**Introduction to the Book**

**of Ruth**

**SUMMARY**

The book of Ruth tells the story of three people: Naomi, a widow from Bethlehem in Judah; Ruth, her daughter-in-law from Moab; and Boaz, a gentleman farmer from Bethlehem. Ruth, in a supreme act of devotion, follows Naomi home from Moab and there meets Boaz, Naomi's close relative. Boaz understands that Ruth, though a foreigner, is a woman of worth. Through a scheme of Naomi to send Ruth to meet Boaz in secret, and through the cleverness of Boaz, who claims Ruth before the city elders, Boaz and Ruth marry and have a child, thus insuring the continuation of the Davidic line that eventually leads to the birth of Jesus.

**SO WHAT?**

The book of Ruth shows how the actions and commitments of ordinary and even unexpected people such as foreigners and widows can change the course of history for the better. The book helps the reader redefine family, appreciate the significant role of the righteous foreigner, and look to the importance of living up to the spirit rather than the letter of the law. God works through the actions of a widow, a foreigner, and a wealthy farmer to bring about the birth of the grandfather of King David, which ultimately leads to the birth of Jesus.

**WHEN WAS IT WRITTEN?**

Ruth is an independent narrative that might have been written any time from David's reign to postexilic times. Some suggest that the emphasis on the righteous foreign woman (Ruth) was specifically intended to counter the attitude toward foreign women found in the postexilic period of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 10:1-5; Nehemiah 13:1-3).

**WHAT'S IT ABOUT?**

The book of Ruth tells the story of how a widow, Naomi; her daughter-in-law from Moab, Ruth; and a wealthy farmer from Bethlehem, Boaz, make possible the birth of Obed, the grandfather of King David.

**HOW DO I READ IT?**

The book of Ruth, like so many of the individual narratives in Genesis through Kings, uses action, dialog, suspense, humor, irony, and an acute sense of human character to illustrate lessons of history and theology. Readers should attend to understanding the characters, the settings, and the major themes as well as repeated or emphasized ideas or words.

AUTHOR: [Diane Jacobson, Professor of Old Testament](http://www.enterthebible.org/contributors.aspx?rid=918)

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**Issues to Look for and Consider**

• **Famine, grain, and fullness.** Food plays a major role in the book of Ruth. It begins ironically with famine in Bethlehem, which in Hebrew means "house of food." Each subsequent scene transition is marked by a mention of grain or food: Naomi hears the Lord has ended the famine; the harvests begin and continue; Ruth gleans; Boaz shares a meal with Ruth and sends grain home to Naomi; Ruth shares food and grain with Naomi. This imagery helps the reader consider the movement of the entire book from famine to birth and fullness. The movement occurs both in the life of Naomi and in the life of the entire nation, who move in this book from the period of the judges to the time of the kings. Readers are invited to consider how and why life moves from emptiness to fullness, including the role of God and the loving behavior of ordinary people.

• **Genre.** The book of Ruth is best read as a biblical short story told about Israel's ancestors, much like the stories about Joseph. The details are important not so much for their historical accuracy as for what they tell us about how God works through ordinary people for the good of all. The major historical claim is that David had a Moabite great-grandmother.

• **Israel's relationship with Moab.** Moab was one of Israel's most hated enemies. When Israel was wandering in the wilderness in Numbers 21-33, Moab refused to give the people food and passage through their land. They even hired Balaam to curse Israel. For this reason Moabites were not allowed to enter the assembly of the Lord (Deuteronomy 23:3-5). In the book of Ruth, when Elimelech and his family went to sojourn in Moab and especially when his sons married Moabite women, the ancient reader would have found this very questionable, even treasonous behavior. Ruth, in the book, is always spoken of as Ruth the Moabite, to remind the reader of her nationality. Yet through her loyalty and generosity, Ruth is shown to be a worthy woman (3:11). She is compared to the matriarchs of Israel (4:11) and becomes the instrument of Naomi's fulfillment (4:15). Moreover, David is shown to have a Moabite great-grandmother, thereby inviting readers to consider the value and importance of righteous foreigners, a point emphasized once again by Matthew through the women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1-17).

• **The levirate system of insuring family lines.** In ancient Israel, continuing the family line was of paramount importance, especially in order to insure that family property stays in the family. Deuteronomy 25:5-10 presents the law of the levirate whereby the childless widow of a deceased brother is given in marriage to the living brother. The firstborn son of the new union continues the dead brother's name and thus inherits the property. Additionally, the widow is not left without family. When Naomi loses her husband and sons, she dreams aloud to her daughters-in-law about such a possibility and then dismisses it as impossible (Ruth 1:12-24). Ironically, Boaz, in chapter 4, makes use precisely of this system to claim Ruth and make possible the birth of Obed. Though not technically a brother, Boaz stretches the law to apply to the next-of-kin, thus fulfilling the spirit rather than the letter of the law.

• **The life of a foreign woman.** An unmarried, childless foreign woman living in Israel, outside of the protection of her father's home, would have been an outcast--particularly a woman from an enemy country such as Moab. She would have had no status and no means of making a living except possibly prostitution. In fact, one of the Hebrew words for "prostitute" is the very word for "foreign woman" that Ruth applies to herself (2:10). But Ruth chooses a different way. She first gleans the grain left for the poor, and then she lays claim to a family connection with Boaz, risking being mistaken for a prostitute. The reader, like Boaz, must see nobility rather than shame in her actions at the threshing floor, much as Judah must recognize righteousness in the actions of Tamar in Genesis 38. Thus the women at the gate compare Ruth to Tamar (Ruth 4:12).

• **The life of an Israelite widow.** Widows in Israel did not have an easy life. They are most often grouped together with orphans, sojourners, and the poor, all groups on the fringes of society that need protection. They were frequently considered objects to be pitied and burdens on society, particularly if they were childless as well. Widows possibly felt some level of guilt for what had befallen them. Thus Naomi, renaming herself Mara, which means "bitter," identifies herself as empty and deserted by God (1:20-21). And yet in the book of Ruth, the two widows, Naomi and Ruth, become the active agents of positive change, showing that God uses unexpected people in unexpected ways.

• **The role of the next of kin.** The "next of kin" in ancient Israel was called a go'el, which can also be translated "redeemer." This nearest relative or redeemer was intended to protect the property and honor of the family and also to act the part of the "redeemer" in the levirate system of marriage by marrying a dead brother's widow and having a child in his name. In the final two chapters of the book of Ruth, this Hebrew word for "redeemer/next-of-kin/redeem" (appearing both as a noun and a verb) occurs twenty-one times. The issue is who will redeem/buy back/act as next of kin for Ruth, Naomi, and ultimately for Israel. Boaz first comes forward as the dependable redeemer rather than the nearest next of kin. In the final use of go'elin the book of Ruth, the women apply it to the child born to Ruth, declaring that the Lord has not left Naomi without a next of kin (4:14).

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**Theological Themes:**

•**Blessing.** Blessings occur seven times in the book of Ruth, from Naomi blessing both her daughters-in-law (1:8) and Boaz (2:19-20), to Boaz's casual blessing of his workers (2:4) and deeper blessing of Ruth (3:10), and climactically to the women blessing the Lord for the birth of the child (4:14). These blessings point out how God works in the lives of the people and in history.

• **Commitment and loyalty.** Unlike in the previous period in Judges, in which everyone "did was right in their own eyes," the three major characters of the book of Ruth act out of loyalty, love, and a deep sense of righteousness. Such values and actions make possible the eventual birth of David, thus insuring the survival of the nations through their individual acts of kindness.

• **Family ties.** The book of Ruth helps to redefine family, centering not on blood relationships but rather on acts of loyalty and love. The book, which begins with the death of Naomi's blood family, shows that what constitutes family is not necessarily evident. The plot hinges first on Naomi, then on Boaz, and finally on the whole community, recognizing Ruth the Moabite as crucial to the family. The book ends with the birth of a "mixed blood" child becoming the "next of kin," ushering in the continued family of David.

• **How God acts.** God does not act or speak directly in the book of Ruth. Rather God's hand is discerned in such accidental occurrences as Ruth's happening on the field of Boaz, in the righteous actions of the people, and in the blessing bestowed on and by the various characters of the book.

• **Lament.** The blessings of Ruth are balanced by the very real and moving lament of Naomi when she returns as Mara, "bitter," to Bethlehem (1:20-21). Naomi's lament is reminiscent of laments in Psalms and Job. Through the lament, sorrow is given voice and placed before God.

• **The role of the foreigner.** Throughout Israel's history the foreigner plays a double role. One is as enemy, but righteous foreigners like Ruth the Moabite also regularly arise and play significant roles in Israel's history. Such characters as Ruth remind the people that foreigners not only deserve care, but also that these foreigners themselves build toward God's promised future.

• **The spirit of the law.** Several laws from Leviticus and Deuteronomy play a role in the book of Ruth, including the law of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) and the law of leaving gleanings for the poor (Leviticus 19:9; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:21). At the heart of the use of the law in the book is the principle of taking care of the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the poor through attending to the spirit rather than the letter of the law. In so doing, blessings return to the community as a whole.

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Background on Moab

**Origins of Moab**

**Genesis 19:30-37**  30 ¶ Now Lot went up out of Zoar and settled in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to stay in Zoar; so he lived in a cave with his two daughters. 31 And the firstborn said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the world. 32 Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father." 33 So they made their father drink wine that night; and the firstborn went in, and lay with her father; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose. 34 On the next day, the firstborn said to the younger, "Look, I lay last night with my father; let us make him drink wine tonight also; then you go in and lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father." 35 So they made their father drink wine that night also; and the younger rose, and lay with him; and he did not know when she lay down or when she rose. 36 Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. 37 The firstborn bore a son, and named him Moab; he is the ancestor of the Moabites to this day.

**Moab and Wilderness Wanderers**

**Numbers 22:3-6**  3 Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were so numerous; Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel. 4 And Moab said to the elders of Midian, "This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field." Now Balak son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time. 5 He sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor at Pethor, which is on the Euphrates, in the land of Amaw, to summon him, saying, "A people has come out of Egypt; they have spread over the face of the earth, and they have settled next to me. 6 Come now, curse this people for me, since they are stronger than I; perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land; for I know that whomever you bless is blessed, and whomever you curse is cursed."

**Ethnic & Religious Cleansing of Israelites from their Moabite Wives**

**Ezra 9:1-2**  NRS **Ezra 9:1** ¶ After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the **Moabites**, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. 2 For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way."

**Nehemiah 13:23-31**  23 ¶ In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and **Moab;** 24 and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples. 25 And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. 26 Did not King Solomon of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. 27 Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?" 28 ¶ And one of the sons of Jehoiada, son of the high priest Eliashib, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; I chased him away from me. 29 Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, the covenant of the priests and the Levites**. 30 ¶ Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign,** and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; 31 and I provided for the wood offering, at appointed times, and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

**Nehemiah 13:1-3**  NRS **Nehemiah 13:1** ¶ On that day they read from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, 2 because they did not meet the Israelites with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them-- yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. 3 When the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.

No Moabite to enter the house of God…

**Deuteronomy 23:3-6**  3 ¶ No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD, 4 because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. 5 (Yet the LORD your God refused to heed Balaam; the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loved you.) 6 You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live.

The book of Ruth was written for the people of Judah, the southern kingdom, as they pondered the beginnings of the line of David, their royal family. It uses a story about Judah's historical roots to illumine the values of loyalty, loving-kindness, and care for the stranger, which the author hoped would govern the later life of Judah (much as Americans tell stories about George Washington not lying about chopping down a cherry tree to show that we value telling the truth). The book of Ruth looks back to the period between the rule of Israel's judges or charismatic leaders and the birth of David, marking the beginning of the rule of kings. By the end of the time of the book of Judges, the loosely bound tribes of Israel had no leader and were chaotically fighting among themselves. This was expressed in the repeated and final refrain of Judges 21:25, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." The promised future was possible only through the rule of a just king.

The book of Ruth assumes knowledge of village life in rural Judah, including patterns of planting and harvesting, gleaning and threshing; the manner in which the city elders gathered at the village gate to govern and issue decisions about village life; and village traditions and laws. The latter included laws of property, gleaning, and levirate marriage. The book also assumes and tries to correct a widespread suspicion of foreigners, particularly from enemies like the Moabites.