

# The Book of Ruth



The Book of Ruth is agreed to be, by most scholars, fiction: a powerful short story set in an historical context. The story is historically possible (for centuries its literal truth went unchallenged) although scholars now believe that it was written for several purposes:

- It holds up to its readers models of heroines and a hero.
- It shows how a non-Israelite can become a faithful worshipper of Yahweh.
- It justifies the custom of Levirate marriage.

The authors of the Book of Ruth may have composed the book for any of the above stated efforts, although the last reason is generally believed to be the main purpose of the book.

## Dating

Ruth was probably written at a time when Jews were inter-marrying with Gentiles, and many Jews considered this to be wrong and against the law (c.f the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah). It would have borne witness that non-Jewish people were not to be condemned. After all, a Moabite woman was King David's Grandmother. The story refers to the days "...when Judges were Judging...". Since the early monarchy followed the period of the Judges, the story may have originated in the early monarchy, in the reign of David or Solomon, c.900 BC, although the basic version may have circulated orally for generations before it was written down.

It is believed to have originally been a part of the Book of Judges, but was then separated at a later date. Some scholars suggest that it was written much later (due to the style of Hebrew), about c.500 BC, but the general consensus is that it dates from the pre-exilic reigns of David or Solomon, possibly to establish the lineage of David.

## Levirate Marriage

The book of Ruth is permeated with ancient Israelite customs that seem strange to us: the gleaning of grain by the poor (Ruth 2:2), inheritance laws (Ruth 4:9-10), the removal of sandals in business exchanges (Ruth 4:7). Another custom alluded to in the story is that of levirate marriage (Ruth 1:11-12).

If a married man died without any children to carry on his name and inheritance, it was his unmarried brother's responsibility to marry the widow so that: "The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel" (Deuteronomy 25:6). This is known as a levirate marriage from the Latin word for brother-in-law, *levir*.

According to *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, "Levirate marriage existed in Ugarit, in the Middle Assyrian (no. 33) and Hittite law codes (no. 193), and possibly in the Nuzi texts" (vol. 4, p. 567).

The earliest biblical example of a levirate relationship is complex. It concerns Judah's sons: Er, Onan and Shelah (Genesis 38). When Er died, Judah told Onan to have children by his brother Er's widow, Tamar, so that Er's name would carry on. Onan, knowing that any children borne by Tamar would legally be Er's, slept with Tamar but selfishly ensured that she did not have any children. God was displeased and put Onan to death. Judah did not then give Tamar to Shelah as his wife, lest Shelah die also.

When Tamar realized that Judah would not allow Shelah to fulfill the obligations of levirate marriage, she disguised herself as a prostitute and sat where she knew Judah would approach. Judah did not recognize her and purchased her services. In due course, Tamar became pregnant and bore Judah twin sons, Perez and Zerah.

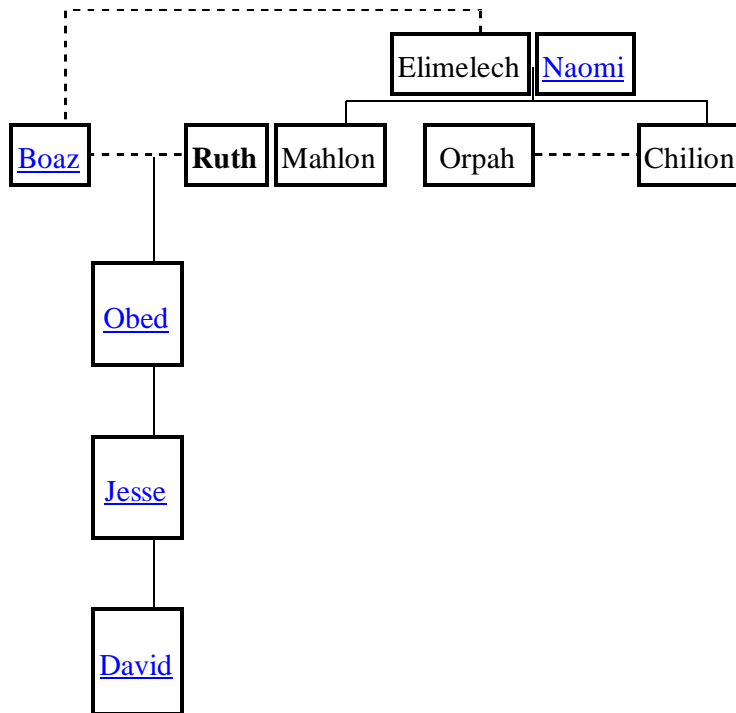
We do not know why Tamar embarked upon this action, but we are told that

Judah acknowledged, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah" (verse 26). She had been faithful to her family obligations, whereas Judah had not been. Through her son Perez, Tamar became an ancestor of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:3, 16).

In the book of Ruth, Naomi told Ruth and Orpah that she had no other sons that could perform the duties of levirate husbands (Ruth 1:11). Boaz was a near relative of Ruth's late husband, Mahlon. Boaz performed the duties of kinsman-redeemer (Hebrew: *go'el*) by marrying Ruth and buying the property that had belonged to Mahlon's father, Elimelech (Ruth 4:9-10).

The son of Boaz and Ruth would thus become the legal inheritor of Elimelech's property, a "son" of Elimelech and Naomi (verse 17). This seems to be an extension of levirate marriage as discussed in Deuteronomy, but many details concerning the transaction remain unknown.

## Family tree of those mentioned



### Themes

The main themes of the book are loyalty and faithfulness. Faithfulness to the covenant in Ruth echoes Israel's covenant with Yahweh. They are God's people, and Yahweh is their God. Naomi asks God to provide for the well-being of her daughters-in-law, her words to Ruth about Boaz are a prayer that God will bless him. Boaz's words to Ruth are a prayer that God will bless her.

The character's relationships with one another show a faithfulness which is grounded in the firm conviction that Yahweh will be faithful to His people, his covenant people. Orpah and Ruth remain faithful to their widowed Mother-in-Law. Even though Orpah eventually returns to home to Moab, she had been willing to accompany Naomi to Judah. Naomi praises such loyalty. Boaz shows his faithfulness by allowing a widow to gather the remains of the harvest (Deut 24:19-21) and by protecting the widow of his dead relative's family. Ruth, who comes to accept Israel's work, will see a levirate marriage.

Feminist scholars point to the levirate law as an example of patriarchy. The woman's purpose is simply seen as being a producer of children: if the man dies she must make herself available to the next male relative.

### Ruth, Boaz and Christ

To appreciate how Boaz foreshadowed Christ, we must first understand the significance of an ancient Israelite law concerning the kinsman-redeemer (Hebrew: *go'el*). This legal statute helped ensure that inherited land remained within the family. It stated, "If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, his nearest relative is to come and redeem [Hebrew: *ga'al*, the same root as *go'el*] what his countryman has sold" (Leviticus 25:25).

Both words, *go'el* and *ga'al*, occur frequently in chapters 2 and 3 of Ruth. Since Boaz was a kinsman (*go'el*) of Naomi, he was eventually able to redeem (*ga'al*) her land through marriage to Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth.

Presumably, Naomi and her husband had previously sold the land before they moved to Moab.

The concern Boaz displayed as kinsman-redeemer to the widow reflects an aspect of God's own character. "Yahweh is the *go'el* of the fatherless and widow and pleads their cause" (*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, p. 353; see also Proverbs 23:10-11 and Jeremiah 50:34).

In the New Testament, we see the ultimate kinsman-redeemer in Jesus Christ, who redeemed us from sin by shedding his blood (1 Peter 1:18-19). In many respects, Boaz typifies Christ. Donald A. Leggett writes, "In the actions of Boaz as *goel* we see foreshadowed the saving work of Jesus Christ, his later descendant."

Dr. Leggett goes on to explain: "As Boaz had the right of redemption and yet clearly was under no obligation to intervene on Ruth's behalf, so it is with Christ. As Boaz, seeing the plight of the poor widows, came to their rescue because his life was governed by Yahweh and his laws, so also of the Messiah it is prophesied that his life would be governed by the law of God and that he would deal justly and equitably with the poor and with those who were oppressed (Ps. 72:2, 4, 12, 13; Isa. 11:4)" (*The Levirate and Goel Institutions in the Old Testament With Special Attention to the Book of Ruth*, Mack Publishing Company, 1974, p. 298).

## **Outline**

### **1. Chapter 1: famine, Moab and death (1:1-22)**

- a) Introduction: 3 widowed women (1:1-7)**
- b) The action: relationship and return (1:8-21)**
- c) Narrative translation (1:22)**

### **2. Chapter 2: Ruth encounters Boaz (2:1-23)**

- a) Introduction (2:1)**
- b) Scene one: Ruth and Boaz (2:2-16)**
- c) Narrative translation (2:17-18)**
- d) Scene 2: Naomi and Ruth (2:19-22)**
- e) Narrative translation (2:23)**

### **3. Chapter 3: Boaz encounters Ruth (3:1-18)**

- a) Scene 1: Naomi and Ruth**
- b) Narrative translation (3:6-8)**
- c) Scene 2: Ruth and Boaz (3:9-13)**
- d) Narrative translation (3:14-15)**
- e) Scene 3: Naomi and Ruth (3:16-18)**

### **4. Chapter 4: The resolution**

- a) The closing kinsman – redeemer (4:1-12)**
- b) Climax (4:13)**
- c) Conclusion (4:14-17)**

### **Appendix (4:18-22)**