

RUTH - A TEACHER'S GUIDE

THE CENTRAL QUESTION:

What does this book/story say to us about God?

This question may be broken down further as follows:

- a. Why did God do it/allow it?
 - b. Why did He record it for our study?
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1. What picture of God would you have if you had only the book of Ruth? What is the historical background of this book? Who do you think wrote the book? Why was it written?

“AUTHOR: Unknown

“The author of Ruth is not identified by the text. Many name Samuel as author; others suggest Hezekiah, Ezra, or even David as having penned the book; but there is no textual evidence to support any of these theories.

DATE: 1010–970 B.C.

“Though there is no unanimity among ancient or modern scholars in dating the Book of Ruth, the first verse places the historical setting of the book during the period of the judges (c. 1375–1050 B.C.). The genealogy in 4:18–22 suggests the latter part of that era. The book as it now stands could hardly have been completed earlier than the time of David, as he is mentioned by name in 4:22. If the book had been written as late as the time of Solomon, it seems likely that this notable figure would have been included in the genealogy. Therefore, the Book of Ruth is dated during the reign of David (1010–970 B.C.).

“THEME: Faithfulness and Redemption

“The period of the judges was a time of lawlessness: characterized by violence and crime, infected with restlessness and continuous warfare, tormented by spiritual apathy and apostasy, and marked by base and corrupt leaders. Although the events in this historical epic were contemporaneous with that period, this book portrays the peaceful home life of a family faithfully honoring the Lord and trusting His providence, in spite of economic adversity and surrounding idolatry, discouragement and death (Judges 17:1). The key term in the story is ‘kindness’ (*hesed*, Heb.), meaning covenant loyalty (1:8; 2:20; 3:10). Ruth and Boaz illustrate what covenant righteousness and loyalty are about in an era when ‘everyone did *what was* right in his own eyes’ (Judges 21:25).

“The book shows how the patriarchal promises found fulfillment in the establishment of a messianic dynasty, as God quietly but providentially began to achieve His salvific purposes through the faithfulness of a single family. The book describes common settings (e.g., a barley field, a city gate), where common people (e.g., a worker, a landowner), were doing common activities (e.g., harvesting, business, marriage, childbearing). Nevertheless, they were being guided by the mysterious hand of God, who was using their uncommon faith to prepare the way for Israel’s greatest king, David (4:22). No event in the life of God’s people is truly common or insignificant, because He is incessantly involved.

“Nowhere is the sanctity of the home more evident than in the Book of Ruth. The book portrays a woman who epitomized godly womanhood (cf. Prov. 31:10–31). The book is (1) the exciting story of the romantic love between Ruth and Boaz—Gentile and Jew united in the ancestry of the Messiah; (2) the matchless account of devoted friendship between Ruth and Naomi—two women

unlike in every way except in their love for one another; and especially, (3) an unfolding of the magnificent, life-changing drama of reconciliation between God and man, in which YAHWEH God redeems helpless and sinful man, just as the Hebrew kinsman-redeemer, Boaz, redeemed Ruth, a widowed Gentile idolatress, from childlessness and poverty. The responsible exercise of man's will is balanced by the sovereign activity of God (who is named twenty-three times in the eighty-five verses of Ruth); for as Ruth chose the godly Hebrew family with determined commitment, even so God adopted her in a permanent relationship into His family. The providence of God gives victory in overwhelming adversities, even as Ruth's decision to remain with the aged, poverty-stricken Naomi was rewarded, not only with the security of a wealthy husband, but also with the joy of motherhood and a place in the ancestry of the Messiah. The Moabitess Ruth was woven into the family of God with the scarlet thread of redemption.

"LITERARY STRUCTURE: An ancient literary device for structuring material, especially common in the Old Testament, is called chiasm. It consists of repeating or matching a series of elements in reverse order. The inversion may involve repetition or paralleling of words, ideas, actions, or characters. This produces a structure of parallel elements that meet in the center. In the Old Testament such a device is found organizing extensive narratives, prophetic sermons, short speeches, and poetic passages. A short poetic example is Deuteronomy 32:16.(a) They provoked Him to jealousy(b) with foreign gods;(b) With abominations(a) they provoked Him to anger.

"The Book of Ruth is an example of a chiastically structured narrative, whose turning point is at the end of chapter 2. This yields the following parallel sections:

1:1–5: The Family of Elimelech

1:6–22: The Faithfulness of Ruth

2:1–23 The Kinsman-Redeemer in the Barley Field

3:1–18 The Kinsman-Redeemer at the Threshing Floor

4:1–17 The Faithfulness of Boaz

4:18–22 The Family of David

In Ruth the chiasmic structure serves to highlight the reversal of barrenness to blessing accomplished by the Lord's gracious providence." (*Believer's Study Bible*)

"The author has many purposes. (1) Historically, he provides information as to certain activities and customs in the period of the judges. (2) Theologically, the book emphasizes the sovereign activity of God's providential working in the affairs of man. Not only does God's promise to the seed of Abraham go on through the troubled time of the judges, but He so arranges the details of earth's history and the chosen line to include salvation for Gentiles as well. Ruth thus provides an important link in the unfolding messianic genealogy. (3) Devotionally, the book provides several analogies between the work of the kinsman-redeemer of ancient Israel and that of Jesus Christ, who serves as the saving Mediator for all men. It also assures the believer of God's continuing love for a helpless mankind and of His willingness to meet man's needs. An exciting story of true romance, the book also gives instruction in practical living in such things as personal morality, a genuine concern for the needs of others, and the necessity for personal godliness in the face of testing and adversity. A great deal of helpful information for today's Christian woman may also be found in the example of Ruth, whose virtues of godliness, purity, humility, honesty, fidelity, and thoughtfulness remain an exemplary standard for all. Similarly, Boaz becomes for the Christian man a model of God-given strength, honor, graciousness, courtesy, and compassion that can give encouragement for becoming a believing gentleman in the finest sense of the word." (*King James Version Study Bible* -

Intro to the book of Ruth)

“Ruth and Boaz are part of a longer line that often shows God’s grace combined with human frailty. One of David’s ancestors was Perez (4:12, 18), son of an irregular union between Judah and his own daughter-in-law, Tamar, who was “more righteous” than the patriarch himself (Gen. 38:26). The closing few verses of Ruth (4:18–22) are commonly said to be a later addition to the book, but genealogies are not unusual in ancient narratives. Also, this genealogy underlines a particular value of Ruth, its revelation of the mixed ancestry of King David and through him, of Jesus Christ.

“Looking beyond this witness to the legitimacy of David’s kingship, we should note the significance of the book in the light of the gospel. Ruth follows the faith of Abraham, as she leaves home and family to go to a foreign land under the Lord’s care. The universal scope of the gospel comes to light as Ruth the Moabite finds the blessing promised to all the nations in Abraham’s descendants. Finally, Ruth becomes an ancestor of Christ, who in Himself will reconcile to God such different nations as Moab and Israel.” (*New Geneva Study Bible* - Intro to the book of Ruth)

This small book tells of events that took place during the time of the Judges. After reading Judges, it is a wonderful breath of fresh air. There were still some kind, considerate people who followed the laws and rules given to Moses by God. While all Israel is in a state of disaster because of turning away from God, a foreigner, a Moabite woman by the name of Ruth, responded to the truth as lived in the life of her in-laws and became an ardent follower of Yahweh, Israel’s true God. Because of her love and loyalty she becomes the great-grandmother of King David and an ancestor of Christ. Boaz, her second husband, was the son of Rahab, the Jericho prostitute, who married a leader of the tribe of Judah by the name of Salmon. Salmon was a descendant of Judah and Tamar, the Canaanite, one-time prostitute, who was waiting for someone else to fulfill his levirate obligations to her! (Genesis 38) It should be clear from all this that God will work with anyone who is serious about “knowing” Him and willing to listen to Him.

The amazing thing about all these stories is that they are the stories of real people whom God is going to choose as His ancestors! God doesn’t try to hide the “black sheep” in His family. He goes out of His way to tell their stories. He even writes special books in the Bible to do so. Moreover, in the days when women didn’t count for much at all in the thinking of most men, God seems to emphasize the stories of the colorful women in His family. A whole chapter tells the story of Tamar (Genesis 38), a whole chapter tells the story of Rahab (Joshua 2), a whole book carries the name of Ruth, and two whole chapters tell the story of Bathsheba. (2 Samuel 11,12) The book of Ruth is one of only two books in the Bible named after women. For Rahab and Ruth, we know considerably more about them than we do about their husbands!

2. Ruth was a Moabite. Where did the Moabites come from? (Genesis 19:30-38) What relationship were Israel to have with the Moabites? (Deuteronomy 23:3-6; Nehemiah 13:1,2) Balak, one of the kings of Moab, tried to overcome Israel by paying Balaam to curse them. (Numbers 22-25) There was constant warfare between Israel and Moab for many years. (Judges 3:12-30; 2 Samuel 8:2,11,12; 1 Chronicles 18:2,11; 2 Kings 1:1; 3:4-27) The prophets spoke bitterly against Moab. (Isaiah 15,16; 25:10; Jeremiah 9:25,26; 25:17,21; 48:1-46; Ezekiel 25:8-11; Amos 2:1,2; Zephaniah 2:8-11)

The Moabites were descendants of Lot’s incestuous relationship with his elder daughter. As far

as we know she later intermarried with the surrounding tribes and no doubt Moab and his descendants were fully integrated into Canaanite custom and culture by the time Israel came back from Egypt. The many verses mentioned above tell the story of the terrible feud between these old cousins. God apparently recognized how serious any relationship with these people would be when He warned the Israelites about them. Deuteronomy 23:3-6:

³ “No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none belonging to them shall enter the assembly of the LORD for ever; ⁴ because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came forth out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Be’or from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. ⁵ Nevertheless the LORD your God would not hearken to Balaam; but the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loved you. ⁶ You shall not seek their peace or their prosperity all your days for ever. (RSV)

3. Why do you think the book of Ruth was included in the Canon? (Ruth 4:17-22) When did the events of this book occur? (Ruth 1:1-2)

This book was probably originally written to explain the ancestry of Israel’s greatest king. It was written no later than the early days of the kings of Israel. It was included because of the important place David had in the history of the nation. It helps also to balance the history of the nation as recorded in the book of Judges! In the Hebrew canon Ruth appears in the Megilloth, or Five Scrolls, along with Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther. The Megilloth belonged to the 3d division of the canon, the Hagiographa, or “Holy Writings”. Each of these books was read in its entirety during one of the five Jewish festivals each year. Ruth was read during Pentecost. But this location for Ruth was probably assigned long after the book was written at the time when the Hebrew canon was put together.

4. Why did some of “God’s true people” have to flee to the heathen to find food to eat? (Ruth 1:2) Why do you suppose the famine came?

The warnings in Deuteronomy about the results of turning away from God certainly come to mind as one thinks about a famine occurring in the land. (See Deuteronomy 11:17; 28:15-24) Core samples from the Dead Sea area suggest that ancient Palestine never had more than marginal agricultural capacity because of the limited annual rainfall total. Famines were a part of ordinary life.

5. Was Naomi (Mara) right that the Lord had dealt very bitterly with her? (Ruth 1:20,21) How about Job when he said, “The Lord gave, and now the Lord has taken away”? (Job 1:21, GNB; Compare 2 Samuel 24:1 in contrast with 1 Chronicles 21:1) Isn’t it clear from the earlier verses that Satan was the one who “took away”? Was this a serious error on Job’s part? (Job 1:22) Or was he speaking as they understood things in those days? When someone has a horrible accident we sometimes say, “It must have been God’s will.” Are death and sickness ever God’s will?

Remember that it was never God’s plan for humans to leave the garden of Eden! We should all still be living in wonderful peace and security, talking with God on a daily basis and eating from the tree of life. Sin, sickness, and death were never supposed to be a part of that plan. Many ancient peoples believed in the existence of many “gods”. They tended to have a different “god” for each powerful force or event that they knew about. They thought human history was largely determined

by whether or not they could keep these “gods” happy. Judaism and later Christianity and Islam believe in only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4). Therefore when the people would have something unexplainable happen to them, whether good or bad, the natural tendency was for them to attribute that occurrence to God. We do much the same day when we say, “It must have been God’s will” or when we call natural disasters “acts of God”.

In some cases it is clear that Satan was actually the one who was responsible for a particular event. He is certainly at least primarily responsible for sin and its overall consequences in our world today.

6. Why did Ruth become so devoted to Naomi her mother-in-law? (Ruth 1:6-18)

Since it looked very unlikely that Naomi would ever produce more sons to marry her, and since Naomi was certainly not “blessed” with a lot of money, we must assume that Ruth was attracted by some personal characteristic of Naomi’s or by her religion. The Moabites and the Israelites were perpetual enemies, so Ruth wasn’t likely to join the Israelites because she thought that they would welcome her with open arms. In light of Ruth’s beautiful statement in Ruth 1:16,17 we must believe that Ruth was convinced that Yahweh was superior in every way to Molech!

7. What do Boaz’s statements to Ruth imply about conditions in those days? (Ruth 2:8,9; Compare 2:22)

It is clear that women in general and probably especially a foreign woman without a husband would be considered an easy target for those men in the area who wanted to take advantage of them. Boaz and Naomi were doing their best to be sure that Ruth was protected as much as possible. Remember what happened to the Levite’s concubine just a few miles from Bethlehem in those days! (See Judges 19)

8. Why do you think Boaz took such an interest in Ruth? (Ruth 2:4-7,10-16)

Boaz seemed to be a very godly and kind man. Ruth was young and may have been quite attractive as well. But no doubt Boaz, being a wealthy landowner had met attractive young women before. Some have suggested that Boaz may have had other wives, but there is no suggestion of this in Scripture. It is even possible that some of the Jews were reluctant to marry this son of a former Canaanite prostitute. In any case, he was apparently attracted to Ruth and was ready to give her special treatment.

9. Would you want your daughter to do what Ruth did in Ruth 3? Should we recommend this for our boarding schools?

Times were very different then. We must always remember that God works with people where they are in their experience and in their society. While some of her methods wouldn’t be recommended today, Ruth was following the acceptable practices in the society of her day. Studies show that at least in ancient Arabia nearby, this was a familiar custom. It appears to be supported by laws in several ancient near eastern lands. See *Biblical Archaeologist Reader* (1970).

10. Why is there such a detailed telling of the negotiations for buying Elimelech’s property? (Ruth 4:12)

It seems clear that this was to record that Boaz followed all the rules set down by Moses. He did not want it to appear that because his mother was not a Jewess, and the woman he was arranging to marry was not Jewish that he was ignoring Jewish law. Boaz was being the kind of outstanding citizen that all Jews should have been. If all Israelite men had followed his example, the story of ancient Israel would have turned out quite differently!

11. Do you think the Levirate marriage rule should be followed today? Why, or why not? Apparently it was still followed in the times of Christ. (Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Matthew 22:23-28; compare Leviticus 18:16; 20:21)

In our society we would have a lot of trouble with this. But in the society in which they lived this was a good provision. It prevented women from being despised or abandoned because their husbands had died. It provided some social security for older widows. And perhaps most important of all, it provided a potential way for heirs to be raised up to inherit the property of the deceased and to carry his family name.

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