

The History, Book 3

Ruth

This small book is one of the best-loved books of the Bible. Although the story takes place during the period of the Judges, it comes like a breath of fresh air after the faithless apostasy, self-serving betrayal, and brutal violence of the Book of Judges; and, as an added benefit, is beautifully written.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the great German writer, poet, artist, and scientist, known as “the Shakespeare of Germany,” wrote of the Book of Ruth, “We have nothing so lovely in the whole range of epic and idyllic poetry.”

A. Author. The human author is unknown; but an excellent guess is that Ruth was written by the prophet Samuel, the last of the Judges of Israel, whose book follows next.

B. Place and Date. The closing verses reveal that Ruth was written four generations after the events described, or about 1,100 BC, during the time of Samuel; the likely place is Judea, in the vicinity of Ramah.

C. Occasion. The book describes domestic life in the early part of the period of the Judges, and provides a pleasant bridge between that dismal period and the period of the Kings. The closing verses record the genealogy of David, Ruth's great-grandson, from David, back to Pharez, the son of Judah (with Tamar), the son of Jacob the patriarch.

***NOTE:** Ruth is not a bridge between the period of the Judges and the period of the Kings in the sense of chronology, for the events of Ruth took place early in the 400-year period of the judges, and about 300 years before the book of Ruth was written. Ruth provides the refreshing bridge only in a literary sense. Perhaps when the Lord inspired Ezra and the Great Synagogue, as they decided the order of the OT books and closed the canon about 700 years after Ruth was written, He knew that we would need a refreshing break between the books of Judges and I Samuel.*

D. Theme. Ruth is a beautiful story of love, commitment, and God's provision. It is a story of hope and redemption, of a widow from a pagan tribe, without husband or son to protect her, who became highly favored of God and a direct ancestor of Jesus; Ruth is one of only three women mentioned by name in His genealogy (a fourth woman, Bathsheba, is mentioned, but not by name). It is fitting that the heart of the story takes place in and around Bethlehem, where Jesus would later be born; it is also interesting to note that Boaz, the hero of the story who becomes Ruth's husband, is the son of Rahab the harlot, who is also one of

those three highly honored women who are named in the Messiah's genealogy (Matthew 1:1-16)¹. It isn't difficult to see here the hand, mind, and heart, of our gracious, redeeming GOD, who makes beautiful things out of broken pieces.

E. Highlights. Highlights of Ruth include the following:

1. "Entreat Me Not to Leave Thee". (Chapter 1)

A man named Elimelech of Bethlehem in Judah, his wife Naomi, and their two sons migrate into Moab to escape a famine in Judah, and remain there for about 10 years. During that time Elimelech dies and the sons, Mahlon and Chilion, marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth². After both the sons die, leaving no children, Naomi is left a widow without sons to protect her. Hearing that the famine in Judah is over, she decides to return to her family there, and advises her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab and remarry. Orpah decides to stay, but Ruth pleads with Naomi to allow her to go with her, and Naomi agrees. They travel together to Bethlehem, and arrive at the time of the barley harvest. Ruth's plea to remain with Naomi (1:16-17) is one of the most beautiful pieces of poetry in the English language, and one of the most familiar passages of Scripture to those outside the Church. It is often included in wedding liturgies.

2. Boaz Finds a Virtuous Woman. (Chapter 2)

When Naomi returns to Bethlehem, bringing Ruth with her, they are well received. Naomi sends Ruth to glean in the barley fields of Boaz, a close (and rich) relative of Naomi's dead husband. Boaz notices Ruth, likes what he sees, and expresses his appreciation for her loyalty to Naomi. He gives her preferential treatment, and orders his hands not to molest her. Warned by Boaz to stay near his men (for protection), and not to glean in any other field, she gathers barley until the end of the barley and wheat harvest, returning each day to Naomi.

NOTE: The fact that Boaz found it necessary to warn his field hands not to molest Ruth is an indication of the low and defenseless status of young, unattached women in that place and time. The obvious implication is that, had Boaz not warned them, this young, beautiful, stranger, and a non-Jewish, woman, would have been fair game, sexually, for the field hands (or for the field hands of other property owners if she strayed into their fields).

3. A Strange Rendezvous at the Threshing Floor. (Chapter 3)

Boaz is staying at his threshing floor during the winnowing process, day and night. Naomi, seemingly guided by the Holy Spirit to bring about the marriage

¹ It is a revealing glimpse into the mind and heart of God to realize that these four women would never have been chosen for high honor by mortal man.

² Mahlon means "sickness," and Chilion means "consumption, or pining away"; one wonders if the names contributed to their death, or if they were so named after their deaths. Since Hebrew children and places were often named to commemorate a condition or event, the names may mean that the men were renamed after their deaths.

that would lead to the birth of the Messiah, advises Ruth to sleep on the threshing floor, at Boaz's feet. She causes Ruth to bathe, put on perfume and a nice garment, and head for the threshing floor. After Boaz is asleep, not aware that Ruth is there, she lifts his blanket and lies down at his feet. Boaz wakes at midnight, startled to find her at his feet; he expresses his admiration of her virtue, and discusses the possibility of their marriage. They sleep the rest of the night, she rises before daylight ("before one could know another"), and Boaz sends her home with a generous gift of barley.

NOTES:

a. Winnowing is the ancient process of pouring the gathered barley (or other grain, such as wheat) onto a "threshing floor," a hard, flat and smooth surface, prepared and maintained for the process. The gathered grain is then beaten with flails (usually hinged rods), to separate the grain from the chaff that surrounds the grains. The entire mass is then thrown into the air with tools like wide pitch forks, allowing the wind to blow the worthless chaff away, leaving the heavier grain, which falls back onto the threshing floor. In some parts of the World this is still the method for separating the grain from the chaff.

b. To protect the valuable crop from thieves, it was customary in ancient times for the master and his field hands to sleep on the threshing floor, next to the winnowed grain, until the crop was fully threshed and safely in storage. This was particularly true during the time of the Judges, when pagans regularly raided the threshing floors of the Israelites to rob them of their harvested grain.

4. Happy Endings All-Around. (Chapter 4)

Boaz wants to buy Elimilech's land from Naomi and marry Ruth, but there is one man, more closely related than Boaz, who has first choice. The closer relative declines his right to redeem the dead relative's property, because marrying Ruth and having children would "mar" the inheritance he already has³. He doesn't explain this; but it probably means that to marry Ruth, and produce children in Mahlon's name with her, would complicate matters for the wife and children he already has.

In the presence of witnesses in the Bethlehem city gate, the closer relative releases his right of redemption to Boaz, and seals the deal by taking off one shoe and handing it to Boaz. Boaz and Ruth marry, and have a son named Obed. Naomi, who now has plenty of money from the sale of her husband's land, becomes the child's nurse, and there are happy endings all around.

NOTE: *The city gate was the public place where leading citizens gathered to make legal transactions, being comparable today to the courthouse door. By handing*

³ The Hebrew word rendered "mar" is *shachath*, meaning to decay or ruin.

Boaz a shoe, the closer relative releases his claim to the land and states symbolically and publicly, that Boaz now has sole right to walk all over the property. The real estate purchased also carries the obligation to marry the widow, and the responsibility to produce children with her, a responsibility which Boaz is apparently happy to accept.

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