

# Ruth - Introduction & Background

## Title

The title of the book is named after Ruth who is the heroine of the story. It is better not to say that the book derives its name from the book's central character since commentators disagree as to whether Ruth was the book's central character. The Hebrew title of the book "Ruth" is a possible Moabite modification of the Hebrew word *reuit*. This word means "friendship or association." The LXX title *Routh* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew title. The Latin Vulgate title is *Ruth*. This title represents a transliteration of the LXX title *Routh*.

## Authorship

Although the book is anonymous, it is likely that Samuel is the book's author. Jewish tradition holds to Samuel as the author. For example, *Baba Bathra* 14b of the Babylonian Talmud attributes authorship of the book to Samuel. Also, "the attachment of the Book of Ruth to the Book of Judges in the twenty-two-book arrangement of the Hebrew Bible implies common authorship or compilation of the two books."<sup>4</sup> Some contend the writer could not have been Samuel since the book mentions David (4:17,22) and Samuel died (1 Sam 25:1) before David's inauguration (2 Sam 2; 5). However, this argument collapses upon recognizing that Samuel selected and anointed David (1 Sam 16) prior to the prophet's death (1 Sam 25:1). It was David's selection rather than his inauguration that made David stand out as a special person in Samuel's mind. Moreover, "the structure and unity of the book argue for it being the product of one writer rather than a composite put together by many hands over a long period of time."

## Date

Many argue that the book was written in the Solomonic era since the Jewish custom regarding the exchanging of the sandals had to be explained (4:7). However, because Solomon is not mentioned in the concluding genealogy, it seems better to conclude that the book was written in the early part of the kingdom era before Solomon's rise to power. Furthermore, because Samuel died before David's inauguration, the book was likely written in the earliest part of the kingdom era while Saul was still ruling. The book was probably written in between David's selection and anointing in 1025 BC (1 Sam 16) and Samuel's death (1 Sam 25:1). All things considered, a date of 1020 BC for the composition of the book would not be far from wrong.

## Audience and Era

The original recipients of the letter were the nation of Israel as a whole living under Saul's kingdom. The book was addressed to them and established the legitimacy of God's choice of David over Saul.

## Scope

The contents of the book transpired during the time of the judges (1:1), which elapsed in between 1350–1050 BC. Some attempt to find a more specific date for the book's events based upon the assumptions that Boaz was David's great-grandfather and the date of David's life span elapsed in between 1041–971 BC. According to this scenario, the events of the book transpired during the judgeships of Samson (1105–1085 BC) or Samuel (1115–1021 BC). However, this scenario seems difficult to maintain since Boaz is the Son of Salmon whose wife was Rahab the harlot (Matt 1:5). Rahab is portrayed as an adult at the time of the conquest and likely gave birth to Boaz not too long afterward. Thus, the three generations of Boaz, Obed, and Jesse would have to cover a period of 360 years (1400–1040 BC). Moreover, this scenario also assumes the genealogy is closed when it may be open and only represent a selection of influential people from David's lineage.

Others are confident that the events of the Book of Ruth took place during the judgeship of Gideon since 6:3-4 seems to mention a famine similar to how a famine is mentioned in Ruth 1:1. However, there were multiple famines throughout the era of the judges. Moreover, 6:3-4 may not be discussing a famine but rather only a food shortage due to regular Midianite invasions. All that can probably be said for certain regarding the time of these events is that "since Ruth was a great-grandmother of David, the Ruth narrative may have taken place in 1200 BC."

However, a duration can be assigned for the book's various units. According to 1:4, the section involving the Moabite sojourn (1:1-18) took place over ten years. Moreover, according to 1:22 and 2:23, the section occurring in the field of Bethlehem (1:19–2:23) transpired in a matter of months. Also, according to 3:2,8,14,18, the section occurring on the Bethlehem threshing floor (3:1-18) occurred in one day. Finally, according to 4:13-16, the section occurring in the city of Bethlehem (4:1-22) took place in one year.

## Christ in Ruth

Christ is apparent in the Book of Ruth in two ways. First, Boaz's temporal work of redemption prefigures Christ's eternal work of redemption. The word *goel* ("one who redeems" or "close relative") is found 13 times in the book mostly in reference to Boaz. Under the requirement of redemption of the land, the closest relative of the deceased was obligated to buy back the deceased's property if it was lost due to poverty or foreclosure so that it could remain in the family (Lev 25:25-28). Under the requirement of Levirate marriage, the closest relative of the deceased was also to marry the deceased's wife so that the name of the deceased would not die out (Deut 25:5-10). Boaz's willingness to fulfill the requirements prefigures Christ in three ways.

First, just as the kinsmen redeemer was to be the next of kin to qualify to perform the work of redemption (Deut 25:5,7-10; Ruth 2:20), Christ also became a member of the human race to qualify to become humanity's redeemer (John 1:1,14; Gal 4:4; Rom 1:2; Phil 2:5-8; 1

Tim 2:15; Heb 2:14,16-17; 10:51). Second, just as the kinsmen redeemer must have the means to pay the purchase price for the land (Ruth 2:1), Christ also paid the expensive price associated with redeeming lost humanity (1 Cor 6:20; 1 Peter 1:18-19). Third, just as Boaz was willing to be the redeemer (Ruth 3:11), Christ was similarly willing to redeem humanity (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 10:15-18; Heb 10:7; 1 John 3:16). In sum, just as Boaz took Ruth as a Gentile bride who he financially enriched, Christ also took a Gentile bride called the church that He spiritually enriches.

The second way that the Book of Ruth prefigures Christ is by speaking of how the messianic line was preserved. The book's concluding genealogy traces the lineage from Judah (Gen 49:10) to David (4:18-22) and therefore ultimately to Christ (Matt 1:5; Luke 3:32). Thus, in the Book of Ruth, Boaz functions as both the kinsmen redeemer and the one who continues the Davidic and Messianic lineage.

### **Historical Background**

There are at least three historical pieces of information that the reader must grasp before he can fully understand the message of the Book of Ruth. *First*, the Moabites were the notorious descendants of Lot (Gen 19:30-38) who lived Northeast of the Dead Sea. Because they worshipped Chemosh and opposed Israel's entrance into Canaan (Num 22-25), they were banned from entrance into Israel's public worship assembly (Deut 23:3-6). The Moabites engaged in continual battles with Israel throughout biblical history (Judges 3:12-30; 1 Sam 14:47; 2 Sam 8:11-12; 2 Kings 3:4-27). The story recorded in the Book of Ruth transpires roughly two centuries after the first of these battles and about 80 years before the second of these battles.

*Second*, the right of redemption (Lev 25:25-28) gave the next of kin the responsibility of buying back property that had been sold because of foreclosure due to poverty. The logic of this provision was to keep the property within the family. Because of Naomi's impoverished condition upon returning from Moab, she was powerless to regain her lost Bethlehem property absent the assistance of kinsmen redeemer Boaz. *Third*, under the principle of Leviratic marriage (Deut 25:5-10), the next of kin of a deceased man was to marry his widow and produce an offspring in order to prevent the deceased man's lineage and name from dying out. Because Naomi was too old to reproduce, her daughter-in-law Ruth continued the family name by marrying kinsmen redeemer Boaz and begetting Obed.

### **Structure**

One structural clue is noting how the two halves of the book accomplish different purposes. While the first two chapters focus on the relationship between Ruth and Naomi and demonstrate Ruth's love for Naomi, the second two chapters focus on the relationship between Ruth and Boaz and reveal Ruth's reward. Also, it is helpful to note how the setting changes as the reader moves from one chapter to the next. Chapter one takes place in

Moab. Chapter two takes place in the fields of Bethlehem. Chapter three takes place on a Bethlehem threshing floor. Chapter four takes place in the city of Bethlehem.

### **Key Themes**

Several important themes recur throughout the Book of Ruth. *First*, a dominant theme is *hesed*, which means kindness or covenant loyalty. It is used both in regard to God (1:8; 2:20) and Ruth (3:10). Such covenant loyalty exhibited in the Book of Ruth is to be contrasted with the covenant infidelity that existed throughout the era of the judges (21:25).

*Second*, the book deals with God's faithfulness to His own covenants. God's faithfulness to the seed aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant is evidenced through the preservation of the Davidic and messianic line (4:18-22). God's promise to bless the Gentiles (Gen 12:3) is seen in His blessing of Ruth the Moabitess. The curses for disobedience associated with the Mosaic Covenant (Deut 28:15-68) are seen in the famine that Israel was experiencing at the time as well as in the deaths of Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion. However, the blessing for obedience associated with the Mosaic Covenant (Deut 28:1-14) is seen in the way God blessed Ruth for honoring His covenant people.

*Third*, the book explains that obedience brings fullness and blessing. Naomi's lack of faith only brought her barrenness and bitterness. However, Ruth's covenant loyalty (1:16-17; 3:10) brought fertility and reward not only to herself (4:13,17) but also to Naomi (4:14-16).

*Fourth*, God's purpose in including the Gentiles in His redemptive program is well attested in the book. While Israel was in covenant rebellion as evidenced by the famine (1:1) as well as Mahlon and Chilion taking Moabite wives (Deut 23:3), God used a Gentile woman to continue the Davidic and messianic line thereby granting her a prominent place in the genealogy (4:18-22).

*Fifth*, the theme of emptiness and fullness (1:21) can be traced throughout the book. For example, Canaan is depicted as transitioning from famine (1:1) to harvest (1:22). Also, while Naomi is portrayed early on as losing her husband and sons and becoming bitter, she is portrayed as experiencing fulfillment as Obed's nurse at the end of the book. Similarly, while Ruth is depicted as widowed at the beginning of the book, she is rewarded through a husband, a son, and genealogical prominence at the end of the book. *Sixth*, the notion of *goel* or redemption is replete throughout book. "Various forms of the Hebrew words 'redeem,' 'redeemer,' 'redemption,' and 'kinsman-redeemer' are used 20x in the book, thus making redemption one of the book's key words."

*Seventh*, God's sovereignty is displayed throughout the book (1:6; 2:3, 12; 4:6,13). God is seen working behind the scenes in furtherance of His covenant purposes in the dark era of the judges. *Eighth*, prayer is a dominant theme. In the book, petitions are recorded from Naomi (1:9; 2:19-20), Boaz (2:4; 3:10), and the people of Israel (2:4; 4:11-12,14-15). *Ninth*, the book demonstrates God's grace. In the book, God not only blesses Ruth who was a

citizen of Israel's foreign enemy, but he also allows Boaz to become the kinsmen redeemer although he was not the closest relative (3:12).

### **Unique Characteristics**

The Book of Ruth boasts several outstanding characteristics. *First*, the redeemer motif appears over twenty times in the book. *Second*, the book represents one of two biblical books named after and expressly devoted to a woman. The other book is Esther, which differs from Ruth in a number of fundamental ways. *Third*, the book provides an OT portrait of Gentile faith.

*Fourth*, the book furnishes a graphic depiction of the Davidic lineage (Gen 38; 49:10; Ruth 4:12,17-22). *Fifth*, the book is filled with contrasts. They include Ruth and Orpah, Jew and Gentile, the nearest relative and Boaz, Elimelech and Boaz, emptiness and fullness, and famine and harvest. *Sixth*, the Book of Ruth furnishes the only biblical example of kinsmen redeemer who properly fulfilled his duty under the Levirate marriage provision. In this regard, Boaz stands in contrast to Onan who refused to fulfill his Levirate duty (Gen 38:8-9). *Seventh*, the book uses the name of God inordinately. His name is found 23x in 85 verses. For example, "Lord" or *Yahweh* is used 17x, "God" or *eloheim* is used 3x, and Almighty or *sadday* is used 2x.

### **Purposes**

Samuel had several purposes in mind when he wrote the book. *First*, he wrote to establish David's genealogical rights to the throne (4:18-22). The book shows God's sovereign actions in continuing the line from Judah (Gen 49:10) to Boaz to David. Such genealogical clarification would be necessary in David's day when Saul had been rejected by God as king resulting in Saul seeking to thwart David's accession to the throne. Samuel wrote the book after David's selection and anointing to show that David was God's choice to rule the nation in spite of the fact that David was not yet on the throne.

*Second*, he wrote in order to describe God's work in faithfully fulfilling His covenant purposes even in the dark era of the judges. *Third*, he wrote in order to vindicate the righteousness of Bethlehem after the unrighteous events involving the city of Bethlehem that took place in Judges 17-21. In other words, the Book of Ruth represents the "bright spot" in the Bethlehem trilogy. Such vindication of the city was necessary since it was to be the birthplace of David and eventually the messiah (Micah 5:2). *Fourth*, because David's ancestry is not given in 1-2 Samuel, he wrote in order to furnish David's ancestry.

*Fifth*, Samuel wrote in order to provide a historical bridge between the era of the patriarchs and the era of the monarchy. Interestingly, the genealogy connects Boaz to Judah rather than the Mosaic era. This arrangement shows that the Davidic kingdom has its roots in the unconditional seed promises given to Abraham rather than in the conditional Mosaic Covenant. *Sixth*, the book was written to hold up some of the virtues of the main characters that the author desires for his audience to imitate. For example, Ruth is called a

virtuous woman (3:11) on account of her commitment to her mother-in-law. Exaltation of such virtuous character was necessary in the dark judges era when positive role models were difficult to find (21:25).

### **Message**

In times of national covenant infidelity, God sovereignly used the faithfulness of an unlikely candidate (a female, Gentile, pagan, poverty stricken, widowed, Moabitess), who broke with her own pagan background (Gen 19:30-38; Deut 23:3-6) in order to embrace the people of Israel and their God, so He could create fullness out of emptiness and further the Davidic and messianic lineage promised in the seed aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant. Consequently, as a result of the Abrahamic Covenant's promise to bless those who bless Israel (Gen 12:3) and the Mosaic Covenant's promise of blessing for obedience (Deut 28:1-14), through the work of a kinsmen redeemer God rewarded her by giving her a new husband, son, and privileged genealogical position.

### **The Problem of Deuteronomy 23:3**

According to Deut 23:3, a Moabite, or any of his descendants up to the tenth generation, could not gain entrance into Israel's public assembly. How then could Ruth become a Jewish proselyte (1:16-17) since she was from Moab? One possible resolution is by noting that Ruth was a Moabite woman (1:22) and the prohibition of Deut 23:3 applies only to Moabite men. In this regard, the prohibition is similar to an earlier restriction aimed only at men. Deut 21:10-13 gives regulations regarding a man who takes a captive woman as his bride.

Furthermore, how could David become king of the nation after only three generations when he had Moabite blood in his veins? Perhaps David could become king since he was not purely a Moabite. Also, perhaps Deut 23:3 states the general principle without filling in all the exceptions (Matt 12:1-8). Maybe one unstated exception is that those Moabites, like Ruth, who demonstrated covenant faithfulness could enter the sanctuary.

### **Outline**

#### I. Sojourn to Moab (Ruth 1:1-22)

- (1) Three deaths: Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion (1:1-5)
- (2) Naomi's inability to provide husbands for her daughters-in-law (1:6-14)
- (3) Ruth's resolve to be with Naomi (1:15-18)
- (4) Naomi's bitterness as she returns from Moab to Bethlehem (1:19-22)

#### II. Ruth's plan to obtain food and her initial encounter with Boaz (Ruth 2:1-23)

- (1) God's sovereignty guides Ruth to Boaz (2:1-7)
- (2) Boaz assists Ruth (2:8-17)
- (3) Ruth reports to Naomi (2:18-23)

#### III. Naomi's plan to obtain security for Ruth (Ruth 3:1-18)

- (1) Naomi's plan to obtain security for Ruth (3:1-5)

- (2) Ruth's obedience and Boaz's response (3:6-13)
  - (3) Ruth returns to Naomi (3:14-18)
  - IV. Divine provision for Ruth (Ruth 4:1-22)
    - (1) Nearest kinsmen opts not to marry Ruth (4:1-7)
    - (2) Ruth's reward (4:8-22)
      - (A) Husband (4:8-12)
      - (B) Son (4:13-17)
      - (C) Genealogical prominence (4:18-22)
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### **Why Study This Book?**

The Book of Ruth is one of the most dramatic books of *prophecy* in the Bible. The ancient Jewish Scriptures often included Ruth with the book of the prophets (not the book of Judges, which is where it fits historically). The basic theme is that these 66 books are a single message system; every book, every name, every detail is there by design. In Ruth every detail not only carries this romance along, it also carries along the romance of redemption, and it gives us hints about God's plan (i.e., Kinsman-Redeemer; Israel and Church, etc.).

### **Approach (for any study of Scripture)**

There are multiple levels of study:

- (1) Primary application
  - Historical, an event that actually happened
- (2) Practical
  - Exegesis - what does the text say
  - Exposition - what does the text mean
  - Homiletic - the application to our own daily lives
- (3) Prophetic revelations
  - Mystical and prophetic insights
- (4) *Remez*
  - A hint of something deeper

### **Hermeneutics**

- Greek Model: Prophecy = Prediction → Fulfillment
- Hebrew Model: Prophecy = Pattern
  - Hebrews study the Scripture to identify patterns, not just what it says

Hosea 12:10: I have also spoken by the prophets, and I have multiplied visions, **and used similitudes**, by the ministry of the prophets.

— Similes, allegories, etc.

### **Critical Links in the Chain**

Bethlehem → The Cross → To the Crown → To the Throne of David

- Why is Bethlehem the City of David?
- Book of Ruth underscores what really happened at the Cross
- It confirms that Jesus is destined to be Crowned and sit on the Throne of David
- Explains the scene and events of Rev 5

Issues: The Kinsman-Redeemer; the distinction between the Church and the Nation Israel

### **The Book of Ruth**

- "In the days the judges ruled..."
- The Ultimate Love Story
- At the literary level
- At the prophetic, personal level
- One of the most significant books for the Church
- The Role of the Kinsman-Redeemer
- Essential pre-requisite to Revelation
- In the Jewish liturgy, the scroll of Ruth is read on *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks
- This is the only feast of Moses which uses *leavened* bread

### **Outline of Book**

- Ruth 1 - Love's Resolve — Ruth cleaving to Naomi
- Ruth 2 - Love's Response — Ruth gleaning
- Ruth 3 - Love's Request — The Threshing Floor Scene
- Ruth 4 - Love's Reward — The Redemption of both Land and Bride

### **Theme**

Redemption is a recurring theme in the book, but the primary purpose of the book appears to be to reveal how God often works providentially behind the scenes to bring His will to pass. God is mentioned in 23 of 89 verses of Ruth, in contrast to Esther, which also teaches the providence of God, but does not mention God at all.

Other purposes are to validate David as the first true, legitimate king of Israel, to illustrate the concept of a kinsman redeemer, and to show that the scope of God's grace in the OT

included Gentiles.