

Book of Ruth Explained

Title: Ancient versions and modern translations consistently entitle this book after Ruth the Moabitess heroine, who is mentioned by name 12 times (1:4 – 4:13).

Only two Old Testament books receive their names from women, Ruth and Esther.

The Old Testament does not again refer to Ruth, while the New Testament mentions her just once, in the context of Christ's genealogy (Matt. 1:5; compare Ruth 4:18-22).

“Ruth” most likely comes from a Moabite and/or Hebrew word meaning “friendship.”

Ruth arrived in Beth-lehem as a foreigner (2:10), became a maidservant (2:13), married wealthy Boaz (4:13), and was included in the physical lineage of Christ (Matt. 1:5).

The Book of Ruth derives its name from its principal character.

The biographical sketch of this godly young Moabitess contains much information concerning the customs of the ancient Near East and provides its readers with some valuable data regarding the ancestry of King David.

It also demonstrates God's gracious concern for all mankind, Jew and Gentile alike.

The book was read at the Feast of Pentecost.

All 85 verses of Ruth have been accepted as canonical by the Jews.

Along with Song of Solomon, Esther, Ecclesiastes and Lamentations, Ruth stands with the Old Testament books of the Megilloth or “five scrolls.”

Rabbis read these books in the synagogue on 5 special occasions during the year, Ruth being read at Pentecost due to the harvest scenes of Ruth (chapters 2 and 3).

Authorship: Jewish tradition credits Samuel as the author, which is plausible since he did not die (1 Sam. 25:1), until after he had anointed David as God's chosen king (1 Sam. 16:6-13).

However, neither internal features nor external testimony conclusively identify the writer.

This exquisite story most likely appeared shortly before or during David's reign in Israel (1011 – 971 B.C.), since David is mentioned (4:17, 22), but not Solomon.

Goethe reportedly labeled this piece of anonymous but unexcelled literature as “the loveliest, complete work on a small scale”.

What Venus is to statuary and the Mona Lisa is to paintings, Ruth is to literature.

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 then 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.

Historical Setting: The opening verse places the book in the era of the judges, at a time of a great famine.

Such a condition existed in the days of the Midianite oppression (Judges 6:3-6).

If this was the occasion spoken of in the Book of Ruth, a date in the middle of the twelfth century B.C. would be distinctly possible for the events narrated here.

Besides the opening statement of the book, the internal evidence reveals an intimate acquaintance with ancient Hebrew and Near Eastern social customs (chapters three and four).

This data argues strongly for an early date.

Moreover, Jewish canonical tradition links (Judges and Ruth), together as one book, again pointing to an early date.

Thus seen, the Book of Ruth provides its readers with a light of spiritual faithfulness in a period of otherwise spiritual darkness.

Genealogically, Ruth looks back almost 900 years to events in the time of Jacob (4:11) and forward about 100 years to the coming reign of David (4:17, 22).

While Joshua and Judges emphasize the legacy of the nation and their land of promise, Ruth focuses on the lineage of David back to the patriarchal era.

At least 7 major theological themes emerge in Ruth.

1. Ruth the Moabitess illustrates that God's redemptive plan extended beyond the Jews to Gentiles (2:12).

2. Ruth demonstrates that women are co-heirs with men of God's salvation grace (compare Gal. 3:28).
3. Ruth portrays the virtuous woman of (Prov. 31:10; compare 3:11).
4. Ruth describes God's sovereign (1:6; 4:13), and providential care (2:3), of seemingly unimportant people at apparently insignificant times which later prove to be monumentally crucial to accomplishing God's will.
5. Ruth along with Tamar (Gen. Chapter 38), Rehab (Joshua chapter 2), and Bath-sheba (2 Sam. chapters 11 and 12), stand in the genealogy of the messianic line (4:17, 22; compare Matt. 1:5).
6. Boaz, as a type of Christ, becomes Ruth's kinsman-redeemer (4:1-12).
7. David's right (and thus Christ's right), to the throne of Israel is traced back to Judah (4:18-22; compare Gen. 49:8-12).

Background – Setting: Aside from Beth-lehem (1:1), Moab (the perennial enemy of Israel, which was east of the Dead Sea), stands as the only other mentioned geographic/national entity (1:1-2).

This country originated when Lot fathered Moab by an incestuous union with his oldest daughter (Gen 19:37).

Centuries later the Jews encountered opposition from Balak, king of Moab, through the prophet Balaam (Num. chapters 22-25).

For 18 years Moab oppressed Israel during the time of the judges (3:12-30).

Saul defeated the Moabites (1 Sam. 14:47), while David seemed to enjoy a peaceful relationship with them (1 Sam. 22:3-4).

Later, Moab again troubled Israel (2 Kings 3:5-27; Ezra 9:1).

Because of Moab's idolatrous worship of Chemosh (1 Kings 11:7, 33; 2 Kings 23:13), and its opposition to Israel, God cursed Moab (Isa. Chapters 15 and 16; Jer. chapter 48; Ezek. 25:8-11; Amos 2:1-3).

The story of Ruth occurred in the days "when the judges governed" Israel (1:1; ca 1370 to 1041 B.C.; Judges 2:16-19), and thus bridges time from the judges to Israel's monarchy.

God used "a famine in the land" of Judah (1:1), to set in motion this beautiful drama, although the famine does not receive mention in judges, which causes difficulty in dating the events of Ruth.

However, by working backward in time from the well-known date of David's reign (1011 – 971 B.C.), the time period of Ruth would most likely be during the judgeship of Jair (ca 1126 – 1105 B.C.; Judges 10:3-5).

Ruth covers about 11 or 12 years according to the following scenario.

1. Verses 1:1-18, ten years in Moab (1:4);
2. Verses 1:19 – 2:23, several months (mid-April to mid-June), in Boaz's field (1:22; 2:23);
3. Verses 3:1-18, one day in Beth-lehem and one night at the threshingfloor; and
4. Verses 4:1-22, about one year in Beth-lehem.

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.