

Introduction to Ruth

Ruth is a story about self-sacrificial love against all odds. The title character is a Moabite woman who marries into an Israelite family but becomes an impoverished widow. Ruth refuses to abandon her mother-in-law, Naomi—also a widow. Together, they travel from Moab to Bethlehem, where Ruth works to provide for them both. Ruth then marries Boaz, a relative of Naomi’s husband, and gives Naomi a grandchild—redeeming them from poverty and restoring Naomi’s joy.

Background

The book of Ruth is mainly set in the town of Bethlehem of Judah—the hometown of David and birthplace of Jesus (Matt 2:1–6; John 7:42). The narrative opens explaining how famine in Judah drove Naomi’s husband, Elimelech, to move his family to Moab. The story is set during the period of the judges (roughly 1250–1050 BC) and serves as a bridge between this lawless era—when everyone did what was right in their own eyes (Judg 17:6; 21:25)—and the era of Israel’s monarchy.

Like many stories in the Old Testament, Ruth presents an unexpected reversal of the common expectations of the time. In the patriarchal culture of ancient Israel, a childless widow like Ruth would have been limited to the lowest levels of society. Her status as a foreigner from Israel’s sometime-enemy Moab (Judg 3:12–21) would have reduced her social status even further. However, through her faithfulness to Naomi and her marriage to Boaz, she moves from the margins to mainline society.

The marriage of Ruth and Boaz depicts an ancient Near Eastern custom called “levirate marriage” (described in Deut 25:5–10). After a man died, a relative (often his brother) was expected to marry the deceased man’s widow; the Hebrew text calls this as acting as a *go’el*, which may be broadly defined as redeemer. This custom preserved the deceased man’s lineage and his family’s inheritance. It also provided support for the widow—redeeming her from an otherwise desperate existence without a family and income.

Structure

Ruth may be divided into four acts bookended by a prologue and an epilogue, with the story moving thematically from death to life. The prologue (Ruth 1:1–5) sets the stage with an Israelite family migrating to Moab during a famine. The father and his sons die, leaving his wife, Naomi, and the sons’ Moabite wives, Ruth and Orpah. In the first major section (1:6–22), Naomi and Ruth journey to Israel. Rather than remaining in Moab and marrying a husband from her own people, Ruth insists on committing herself to Naomi and Naomi’s God—the God of Israel, Yahweh (1:15–18).

In the second section (2:1–23), Ruth gathers food for herself and Naomi by gleaning barley in the field of Boaz, a relative of Naomi. The third section (3:1–18) describes Ruth following Naomi’s advice and sleeping on the threshing floor at Boaz’s feet. Ruth asks Boaz to redeem her by marrying her, and he agrees. In the fourth major section (4:1–12), Boaz successfully negotiates with a closer relative, who has the first right to act as Ruth’s redeemer (*go’el* in Hebrew). In the epilogue (4:13–22), Boaz marries Ruth, and she gives birth to a son, Obed, who becomes the grandfather of King David.

Outline

- Prologue: The family line ends (1:1–5)
- Ruth joins Naomi (1:6–22)

- **Ruth meets Boaz (2:1–23)**

- Ruth sleeps at Boaz's feet (3:1–18)

- Boaz redeems Ruth (4:1–12)

- Epilogue: The family line continues (4:13–22)

Themes

Redemption is at the center of Ruth. At the beginning of the book, Naomi believes that Yahweh has turned against her (1:13, 20–21). Despite this, Ruth demonstrates her love by staying with Naomi instead of returning to her own family. These two marginalized women travel together to Israel in hope of a better life. Through Ruth's kindness and self-sacrifice, God works to renew Naomi's faith and redeem Ruth from the bleak existence of widowhood in the ancient world.

The book emphasizes the vital role women play in God's plan for humanity. By the standards of Israelite society, Ruth and Naomi would be powerless and inconsequential. But God's plan turns societal expectations upside down, and the women become central figures in the story of God's people.

Underlying this story of redemption is Yahweh Himself, who is with His people even in foreign lands—unlike Moab's gods. The story shows that Yahweh desires to incorporate outsiders into His people, even into the lineage of Israel's great king, David, and its ultimate king, Jesus (Matt 1:5–6; compare Gal 3:28–29). Ruth demonstrates that Yahweh can use any of us to further His work in the world and that He will go anywhere for any of us.

John D. Barry et al., Faithlife Study Bible (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016).