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# BOOK OF RUTH

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**Approximate date:** between 950-700 B.C.E. (Right, conservative-moderate); 586-500 or 400s-250s B.C.E. (Left)

**Time period:** a famine in Israel during the rule of the Judges

**Author:** Samuel (Right); Israel's court historians (conservative-moderate); an unknown person from the Southern Kingdom (Left)

**Location of author:** Land of Israel before or during the monarchy (Right, conservative-moderate); Land of Israel after the exile (Left)

**Target audience and their location:** people of Israel before, during, or immediately after the reign of David (Right, conservative-moderate); Jewish people having returned from Babylon (Left)

**People:**

Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, Kilion, Orpah, Ruth, Boaz, Obed

**People mentioned:**

the judges, "Mara" (another name for Naomi), kinsman-redeemer (unnamed), Rachel, Leah, Peretz, Tamar, Judah, David, ancestors of David (4:18-22)

**Places:**

Bethlehem (in Judah), Moab

**Places mentioned:**

Ephratah

**Key Themes and Events:**

famine in the Land of Israel / Elimelech moves his family to Moab / Elimelech, Mahlon, and Kilion all die in Moab / Naomi prepares to return to her home in Israel, and Ruth wishes to join her / Naomi returns to Bethlehem and tells the people to call her "Mara" / Boaz notices Ruth the Moabitess / Boaz asks his servants to deal generously with Ruth / Ruth tells Naomi that she encountered Boaz / Naomi advises that Ruth make herself attractive to Boaz / Naomi intends to sell Elimelech's piece of land / the kinsman-redeemer refuses to buy the land / Boaz purchases Elimelech's land as kinsman-redeemer, agreeing to take Ruth as his wife / Ruth marries Boaz / Ruth gives birth to Obed, ancestor of King David

**Key Scriptures:** Ruth 1:16-17; 2:10-12, 20; 4:9-10 / **Ruth remains loyal to Naomi** (1:1-22); **Ruth gleanes in Boaz's field** (2:1-23); **Ruth follows Naomi's plan** (3:1-18); **Ruth and Boaz are married** (4:1-22)

**Theological Summary:** Readers of the Book of Ruth almost immediately can recognize it for what it is as a great account of human kindness,<sup>1</sup> as God uses people faithful to Him to accomplish restoration. Christian tradition, following the book order of the Greek Septuagint, places Ruth immediately after Judges. This was apparently something also followed by the First Century historian Josephus (*Against Apion* 1.38-40),<sup>2</sup> making Ruth an extended narrative as a part of the histories. In Jewish tradition Ruth is placed among the Writings, specifically among the five *Megillot*.<sup>3</sup> The Book of Ruth is not placed in this later part of the Scriptures to demean women, but because it is used for special holiday readings. Ruth is frequently read at *Shavuot*/Pentecost, partly because of the belief that King David was born and died at this time.<sup>4</sup>

The name of this text is for Ruth (Heb. *Rut*, רוּת), a young Moabite woman, who would become the great-grandmother of King David and an ancestor of Yeshua the Messiah (4:21-22; Matthew 1:1, 5).<sup>5</sup> Even though this book is named for Ruth, the principal character is actually the Israelite widow Naomi, who is forced to move to Moab during a time of famine in the Land of Israel. The events that Ruth portrays occur during the time of the Judges (1:1), and actually take place during a time of relative peace between Israel and the Moabites. The story of Ruth gives us a glimpse into an Israelite family during this period, and how various women must fare on their own.<sup>6</sup>

Jewish tradition in the Talmud points to Samuel being the author of Ruth (b.*Bava Batra* 14b),<sup>7</sup> even though there is significant justification to doubt this because of the mention of King David at the end of the text (4:17, 22). Most conservatives today consider Ruth to be an anonymous book,<sup>8</sup> which means that its composition should likely be placed at the feet of Israel's court historians. "There is nothing in the Book of Ruth itself that helps us to identify the author. All we can say is that he was a literary artist and skillful teacher" (*EXP*).<sup>9</sup>

Conservatives affirm that the style of Hebrew used in Ruth points to a composition time sometime during the monarchy. Many conservatives prefer to place it immediately prior to, or during the reign of King David,<sup>10</sup> perhaps a century after Ruth actually lived.<sup>11</sup> Some, however,

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<sup>1</sup> D. Harvey, "Ruth, Book of," in *IDB*, 4:131.

<sup>2</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1063.

<sup>3</sup> Harvey, "Ruth, Book of," in *IDB*, 4:134; J.G. Baldwin, "Ruth," in *NBCR*, 278; G.V. Smith, "Ruth," in *ISBE*, 4:423; Phyllis Trible, "Ruth, Book of," in *ABD*, 5:846.

<sup>4</sup> Adele Reinhartz, "Ruth," in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1579.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Harvey, "Ruth, Book of," in *IDB*, 1:131.

<sup>6</sup> Trible, "Ruth, Book of," in *ABD*, 5:845.

<sup>7</sup> "Samuel wrote the book that is called by his name and the book of Judges and Ruth" (b.*Bava Batra* 14b; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Edward McComiskey, "Ruth, Book of," in *NIDB*, 875; Smith, "Ruth," in *ISBE*, 4:423.

<sup>9</sup> F.B. Huey, Jr., "Ruth," in *EXP*, 3:510.

<sup>10</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1060; Baldwin, in *NBCR*, 277; McComiskey, "Ruth, Book of," in *NIDB*, 875; Smith, "Ruth," in *ISBE*, 4:244; Huey, in *EXP*, 3:511.

argue for a later date during the monarchy after the death of David.<sup>12</sup> The presumed audience of Ruth needed to know about the various times in Israel's history and the faithfulness of a few during a period of extreme unrest and moral depravity.

Liberals often consider the Book of Ruth to have been compiled after the Babylonian exile. While liberal views are not uniform, a few consider it to be a cult-myth from the Ancient Near East adopted by the Ancient Israelites.<sup>13</sup> Others consider Ruth to be an ahistorical novel, believing that many potentially unpleasant elements have been removed from the story, making it exactly that—a story.<sup>14</sup> Most liberals consider Ruth to have been written during the Fifth-Fourth Centuries B.C.E., or even as late as the Third Century B.C.E.,<sup>15</sup> as a protest to the intermarriage going on during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Liberals will frequently argue that an archaic style of Hebrew has been deliberately imported into the text by Ruth's author,<sup>16</sup> but this has been refuted on historical grounds by many conservatives.<sup>17</sup> Some liberals, surprisingly, in response to this evidence have been reverting to an earlier date for Ruth: "all of the old 'evidence' has shown itself to be quite indecisive...a story of a Moabite background for David must antedate the 'transfigured' picture of David in the days of the Chronicler and even the era of the royal psalms. Accordingly, perhaps all that can be said is that such evidence as does exist points to a date in the monarchic period, and more likely the earlier part of it" (*IDBSup*).<sup>18</sup>

Of course, the biggest problem with the liberal view of Ruth is the belief that it does not portray any valid historical events, or the lives of people who actually existed. Is the story of Ruth too idealistic? Do we have substantial reasons to doubt the historicity of what it portrays—or must we consider the author's purpose for composing it?<sup>19</sup> Interestingly enough, there are some liberals who want to affirm some historicity of Ruth because of the centrality of women in the story,<sup>20</sup> including the possibility of a female author.<sup>21</sup>

Our present textual witnesses of Ruth in their Hebrew form are relatively strong. The MT and LXX generally conform to one another, with a few variants present among the DSS.<sup>22</sup>

In the story of Ruth, we see the principal female protagonist, Naomi, having to move to Moab because of a famine in Israel. While in Moab, her two sons take Moabite wives. Ruth is one of those wives. Naomi and Ruth become widowed, and Ruth as a Moabitess joins herself to the God of Israel and selflessly devotes herself to Naomi (1:16-17; 2:11-12; 3:10; 4:15). In

<sup>11</sup> Baldwin, in *NBCR*, 278.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, "Ruth," in *ISBE*, 4:244; Dillard and Longman, 131.

<sup>13</sup> Tribble, "Ruth, Book of," in *ABD*, 5:843.

<sup>14</sup> Baldwin, in *NBCR*, 277.

<sup>15</sup> Harvey, "Ruth, Book of," in *IDB*, 4:132, 133.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:132.

<sup>17</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 1060-1061; Huey, in *EXP*, 3:511; Dillard and Longman, 130.

<sup>18</sup> R.M. Hals, "Ruth, Book of," in *IDBSup*, 759.

<sup>19</sup> Huey, in *EXP*, 3:510.

<sup>20</sup> Reinhartz, in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1578.

<sup>21</sup> Tribble, "Ruth, Book of," in *ABD*, 5:843.

<sup>22</sup> Harrison; *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 1063-1064; Huey, in *EXP*, 3:514; Tribble, "Ruth, Book of," in *ABD*, 5:843.

the course of the story, they return to the Land of Israel and encounter a well-to-do Israelite named Boaz. Boaz demonstrates great kindness to both of these women (chs. 2-4), and is able to bring restoration to what they have lost, ultimately marrying Ruth.

The principal characters in Ruth all fulfill the Torah's command to love (Leviticus 19:18; cf. Romans 13:10), and are blessed by God in the process. Ruth is wholeheartedly accepted into an Israelite family. Some theologians have compared the kindness of Ruth toward Naomi to the kindness shown by the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37.<sup>23</sup>

Ruth is a very short story, and as such it is told quickly. It often has a very wide appeal to Bible readers because many are able to easily identify with the human interests that it portrays.<sup>24</sup> Many form critics have compared Ruth to being an ancient *novella*,<sup>25</sup> noting its high literary composition.

The principal theme of the Book of Ruth is undeniably redemption and God's faithfulness through trial. This is something that we see all throughout the history of Ancient Israel. In spite of the terrible wickedness around them, the family unit portrayed in Ruth is faithful to God. "No one can be called evil in the book of Ruth" (Dillard and Longman).<sup>26</sup> The redemption that we see in Ruth largely relates to the restoration of those things that people have lost such as family members, property, and/or prestige.<sup>27</sup> Ruth is absolutely portrayed as an appropriate ancestor for both King David and Yeshua the Messiah.

In Ruth's story of redemption, we see how God often works behind the scenes via the generosity of others.<sup>28</sup> "It is through this subtlety that the book instructs its readers concerning God's ongoing work in the life of ordinary people" (Dillard and Longman).<sup>29</sup> We see how God can use those who are faithful to Him to bring salvation to others—even those outside of the presumed community of faith.<sup>30</sup> Some have even referred to the text as a "messianic history" (Dillard and Longman).<sup>31</sup>

On its own terms, Ruth is a very moving story, but knowing that Ruth was a progenitor of David and ultimately Yeshua Himself makes it an even more important stage to consider in the progressive plan of God.<sup>32</sup> Ruth portrays for us the significant theological concept of the kinsman-redeemer or *go'el* (גֹּאֵל), something that we often lose in English translation.<sup>33</sup>

Many in today's Messianic community examine the Book of Ruth at some time during the year, often during the festival of *Shavuot*. Ruth has a message that remains true for anyone who reads it at any time: God's faithfulness during times of trial. It encourages us today to be welcoming of anyone who comes into the fold, Jewish or not, and consider them as full-

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<sup>23</sup> Kathleen R. Farmer, "Ruth," in *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 383.

<sup>24</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1059; Baldwin, in *NBCR*, 277.

<sup>25</sup> Hals, "Ruth, Book of," in *IDBSup*, 758; Huey, in *EXP*, 3:512; Tribble, "Ruth, Book of," in *ABD*, 5:843.

<sup>26</sup> Dillard and Longman, 129.

<sup>27</sup> Farmer, in *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 383.

<sup>28</sup> Hals, "Ruth, Book of," in *IDBSup*, 785; Tribble, "Ruth, Book of," in *ABD*, 5:845; Reinhartz, in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1579.

<sup>29</sup> Dillard and Longman, 133.

<sup>30</sup> McComiskey, "Ruth, Book of," in *NIDB*, 875; Smith, "Ruth," in *ISBE*, 4:245.

<sup>31</sup> Dillard and Longman, 134.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Baldwin, in *NBCR*, 278.

fledged members of the community of Israel. Ruth portrays an example of how we should have godly homes and families that are faithful to God and His ways—and most importantly how we should love. It should also cause us to consider the valued role of women in the community of faith.

### **Bibliography**

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## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON RUTH:

- 1. How bad was it for Naomi to have been widowed and on her own as a woman, among a foreign people (the Moabites), given the cultural norms of her day?**
  
- 2. What do you believe the significance is of Boaz willfully agreeing to purchase Elimelech's property and marrying Ruth?**
  
- 3. How does the Book of Ruth affect the ongoing discussion of the role of women in today's (Messianic) community of faith?**
  
- 4. Do you believe that today's Messianic community takes the message and themes of Ruth seriously? Why or why not?**

## REFLECTION ON RUTH'S PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

*Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Book of Ruth:*