

## 1 Ruth Overview

### Written by whom?

The author is unknown. Jewish tradition suggests that it was Samuel, but it is unlikely that he is the author because the mention of David (at the end of the book) implies a later date.

### Written when and where?

The literary style of Hebrew used suggests that it was written during the period of the monarchy. The story itself is set during the time of the judges, 1380 to 1050 BC. The book of Judges speaks of the people of Israel as living in a period of religious and moral failure, a fractured nation and general oppression by surrounding nations. The people repeatedly turned away from God, and there was no strong central government or leader. The book of Ruth is set during a temporary time of peace between Israel and Moab.

### Written to whom?

It is not written to a specific people, but was most likely written during David's reign as a retelling of his family history.

### What form?

This is a Hebrew short story. It is considered a historical narrative. It is very symmetrical, moving through four short episodes from distress to a closing account of relief and hope.

### What's it about?

There is a strong emphasis on redemption. Naomi is the center of this redemption, as she is transformed from despair to happiness through the selfless, God-blessed acts of Ruth and Boaz. Naomi moves from emptiness to fullness. In the same way, Israel was transformed from national desperation at the death of Eli (the leader of the temple and priests) to peace and prosperity (in the early days of Solomon) through the leadership of David.

The author uses Ruth's unswerving and selfless devotion to Naomi, who is desolated by the loss of her husband and sons, as a way to show the concept of divine providence. The book also homes in on Boaz's kindness to these two widows. The author presents these lives as examples of those that show, in their everyday life, the self-giving love that fulfills God's law.

## 2 Ruth Chapter 1 – Scripture Questions

1. Why did Elimelech, Naomi's husband, move his family to Moab? (vs. 1)
2. What terrible things happened to Naomi and her daughters-in-law? (vs. 3-5)
3. Why did Naomi decide to return to her homeland? (vs. 6)
4. What did Naomi urge Orpah and Ruth to do? (vs. 8, 9)
5. After the first refusal to leave, what did Naomi say that convinced Orpah to return to her parent's home? (vs. 11-14)
6. What promises did Ruth make to Naomi? (vs. 16-18)
7. How did the people of Bethlehem react to the sight of Naomi? (vs. 19)
8. Why did Naomi change her name? (vs. 20, 21)
9. When did Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem? (vs. 22)

### 3 Ruth Chapter 1 – What Did it Mean to Them?

The story opens during the time of the judges, who were military leaders and local rulers, taking care of political and legal justice. It was, in general, a time of lawlessness and chaos. The story begins with a famine, a natural catastrophe that occurred often in Palestine. It was probably widespread. 'Bethlehem in Judah' was about six miles south of Jerusalem. The name means 'house of bread' and probably referred to the normal fertility of the ground. Moab was a land that lay east of the Dead Sea, and most of the area receives adequate rain.

Marriages with Moabites were not specifically forbidden by the law, but they couldn't participate in the religious life of the people until they had been there for at least ten generations. There was an immense amount of hostility between the nations, beginning when the Israelites invaded with Joshua. There is a marker dating from 830 BC that boasts of the massacre of entire Israelite towns.

Naomi's attempt to convince her daughters-in-law to return to their mother's tents (so that they could remarry) assumed what is called the law of levirate marriage. This law provided for the marriage of a childless widow to a brother-in-law, and was a way of protecting the women and continuing the line of the deceased man. As foreigners, Orpah and Ruth would have faced a difficult task in remarrying in Israel.

In ancient times, it was believed that deity had power only in the geographical region occupied by his or her worshippers. So, to leave one's land meant separation from one's gods. Ruth's commitment to Naomi was not just to her person, but a commitment to leave her gods and commit herself to the Almighty.

Naomi's name change was a common practice, to change a name to reflect changed circumstances. She asked that her name be changed from Naomi ("Pleasant") to Mara ("Bitter"). She believed that God had, for some unknown reason, made her life very bitter. She did not mean it as an accusation but as an acknowledgement of his total control of all things. Naomi probably shared the Israelite belief that God blessed the righteous and brought trouble on the unrighteous.

The two women arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the season of barley harvest, in the eighth month of the agricultural calendar, probably April or May.

## 4 Ruth Chapter 1 – Application Questions

1. The story of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz had probably been told and retold in David's family. What meaningful story (or stories) have been told and retold in your family? Why do you think these stories are important?
2. Ruth was willing to give up everything to stay with Naomi: her family, her homeland, her gods, her hope of remarrying. What makes us willing to change our lives and give up everything?
3. Naomi faced some horrible events in her life. She asked to be called "Bitter". What are the things that can make people bitter, and how do we stop bitterness from overtaking us?
4. Ruth showed incredible, unexpected loyalty to Naomi. What is it about certain people that inspires us to loyalty?

## 5 Ruth Chapter 2 – Scripture Questions

1. How is Boaz, Naomi's relative on Elimelech's side of the family, described? (vs. 1)
2. Where did Ruth decide to look for work? (vs. 2)
3. What did Boaz ask his foreman? (vs. 5)
4. How did the foreman describe Ruth? (vs. 6, 7)
5. What special privileges did Boaz give Ruth? (vs. 8, 9)
6. How did Ruth respond to the kindness of Boaz? (vs. 10)
7. Why was Boaz so kind to Ruth? (vs. 11, 12)
8. After they had lunch together, how did Boaz instruct his servants? (vs. 15, 16)
9. How did Naomi react to the news about Boaz's kindness to Ruth? (vs. 20)
10. Why did Naomi want Ruth to stay in Boaz's fields? (vs. 22)
11. How long did Ruth work the harvest in Boaz's fields? (vs. 23)

## 6 Ruth Chapter 2 – What Did it Mean to Them?

The author uses the introduction of Boaz and his relation to Naomi as a sign of hope. The previous chapter ended with Naomi's name change, from 'Pleasant' to 'Bitter', and this section begins with a potential kinsman-redeemer.

Although Ruth is an alien and, as a young woman alone, obviously quite vulnerable in the harvest fields, she bravely sets out to provide for her mother-in-law. The law of Moses instructed landowners to leave what the harvesters missed so that the poor, the alien, the widow and the fatherless could glean for their needs (Leviticus 19:9, 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19). At the time of harvest, it was the custom for the men to cut the grain and for the servant girls to go behind them to bundle the grain stalks up, tie them together, and stand them up for gathering later. Anything that fell on the ground was free for others to pick up.

It is clear from the greetings between Boaz and his laborers that he was a godly man with a kind spirit. Ruth's commitment to care for Naomi had reached Boaz, and he was impressed enough with her that he gave her permission to work alongside his servant girls. This would have given Ruth standing with the other women and provided safety for her in the fields.

Redemption is a key concept in Ruth. The kinsman-redeemer was responsible for protecting the interests of needy members of the extended family: to provide an heir for a brother who had died, to redeem land that poor relatives had sold outside the family, to redeem a relative who had been sold into slavery, or to avenge the killing of a relative. Naomi is encouraged when she hears that the Lord has led Ruth to the fields of a relative who might serve as their kinsman-redeemer. This moment of Naomi's awakened hope is the crucial turning point of the story.

## 7 Ruth Chapter 2 – Application Questions

1. Ruth is determined to care for Naomi, bravely going among strangers and accepting the risk as a young immigrant woman alone in an unknown land. Is there anything about this image that we can use for ourselves? Do you ever see yourself, or feel like, a stranger in a strange land? If so, how can we be like Ruth?
2. Boaz is an example of a person who lives the values of his faith. What can we do to be 'kinsman-redeemers' to those in our church who need to be cared for or protected?
3. Naomi was surprised by the generosity of Boaz, and quick to recognize the potential for Ruth. Her spirit begins to be hopeful. Has anything happened recently that gives you hope for the future, either for yourself, our church, or Christianity in general?
4. The author of the book is clearly writing so that we can see the hand of God in the lives of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. Do you believe that God has a giant script that we are all blindly living out? Why or why not?

## 8 Ruth Chapter 3 – Scripture Questions

1. Harvest done, what was Naomi's urgent concern for Ruth? (vs. 1)
2. What instructions did Naomi give to Ruth? (vs. 2-4)
3. How did Ruth respond to Naomi's instructions? (vs. 5, 6)
4. When did Boaz notice Ruth's presence? (vs. 8)
5. What did Ruth ask Boaz to do? (vs. 9)
6. How did Boaz answer Ruth's request? (vs. 11-13)
7. What did Boaz do to protect Ruth's reputation? (vs. 14)
8. What gift did Boaz give to Ruth before he returned to town? (vs. 15)
9. When Ruth returned home, what did Naomi ask? (vs. 16)
10. After all this, what did Naomi tell Ruth to do? (vs. 18)



## 9 Ruth Chapter 3 – What Did it Mean to Them?

Naomi is beginning to be hopeful. All throughout the seven or so weeks of harvest, Ruth has been gleaning in Boaz's fields. Boaz had treated her favorably, and it seems that everyone who came to know Ruth was impressed by her hard work and her care for Naomi. Now that the harvest is over, Naomi knows that the time is right for Ruth to make her request for protection.

In many parts of this ancient world, the end of harvest was celebrated with parties and sexual abandonment. There were even fertility rituals that would be enacted on the threshing floors, attempting to draw the attention of the gods responsible for making the next season fruitful. Many children were born nine months after the end of harvest!

Naomi and Ruth were taking a calculated risk by their actions. Ruth prepared herself as a bride and offered herself as a marriage partner. The phrase "uncovered his feet" is a euphemism for the action that she took: she made herself sexually available to Boaz. The phrase "Spread the corner of your garment over me" is a marriage offer. The risk was that he would simply use her and abandon her. The potential outcome was that he would marry her.

Because he was a good, upright man, he not only accepted her offer but protected her reputation. She stayed with him the rest of the night, but he sent her away in the early morning. This also protected his reputation. While it was usual for landowners to stay in the threshing floor to protect the grain from theft, threshing-floor parties were common enough that if Ruth were seen leaving, people would assume that Boaz had been having a sexual encounter with her. Since he had accepted the role of kinsman-redeemer, he was responsible not only to marry her (or to see that she was married), but to gain back the lost family property and protect the family name. All that remains now (for Naomi and Ruth, at any rate) is to wait.

## 10 Ruth Chapter 3 – Application Questions

1. Naomi was hopeful once again. But she didn't just wait: she made a plan and took action. Yet many verses, like Psalms 130:6, say "I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning." How do we navigate the space between waiting for the Lord and making our own plans?
2. Ruth seems to have been very obedient (or at least very compliant) as well as loyal and hardworking. In this country, we prize independence and self-reliance. What advantages does Ruth gain by her obedience? What do we lose by our reluctance to be obedient to others, especially those older than us?
3. Ruth took a risk by showing up at night at Boaz's threshing floor. Things could have turned out badly for her if Boaz had been a different person. What place does taking risks have in serving God? Does God want us to take the riskier or the safer paths? How can we know when to take risks?
4. Do you feel as if Naomi and Ruth took advantage of Boaz? Did they "trap" Boaz into helping them? Why or why not?

## 11 Ruth Chapter 4 – Scripture Questions

1. How did Boaz begin the process of redeeming Ruth and Naomi? (vs. 1, 2)
2. How was the negotiation with the kinsman-redeemer handled? (vs. 2-4)
3. What was the “Oh, by the way” issue that Boaz threw into the discussion? How did the unnamed relative react to the news? (vs. 5, 6)
4. What odd thing did Boaz and the relative do to seal the deal? (vs. 7, 8)
5. What announcement did Boaz make to the elders and the people who were witnessing the transaction? (vs. 9, 10)
6. How did the elders and witnesses react to Boaz? (vs. 11, 12)
7. What happy event occurred after Boaz and Ruth were married? (vs. 13)
8. How was Ruth described by the women who attended the birth? (vs. 15)
9. Who is named as the mother of Obed? (vs. 17)
10. How many generations are listed between Perez and David? (vs. 18-22)

## 12 Ruth Chapter 4 – What Did it Mean to Them?

In ancient Israel, the town gate was a type of ‘town hall’. This was the normal place for business and legal transactions, and there were normally plenty of witnesses available. Boaz gathered ten elders, which was a full court for legal proceedings.

There are two possible reasons for the selling of the land. First, it is possible that Naomi owned the land but was so poor that she was forced to sell. In this case, it was the duty of the kinsman-redeemer to buy any land in danger of being sold outside the family. Second, Naomi did NOT own the land (it may have been sold to finance the family’s resettlement in Moab) but by law she retained the right of redemption to buy the land back. Since she did not have the money herself, she would have been dependent on a kinsman-redeemer to do it for her.

After Boaz let the unnamed relative know that Ruth was part of the package, the relative rejected the land—and Ruth. He may have been afraid that if Ruth’s son was his ONLY son, that all of his family’s land and property would then be transferred to the family of Elimilech. Boaz ran this risk, too.

The process of taking off a sandal and passing it to a party in the transaction was a way of publicly renouncing one’s property rights and passing them to another. It may be related to an ancient practice of walking barefoot on property that was purchased.

Perez was Boaz’s ancestor. Perez was an appropriate model, because he was born to Judah from a union based on the levirate practice. The tribe of Judah had become an important one. So the blessing of the elders was a preparation for the lineage recited at the end of the book.

## 13 Ruth Chapter 4 – Application Questions

1. Boaz doesn't hesitate to use his standing in the community to do good things for people who are on the margins of society. How can we use our standing, whatever it is, to benefit those who are on the margins of our society?
2. Like family relationships, church member relationships can be very complicated. How important is it to straighten out problems between members? Is it okay to simply let some problems continue?
3. Ruth lived in a patriarchal society. Our society is more egalitarian—equality between people—(at least in law, if not in fact). What should be the Christian attitude toward different cultures or ways of living?
4. Many people today are enjoying finding out about their genealogy, researching ancestors. How is it helpful to know your background? How can it be harmful? What about our church's background? What are the pros and cons of knowledge about our history?