

History: **RUTH**

INTRODUCTION

In the midst of the biblical accounts of powerful judges, kings, the failure of Israel, and grand military battles comes the much smaller, more personal story of Ruth. Ruth is primarily the story of two widows: Naomi, an Israelite from Bethlehem, and her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth. The grief of losing their husbands, and of Naomi losing her two sons, is coupled with the stress of not being able to provide for themselves in ancient days as widows. They needed help, and that help came in the form of Boaz, a relative of Naomi's late husband, who "redeemed" Ruth by marrying her.

The story of Ruth is one of love, loyalty, and rescue. So, in this small-scale story, we see the overall themes of God's story in Scripture played out in the lives of ordinary people—people who became ancestors of King David and the true Redeemer, Jesus.ⁱ

IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING

Have you ever heard of a "kinsman redeemer"? That's not exactly a term we use frequently here in the 21st century. But in ancient Israel, a kinsman redeemer was someone who delivered a family member from difficult circumstances.ⁱⁱ One of the roles of the kinsman redeemer goes all the way back to Levirate Law in Deuteronomy 25:5-6. The kinsman redeemer had a responsibility to marry a widow in the family who did not have any heirs. By marrying a widow, he would then name their offspring after his wife's deceased husband so that the line or "name" of the family would continue.

BOOK ORGANIZATION

RUTH: Loyalty
Grief (Chapter 1)
Courtship (Chapter 2)
Engagement (Chapter 3)
Wedding (Chapter 4)

JESUS IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

The story of Ruth centers around the idea of a kinsman redeemer: one who will deliver someone who is experiencing difficult circumstances, whether a result of their own sin, sin done to them, or simply the overall brokenness of the world. Boaz was Ruth's kinsman redeemer, who at great cost to himself, saves Ruth from being a widow unable to provide for herself and Naomi. Boaz is a picture of Christ, who came to redeem humanity at great cost to Himself.

Ruth appears in the genealogy of Jesus listed in Matthew 1, as does Boaz's mother, Rahab. Yet both of them were Gentiles; they were not Israelites by birth. A common misconception when reading the Old Testament is thinking that God only cared about Israel. However, Ruth shows us that God is Lord of all, and He desires relationships with people of all nations, not just Israel; as, Ruth, a Moabite woman, is found in Jesus's family tree.

BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: HOW TO APPROACH THE BOOK OF RUTH

OBSERVATION

- The events take place during the period of the judges—a time marked by failure. Take note of how Ruth's story is a "glimmer of hope" that contrasts with the book of Judges.

INTERPRETATION

- Literary Context: Ruth is written in narrative form and could be considered a biography. It was written later, after the period of the judges ended (Ruth 1:1) and after Ruth's great-grandchildren were born (Ruth 4:21-22).

- Narrative Context: Boaz faithfully follows God's Law. For example, he allowed the poor foreigner Ruth to harvest the edges of his field (Leviticus 23:22) and married her as a kinsman-redeemer (Deuteronomy 25:5-6).
- Historical Context: The events take place during the period of the judges (Ruth 1:1), when there was no king and "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). It was a particularly difficult time to be in Ruth's position as a widow and a foreigner. Since King David is mentioned as one of Ruth's descendants at the end of the book, it was probably written after David became king in 1010 B.C.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Cultural Context: Some of the customs that were observed by people at that time may seem unusual to us today—and some were already considered old-fashioned even by the time the book was written, to the point that they had to be explained to the original readers (Ruth 4:7). But these customs were considered normal practices at the time they happened. Don't let unfamiliar gestures throw you off—if you aren't sure what's happening, consult a commentary or study Bible.

APPLICATION

- Following Boaz's example, how can you generously provide for others in need?
- How can you, like Ruth, care for and show love to someone who is grieving?
- The Book of Ruth shows God's love and care for the Nations. While He set Israel apart, through faith, individuals coming from other nations could enter God's family. Conduct a Spirit-led self-evaluation. Does your attitude toward the nations match God's attitude toward the nations?

PRAYER

- In what areas of life do you, like Ruth and Naomi, need God's supernatural provision? Ask God for what you need and trust in Him to provide.
- Spend time thanking God for redeeming you (Titus 2:11-14).
- Ask God to direct your steps. How can you engage with the nations locally or globally? What's your next best step when it comes to living missionally?

CHURCH HISTORY: WHAT HAS CHURCH HISTORY SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF RUTH?

"Christ alone, then, is the Bridegroom to Whom the Church, His bride, comes from the nations, and gives herself in wedlock; aforesaid poor and starving, but now rich with Christ's harvest; gathering in the hidden bosom of her mind handfuls of the rich crop and gleanings of the Word, that so she may nourish with fresh food her who is worn out, bereaved by the death of her son, and starving, even the mother of the dead people—leaving not the widow and destitute, while she seeks new children."—St. Ambrose of Milanⁱ, 350 AD

"And see what a great thing it is to comfort a lonely woman! Ruth, for her reward, is made an ancestress of Christ."—Jeromeⁱⁱ, 400 AD

"Ruth humbly owned herself unworthy of favors, seeing she was born and brought up a heathen. It well becomes us all to think humbly of ourselves, esteeming others better than ourselves. And let us, in the kindness of Boaz to Ruth, note the kindness of the Lord Jesus Christ to poor sinners." – Matthew Henry,^{iv} 1706



ⁱ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Book-of-Ruth.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/ruth/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/introduction-to-ruth/>

ⁱ <https://www.unionpublishing.org/resource/learning-to-read-the-bible-with-the-church-fathers/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.earlychristiancommentary.com/FathersScripIndex/texts.php?id=08001999>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-concise/ruth/2.html>