

Ruth

Lesson 1

Chapter 1:1-22



Background

The book was written between 1500-1600 B.C., and the authorship is undetermined. Ruth, the grandmother of Jessie, and the great-grandmother of King David, was one of the five women listed in the genealogy of Christ along with Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba, and Mary. Ruth was a Moabite, which placed in the lineage of Jesus not only a woman, but a foreigner. Her story is told in this book, as it

recounts how she married into a family of Israel and started worshiping the God of Israel. Despite its title, the book of Ruth tells the story of a woman named Naomi who lived in Bethlehem in the time of the judges. A famine drives Naomi and her family to seek refuge in Moab, where her two sons marry Moabite women. The story continues with the deaths of her husband Elimelech, and her sons, Mahlon, and Chilion; circumstances beyond the control of their wives, Naomi and Ruth. The tragedies threatened to break the spirit of Naomi. But Ruth, whose youth offered her many options for a bright future, decided to remain with Naomi, whom she loved. Her brave decision may have saved Naomi from falling into a despair from which she would not have returned. Later in the story, Naomi would have the chance to return the favor. She used her wisdom to guide Ruth in the matter of seducing Boaz. Both acts provided both women with a secure future.

As is often the case in a society with unequal distribution of power, their secure future would depend on the willingness for one in power to get involved. Boaz proved up to the task, potentially risking his reputation on the threshing floor (certainly risking Ruth's, thereby ruling out future honorable relations with her), and putting him in the position of having to negotiate for the right to marry her. But in doing so, Ruth provided Boaz a son; a future in the form of a legacy.

Different Bibles place the book of Ruth in different locations. Christian Bibles follow the Septuagint, and early Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures in place Ruth in between Judges and Samuel. Thus Ruth seems to be a part of an extended historical narrative that leads the reader directly from the era when "there was no king in Israel" to the time of David, the exemplary king. The Hebrew Bible locates Ruth among the Writings, the division of the canon that includes wisdom literature and psalms. It is one of the "Five Scrolls" or Megilloth, **The Five Scrolls** or **The Five Megillot** (are parts of the [Ketuvim](#) ("Writings"), the third major section of the [Tanakh](#) ([Hebrew Bible](#)). The Five Scrolls are the [Song of Songs](#), the [Book of Ruth](#), the [Book of Lamentations](#), [Ecclesiastes](#) and the [Book of Esther](#). These books or writing are set apart for liturgical use in the major religious festivals of Judaism. In this location (surrounded by postexilic, poetic, and wisdom texts, the reader of Ruth finds it easier to recognize the parable-like form of the story. The experiences and attitudes of the major characters in Ruth mirror those of the Judeans who returned from exile and attempted to rebuild their lives among the ruins of Jerusalem in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. By tracing David's ancestry back to a Moabite woman, the narrator casts serious doubt on the wisdom of Ezra and Nehemiah's attempt to cast all foreign wives out of the restoration community of Israel.

The parable-like form of the story encourages us to see not just that we ought to be like Ruth, but that we are like Naomi. Naomi is the character who most closely mirrors the attitudes and experiences of the people of God, including both Israel and the Christian Church. Naomi is the one who needs redemption, and ultimately she receives it in the story. It is Naomi's life that is renewed; her feelings of bitterness, emptiness, and hopelessness are turned around. Since redemption is not a reward given to Naomi because of her exemplary behavior, identification with her allows readers to hear the good news. Like Naomi, we are the recipients of unmerited love, and our redemption is due to someone else's faithfulness, not our own.

Read Chapter 1

The book of Ruth opens by telling us how Elimelech and his wife Naomi took their two sons to live in the country of Moab, to escape the famine in Bethlehem-Judah. After their father died, the two sons married women of Moab. Naomi, her sons, and their wives lived in Moab for another ten years after Elimelech died.

What prompted Naomi's decision to return to her homeland?

UNDERSTANDING THE MOABITES

In studying this, it's important that we understand who the Moabites were and why they were looked down upon by the Jews. In Genesis chapter 19, we see that Lot fathered two children by incest. In an attempt to preserve the seed of their father, Lot's daughters caused him to get drunk, and without his knowledge they both conceived his children.

What were their son's names? (Genesis 19:30-38) The Moabites, like the Ammonites, were a corrupt nation of idol worshippers, with no regard for Israel. Therefore, God commanded:

"No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even in the tenth generation. For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to pronounce a curse on you." – Deuteronomy 23:3-4, NIV

You may know the story of Balaam's talking donkey, and how the donkey refused to move when confronted by the angel of the Lord. What a lot of us don't remember however is that Balaam was commissioned by the Moabites to put a curse on Israel that day. Thankfully, he didn't follow through with their evil plan because God was directing his path.

Without a close look at the underlying conflict between the two cultures, one might not fully understand that Ruth's decision to stay with Naomi took courageous faith. Moving away from her people to live in a foreign land wasn't an easy choice.

- **What are some of the concerns that Ruth may have had in leaving Moab behind?**

- **Why do you think Orpah changed her mind and returned to Moab?**
- **Ruth gave up her home, she gave up her people, and she gave up any financial security she might have had to go with Naomi. Her future was uncertain, and still, she followed. Why do you think she choose to do that?**
- **What similarities do you see between Ruth and Naomi’s situation and ours right now, with all that is happening in the world?**

As you are reading this story, pay close attention to this powerful, yet often overlooked verse:

“So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.” – Ruth 1:22, NIV

In closing, here are a few more questions to help you dig deep:

- **What could Ruth’s decision teach us about our walk of faith?**
- **Why was the mention of the barley harvest in this chapter significant?**
- **When they arrived in Bethlehem, what did Naomi wish to be called? Why?**
- **Do you agree with Naomi that the “hand of the Lord has gone” against her?**