



Reader's Guide

THE BOOK OF RUTH

Background

The story of Ruth is set about 1100 B.C., approximately the same time that the Trojan War was taking place in Asia Minor. But it was probably not written down until nearly seven hundred years later, when the Hebrew people returned to Israel after their seventy-year captivity in Babylon. This was a time of turmoil when Hebrew leaders perceived foreign customs as a threat to the identity of the Jewish people.

Ruth was a woman from Moab (mō'ab'), a kingdom east of the Dead Sea. The religion of Moab involved the worship of idols—a practice the Hebrews condemned. Ruth married a Jewish man, Mahlon, but was soon left widowed and childless. In 1100 B.C., a woman who had no husband or son could expect to experience dire poverty. Fortunately, the ancient Israelites practiced a custom called "levirate" (lev'ə-rit) marriage (from *levir*, meaning "husband's brother"). According to this custom, a close male relative of the dead husband, such as a brother, was obliged to marry the widow if the husband had left no son. The firstborn son of this second marriage would be raised in the dead husband's name and would be considered his legal heir. Despite being an outsider, Ruth went to Israel with her mother-in-law Naomi and ultimately married Boaz (bō'az'), a relative of her husband's.

Oral Response


Most of us have felt like outsiders at one time or another. Hold a class discussion in which each of you describes an experience in which you felt as if you "didn't belong." What was the cause of this feeling? Who or what helped you overcome this feeling? Or does something—society or yourself—still need to change in order for you to stop feeling this way?

Literary Focus

The Book of Ruth is sometimes called the first **short story** ever written. Unlike the poetry of the Book of Psalms or the narratives in the Book of Genesis, the Book of Ruth contains developed **characters**, a specific **setting**, a definite **plot**, or course of events, and an underlying **theme** about loyalty and acceptance.

THE BOOK OF RUTH

King James Bible

 *The Book of Ruth is an entertaining story, but it is also a lesson about devotion, tolerance, and compassion. Pay attention to the message of the story of Ruth, and note the rewards received by characters who express devotion.*

Chapter 1

Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem-Judah¹ went to sojourn in the country of Moab,² he, and his wife, and his two sons.

And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites³ of Bethlehem-Judah. And they came into the country of Moab and continued there.

And Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons.

And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelled there about ten years.

And Mahlon and Chilion died also, both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband.

Then she arose with her daughters-in-law, that she might return from the country of Moab: for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the Lord had visited his people in giving the bread.

Wherefore she went forth out of the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return unto the land of Judah.

And Naomi said unto her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each to her mother's house: the Lord deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice and wept.

And they said unto her, "Surely we will return with thee unto thy people."

And Naomi said, "Turn again, my daughters: why will ye go with me? Are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?"

"Turn again, my daughters, go your way; for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband also tonight and should also bear sons, would ye tarry for them till they were

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1. **Bethlehem-Judah:** that is, Bethlehem in Judah; Judah was a region in southern Palestine that eventually became a kingdom rivaling Israel to the north.
 2. **Moab:** a kingdom of the Dead Sea, in what is today called Jordan.
 3. **Ephrathites** (ef'ra-thīts): natives of Bethlehem, once known as Ephrath; members of the clan of Ephrah.



RUTH AND NAOMI, WILLEM DROST. Ruth's famous quote, "Wither thou goest, I will go," is often used in wedding ceremonies.

? What quality in Ruth does this speech demonstrate?

grown? Would ye stay for them from having husbands? Nay, my daughters; for it grieveth me much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord is gone out against me."

And they lifted up their voice and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clave unto⁴ her.

And she said, "Behold, thy sister-in-law is gone back unto her people and unto her gods: Return thou after thy sister-in-law."

And Ruth said, "Entreat me not to leave thee or to return from following after thee:

4. **clave unto**: clung to; was faithful to (archaic form of *cleaved*).

for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought⁵ but death part thee and me."

When she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her.

So they two went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, "Is this Naomi?" And she said unto them, "Call me not Naomi, call me Mara:⁶ for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: Why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?"

So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.

Chapter 2

And Naomi had a kinsman of her husband's, a mighty man of wealth, of the family of Elimelech; and his name was Boaz.

And Ruth the Moabitess said unto Naomi, "Let me now go to the field and glean ears of corn after him in whose sight I shall find grace."⁷ And she said unto her, "Go, my daughter."

5. **ought** (archaic): aught, meaning "anything."

6. **Naomi . . . Mara**: Naomi means "pleasantness" or "my pleasant one," in Hebrew, and Mara means "bitterness" or "the bitter one."

7. **glean . . . grace**: According to biblical law, the poor were entitled to glean in the fields—that is, to gather the bits of grain left or dropped by the reapers. The corners of the fields were also left for the poor to reap.

And she went, and came, and gleaned in the field after the reapers: and her hap⁸ was to light on a part of the field belonging unto Boaz, who was of the kindred of Elimelech.

And, behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem and said unto the reapers, "The Lord be with you." And they answered him, "The Lord bless thee."

Then said Boaz unto his servant that was set over the reapers, "Whose damsel is this?"

And the servant that was set over the reapers answered and said, "It is the Moabitish damsel that came back with Naomi out of the country of Moab. And she said, 'I pray you, let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves': so she came, and hath continued even from the morning until now, that she tarried a little in the house."

Then said Boaz unto Ruth, "Hearest thou not, my daughter? Go not to glean in another field, neither go from hence, but abide here fast by my maidens. Let thine eyes be on the field that they do reap, and go thou after them. Have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch thee? And when thou art athirst, go unto the vessels, and drink of that which the young men have drawn."

Then she fell on her face and bowed herself to the ground and said unto him, "Why have I found grace in thine eyes, that thou shouldst take knowledge of me, seeing I am a stranger?"

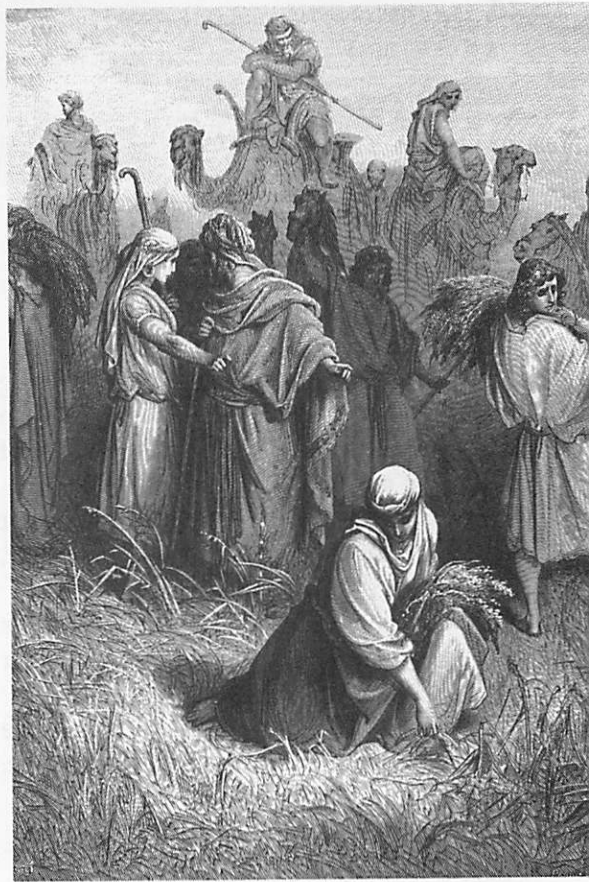
And Boaz answered and said unto her, "It hath fully been showed me all that thou hast done unto thy mother-in-law since the death of thine husband: and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity and art come unto a people which

thou knewest not heretofore. The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust."

Then she said, "Let me find favor in thy sight, my lord; for that thou hast comforted me, and for that thou hast spoken friendly unto thine handmaid, though I be not like unto one of thine handmaidens."

And Boaz said unto her, "At mealtime come thou hither, and eat of the bread, and dip thy morsel in the vinegar." And she sat beside the reapers: and he reached her

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RUTH AND BOAZ, GUSTAVE DORÉ.

8. hap: luck.

parched corn, and she did eat, and was sufficed, and left.

And when she was risen up to glean, Boaz commanded his young men, saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not. And let fall also some of the handfuls on purpose for her, and leave them, that she may glean them, and rebuke her not."

So she gleaned in the field until even, and beat out that she had gleaned: and it was about an ephah⁹ of barley.

And she took it up and went into the city: and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned: and she brought forth and gave to her what she had reserved after she was sufficed.

And her mother-in-law said unto her, "Where hast thou gleaned today? and where wroughtest thou? Blessed be he that did take knowledge of thee." And she showed her mother-in-law with whom she had wrought, and said, "The man's name with whom I wrought today is Boaz."

And Naomi said unto her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he of the Lord, who hath not left off his kindness to the living and to the dead." And Naomi said unto her, "The man is near of kin unto us, one of our next kinsmen."

And Ruth the Moabite said, "He said unto me also, 'Thou shalt keep fast by my young men, until they have ended all my harvest.'"

And Naomi said unto Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It is good, my daughter, that thou go out with his maidens, that they meet thee not in any other field."

So she kept fast by the maidens of Boaz to glean unto the end of barley harvest and of wheat harvest; and dwelt with her mother-in-law.

9. **ephah** (ē'fə): a little more than a bushel.

Chapter 3

Then Naomi her mother-in-law said unto her, "My daughter, shall I not seek rest for thee,¹⁰ that it may be well with thee? And now is not Boaz of our kindred, with whose maidens thou wast? Behold, he winnoweth barley tonight in the threshing floor. Wash thyself therefore, and anoint thee, and put thy raiment upon thee, and get thee down to the floor: but make not thyself known unto the man, until he shall have done eating and drinking. And it shall be, when he lieth down, that thou shalt mark the place where he shall lie, and thou shalt go in and uncover his feet and lay thee down; and he will tell thee what thou shalt do."

And she said unto her, "All that thou sayest unto me I will do."

And she went down unto the floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law bade her.

And when Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of corn: and she came softly and uncovered his feet and laid her down.

And it came to pass at midnight, that the man was afraid and turned himself: and, behold, a woman lay at his feet.

And he said, "Who art thou?" And she answered, "I am Ruth thine handmaid: Spread therefore thy skirt¹¹ over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman."

And he said, "Blessed be thou of the Lord, my daughter: for thou hast showed more kindness in the latter end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou followedst not young

10. **seek rest for thee**: that is, seek a husband; Naomi is trying to fulfill the responsibility of a parent for arranging the marriage of a child.

11. **Spread therefore thy skirt**: a formal act of betrothal.

men,¹² whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to thee all that thou requirest: for all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman. And now it is true that I am thy near kinsman: howbeit, there is a kinsman nearer than I. Tarry this night, and it shall be in the morning that if he will perform unto thee the part of a kinsman, well; let him do the kinsman's part: but if he will not do the part of a kinsman to thee, then will I do the part of a kinsman to thee, as the Lord liveth: lie down until the morning."

And she lay at his feet until the morning: and she rose up before one could know another. And he said, "Let it not be known that a woman came into the floor."

Also he said, "Bring the veil that thou hast upon thee, and hold it." And when she held it, he measured six measures of barley and laid it on her: and she went into the city.

And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, "Who art thou, my daughter?" And she told her all that the man had done to her.

And she said, "These six measures of barley gave he me; for he said to me, 'Go not empty unto thy mother-in-law.'"

Then said she, "Sit still, my daughter, until thou know how the matter will fall: for the man will not be in rest until he have finished the thing this day."

Chapter 4

Then went Boaz up to the gate and sat him down there and, behold, the kinsman of whom Boaz spake came by; unto whom he

said, "Ho, such a one! turn aside, sit down here." And he turned aside and sat down.

And he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, "Sit ye down here." And they sat down.

And he said unto the kinsman, "Naomi, that is come again out of the country of Moab, selleth a parcel of land, which was our brother Elimelech's. And I thought to advertise thee, saying, Buy it before the inhabitants and before the elders of my people. If thou wilt redeem it, redeem it: but if thou wilt not redeem it, then tell me, that I may know: for there is none to redeem it beside thee; and I am after thee." And he said, "I will redeem it."

Then said Boaz, "What day thou buyest the field of the hand of Naomi, thou must buy it also of Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance."

And the kinsman said, "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I mar mine own inheritance:¹³ Redeem thou my right to thyself; for I cannot redeem it."

Now this was the manner in former time in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning changing, for to confirm all things; a man plucked off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbor: and this was a testimony in Israel.

Therefore the kinsman said unto Boaz, "Buy it for thee." So he drew off his shoe.

And Boaz said unto the elders and unto all the people, "Ye are witnesses this day, that I have bought all that was Elimelech's, and all that was Chilion's and Mahlon's, of the hand of Naomi. Moreover, Ruth the

12. **thou followedst not young men:** Boaz, who is eighty years old, is praising Ruth for her willingness to fulfill the levirate marriage obligation by marrying him even though he is old.

13. **lest I mar mine own inheritance:** in other words, by spending money on property that will go to the son legally regarded as Mahlon's, rather than his own.



RUTH AND BOAZ WITH THE REAPERS, French miniature, c. 1250.

Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, have I purchased to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren and from the gate of his place: Ye are witnesses this day."

And all the people that were in the gate and the elders said, "We are witnesses. The Lord make the woman that is come into thine house like Rachel and like Leah,¹⁴

14. **like Rachel and like Leah:** two sisters who were Jacob's wives, their sons were among the twelve sons of Jacob who founded the twelve tribes of Israel.

which two did build the house of Israel: and do thou worthily in Ephrath, and be famous in Bethlehem. And let thy house be like the house of Pharez, whom Tamar bare unto Judah,¹⁵ of the seed which the Lord shall give thee of this young woman."

So Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife: and when he went in unto her, the Lord gave her conception, and she bare a son.

And the women said unto Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel. And he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life and a nourisher of thine old age: for thy daughter-in-law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath born him."

And Naomi took the child and laid it in her bosom and became nurse unto it.

And the women her neighbors gave it a name, saying, "There is a son born to Naomi";¹⁶ and they called his name Obed: He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Now these are the generations of Pharez: Pharez begat Hezron, and Hezron begat Ram, and Ram begat Amminadab, and Amminadab begat Nahshon, and Nahshon begat Salmon, and Salmon begat Boaz, and Boaz begat Obed, and Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David.

15. **Pharez . . . Judah:** Judah was the fourth son of Jacob and Leah. After his daughter-in-law Tamar had twice been left a childless widow after two of his sons died, she tricked Judah into becoming the father of her twin sons, Pharez and Zarah.
16. **son born to Naomi:** not literally, but rather a son in the sense of a legal heir to both her dead husband and dead sons; some biblical scholars suggest that the child may have been legally regarded as Naomi's.

First Thoughts

How did you feel about the conclusion of the Book of Ruth? Did you find it satisfying and appropriate, or did you expect a different ending?

Identifying Facts

1. How does Naomi try to persuade Ruth and Orpah not to follow her?
2. How do Ruth and Naomi manage to survive in Bethlehem?
3. How does Ruth come to the attention of Boaz? Why does he admire her?
4. Why does Boaz first ask another relative to “redeem” the property and wife of Elimelech?

Interpreting Meanings

1. Ruth’s decision to forsake her people and follow Naomi is celebrated as a shining example of selfless devotion. Her virtue is best expressed in the famous line, “Whither thou goest, I will go.” Go back to the story and list the details that emphasize each of the following values: hospitality, courtesy, modesty, acceptance, and respect for custom and tradition.
2. The relationship between Ruth and Boaz is sometimes spoken of as a “love story.” Do you think this is a good way to describe it? If so, what attitudes toward love and marriage does their relationship represent?
3. **Irony** is the contrast between what is expected and what actually takes place. At the end of the story, it is said that David, the greatest king of Israel, will be descended from Ruth. What is **ironic** about this detail?
4. The Book of Ruth is often called a **short story**. Discuss the specific differences between the story of Ruth and the stories you have read from the Book of

Genesis. Consider the elements that make the Book of Ruth a short story: **character development, setting, plot, and theme.**

Applying Meanings

After her husband’s death, Ruth has the opportunity to stay in her homeland and live with her own family, yet she decides to go with Naomi to Israel. Have you ever willingly or unwillingly found yourself an outsider in a strange or foreign place or among people you didn’t know well? Describe your situation, how you felt about it, and the choices you made.

Creative Writing Response

Writing a Letter. Imagine that you are Ruth and that a day or two has passed since you married Boaz. Write a letter to your sister-in-law, Orpah. Summarize for her the experiences you have had since you and Naomi left Moab. Tell Orpah what you have found difficult and what you have enjoyed. Be sure to share your hopes for the future.

Critical Writing Response

Analyzing Characterization. Ruth is a strong, complex **character**. Characters can be drawn in several different ways. A writer can reveal a character directly by telling what he or she is like. On the other hand, a writer can sketch a character indirectly by describing the character’s appearance and dress, letting the character speak to others, revealing the character’s thoughts and feelings, showing how the character affects other people, and showing the character’s actions. Write a two- to three-paragraph essay exploring the characterization of Ruth in the Book of Ruth. Provide examples of **direct** and **indirect characterization** from the story.