

## What makes Ruth unique?

The book of Ruth is set in the time of the judges, but the book itself probably took shape many centuries later. Most scholars, in fact, believe that Ruth was written during the post-exilic period, after the people of Israel had been allowed to return home from their exile in Babylonia. Two of the leaders in post-exilic Israel -Ezra and Nehemiah- taught the people to be very strict about separating themselves from foreigners. This likely created a climate of suspicion and distrust of anyone who was a non-Jew in post-exilic Israel. The book of Ruth, then, is an excellent example of Israel's post-exilic literature, which challenged traditional ways of thinking about God, God's purposes, and God's chosen people (Israel).

## Why was Ruth written?

The story of Ruth was written to show the people of Israel that God's purposes may be fulfilled in unexpected ways, that God works in the lives of anyone who is faithful, and that God's love and goodness is for everyone-not just those who were part of the covenant people of Israel.

These messages seem easy enough for us to comprehend, but for Jews living in the days when scholars believe the book of Ruth was written, these messages were anything but easy to accept! Ruth was not from any of the tribes of Israel: but from Moab, which was situated across the Jordan River, and whose people were a long-time enemy of Israel. Ruth left the security of her own family to live in Israel with her mother-in-law, Naomi, and to take care of this childless widow. Ruth married and eventually had a child of her own-and surprisingly became an ancestor of King David himself.

## What's the story behind the scene?

The story of Ruth tells about events that happened during the time of the judges, which was a period of many years before David became king of Israel in 1000 B.C. Many of the Hebrew terms and customs that are mentioned in the story come from this time, but some of the language and laws at work in the book come from as late as 250 B.C. This means that the final version of the story was probably written down centuries after the time when the story took place, in the time scholars refer as the post-exilic period, that is, after the people of Israel had returned from their exile around 539 B.C.

There is an interesting custom behind the story told in Ruth. In the ancient world, when a married man died and left no children, it was the custom for one of his brothers to marry his widow. Any children they had would then be thought of as the children of the dead brother, so that his name could live on (see Deuteronomy 25:5, 6).

## How is Ruth constructed?

Ruth is like a short story with interesting characters and a plot that leads to a happy conclusion. It is meant to be read as a story with an important message about God and God's people. The story told in the book unfolds in four scenes, each one corresponding to a chapter.

Scene One (Chapter 1): Ruth and Naomi leave Moab

Scene Two (Chapter 2): In Israel, Ruth meets Boaz

Scene Three (Chapter 3): Boaz accepts Ruth

Scene Four (Chapter 4): Ruth and Boaz marry

## Discussion Questions about the Message of Ruth

1. When her sons died, Naomi believed that God had turned against her and Ruth (chapter 1). Why did she feel so desperate? Have you ever felt this desperate or have you known anyone who felt bitter like Naomi? If so, what caused these feelings and how did you or your friend get through this difficult period?
2. Both of Naomi's daughters-in-law loved her, but they made very different decisions about how to go on with their lives? (1:6-18). What did Orpah do? What did Ruth do? Why do you think Ruth wanted to go with Naomi to Judah?
3. What did Ruth do to help Naomi when they got to Bethlehem in Judah? (2:1-18). What seem to have been the risks for women who did this kind of work? How could the fact that Ruth was a foreigner (from Moab) have made the situation even more difficult? Are there people with different cultural or religious backgrounds living in your community? If so, how are they treated? What can you do to make them feel more accepted?
4. The field in which Ruth chooses to work belongs to a rich and important man named Boaz (2:3-23). What kind of person does he seem to be? How does he treat Ruth? The Law of Moses required faithful Jews to allow foreigners and widows to pick up stalks of grain after a field was harvested. In what way did Boaz do more than what the law required? What can you learn from Boaz's actions?
5. In chapter 3, Naomi helps Ruth to find a husband. Why do you think she felt this was an important thing to do?
6. Why do you think Boaz was so impressed with Ruth? (3:10) What prevented him from offering to marry her right away? (3:12,13). What did Boaz do to solve this problem? (4:1-8). How did this help Naomi as well as Ruth? (4:9,10).
7. How would you describe the mood at the end of the story? How are Naomi's feelings after the birth of her grandson (4:14-17) different from her feelings at the end of chapter one? How does she show her gratitude? How did Naomi's grandson, Obed, become a blessing for all the people of Israel?
8. How would you describe the book of Ruth as challenging the traditional beliefs among many of the Jews of post-exilic Israel? What surprise ending does the book have for them?
9. What is the importance or significance of Ruth's name appearing in Matthew 1:5?

A church in Indiana put together the study that follows. After a brief introduction they take a closer look at the four chapters in Ruth. The study picks up a word or phrase in the text (word or phrase is bolded) and then offers a comment. I found their insights to be helpful in gaining understanding of the original situation and context of the story.

# Ruth

## A Bible Study

### Content

Two books of the Old Testament bear the names of women: Ruth and Esther. They were heroines in dramas not only centuries apart in point of time but also as different in plot as the role played by Ruth contrasts with that of her contemporaries, the judges of Israel. The later were public figures, tribal and national representatives, arbiters of international disputes. Ruth does however have a niche in the hall of Israel's great because she was found "faithful in a very little" (Luke 16:10) in the way she met and overcame domestic crises which frequently arise in the everyday life of an ordinary private citizen.

The scenes in the book of Judges are black with crimes against God and man; treachery, brutal war, massacre, cities in ruins etc. Into these "Dark Ages" of Israel, the book of Ruth sheds a ray of light; piety, marital fidelity, social responsibility, rural tranquillity.

History is more than a record of battles, dates and dynasties of kings. It is indeed comforting to know that "the Judge of all the earth" has the power to direct the destiny of nations even though "the kings of the earth set themselves...against the Lord." It is just as comforting to be assured that "He who sits in the heavens" is not so occupied with running the universe as not to be able to be concerned with the vicissitudes of ordinary little people. In short, the Lord God Almighty loves every single individual in a personal way. Is God Himself concerned with you and your life? Yes He is and the book of Ruth answers this question.

The book of Ruth is a part of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. An inconspicuous believer- a peasant woman, a convert like Ruth can achieve the status of royalty. God allows strange circumstances and a resolute obedience of faith combine to make Ruth the great-grandmother of

Israel's famous king David. Ruth thus becomes an ancestress to the king of kings.

### Time

"The days when the judges rules" (1:1) comprised an era extending over centuries. The last two accounts of Judges describe conditions that prevailed not long "after the death of Joshua." However, the events of Ruth's life evidently took place in the final decades of that turbulent age. There was as yet "no king in Israel" (Judges 17:6) But only two generations intervened between Ruth and David (4:17). Saul, the first king, was soon to be anointed by Samuel the last of the judges.

How Ruth Happened to...

I. Come to live in Bethlehem 1:1-22

II. Meet her future husband 2:2-23

III. Become Boaz's Wife 3:1-4:17

IV. Become David's Ancestress 4:18-21

How Ruth Happened to live in Bethlehem 1:1-22

1:1 **A famine** Before Ruth enters the plot of the story, a disaster occurred when the Judges ruled. It was the first link in a chain of circumstances that “happened to come” by divine providence to shape the heroine’s destiny. Likewise in our lives, what might seem to be by all outward circumstances as a disaster may often be a stepping stone for God to act on our behalf.

Brought on by a drought, plagues of locusts, or other natural causes, famines were not infrequently the cause of emigration in search of sustenance (cf. Genesis 12:10; 16:1; 41:56). In this instance the lack of food could have resulted from raids on the harvest by marauding nomads such as the Midianites and the Amalekites (Judges 6:3-6) Certain fields in the land may have been hit particularly hard and often.

**Bethlehem** The cupboard was bare even in a place called “the house of bread.” In ancient history this city was also referred to as Ephrathah just as the town of Poe, Indiana was at one time referred to as “Williamsport” and “Poeghkeepsie.” The story of Ruth begins with citizens of Bethlehem and ends with the Bethlehemite David (4:22) in whose house God “raised up a horn of salvation.” (Luke 1:68 f)

**Country of Moab** Literally “the fields of Moab.” People in search of food would naturally “seek out fertile areas” in a country. Moab consisted to a great extent a plateau, 3,000 feet high and scarred by deep ravines. In order to sojourn, and take up temporary residence there, the Bethelmites had to travel from their home, 6 miles south of Jerusalem, around the northern end of the Dead Sea and midway down its eastern shore--some 100 miles.

1:2 **Elimelech** A name often was chosen to describe a characteristic of its bearer. Elimelech means “my God is king” or “God is king.”

**Naomi** derived from a common noun meaning favor, delight, loveliness, beauty, is one who is regarded as having “favor with God and man” (see Luke 2:52; Psalms 90:17)

1:4 **Moabite wives.** The Moabites are not explicitly mentioned among the nations of Canaan with whom the Israelites were forbidden to intermarry (Deuteronomy 7:1-3) However, the Law decreed that a Moabite shall “not enter the assembly of the Lord even to the tenth generation (Deuteronomy 23:1) and yet the Lord allowed the wife of such a marriage become an ancestress of the Savior of all nations. (Ephesians 2:11-22)

**Orpah...Ruth** Because little is known of the Moabite language, it is difficult to determine the precise meaning of the wives’ names. Orpah is related to the Hebrew word for neck, used figuratively in the phrase “stiff necked or stubborn.” Ruth appears to be a contracted form of a noun which in Hebrew means “companionship, friendship, fellowship.” Also it is interesting to note that the famous talk show host was to be given the name “Orpah” but what appeared on her birth certificate was the name “Oprah!”

## 1:6-22 Emigration to Israel

1:6 **To return** It is not necessary to assume that Naomi’s sons were married at the beginning to the “ten year” of their Moabite sojourn. Not blessed with children, the marriages no doubt took place not long before their death and Naomi’s decision to return home.

1:8 **Mother’s house** Under their mothers’ care and direction, the widows would have assumed their premarital status, making them eligible for remarriage. Apparently their fathers--at least Ruth’s--still were living.

1:13 **Exceedingly bitter** The first part of this verse makes good and perfect sense if we render it as follows “For the bitter [fate that has overtaken] me is too onerous for you [to share it with me].”

Naomi advanced good reasons why her daughters-in-law had no prospect of establishing a home if they remained with her

(1) she was too old to bear sons whose duty it would be to enter a levirate marriage with them. (Genesis 38:8; Deuteronomy 25:5; Leviticus 18:18)

(2) even though she were to be married again and were capable of bearing sons, the widowed sisters could not be expected to “wait until they were grown. The hand of the Lord has gone forth,” striking her with such severe blows of adversity as to leave her future bleak with frustrations. Why should they want to throw in their lot with her?

Naomi humbled herself, perhaps not without some resentment, “under the mighty hand of God,” making it the source of all that happens. The hardest four words for us to pray today come from the Lord’s prayer “Thy will be done...” Naomi is living this petition.

**1:16 Where you go** Her sister-in-law’s compliance with Naomi’s directives did not deter Ruth from entrusting her future, as dark as it may be “to the Lord.” Naomi’s and Israel’s God. Her reply to Naomi may serve as a wedding text, as it often has, if a daughter-in-law’s faithfulness to her mother-in-law is made exemplary for the relationship of husband and wife.

**1:17 The Lord do** No longer a worshiper of Chemosh the Moabite national deity (Numbers 21:29) Ruth declared her readiness to “renounce all” by invoking the name of Israel’s covenant God to subject her to dire consequences in case she should break her vow. To see similar vows in which the formula “so much more also” set no limit to the punishment for unfaithfulness see 1 Samuel 14:44; and 2 Samuel 3:35.

**1:20 Mara** Before she left, Naomi had been the favored or lovely one. She returned a broken “empty” childless widow. The Almighty had dealt so bitterly with her that her present condition would be more aptly described if people called her “Mrs. Bitter.” Today how many believers have shared her pain? She did not realize that in His providence God was linking her name with Him who was to be given a name “which is above every name” because He was to “save His people from their sins.” Looking into the future Ruth is included in this number as you and I.

## **How Ruth met her Future Husband 2:1-23**

### **2:1-7 Chance Gleaning in the Field of Boaz**

**2:1 Boaz** The first chapter tells how “Ruth the Moabite” came to live in Bethlehem. Even there she could have remained an obscure widow if she had not come to know her future husband. His name is Boaz which means “in Him is strength.” This name occurs again only as the name of the left pillar of Solomon’s temple. (1 Kings 7:21)

**2:2 Glean** “The sojourner, the fatherless and the widow” were permitted to follow “after the reapers” (verse 3) gathering the stalks of grain which the latter had missed or dropped. (Leviticus 19:9; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19) This was a form of welfare where the poor were cared for out of the abundance of the nation’s wealth.

**2:3 Happened** Ruth’s destiny was shaped by a series of circumstance which appear to happen by chance. Not so! Her story demonstrated that there is no such thing as a blind fate. Designed by “the hand of the Lord,” (1:13) even the most insignificant turn of events is providentially intended to give each individual, whether peasant or king the chance to play a particular role in life. (see Luke 10:21; 1 Samuel 1:6; Exodus 2:14ff)

2:4 **Behold** It so “happened” that Boaz came upon the scene at the right moment to get acquainted with Ruth, of whom he had heard a good report. Question: Are there any “chance” meetings in life? Also, what sort of “report” do we receive?

2:7 **For a moment** Consider a literal translation from the Hebrew text: “This [that you see] her [now] sitting in the house [erected as a shelter for the harvesters] has been [only] for a little [time].”

### **2:8-16 Kind Treatment by Boaz**

2:8 **My daughter** Ruth was not disappointed in her hope to find a landowner in “whose sight” she might find favor. Boaz treated her, “a foreigner,” as a daughter, commending her for her kindness to her mother-in-law. He declared her deserving of a “full reward” from “the Lord, the God of Israel” under whose protecting “wings” she had “come to take refuge.”

Consider the care which Boaz gave to Ruth.

- (a) a place close to his maidens
- (b) protection against being molested
- (c) permission to quench her thirst from his reapers’ water supply.

2:11 **Left** Ruth’s leaving her homeland is reminiscent of Abraham who “by faith...went out, not knowing where he was to go.” (Hebrews 11:8; Genesis 12:1)

2:12 **Spoken kindly** Literally “spoken upon the heart” i.e. as tenderly as a lover speaks to the woman he is wooing. (Genesis 34:3; Hosea 2:14; Isaiah 40:2)

2:14 **Eat** Boaz accorded Ruth additional privileges, letting her

- (a) be his guest at lunch (verse 14)
- (b) “glean even among [better. “between”] the sheaves,” no longer “after the reapers” (verse 15)
- (c) carry off “bundles” the young men were deliberately to “pull out” for her (verse 16).

### **2:17-23 Disclosure of Boaz’s Relationship**

2:19 **The man’s name** Surprised that Ruth brought home almost a bushel of barley, considerably more than the normal yield of a day’s gleaning, Naomi concluded that “the Lord” in His “kindness” had directed her daughter-in-law to the field of “a relative.” If Boaz would act also in the capacity of a kinsman this chance meeting held prospects of additional and more permanent help. From the first, Ruth was to keep “close to the maidens of Boaz.”

2:23 **Barley and wheat harvests** During the three months of April, May, June

### **How Ruth Became Boaz’s Wife 3:1-4:17**

#### **3:1-5 Marriage Proposal Planned**

3:1 **Said** Naomi now took steps to accomplish what she evidently had in mind from the moment she heard of Ruth’s meeting a relative. “Too old to have a husband” herself the older widow contrived a way for her

daughter-in-law to approach Boaz with the request to assume the role of a kinsman, which meant entering a levirate marriage with her (1-5).

Not averse to the proposal, Boaz, however, deferred acting on it until “a kinsman nearer than” he had been apprised of his rights in the matter (6-13). Sending Ruth back to Naomi (14-18), Boaz at once took steps to clear up the situation. When the nearest of kin waived his right of redemption” (4:1-6), the prospective bridegroom had the fact publicly notarized that he was legally entitled to marry Ruth. At the same time he publicly obligated himself to acquire title to her dead father-in-law’s property, no doubt heavily encumbered with debts, in order to restore it to the family of Elimelech.

3:2 **Kinsman** A more discriminating translation would be “an acquaintance.” Naomi was hopeful that this distant relative would act in the capacity of kinsman, a redeemer.

3:4 **Lie down** Naomi instructed Ruth how to let Boaz know that she had not “gone after young men” in search of a husband but was quite willing to have him “do the part of the next of kin”, i.e. to marry her. Perhaps the Moabite daughter-in-law needed specific directions because she was not acquainted with this strange procedure. However, no parallels to it are known to confirm the supposition that it was an accepted custom even in Israel. The circumstances are unusual indeed, requiring drastic measures. Ordinarily marriages were contracted by the male head of the house. In this case a woman without a husband had to find a way for her widowed ward to propose a marriage which the law made obligatory for a kinsman. Boaz did not interpret Ruth’s action as a wily attempt to lure him into intercourse with her, thereby putting him under obligation to her. Whether Naomi was prepared to have Ruth take such a course, if necessary, cannot be determined.

### **3:6-18 Proposal Temporarily Declined**

3:7 **Heap** Taking advantage of an evening breeze, Boaz had been “winnowing barley” on “the threshing floor,” which was communal property. He slept there in order to guard “the heap of grain” which he had been unable to transport into his granary.

**His feet** The Hebrew word is not the usual noun for feet. Outside of this chapter it occurs again in Daniel 10:6 in the phrase translated “arms and legs.” The context suggests that Ruth “uncovered the place at his feet,” which here need not be a euphemism for male genitals.

3:9 **Your skirt** Literally your “wings.” Boaz had commended Ruth for taking refuge under the “wings” of the Lord, the God of Israel.” Now she asked her kinsman to let her find safety under his “wings.” However, she implied more. The same noun is used to denote the wings of a garment. The expression “to spread a skirt over” a woman means to take her into marriage. (see Ezekiel 16:8; Deuteronomy 22:30)

3:11 **Woman of worth** A general phrase denoting excellent qualities of various kinds. KJV says “virtuous” where RSV renders “a good wife”

3:15 **Six measures** The Hebrew (“six of barley”) does not specify what the measures were. Whatever its exact weight, the gift was so generous that he laid it upon her, i.e. helped her to get it on her shoulder or head.

### **4:1-12 Legal Status Clarified**

4:1 **The Gate** Boaz sat down there where court was held and business transactions were legalized, “the elders of the city” serving as witnesses, jury, and judge.

4:3 **Kinsman** The literal translation brother (KJV) is preferable. The term brother does not only denote a member of the same family but also a more distant relative. Leviticus 25:25 makes provision for a “brother” who has become poor.

4:4 **Besides you** There is no one who can dispute your claim to be “the next of kin.”

4:5 **Buying Ruth** KJV: “buy it [the field] also of Ruth” Boaz, who fully understood the situation explained to the prospective kinsman that Ruth too had a claim to the land (9). Its redemption obligated the kinsman to restore the name of the dead by marrying the childless widow. Legally the heir to the property, the first son of this marriage would perpetuate Elimelech’s son’s name.

4:6 **Impair** The kinsman was financially unable to assure responsibility for property other than the inheritance of his immediate family.

4:7 **Custom** Even though it was no longer in vogue, the writer knew the custom by which a voluntary transfer of property was publicly attested. In cases of a kinsman’s refusal to see to it that his obligations were discharged—as they were in this instance by Boaz, a more distant relative—the procedure was quite different (cf. Deuteronomy 25:7-10)

4:10 **Ruth...I have bought** He had acquired the legal right to marry her. The money paid for the field was the equivalent of the usual bride price. (Genesis 29:18)

4:11 **Rachel and Leah** The people invoked upon Ruth the blessing of such fruitfulness as made Jacob’s two wives the matriarchs of all Israel, the children of their maids, Bilhah and Zilpah, being reckoned as belonging to their mistresses. (Genesis 30:3)

4:12 **Perez** In offering their good wishes to the bridal couple the women mentioned a less known ancestor of Boaz (18-21) because he was born to Judah of Tamar, who like Ruth had lost her first husband. (see Genesis 38:1,8,15)

#### **4:1~17 Marriage Consummated**

4:17 **A name** It was not customary for the women of a community to name a child. However, the circumstances of Ruth’s marriage were very unusual too. Naomi treated her son as if he were hers. Obed, meaning “servant” was born to Naomi in the sense that through him her husband’s name would live on. God moved in a mysterious way to let Ruth, the Moabite peasant girl, become the great-grandmother of Israel’s great king David!

#### **How Ruth Became David’s Ancestress 4:18-22**

To officially verify Ruth’s status in Israel, the book closes with a genealogy, beginning with Perez and ending with her famous descendant David.

#### **Sources**

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