

Introduction to Ruth

Where is it in the Bible?

Ruth is the eighth book of the Old Testament and the third of the historical books in Christian Bibles. The book itself says that the events it describes occurred during the time of the Judges (Ruth 1:1), which may explain why it was put after the book of Judges. Ruth ends with a genealogy of David, which is a natural transition to the story of the monarchy which begins in 1 Samuel. In the Hebrew Bible, Ruth is in a different place; it is included in the Writings and found between Song of Solomon and Lamentations.

Who wrote it?

Little is known about the author of Ruth, although Jewish tradition suggests that it was Samuel. This is not considered likely, however. "The author might have been a village priest, an elder, a teacher, or a wise woman who told ancestral stories to edify and to inspire the people."¹ Some have suggested that it might have been written by a group of women.

When was it written?

Ruth could have been written as early as the time of David around 1000 B.C. or as late as postexilic times. Some think that it was written to argue against the suspicion of foreign women that was common at that time (see Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 13).

What is it about?

Ruth is a historical short story about the loyalty of a Moabite woman toward her Hebrew mother-in-law and how that led to happiness and security for both of them. Its historical accuracy is not as important as the way it shows how God works to bring about blessing through ordinary people. The book is named for the Moabite woman and is one of only two Biblical books named for a woman.

How is it structured?

- I. Ruth and Naomi (1:1-22)
 - a. Naomi Loses Her Family (1:1-5)
 - b. Ruth and Naomi Return to Bethlehem (1:6-22)
- II. Ruth and Boaz (2:1-4:17)
 - a. Ruth Meets Boaz in the Fields (2:1-23)
 - b. Ruth Meets Boaz at the Threshing Floor (3:1-18)
 - c. Ruth Marries Boaz (4:1-12)
 - d. Naomi's New Family (4:13-17)
- III. The Genealogy of David (4:18-22)

¹ Diane Jacobson at <http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=28>

What are some of its themes?

- **Concern for the Marginalized:** Widows and foreigners were outcasts in Israel at the time this story takes place. Yet in this story, two widows, one a foreigner, are portrayed as assertive agents of change whose actions ultimately affect the history of Israel and the world. We are reminded to treat these people with care and concern.
- **Famine, Grain, and Fullness:** Food plays a major role in the book of Ruth. Naomi and her family move to Moab because of a famine in Bethlehem, which ironically means "house of bread" in Hebrew. Other major scenes in the story are marked by references to food. For example, Ruth and Naomi return to Bethlehem because the famine is over; Ruth meets Boaz while gleaning in his field; and Ruth spends the night with Boaz at the threshing floor after the harvest. Several times, Ruth brings food home to Naomi. The entire story moves from the emptiness of Naomi's life at the beginning to its fullness at the end.
- **God at Work in the World:** God does not act or speak directly in this book but is at work behind the scenes using unexpected events and unlikely people to achieve God's purposes.
- **Prominence of Women:** Two of the main characters in this book are women who are active, bold, and willing to take risks. Conversations involving women in the Bible are rare. When they occur, they usually involve two women, and often only one of them speaks. In all cases, the topic of these conversations is a male. In Ruth, there are 29 verses in which women speak to each other, more than in the rest of the Bible combined. In addition, the subject does not only concern men; the women talk about each other's welfare, the day's events, and food.
- **Role of Foreigners:** Moab was one of Israel's most hated enemies. In spite of this, Elimelech and his family moved there to escape the famine, and his two sons married Moabite women. Throughout the story, the author constantly reminds us of Ruth's nationality. Yet her faithfulness and kindness to Naomi mark her as an exemplary woman. Indeed, Ruth is a reflection of God's love and faithfulness to God's people.