

Ruth

ORIENTING DATA FOR RUTH

- **Content:** a story of loyalty to Yahweh during the period of the judges, in which Naomi's fortunes mirror Israel's during this period (while also providing the lineage of King David)
- **Historical coverage:** a few years around 1100 B.C.
- **Emphases:** life in a village that remains loyal to Yahweh during the time of the judges; the welcoming of a foreign woman under Yahweh's wings; God's superintending care that provides Israel with its great king

OVERVIEW OF RUTH

What a relief to find Ruth after Judges! Indeed, here in bold relief is another story from the same period, about one good man and two good women, not to mention a whole community, who are portrayed as faithful to the covenant. Although the book of Ruth (along with Esther) appears among the Writings in the Hebrew canon, in the Greek Bible—used by the Christian tradition—Ruth was placed between Judges and 1 Samuel, almost certainly because of the way it begins (“In the days when the judges ruled”) and ends (“Obed [was] the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David”). You will see how perceptive that move was.

The book of Ruth is sometimes treated as a love story—and in some ways it is indeed a love story, but not a romance. Yahweh's love for Israel here finds expression in Ruth's and Boaz's loving concern for Naomi, and in Boaz's for Naomi and Ruth. Although the heart of the story features the actions of Ruth and Boaz, the central figure throughout is Naomi, as the prologue (1:1–5) and epilogue (4:13–17) make clear. The narrative plot deals with Naomi's moving from “emptiness” in a foreign land to “fullness” back home in Bethlehem in Judah, from a form of barrenness (widowhood with no male heir) to full inheritance through Boaz's assuming the responsibilities of kinsman-redeemer and, through his marriage to Ruth, providing her with a male heir—and what an heir he turned out to be!

The story is told in four scenes, each employing an opening thematic sentence and each, except for the last, containing a closing sentence that sets up the reader for the next scene. In turn the scenes depict Naomi's emptiness (1:6–22), her awakened hope (ch. 2), the progress toward fulfillment (ch. 3), and fullness realized in the birth of an heir (ch. 4).

And how does fullness come? Through Ruth, a young Moabite widow, and Boaz, the established, wealthy, upstanding man of Judah—extremes on the sociological scale—who both act toward the needy one (Naomi) in the way that is open to them and without considering their own benefit, and both risking all to do so. Indeed, the role played by their two foils (Orpah and the other kinsman) highlights the risk factor for each.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING RUTH

In telling this story as he does, the narrator probably intends the reader to see here a comparison with Israel as a whole during the time of the judges (1:1). In a time of famine, the family of Elimelech seeks life away from Yahweh's promised land in the land of Moab, only to find death and emptiness. By returning home—to Bethlehem, the "house of bread" with its abundant harvest—the one whose name means "sweet" but calls herself "bitter" (1:20) starts on a journey from hope to fulfillment, to having a "son" who will serve as her ultimate kinsman-redeemer. And in so doing, she sets in motion events that will lead to Israel's receiving their foremost king. You can hardly miss the final blessing of Naomi by the women of Bethlehem in 4:14: "May he become famous throughout Israel!" Indeed!

In this regard it is important that you also watch how both the town of Bethlehem in general and the three main characters in particular are portrayed as loyal to Yahweh and the covenant, and thus experience the covenant blessings (see esp. Deut 28:3–6) during "the days when the judges ruled" (1:1). This comes out in a variety of ways: Ruth's determination to follow Yahweh because of her relationship with Naomi (1:16–18); the greetings of Boaz and the harvesters, reflecting God's presence and blessing (2:4); Boaz's welcoming of Ruth, who has chosen to take refuge under the wings of Yahweh (2:12); Boaz's own generosity and largeheartedness (2:8–9, 14–18); and Naomi's "blessing" of Boaz (2:20).

But this theme is especially evident in the way the narrator weaves into the story indications of their obedience to the covenant law—gleanings left for an alien; the kinsman-redeemer; inheritance through the covenant marriage-inheritance laws. The narrator assumes his readers will recognize all these covenantal factors. These are not people who need to be portrayed as consulting the law for guidance on what to do; rather they are simply demonstrating their covenant loyalty to Yahweh by the way they live and treat people. The author seems concerned in the end to show that David's forebears were themselves faithful Yahwists in a time when much of Israel was not.

Note finally how Ruth herself becomes an example of the blessing of Abraham working out in practice (Gen 12:3, "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"). She is an alien from a hated foreign nation (Deut 23:3). Yet she chooses to follow Israel's God and thus becomes part of his people (Ruth 1:16–17); as such she herself loves Naomi (4:15) by showing Yahweh's kindness (2:11–12) to one who has experienced exile and bitterness (1:19–21). In turn she is blessed by Boaz as one who has chosen to come under Yahweh's care and blessing (2:12); and at the end Yahweh thus "enabled her to conceive" (4:13). Though a foreigner without the covenant history enjoyed by the other Israelites, she nonetheless shows covenant love and loyalty in a way that most Israelites did not at this time in history. She, a non-Israelite, is used as an example to Yahweh's own "firstborn" (see Exod 4:22). Thus she is one of four Gentile women included in Matthew's genealogy (Matt 1:5b; cf. vv. 3, 5a, 6), which in his Gospel anticipates the gospel as good news for "all nations" (Matt 28:19).¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 78–80.