

SERIES: BOOK OF RUTH
“ Meet the Written Ruth “

This morning I want to introduce you to the novella of Ruth, that short, compact, pointed, and beautiful story of loyalty, devotion, and love found in our Older Testament just after the book of Judges. This excellently written account consists of 2,568 words (or 10, 435 letters) in the NASB. Please find it in your Bible.

Meaning of the word

The word *ruth* is one of those rare words [like cleave] that has two opposite meanings. *Ruth* is a noun that describes *compassion for the misery of another* or *sorrow for one's own faults*. [Sharon's ruth was evident to all.] *Compassion* or *sorrow* are the two ideas. The contrast becomes more evident in the adjectives: *ruthful* which means *full of ruth* or *full of compassion* or *full of sorrow* as in *causing compassion* or *causing sorrow*. The other adjective with which we are more familiar is *ruthless* which means *less of ruth*, or *without pity or compassion*. The synonyms for *ruthless* are *merciless*, *hard*, *harsh*, *unrelenting*, *mean*, *cold*, *unfeeling*, *savage*, etc. But for our purposes the word *ruth* will be the proper noun and name, Ruth. This four-letter name is mentioned 13x in the Bible, 12x in the book by this name, and 1x in Matthew in the kingly genealogy of Jesus. It describes a dynamic and delightful daughter of an undisclosed dad.

Reasons for choosing this book

I have chosen to preach on this little book for several reasons:

1. It has an encouraging message for us. For many years we have lived under the blanket of “political correctness” and “tolerance” of everything except biblical Christianity. Part of the change that has been promised for the near future is a moving further away from biblical standards. Our culture is approaching that of the historical period of the Judges in which “everyone did what was right in their own eyes”. The opening line of this little book looks very contemporary. It reads **Now it came about in the days** [here it comes, note it!] **when the judges governed**...that is, they ruled. We live in such a day! Dr. Larry Richards says: **The story is set in the difficult days of the Judges, which were marred by appalling spiritual, moral, and social decline. Yet, as the story unfolds, we discover that within the corrupt society there were still true believers: simple folk who tried honestly to love and serve God, and to live generously with their neighbors. The unveiling of Ruth, of her mother-in-law Naomi, and of her husband-to-be, Boaz, reminds us that the true sacred history is not learned so much in the annals of heroes and kings, as in the daily lives of godly women and men. The Book of Ruth should be required reading for any who study the era of the Judges, for it brings much-needed balance to our impression of that age of spiritual disarray. It is time we have some inspiring and encouraging words from these “every day believers” of simple, yet profound, devotion to one another and to our God. Ruth is one of the Old Testament’s warmest and most encouraging books.**

2. **The Book of Ruth also makes distinctive theological and historical contributions that nicely blend in with the holidays of the next couple of months. Because of its setting in the “barley harvest” it coincides nicely with our Thanksgiving service in two weeks. Then because of its emphasis on the actions of Boaz as the kinsman-redeemer it fits conveniently with our celebration of Christmas. On the surface the kinsman-redeemer looks like a cultural way of**

doing business. But, (t)heologically it provides a clear picture of the kinsman–redeemer, an individual who through relationship is able to intervene on a family member’s behalf. In this role Boaz prefigures Jesus Christ, who became a real human being so that He might be our kinsman, and qualify as our Redeemer. Historically Ruth is an ancestress of David the king, who also prefigures Jesus, the ultimate Ruler of God’s kingdom. How stunning that God called a Moabite woman, not one of the chosen people, for this significant role. What clear evidence that, in ancient times as in ours, God’s love reaches out to all.

3. It is a beautiful story with many useful insights for building beneficial character. It almost gets comical reading through all the pages of explanations others have written as to why this novella was written. Then I found this explanation that that I liked. The older commentator writes: Why not rather suppose that the writer wrote just because he was charmed with the facts of Ruth’s character, and because he rejoiced over the reward with which, in the providence of God, the heroine’s devotedness was so signally crowned? Why not accept the narrative of the Book as being simply what it appears to be? Why not suppose that the writer may have simply sought to reproduce, in the literature of words, the delineation of character and reward that had already been so charmingly executed in the literature of facts? Why hesitate to assume that he may have undertaken his task in the spirit of literary spontaneity, feeling a wide sympathy in his heart, seeing a meaning in everything, and resting assured that there must be a very peculiar meaning and lesson in all those things that are the outcome of noble effort, noble endurance, and noble love. [Remember Ruth is one of only a few women the Scripture calls “noble”. Now, this writer used it of her and her story.]

The writer must, we conceive, have been, though perhaps unconsciously, and in a comparatively limited sphere of activity, *a true litterateur*. He loved literature for its own sake, and had a true appreciation of its mission and responsibilities. Hence, though a Hebrew, he did not turn aside his eyes and his heart from beholding and admiring facts full of interest, and instruction, because they occurred in connection with an alien race. Nor did he make apologies for finding excellences in Gentiles, and recording them with vivid rest and delight. There is a noteworthy absence of Hebrew bigotry in the spirit of the Book.

The title which is given to his commentary on the book by Richard Bernard, another of the Puritan expositors, brings out admirably what appears to have been the aim of the Hebrew writer—‘RUTH’S RECOMPENSE.’¹ Add to this the guidance of the Holy Spirit and we have a bountiful supply of beneficial character qualities.

4. Sue wanted me to preach it.

Ruth at a glance

KEY PEOPLE

Ruth *A Moabite widow who allied herself with God’s people out of love for her Hebrew mother-in-law, and whose gracious character won her renewed hope and a place among the people of God.* She is referred to five times after her introduction as “Ruth the Moabite” [1:22; 2:2, 21; 4:5, 21] and once as “the young Moabite woman” [2:6]. {For those of you with an outline, on the back of your sheet is the partial genealogy of Ruth}

¹*The Pulpit Commentary: Ruth*. 2004 (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.) (vii). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Naomi *A Hebrew woman who knew tragedy, but rediscovered happiness through the faithfulness of Ruth, her Moabite daughter-in-law.* Watch her for the theme of “empty to full”, “sadness to singing”, emotional “rags to riches”, or the poverty walking away from the promises of God and the pleasures of returning to His promises.

Boaz *A godly Hebrew man, a relative of Naomi, who accepted a kinsman’s responsibility and married Ruth, to the benefit of all three and the nation.*

KEY EVENTS

Ruth’s choice (1:11–18). *Ruth chose to return with Naomi to her people, even though she had no prospect of remarriage in Israel, a foreign land.*

Ruth’s labors (2:1–13). *Ruth was willing to work, which brought her to the attention of Boaz.*

Boaz’s choice (3:11). *Boaz responded to Ruth’s invitation and good reputation by arranging to marry her.*

Obed’s birth (4:13–22). *The child of Ruth and Boaz became the grandfather of David, Israel’s greatest king.²*

KEY STATISTICS

The key literary structure of this book is dialogue. Of the 85 verses in the four chapters, 55 are in the form a dialogue. That is an amazing 65% of the book is dialogue, which makes for quick and easy reading. This little book would make a great 4 act play and the dialogue is already written. It shows how early the classic style of writing a good story was known. It starts with a problem and then takes the reader through the important steps of resolution and ends with a good conclusion. [All you would be writers, follow this pattern to success.]

The Book of Ruth is one of the most delightful literary compositions of the ancient world. The narrator is a master at painting word pictures. He skillfully employs the techniques of dialogue, characterization, repetition, reticence, ambiguity, suspense, wordplays, inclusions, et cetera to produce this moving work of art. But what is it about this picture that moves the reader? And what are the points he seeks to get across? Although Ruth is a short book, it is complex in its plot and subtle in its development of themes (of which there are several).

From a literary perspective we recognize in the book a beautiful development of the theme of “from emptiness to fullness.” At the outset Naomi is emptied of all her resources (food, home, male support). But in the end she experiences complete filling/fulfillment through a daughter-in-law declared by the women of the town to be more valuable than seven sons. This theme is elevated to the theological level at the beginning by Naomi, who blames God (Shadday/Yahweh) for emptying her life and making her bitter (1:20–21), and at the end by the narrator, who in an exceptional overt recognition of divine involvement declares that Yahweh gave Ruth conception (4:13).³

As far as the date of the book, you need to think of two dates. The drama occurred in the period of the judges, probably near the end of that period, and most probably fits with the events of chapters 17-21, about 1050 B.C. The writing of it was probably by Samuel during the reign of

²Richards, Lawrence O.: *The Bible Readers Companion*. electronic ed. Wheaton : Victor Books, 1991; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996, S. 173

³Block, D. I. (2001, c1999). *Vol. 6: Judges, Ruth* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (603). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

King David, around 950 B.C. Of course, there is some debate about these dates, as with all dates, but these are the ones I prefer.

There is very little debate about Ruth belonging in the canon of Scripture. It has been accepted since the time of its writing. Its position in our Bibles follows the placement of it in the Septuagint [first Greek Bible].

Compared with many other Old Testament books, the textual integrity of Ruth is remarkable. The best recent commentators have agreed that, while a handful of readings in the MT may be improved on the basis of the ancient versions and *qere* [versus *kethib*] readings in the Hebrew manuscripts, only the last line of 2:7 defies solution. The NIV is based largely on *Codex Leningradensis*, an early eleventh century A.D. manuscript in the Ben Asher tradition. Four fragments of Ruth have been found in the caves of Qumran. In general these readings support the MT. The only significant variant is found in 3:14, where the Qumran scroll reads *mrgl tyw*, “place of his feet,” rather than the MT’s *mrgl tw*, “place of his foot.”⁴

The best known verses of the story are in chapter 1. "But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. “Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.”” (Ruth 1:16-17, NASB95)

With this brief introduction to the book of Ruth, follow along in your Bible with the reading of the text.

These four things, then, seem the object of the Book of Ruth: to present a supplement by way of contrast to the Book of Judges; to show the true spirit of Israel; to exhibit once more the mysterious connection between Israel and the Gentiles, whereby the latter, at the most critical periods of Israel’s history, seem most unexpectedly called in to take a leading part; and to trace the genealogy of David. Specially perhaps the latter two. For, as one has beautifully remarked:⁴ If, as regards its contents, the Book of Ruth stands on the threshold of the history of David, yet, as regards its spirit, it stands, like the Psalms, at the threshold of the Gospel.⁵

Go and get to know the written Ruth by reading it several more times.

⁴Block, D. I. (2001, c1999). *Vol. 6: Judges, Ruth* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (589). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁴Professor Cassel in his *Introduction to the Book of Ruth*.

⁵Edersheim, Alfred: *Bible History : Old Testament*. Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. 191

