



## An Introduction to the Book of Ruth

### Author and Title

The book is named for its main character Ruth, a Moabite widow who married the Bethlehemite Boaz. She became an ancestor of King David (4:17 and 4:22), and thus an ancestor of the Messiah (Matthew 1:1 and 1:5-6). The author of Ruth is never named in the Bible. According to rabbinic tradition (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Bathra 14a-15b), Samuel is the author. This is unlikely, however, since Samuel died before David actually became king, and Ruth 4:17-22 implies that David's kingship was an established fact at the time of writing.

### Date

The mention of David (4:17), and his genealogy (4:18-22), places the writing after David's accession to the throne (2 Samuel Chapter 2) in circa 1010BC. The narrator's explanation of a custom once current <<*in former times in Israel*>> (4:7) distances him from the story's events, which occurred <<*In the days when the judges ruled*>> (1:1a). Therefore, the book could have been written any time after 1010BC by an author using accurate oral or written material as historical sources.

### Theme

This book highlights how God's people experience his sovereignty, wisdom and covenant kindness. These often come disguised in hard circumstances and are mediated through the kindness of others.

### Purpose

Given the Book of Ruth's interest in all Israel (4:7 and 4:11), it may have been written in hopes that the 12 tribes, which divided into two nations in circa 930BC (1 Kings 12:1-20), would reunite. The story itself takes place in the time of the judges, after the conquest and before circa 1050BC, before a king was in place to

reign over a united kingdom. This book explains the providential ancestry of David, who would become such a king.

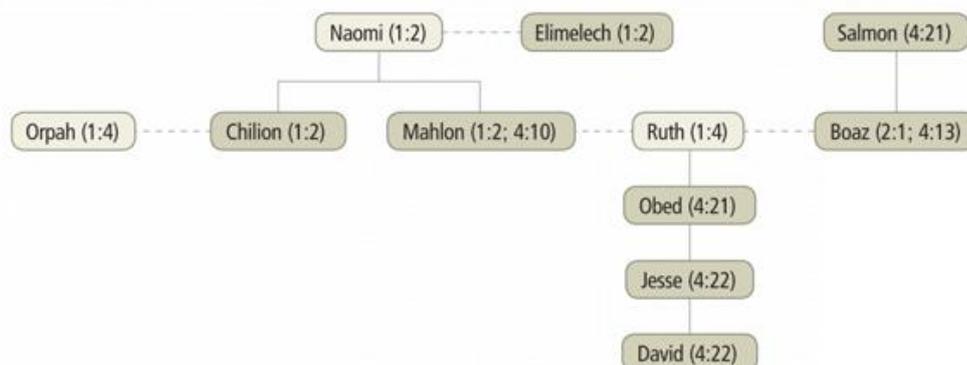
## Content

In the period of the judges, Elimelech, Naomi and their sons leave Bethlehem because of a famine to sojourn in Moab. Naomi's husband Elimelech dies there. Mahlon and Chilion, their sons, marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Ten years later the sons die too, leaving no children. Naomi is bereft of family (1:1-5).

Learning that the famine in Israel is over, she decides to return to Bethlehem; Orpah stays behind, but Ruth insists on accompanying Naomi (1:6-22). At harvest time, Ruth goes to glean in a field that happens to belong to Elimelech's relative, Boaz (2:1-23). Naomi knows he is an eligible kinsman-redeemer. Following Naomi's daring plan, in a midnight encounter at the threshing floor Ruth boldly asks him, as a redeemer, to marry her (3:1-18). After a closer kinsman refuses to take Ruth, Boaz redeems all the property of the deceased and marries Ruth (4:1-12). They have a son Obed, who becomes the grandfather of King David (4:13-22).

Ruth's words in the book, as compared with Naomi's or those of Boaz, are surprisingly few; the story, however, hangs on them. Ruth expresses her lifelong commitment to Naomi: <<**May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!**>> (1:17), which takes her from Moab to Judah. She resolves to provide for Naomi: <<**Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain**>> (2:2), which brings her from Bethlehem to a field belonging to Boaz. She invites Boaz to <<**spread your cloak over your servant**>> (3:9), which leads her from childless widowhood to marriage and motherhood (4:13).

Family of Ruth



## Key Themes

1. Kindness. Ruth shows Naomi kindness, Hebrew *hesed*, particularly in leaving her country and family to care for her mother-in-law (1:16-17 and 2:11), because she loves her (4:15). Then Boaz shows kindness in his welcome to Ruth, acting as a kinsman-redeemer (4:9-10), and marrying Ruth (4:13). Human kindness reflects the kindness or 'steadfast love' that the Lord shows

to his people; this is a reflection of Exodus 15:13, Deuteronomy 7:8-9, Psalm 103:4, 106:7, 106:10 and 136:10-15.

2. *Redemption* is bound to kindness and is at the heart of the story (2:20). Redeem, Hebrew *ga'al*; redeemer, Hebrew *go'el*; and redemption, Hebrew *ge'ullah*, appear 23 times. The Book of Ruth describes two legal institutions combined in one practice, which the Law of Moses does not require, namely, property redemption by a near kinsman and the 'levirate' marriage. Property redemption by a relative assured that land would not remain in perpetuity outside the family (Leviticus 25:23-25). Levirate marriage, from the Latin *levir* meaning 'husband's brother', involves a childless widow marrying her husband's brother to provide an heir for the dead husband (Deuteronomy 25:5-6). Differences in Ruth, as compared with these laws, reflect customs applicable to particular circumstances. Boaz, a close relative but not the closest, redeemed the property (Ruth 4:9), married Ruth (4:10 and 4:13), and fathered Obed (4:13 and 4:17), who became heir to the property of the deceased.

Once redemption occurred, Ruth and Naomi's desperate conditions radically changed (4:13-17). This reversal is highlighted by contrasts: living/dead (1:8 and 2:20); find/seek rest (1:9 and 3:1); pleasant/bitter (1:20); full/empty (1:21 and 3:17); last/first kindness (3:10). The resolution to the narrative conflict is the act of redemption by Boaz (4:9-10), resulting in blessing for Ruth in marriage, conception, and giving birth (4:13), and for Naomi in restored and nourished life in her old age (4:14-15). Redemption also brought blessing to the community (4:11-12) and, through David, to the nation (4:14 and 4:17).

### History of Salvation Summary

As a foreigner and ancestor of David (4:17), Ruth is a forerunner of the universal blessing that Christ's redemptive work ushered in. Many OT prophecies anticipate a new David, e.g. Jeremiah 33:15-17, Ezekiel 37:24, Hosea 3:5 and Zechariah 12:7-10, reigning over Israel and incorporating the Gentiles into his benevolent empire, e.g. Isaiah 55:3-5 and Amos 9:11-12. This expectation is fulfilled in David's 'son', Jesus the Christ or Messiah, as confirmed in Matthew 1:1-6, Luke 3:31-33, Acts 13:23 and Romans 1:3-5. In him, the 'Gospel' preached beforehand to Abraham (Genesis 12:3, Romans 15:8-12 and Galatians 3:8), that all nations will be blessed, is fully realised (Romans 4:9-12 and Galatians 3:7-9). Through Christ, David's throne is re-established forever (Acts 15:16, Revelation 3:7, 5:5 and 22:16). Christ's reign is universal (Matthew 28:18-20, Romans 1:5 and 15:8-12). In him, redeemed people of all nations, no longer strangers and aliens, become fellow citizens in God's household (Ephesians 2:11-22).

## Literary Features

In terms of compact storytelling, Ruth is a masterpiece of narrative art. It is densely packed, yet the charm of the book is evident even to the most unsophisticated reader. The Book of Ruth is the classic love story of the Bible. Few stories in the Bible are told from a woman's viewpoint, but in the story of Ruth, not only is a woman the protagonist but the world of the story is a woman's world, and the writer gives attention to feminine values and feelings. Of course Boaz in his role as kinsman-redeemer cuts a striking figure as a man who embodies the Lord's own kindness. The story exalts virtuous womanhood and strong manhood.

The overall genre is story or narrative, but several further subtypes converge as well. Ruth is a love story. It is also an idyll, i.e. a brief story describing a simple, pleasant aspect of rural and domestic life. As that definition suggests, Ruth has affinities with pastoral literature, and in this case the idealised rural world provides a setting for the idealised romance of the book: even though readers know from the first verse that the story is set in tumultuous times, these do not come into view. The story is also a hero story built around the life of an exemplary heroine as well as featuring an idealised male hero. Boaz is a rarity in the Bible, a character who gets a uniformly positive portrayal; most other characters reveal their flaws. But this reflects the literary function of Boaz as the embodiment of the Lord's kindness.

The plot of the story of Ruth is a quest story in which the stated goal is to find Ruth a home (1:9 and 3:1). The plot follows the conventional U-shape of literary 'comedy', with events first descending into potential tragedy and then rising to a happy ending as obstacles to fulfilment are gradually overcome.

## The Setting of Ruth

Set in the period of the judges, the Book of Ruth records how a famine in Judah forces Naomi and her husband to leave Israel and move to Moab, where their sons marry Moabite women. When Naomi's husband and sons die, she decides to return to her home in Bethlehem in Judah, and her daughter-in-law Ruth chooses to go with her.



Regional Map

### Outline

- I. Elimelech's Family Goes to Moab (1:1-5)
- II. Naomi and Her Moabite Daughters-in-Law (1:6-22)
- III. Ruth Meets Boaz (2:1-23)
- IV. Ruth and Boaz at the Threshing-Floor (3:1-18)
- V. The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth (4:1-12)
- VI. The Genealogy of David (4:13-22)
  - a. Conclusion: Naomi Blessed with a New Family (4:13-17)
  - b. Genealogy: Extended Blessing (4:18-22)