gone looking for a young man, either rich or poor. But instead, you came to me.

“Now don't worry, Ruth. I will do everything you ask. Everyone in town knows you are a fine woman. It is true that I am a close relative and am responsible for you. However, there is a man who is a closer relative than I am. In the morning we will find out whether he will take responsibility for you. If so, well and good. If not, I will take the responsibility. Now lie down and stay here till morning.”

So, she lay there at his feet. She got up before it was light enough for her to be seen. Boaz did not want anyone to know that she had been there. Boaz poured out nearly twenty kilogrammes of barley for her and helped her to lift it on her shoulder. Then she returned to the town with it.

When she arrived home, her mother-in-law asked her, “How did you get on, my daughter?”

Ruth told her everything that Boaz had done for her. She added, “He told me I must not come back to you empty-handed, so he gave me all this barley.”

Naomi said to her, “Now be patient, Ruth, until you see how this all turns out. Boaz is certain to take care of this matter today.”

## Boaz marries Ruth

Ruth 4:1-12

Boaz went to the meeting place at the town gate and sat down there. Then the man whom Boaz had mentioned, Elimelech's nearest relative, came by.

Boaz called to him, “Come over here, my friend, and sit down.” So, he went over and sat down. Then Boaz got ten of the leaders of the town and asked them to sit down there too.

When they were seated, he said to his relative, “Now that Naomi has come back, she wants to sell the field that belonged to our relative Elimelech. I think you ought to know about it. If you want it, buy it. But if you don't want it, say so, because the right to buy it belongs first to you and then to me.”

The man said, “I will buy it.”

Boaz said, “Very well, but if you buy the field from Naomi, then you are also buying Ruth, the foreign widow. In this way, the field will stay in the dead man's family.”

The man answered, “In that case I will give up my right to buy the field. You buy it. I would rather not.”

Boaz said to the leaders and all the others there, “Today I have bought from Naomi everything that belonged to Elimelech and to his sons. In addition, Ruth the foreign widow, becomes my wife. This will keep the property in the dead man's family. Also, his family line will continue among his people and in his town. You are witnesses to this today.”

The leaders and the others said, “Yes, we are witnesses. May the LORD make your wife bear many children like our ancestors Rachel and Leah! May you become rich and famous! May the children that the LORD will give you by this young woman make your family important!”

## Ruth and Boaz have a son

Ruth 4:13-22

So, Boaz took Ruth home as his wife. The LORD blessed her, and she became pregnant and had a son. The women said to Naomi, “Praise the LORD! He has given you a grandson today to take care of you. May the boy become famous in Israel!

“Your daughter-in-law loves you. She has done more for you than seven sons. And now she has given you a grandson. This grandson will bring new life to you and give you security in your old age.” Naomi took the child, held him close, and took care of him.

The women of the neighbourhood named the boy Obed. They told everyone, “A son has been born to Naomi!” Obed became the father of Jesse, who was the father of King David.

# Esther

## Queen Vashti defies King Xerxes

Esther 1:1-22

In the third year of his reign, King Xerxes gave a banquet for all his officials and administrators. The armies were present, as well as the governors and noblemen of the provinces. For six whole months he made a show of the riches of the imperial court.

After that, the king gave a banquet for all the people in the capital city of Susa, rich and poor alike. It lasted a whole week and was held in the gardens of the royal palace.

Meanwhile, Queen Vashti was giving a banquet for the women. On the seventh day of his banquet the king was drinking and feeling merry, so he called in his personal servants. He ordered them to bring in Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown. The queen was a beautiful woman, and the king wanted to show off her beauty to the officials and all his guests. But when the servants told Queen Vashti of the king's command, she refused to come. This made the king furious.

It was the king's custom to ask for expert opinion on questions of law and order. So he called for his advisers, who would know what should be done. He said to these men, “I sent my servants to Queen Vashti with a command, and she refused to obey it! What does the law say that we should do with her?”

Then one official declared to the king and his officials: “Queen Vashti has insulted not only the king but also his officials — in fact, every man in the empire! Every woman in the empire will begin to look down on her husband as soon as she hears what the queen has done. They'll say, ‘King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to come to him, and she refused.’ Wives everywhere will have no respect for their husbands, and husbands will be angry with their wives.

“If it please Your Majesty, issue a royal proclamation that Vashti may never again appear before the king. Order it to be written into the laws of the kingdom, so that it can never be changed. Then give her place as queen to some better woman. When your proclamation is made known, every woman will treat her husband with proper respect, whether he's rich or poor.”

The king and his officials liked this idea, and the king did what the official suggested. To each of the royal provinces he sent a message, saying that every husband should be the master of his home and speak with final authority.

## Esther becomes queen

Esther 2:1-18

Later, even after his anger had cooled down, the king kept thinking about what Vashti had done and about his proclamation against her. So, some of the king's close advisers suggested, “Why don't you make a search to find some beautiful young virgins? You can appoint officials in every province of the empire and order them to bring all these beautiful young women here to your harem. Put them in the care of Hegai, the servant who oversees your women, and let them be given a beauty treatment. Then take the young woman you like best and make her queen in Vashti's place.”

The king thought this was good advice, so he followed it.

There in Susa lived a Jew named Mordecai. He had a cousin, Esther. She was a beautiful young woman, and she had a good figure. At the death of her parents, Mordecai had adopted her and brought her up as his own daughter.

When the king had issued his new proclamation and many young women were being brought to Susa, Esther was among them. She too was put in the royal palace in the care of Hegai, who oversaw the harem. Hegai liked Esther, and she won his favour. He lost no time in beginning her beauty treatment of massage and special diet. He gave her the best place in the harem and assigned seven young women to serve her.

On the advice of Mordecai, Esther had kept it secret that she was Jewish. Every day Mordecai would walk in front of the courtyard of the harem, in order to find out how she was getting on and what was going to happen to her.

The regular beauty treatment for the women lasted a year. After that, each young woman would be taken in turn to King Xerxes. When she went from the harem to the palace, she could wear whatever she wanted. She would go there in the evening, and the next morning she would be taken to another harem. She would not go to the king again unless he liked her enough to ask for her by name.

The time came for Esther to go to the king. When her turn came, she wore what Hegai advised her to wear. Esther was brought to King Xerxes in the royal palace. The king liked her more than any of the other women, and more than any of the others she won his favour and affection. He placed the royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti.

Then the king gave a great banquet in Esther’s honour and invited all his officials and administrators. He proclaimed a holiday for the whole empire and distributed gifts worthy of a king.

## Mordecai saves the king's life

Esther 2:19-23

Meanwhile Mordecai had been appointed by the king to an administrative position. As for Esther, she had still not let it be known that she was Jewish. Mordecai had told her not to tell anyone. She obeyed him in this, just as she had obeyed him when she was a little girl under his care.

During the time that Mordecai held office in the palace, two of the palace servants who guarded the entrance to the king's rooms, became hostile to King Xerxes. They plotted to assassinate him. Mordecai learnt about it and told Queen Esther, who then told the king what Mordecai had found out. There was an investigation, and it was discovered that the report was true, so both men were hanged on the gallows. The king ordered an account of this to be written down in the official records of the empire.

## Haman plots to destroy the Jews

Esther 3:1-15

Some time later King Xerxes promoted a man named Haman to the position of prime minister. The king ordered all the officials in his service to show their respect for Haman by kneeling and bowing to him. They all did so, except for Mordecai, who refused to do it. The other officials in the royal service asked him why he was disobeying the king's command. Day after day they urged him to give in, but he would not listen to them. “I am a Jew,” he explained, “and I cannot bow to Haman.”

So they told Haman about this. Haman was furious when he realized that Mordecai was not going to kneel and bow to him. When he learnt that Mordecai was a Jew, he decided to do more than punish Mordecai alone. He made plans to kill every Jew in the whole empire. A day several months later was decided on to carry out his plot.

So, Haman told the king, “There is a certain race of people scattered all over your empire and found in every province. They observe customs that are not like those of any other people. Moreover, they do not obey the laws of the empire, so it is not in your best interests to tolerate them. If it please Your Majesty, issue a decree that they are to be put to death. If you do, I guarantee that I will be able to put more than a great amount of money into the royal treasury for the administration of the empire.”

The king told Haman, “The people and their money are yours. Do as you like with them.”

So, Haman dictated a proclamation. It was issued in the name of King Xerxes.

The proclamation was to be taken to every province of the empire. It contained the instructions that on a single day, all Jews were to be killed. They were to be slaughtered without mercy and their belongings were to be taken.

At the king’s command the decree was made public in the capital city of Susa. Then the news was carried to the provinces.

## Mordecai asks for Esther's help

Esther 4:1-17

When Mordecai learnt of all that had been done, he tore his clothes in anguish. Then he dressed in sackcloth, covered his head with ashes, and walked through the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. Throughout all the provinces, wherever the king's proclamation was made known, there was loud mourning among the Jews. They fasted, wept and wailed.

When Esther was told her what Mordecai was doing, she was deeply disturbed. She called one of the palace servants, and told him to go to Mordecai and find out what was happening and why. Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him and just how much money Haman had promised to put into the royal treasury if all the Jews were killed.

Mordecai gave the palace servant a copy of the proclamation that had been issued in Susa, ordering the destruction of the Jews. He asked him to take it to Esther, explain the situation to her. He was to ask her to go and plead with the king and beg him to have mercy on her people.

The servant did this, and Esther gave him this message to take back to Mordecai: “If anyone, man or woman, goes to see the king without being summoned, that person must die. That is the law. Everyone knows that. There is only one way to get round this law: if the king holds out his gold sceptre to someone, then that person's life is spared. But it has been a month since the king sent for me.”

When Mordecai received Esther's message, he sent her this warning: “You are not safer than any other Jew just because you are in the royal palace. If you keep quiet at a time like this, help will come from heaven to the Jews, and they will be saved. But you will die and your father's family will come to an end. Yet who knows — maybe it was for a time like this that you were made queen!”

Esther sent Mordecai this reply: “Go and gather all the Jews in Susa together. Hold a fast and pray for me. Don't eat or drink anything for three days and nights. My young women and I will be doing the same. After that, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. If I must die for doing it, I will die.”

Mordecai then left and did everything that Esther had told him to do.

## Esther invites the king and Haman to a banquet

Esther 5:1-8

On the third day of her fast, Esther put on her royal robes and went and stood in the inner courtyard of the palace. The king was inside, seated on the royal throne. When the king saw Queen Esther standing outside, she won his favour, and he held out to her the gold sceptre. “What is it, Queen Esther?” the king asked. “Tell me what you want, and you shall have it — even if it is half my empire.”

Esther replied, “If it please Your Majesty, I would like you and Haman to be my guests tonight at a banquet I am preparing for you.”

The king then ordered Haman to come quickly, so that they could be Esther's guests. So, the king and Haman went to Esther's banquet. Over the wine the king asked her, “Tell me what you want, and you shall have it. I will grant your request, even if you ask for half my empire.”

Esther replied, “If Your Majesty is kind enough to grant my request, I would like you and Haman to be my guests tomorrow at another banquet that I will prepare for you. At that time I will tell you what I want.”

## Haman plots to kill Mordecai

Esther 5:9-14

Haman was happy and in a good mood. But then he saw Mordecai at the entrance of the palace. Mordecai did not rise or show any sign of respect as he passed, and so Haman was furious with him. But he controlled himself and went home.

Then he invited his friends to his house and asked his wife to join them. He boasted to them how rich he was, how many sons he had, how the king had promoted him to high office, and how much more important he was than any of the king's other officials.

“What is more,” Haman went on, “Queen Esther gave a banquet for no one but the king and me, and we are invited back tomorrow. But none of this means a thing to me as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the entrance of the palace.”

So, his wife and all his friends suggested, “Why don't you have a gallows built? Tomorrow morning you can ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it, and then you can go to the banquet happy.”

Haman thought this was a good idea, so he had the gallows built.

## The King honours Mordecai

Esther 6:1-13

That same night the king could not get to sleep, so he ordered the official records of the empire to be brought and read to him. The part they read included the account of how Mordecai had uncovered a plot to assassinate the king. The king asked, “How have we honoured and rewarded Mordecai for this?”

His servants answered, “Nothing has been done for him.”

“Are any of my officials in the palace?” the king asked.

Haman had just entered the courtyard. He had come to ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on the gallows that was now ready. So, the servants answered, “Haman is here, waiting to see you.”

“Show him in,” said the king.

So, Haman came in, and the king said to him, “There is someone I wish very much to honour. What should I do for this man?”

Haman thought to himself, “Now who could the king want to honour so much? Me, of course.”

So, he answered the king, “Order royal robes to be brought for this man — robes that you yourself wear. Order a royal ornament to be put on your own horse. Then get one of your highest noblemen to dress the man in these robes and lead him, mounted on the horse, through the city square. Let the nobleman announce as they go: ‘See how the king rewards a person he wishes to honour!’ ”

Then the king said to Haman, “Hurry and get the robes and the horse, and provide these honours for Mordecai, the Jew. Do everything for him that you have suggested. You will find him sitting at the entrance of the palace.”

So, Haman got the robes and the horse, and he put the robes on Mordecai. Mordecai got on the horse, and Haman led him through the city square. He announced to the people as they went: “See how the king rewards a man he wishes to honour!”

Mordecai then went back to the palace entrance while Haman hurried home, covering his face in embarrassment. He told his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then she and those wise friends of his said to him, “You are beginning to lose power to Mordecai. He is a Jew, and you cannot overcome him. He will certainly defeat you.”

## Haman is put to death

Esther 6:14–7:10

While they were still talking, the palace servants arrived in a hurry to take Haman to Esther's banquet.

And so, the king and Haman went to eat with Esther for a second time. Over the wine the king asked her again, “Now, Queen Esther, what do you want? Tell me and you shall have it. I’ll even give you half the empire.”

Queen Esther answered, “If it please Your Majesty, my wish is that I may live and that my people may live. My people and I have been sold for slaughter. If it were nothing more serious than being sold into slavery, I would have kept quiet and not bothered you about it. But we are about to be destroyed!”

Then King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, “Who dares to do such a thing? Where is this man?”

Esther answered, “Our enemy, our persecutor, is this evil man Haman!”

Haman stared at the king and queen in terror. The king got up in a fury, left the room, and went outside to the palace gardens. Haman could see that the king was determined to punish him for this, so he stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life. He had just thrown himself down on Esther's couch to beg for mercy, when the king came back into the room from the gardens. Seeing this, the king cried out, “Is this man going to rape the queen right here in front of me, in my own palace?”

As soon as the king said this the servants covered Haman's head. Then one of them said, “Haman even built a gallows at his house so that he could hang Mordecai, who saved Your Majesty's life.”

“Hang Haman on it!” the king commanded.

So, Haman was hanged on the gallows that he had built for Mordecai. Then the king's anger cooled down.

## The Jews are told to fight back

Esther 8:1-17

That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther all the property of Haman. Esther told the king that Mordecai was related to her. From then on Mordecai was allowed to enter the king's presence. Esther put Mordecai in charge of Haman's property.

Then Esther spoke to the king again. She threw herself at his feet and cried. She begged him to stop the evil plot that Haman had made against the Jews. The king held out the gold sceptre to her, so she stood up and said, “If it please Your Majesty, please issue a proclamation to prevent Haman’s orders from being carried out. How can I endure it if this disaster comes on my people, and my own relatives are killed?”

King Xerxes then said to Queen Esther and Mordecai, the Jew, “A proclamation issued in the king’s name and stamped with the royal seal cannot be revoked. You may, however, write to the Jews whatever you wish. You may write it in my name and stamp it with the royal seal.”

So, Mordecai called the king’s secretaries and dictated letters for the whole empire. The letters were written to each province in its own language and system of writing. Mordecai had the letters written in the name of King Xerxes, and he stamped them with the royal seal.

These letters explained that the king would allow the Jews in every city to defend themselves. If armed men of any nationality in any province attacked the Jewish men, their children or their women, the Jews could fight back and destroy the attackers.

Then the streets of the capital city rang with cheers and joyful shouts. For the Jews there was joy and relief, happiness and a sense of victory. In every city and province, wherever the king’s proclamation was read, the Jews held a joyful holiday with feasting and happiness.

## The festival of Purim

Esther 9:20-32

Mordecai had these events written down. He then sent letters to all the Jews, near and far, throughout the Empire, telling them to observe two days as holidays every year. It was resolved that every Jewish family of every future generation in every province and every city should remember and observe the days of Purim for all time to come.