

Ruth

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Author

Technically, the author is anonymous because none is listed. The Jewish Talmud (rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, customs and history that was written about 200 AD) gives the authorship to Samuel, but it is difficult to prove their conclusion. Early copies of the Hebrew Torah had Ruth placed right after the book of Judges the same as the Christian Old Testament probably because it is a story from the time of the judges. Scholars say that there is internal evidence that the author could have been Samuel or one of his contemporaries.

Date

The beginning of the book indicates that the story happened during the time of the judges, probably the latter part of the time period (1200 – 1140 BC). But since the book ends with a genealogy from Boaz and Ruth to David, it could not have been written before he was born (1078 BC) and more probably not until he was made king of all Israel around 1048 BC.

Purpose

In the book of Judges, we see God dealing with the unfaithfulness of the nation as a whole by bringing judgment upon them from surrounding nations and showing mercy to them when they repented from their disobedience. The last four chapters of Judges, using stories about the Ephraimites, the Benjamites, and the people of Bethlehem, shows how the internal moral corruption of the people brought them to fighting among themselves as well as fighting the nations around them. The book of Ruth now shows that, in the midst of this time of rebellion, there was still a remnant of people who followed God's law and gave him the glory in the midst of their trials. The book shows the genealogy of David which would otherwise be unknown. It shows how God takes care of those who trust him. The book also beautifully illustrates the theological concept of redemption using the concept of the kinsman-redeemer.

Chapter 1 – Naomi's predicament

Verses 1 – 5. Naomi, her husband (Elimelech), and their two sons (Mahlon and Kilion) were of the tribe of Judah living in Bethlehem which is also known as Ephrath, the place where Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. This was also the area in which Caleb settled after Israel entered the Land of Promise, so the people living in Bethlehem could be thought of as being descendants of one of the "first families" or elite of Israel. After David became king and God's promise that the throne would never leave his lineage, the tribe of Judah would certainly be thought of as the ruling elite and Bethlehem, the city of his birth as a special place. The famine that is occurring in the land shows God's hand of judgment during the rebellious time of the judges. Because of the famine, Elimelech decides to take his family to the territory of Moab where he expects to work and be able to feed his family. The names of the family mean the following: Elimelech means "my God is king," Naomi means "pleasure / pleasant," Mahlon means "sickness," and Kilion means "withering." We don't know how old Mahlon and Kilion were when they arrived in Moab, but by the time they had been there 10 years they had both married Moabite women and, along with their father, had died without having any children. For Elimelech to go live in Moab meant he was not truly trusting God as his king.

The Moabites were descendants of Lot from his incestuous relationship with oldest daughter. They would not allow the Israelites to go through their land on their exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan. During the beginning period of the judges (abt 1380 BC), the Moabites joined with the Ammonites and Amalekites to put the Israelites into subjection for 18 years. Now, some 200 years later, the animosity has lessened to the point that Elimelech could take his family there and expect to be able to find work and be able to buy whatever was necessary for his family to live. The Moabites were not followers of God. They worshipped Chemosh who required human sacrifice.

The Israelites were not prohibited from marrying the Moabites as they were the nations living in Canaan, but they were prohibited from bringing those spouses into the assembly (gathering) of God which would have been the gathering of the Israelites for the worship of Yahweh (YHWH).

Verses 6 – 22. Since Naomi and her daughters-in-law no longer had a male relative to represent them in legal matters, it would be difficult for them to live either in Moab or Israel or anywhere. Women usually had no legal standing in any of the nations, but in Israel there was some limited provisions for a distant relative to assume control over her so that an heir could be provided or so that the family's lands would remain in the tribe. So, when Naomi hears that the Lord is providing food for the Israelite people, she decides to return to Bethlehem and try to live there. She starts out with both her daughters-in-law, but then decides it would be best for them to return to the home of their mothers and there perhaps the Lord would allow them to find another husband. It is interesting to note that she says to go to the home of their mothers rather than their fathers since most nations were male dominated.

At first both girls weep loudly and say that they will go back with Naomi to her people. But Naomi reminds them that she is too old to have another child and would they really wait until that child would grow up for them to be their husband. This is a reference to the custom of a brother taking a deceased brother's wife as his own to provide an heir for his brother and his brother's property. Naomi explains that this is more bitter for her than for them because God's hand has gone out against her.

At this point we learn the names of the girls. One is named Orpah which means "unstable," and the other is named Ruth which means "beauty." Orpah decides to return home but Ruth pleads with Naomi not to make her return to Moab. Using covenant language, she says, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried." Then she calls upon God to be a witness to the covenant saying, "May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."

So Naomi agrees to let Ruth go with her and they travel to Bethlehem. Upon their arrival, the women of the town are excited because they think they recognize Naomi. Naomi tells them not to call her Naomi but to call her Mara which means "bitter." She feels that the Lord has made her life bitter because she went away full (with a husband and two sons) and returns empty (without them) because the Lord has "afflicted" or "testified against her" and brought misfortune upon her. When Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem it is at the beginning of the barley harvest which would have been at the time of Passover. The wheat harvest came right after the barley harvest and ended at the festival of Shavuot, the festival of weeks which was held 50 days (7 weeks plus one day) after Passover. This date is also called Pentecost in Greek which means 50th day.

Chapter 2

Verses 1 – 7. First, we are given information that Ruth will learn later – that Boaz is a relative of Naomi’s husband, Elimelech. The Hebrew that is translated as “man of standing” in the NIV actually means “man of wealth.” That he is a man of standing tells us that he is wealthy and is a community leader. His name means “in whom is strength” or “alacrity” (promptness, eager, or speedy readiness).

Ruth asks permission from Naomi to go into the fields and glean (pick up) grain that is left by the harvesters working in the field. The Civil Law as recorded in Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22; and restated in Deut 24:19, commands the Israelites not to harvest to the very edges of their fields or go back and pick up what the harvesters have missed or dropped the first time through the field. It was to be left for poor people and aliens (non-Israelites) living in the area so that they would be able to get food to eat. This does not seem to have been a common practice in other nations, but it is the Lord’s command for the Israelites, and God would bless them for their obedience in providing for the poor, widows, and aliens. So Ruth must have learned about this provision from Naomi and she qualifies as a widow, because she is poor, and because she is an alien. So she goes out into a field to glean, and we are let in on the secret that she happens to be in a field belonging to Boaz. Although this seems like a lucky, chance happening, there is no such thing in God’s oversight of the universe. He has orchestrated that she should be in Boaz’s field and that he is a relative of Elimelech, Ruth’s father-in-law.

While Ruth is gleaning in the field, Boaz comes by to check up on his workers and see how the harvest is progressing. The harvesters would have been day laborers that Boaz’s foreman had hired to pick the grain that day. Boaz greets the workers with “The Lord be with you,” a blessing upon them, and the workers respond with “The Lord bless you.” Then Boaz notices a young woman gleaning in the field and wants to know whose young woman she is. The foreman tells him that she is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi, that she asked for permission to glean, and that she has worked steadily, only taking a short rest.

Verses 8 – 13. Boaz addresses Ruth as “my daughter.” This indicates she is much younger than him. This along with his statement telling her not to move to gleaning in another field but to follow his servant girls and drink from the water jars his men fill shows his desire to be protective of her. It was common for gleaners to move from one field to another so that they might get more gleanings. He also institutes the first anti-sexual harassment policy recorded in the Bible and perhaps anywhere else when he tells the day laborers not to touch her.

Ruth responds to his statement by bowing to the ground, showing a respectful gratitude. Then she asks why he is showing such favor to a foreigner. His reply shows that he knows she is the wife of a relative and thus he is protective because of a kinsman (family) relationship, but also because of her loyalty to Naomi and the fact that she has sought to take refuge in YHWH, the God of Israel. The Hebrew term translated as “wings” that references how she has placed herself under God’s protection, can also be translated as “skirt,” referring to the hem/edge of a garment. Boaz also asks God to bless her richly for her loyalty to the family into which she married and her trust in YHWH. Ruth requests that she would continue to find favor in his eyes because he has been kind to and comforted her and because she recognizes that she doesn’t have the standing with him that his servant girls do.

Verses 14 – 16. When it becomes mealtime, Boaz goes a step further in his kindness to and provision for Ruth. He not only allows her to eat with his servants and what he is providing for them, but he offers her so much

roasted grain that she can eat until she is full and have leftovers to take home for Naomi. Then as she goes back to gleaning after the meal, he quietly informs his workers not to say anything if she glean farther in than just the edges of the field so she is among the sheaves that have been bundled up to be carried back to the threshing area. He also instructs them that if she does glean among the sheaves, they should purposefully pull some stalks from the bundles so that she can pick them up and not to rebuke her for doing it. Boaz has not changed her status as a poor, widowed, alien, but he has made sure that she gets enough gleanings that she and Naomi will have enough to provide for their needs.

Verses 17 – 23. Ruth gleans until evening, threshes the barley she has collected and finds that it amounts to about an ephah or about ½ bushel of grain. That is a fairly large amount for a day's gleaning and not exactly a light load to carry. But she carries it home to where she and Naomi are living and shows it to her. She also gives Naomi the roasted grain that is left over from her meal. Naomi shows her surprise at the amount by asking in whose field she had gleaned and that he be blessed because he took notice of her. When Naomi finds out that the man's name is Boaz, she again asks God to bless him and proclaims that God has not stopped showing his kindness to them and their husbands that had died. Previously in chapter 1:8 when she was telling Orpha and Ruth to return to their families, she asked that God would bless them for their loyalty to her and their husbands. Now affirms that God has answered that prayer. Then she tells Ruth that Boaz is a close relative and one of their kinsman redeemers.

When Ruth tells Naomi that Boaz has told her to stay with his workers until they have finished harvesting all of his grain, Naomi tells her to follow his instructions because in someone else's field she might be harmed.

Ruth does not see that she is a relative of Boaz as giving her any special privileges or any lessening of the responsibility she has taken upon herself of providing for herself and Naomi. Instead, she seems to be happy that she can continue in safety. Staying until all of the barley and wheat had been harvested meant Ruth would have been gleaning for about 50 days (50 – 7 Sabbaths = 43 days). If every day brought ½ bushel that would be a total of 21 ½ bushels of barley and wheat and would have provided plenty for their needs throughout the next year. In addition to that, Ruth would have been allowed to glean in any vineyard and olive fields that Boaz had and that would have brought even more provision for Naomi and her. Indeed, the Lord was blessing her for her humility, her loyalty to her family, and her trust in his provision. May we live like Ruth.

Chapter 3

Verses 1 – 5. It is Naomi's desire that Ruth should have a husband. That is what she prayed for Ruth and Orpah in 1:9. Here she is just trying to help that process along. Naomi reminds Ruth that Boaz is a kinsman of theirs and that she has received his abundant kindness by being allowed to work with his servant girls. When she says for Ruth to wash and perfume herself and put on her best clothes, she is telling Ruth to stop showing that she is mourning the loss of her husband. By convention, no man would approach Ruth to become his wife while she was still mourning for her husband. So Naomi tells Ruth how to show that she is now available to become another man's wife and then how to encourage Boaz to proceed with the affection that he has already shown for Ruth. After Boaz has finished overseeing the threshing for the day and lies down for the night's rest, Ruth is to quietly go remove the covering over his feet and lie down there. Later, in verse 9 we learn that Naomi has told her to say to him, "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer." For Ruth, this action and statement is saying to Boaz, "I've noticed your love for me and I am ready and willing to return it and place myself in your protection." Ruth agrees to follow what Naomi has told her to do.

Verses 6 – 13. Tired from the days activities and full from eating, Boaz is quick to fall asleep. When Ruth notes that he is asleep, she does as Naomi has told her and lies down at Boaz's uncovered feet. Boaz doesn't immediately wake up, but during the night he awakes to find someone lying at his feet, so in the dark he asks who it is. Ruth identifies herself and says what Naomi has told her to say to show her interest in him fulfilling the kinsman-redeemer role of taking her to be his wife.

Boaz is pleased that Ruth has not sought to have a younger man become her husband and asks God's blessing to be upon her. Then he tells her not to be afraid because all the townsmen know she is a woman of noble character. He agrees to do what she is asking – become her kinsman-redeemer – but tells her that there is another relative that is closer who must have the first right to be the kinsman-redeemer. That was an important point because the kinsman-redeemer became the owner of all the property of the wife's deceased husband. In Ruth's case there was no property to be acquired so the kinsman-redeemer would be taking her in without getting anything but a wife in return. Boaz tells Ruth to stay where she is with him for the rest of the night and then leave in the morning before anyone can recognize that a woman has come to the threshing floor. Obviously, it was not normal for a woman to be there, so it might have looked like something improper had happened if she were to stay too long. But he did not want her to be walking around in the night when she might be harmed. Boaz tells her that he will settle the matter with the nearer kinsman-redeemer in the morning.

Verses 14 – 18. As Ruth prepares to leave before daybreak, Boaz gives her six measures of barley to take to Naomi. Since it is still the barley harvest, there hasn't been a lot of time between Ruth's beginning to glean in his field and this request for him to become her kinsman-redeemer. Ruth then returns to Naomi and tells her what has happened and Naomi tells her that she will find out today what has happened because Boaz will not rest until the matter is settled with the nearer relative who could become her kinsman-redeemer.

Although the law of an individual or a near relative redeeming something is set forth in Leviticus 25 and 27, the best picture of a kinsman-redeemer is set forth in chapter 3 and 4 of Ruth. It is the picture of Jesus, as our nearest relative redeeming us from the bondage in which we find ourselves and taking us to be his bride. Following God's example of resting on the seventh day after creating the universe in six days, every seventh year was to be a sabbatical year of rest for the land. Then after seven sabbatical years, the following sabbatical year was to be a year of jubilee when land that has been sold is to be returned to the one who sold it and people are to return to their land. The same applied to people who become poor and sell themselves. They are to be treated as hired servants, not slaves, and released in the jubilee year. From one jubilee year to the next, a near relative could redeem a person's land, or the person himself, by making a payment to the person holding the "title" or "right" of having the property. By his death, Jesus made the payment to redeem us.

Chapter 4

Verses 1 – 6. It is the morning after Ruth has asked Boaz to be her kinsman-redeemer and he vowed to her that he would if the man who was a closer kinsman would not. After sending Ruth home before anyone could recognize that she had been at the threshing floor, Boaz immediately goes to the city gate and sits to wait for the nearer kinsman to come by. The gate of a city was the place where people transacted business and decided legal matters between individuals. It wasn't just a door but was a passageway through a thick wall around the city. It usually had small alcoves lining the passage where people could set up shop, gather to discuss a matter, or transact business. This is where Boaz went, knowing that the relative he sought would come by on his way in or out of the city.

When the man come by, Boaz invites him to "come over here" (probably into one of the alcoves) so they can talk. He addresses him as "friend," and then proceeds to explain that Naomi is selling the piece of land that

belonged to her husband Elimelech, who was their relative. He says that he is bringing it to the man's attention so he can redeem it if he will. They are obviously in the presence of elders of the city because after Boaz says, "If you will redeem it, do so," he then says to the elders "but if he (you) will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line." The man quickly agrees to redeem the land until Boaz informs him that he would also be acquiring the dead man's widow so that the man's name remained with his property. That meant the man would be expected to provide an heir for the dead man so the land would remain part of his inheritance. Upon hearing this, the man realizes that he might be endangering his own estate, probably because he doesn't have any sons of his own and thus if the other man's widow has a son, his first born, it would mean his own property would go to the other man's heir instead of his own by a woman that he might yet marry. So he tells Boaz to do the redeeming.

The rules for redeeming property are found in Leviticus 25 and the rules for levirate marriage (marrying a widow to provide an heir for the dead man) are found in Deuteronomy 25. The two actions do not always have to go together, but Boaz wanted them to do both. Since the other man was the nearer kinsman, he was under a moral, if not a legal, obligation to marry the widow and provide an heir for the deceased man. If he already had a wife, he could not do so because the law didn't require him to become a polygamist (even though we know Jacob was and later David and Solomon also would be). But to refuse to redeem the land and marry the widow if he were able, would bring disgrace on him. Boaz doesn't mention Ruth until the man agrees to redeem the land of Elimelech's that Naomi wanted to sell. Redeeming the land and marrying Naomi, an older woman would not be a hardship or endanger the man being able to pass his land and hers to any son he would have with a wife he took after Naomi died (which could be assumed would be sooner than later). But when he learns about Ruth, a young woman who would be expected to live many more years and give birth to several heirs, he now sees the danger to his future and the property that he already owned.

Boaz seems to have connected the two both because he wanted to do both, but also because he probably knew the man would be putting his own estate in jeopardy. Thus it gave him a leverage to guide the man into not doing the redeeming so that he could.

Verses 7 – 12. Even at this time some people might not have known about the custom of removing a sandal to finalize a legal transference of land. So the writer includes it so everyone would understand what was going to happen next. The fact that a person walked on land that he owned and its dirt would be on the sandal, may have originated the practice of giving a sandal to show the transferring of the land. Since neither of these men would have walked on the land, the nearer kinsman who had the first right to redeem the land would be seen legally as the one who was transferring his right to Boaz by removing his sandal.

At this point, Boaz makes a public announcement that the elders are his witness that he is redeeming the land of Elimelech, Kilion, and Mahlon, and that he is taking Ruth as his wife in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property. And the elders not only agree, but give him the blessing that the Lord make her like Rachel and Leah who built up the house of Israel. Rachel and Leah were seen as the mothers of all Israel even though some of the clans actually originated from their servants, so they are praying for him to have many heirs just as Jacob had many heirs. The elders go on to pray that Boaz may have standing in Ephratah and be famous in Bethlehem. Ephratah means fruitful, so they are praying for him to be wealthy and well-known in their town. The elders then pray that through the offspring Ruth bears to Boaz, his family will be like that of Perez whom Tamar born to Judah (their ancestor).

These prayers are significant because of the parallels between the women involved. Rachel and Leah, like Ruth, had entered the nation from foreign lands where the people were hostile to the Israelites. Tamar, also like

Ruth, was a foreigner who had married into the inheritance of Israel. In addition, the first husband of both Ruth and Tamar had died and they participated in levirate marriage. Tamar seduced Judah into the marriage through the cover of disguise, while Ruth encouraged Boaz into marriage during the cover of night. Judah and Tamar are ashamed when their actions come into public view, while Boaz and Ruth are praised and blessed because they are being loyal to God's people and righteous in their actions. In both cases the husbands are older than their wives. Later it becomes evident that both women bear sons that lead to the line of David and eventually to the Messiah.

Verses 13 – 17. Verse 13 is a key verse in the book because it records how the Lord answers Naomi's prayer that Ruth be given rest (1:9). Having an heir was indispensable for Ruth and Naomi to have rest by continuing the lineage of Elimelech and Mahlon. At the birth of Obed (whose name means "servant") the women of the town praise God because he has not left Naomi without a kinsman-redeemer and pray that he may become famous throughout all Israel. They proclaim that he will renew her life and sustain her in her old age and that her daughter-in-law (Ruth) is better than seven sons to her because she has given birth to a son. The kinsman-redeemer the women mention is not Boaz but Obed, who is seen as giving Naomi a future. Naomi holding her grandson at this point provides a closing to the opening of the book that says she could not have another son after her two sons had died and shows how God provides a future for those who trust him and follow what he says.

Verses 18 – 22. The book ends by giving the lineage from Perez to David and shows that Obed was the grandfather of David. The fact that it has this listing indicates the person who wrote it did so after David was born and probably after he had been anointed to be the next king of Israel, but maybe before he actually assumed that role. It also connects David with the promise given to Judah in Genesis 49:9-12 that "the scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until he comes to whom it belongs." That promise was that Judah's descendants would rule the nation until the promised Messiah would come to take his rightful possession. Matthew used the lineage provided as part of his proof that Jesus was the promised Messiah (Matt 1).