INTRODUCTION TO RUTH

GOD’S KINDNESS AND REDEMPTION

“‘The LORD bless him!’ Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. ‘He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.’ She added, ‘That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers.’”

*Author, Date and Place of Writing*

The author of Ruth is never named in the Bible. According to rabbinic tradition (Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Bathra* 14a-15b), Samuel is the author. This is unlikely, however, since Samuel died before David actually became king (1Sa 25:1). David’s kingship was an established fact at the time of writing (Ru 4:17-22).[[1]](#footnote-0) Most conservative scholars place the date of writing during the time of Israel’s monarchy--either in the time of David or Solomon. Since Solomon is not mentioned in the genealogy (4:18-21), one might deduce that the book was written in David’s time, perhaps around 1010 B.C.[[2]](#footnote-1) The author may have worked in Jerusalem, on the staff of the royal court, perhaps as a scribe.[[3]](#footnote-2)

*Genre*

Ruth is narrative history. It tells about real people, places and events and how God manifests himself. As God manifests himself through his words, we can see how people respond. Some people respond with faith; others do not. Naomi and Ruth responded with faith and were blessed and used by God. As a historical narrative, the book of Ruth can be studied from a historical point of view. At the same time, we need to approach it as God’s redemptive history. As we focus our study on God, we can find the unchanging truth about him and apply it to our own times. Our main pursuit is to learn who God is, meet God personally, and learn how he guides us in our practical lives.

*Occasion and Purpose of Writing*

The events in this book took place during the time of Judges. In the book of Judges we find a repeated pattern: Israel serves the Lord; Israel falls into sin and idolatry; Israel is enslaved; Israel cries out to the Lord; God raises up a judge; Israel is delivered. The times are described: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (Jdg 17:6; 21:25; see also 18:1; 19:1). It was a dark period, characterized by the unfaithfulness of God’s people. Nevertheless, the author of Ruth reveals that God was working through a few faithful people: Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. God was pleased with them and blessed and used them to accomplish his redemptive work regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, gender or social status. God saw that his people’s problem was that they had no king--everyone was doing what they saw fit. It was a chaotic time without any national sense of identity or purpose: Truth was disregarded, lies were common and unfaithfulness was rampant. This resulted in civil unrest, violence, and gross immorality. The nation seemed headed for total destruction. However, God had mercy on them. Though Israel was unfaithful, God was faithful. According to his promise, God prepared to send his King, David, through the family line of Boaz and Ruth. David would rule over Israel with God’s own heart to help his people know, love and obey God and to live faithfully as his people. The author encourages people to trust in the Sovereign God, who is working faithfully behind the scenes to accomplish his redemptive purpose, even in the darkest times.

*Main Themes*

Main themes in the book of Ruth are God’s kindness and redemption. The word “kindness” is used in 1:8, 2:20 and 3:10. It is translated from “hesed” in Hebrew, which is a covenant term, referring to the attributes of God: steadfast love, faithfulness and loyalty, devotion, and kindness. In short, it refers to acts of devotion and loving kindness that go beyond the requirements of duty. God’s kindness was revealed in many ways: by guiding Naomi back to Bethlehem, by moving Ruth to decide to follow Naomi, by leading Ruth to Boaz’s field, by opening Boaz’s eyes to see the work of God in Ruth, by giving wisdom to Naomi to challenge Ruth to propose to Boaz, by preparing Boaz’s heart to accept Ruth’s proposal, and by blessing their marriage with a son.

Boaz was one of the guardian-redeemers who was qualified by the law to redeem the family line of Elimelek. The words “guardian-redeemer” or “redeem” are repeated 15 times (2:20;3:9,12,13[2];4:1,3,4[2]6[3],7,8,14). According to the law, guardian-redeemers were established to protect the needy in a family, to maintain the family line (Dt 25:5-10; Lev 25:25-28). Elimelek’s family line seemed destined to end after his death and the deaths of his two sons. Only the Moabite Ruth, the widow of Elimelek’s son Mahlon remained. In order to maintain the line of Elimelek, Ruth needed to be redeemed. However, she could not become a member of the Jewish community, since there was a law that no Moabite could enter the assembly of the LORD (Dt 23:3-6). Moreover, their social positions were at opposite ends of a spectrum. Ruth was a poor Moabite widow, while Boaz was a rich landowner, an authentic Jew, and a man of standing in Israel. So it seemed impossible for Ruth to be redeemed by Boaz.

However, God’s loving kindness worked to join Boaz and Ruth together in marriage. In fact, Boaz was a redeemer of Ruth, and a type of the Messiah, who is our Redeemer. The LORD blessed the marriage of Boaz and Ruth and enabled her to conceive and give birth to a son. This son became the grandfather of King David, through whose line God sent the Messiah. In truth, God worked according to his promise of redemption. God’s loving kindness is best expressed in sending Jesus Christ into the world as our Redeemer through the offspring of David (Ac 13:23; Gal 3:13-14).

*Characteristics*

Named after a Gentile woman, Ruth. The book of Ruth is one of two books in the Bible named after a woman; the other being Esther. Though they are both women, there are distinct differences between them. Esther was a Jewess who became the Queen for a Gentile King. In contrast, Ruth was the Gentile wife of an Israelite leader and became the great grandmother of King David. In ancient Israel, women were not included in numbering a tribe or the nation. Gentiles were despised. But when Ruth had faith in God, she was used greatly by God for the redemption of her people.

Main figures are two poor widows who have faith in God. Naomi and Ruth became widows. They seemed to have lost everything. They seemed to have no hope for the future; in fact, their lives were over. But when they held onto God’s grace with faith, God blessed them abundantly. To God, their faith was what really mattered. Anyone who has faith in God can be used by God, regardless of their human condition.

Relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Usually the relationship between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law is marked by tensions. However, the relationship between Naomi and Ruth was different. It was marked by genuine love and devotion. They are a good example of a trusting relationship, like a mentor and mentee.

Significant conversations. Portions of the book of Ruth are devoted to conversations between key figures: Naomi and her two daughters-in-law (1:8-18), Boaz and Ruth (2:8-16; 3:9-15), Naomi and Ruth (2:19-22; 3:1-5, 16-18), Boaz and another guardian- redeemer (4:3-8). To understand the meaning of the book of Ruth, we need to grasp the key points of these conversations.

Boaz and Ruth are a type of Christ and the church. Boaz is portrayed as a giver. Boaz embodies generosity, humility, kindness, purity, and an open heart to a foreign widow-- without favoritism. Boaz is also in a position to help Ruth as a redeemer according to the law. In terms of character and position, Boaz is a type of Christ.

On the other hand, Ruth is portrayed as a receiver. As a receiver, she had no sense of entitlement and took nothing for granted. Rather, she was thankful and humble. She knew that she did not deserve to receive favor. But she accepted it with a sense of God’s grace and continued to ask for favor humbly. She is a good example to believers of how to receive God’s blessing through Christ.

Guardian-Redeemer. Redemption is one of the main themes of the Bible. The concept of a guardian-redeemer is uniquely developed in the book of Ruth. It shows us how the work of redemption is carried out through a guardian-redeemer based on the levirate law of Deuteronomy 25:5-10. The establishment of the guardian-redeemer was God’s way of protecting the twelve tribes so that each one could maintain their family line and property. Boaz is a type of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. God promised to send the Messiah through the tribe of Judah. That is why it had to be maintained.

Agricultural setting. The story of Ruth takes place against the background of the barley and wheat harvest. The words “harvest,” “glean,” “barley,” “wheat,” and “threshing floor” are used frequently. The book of Ruth should be understood in light of this background.

God’s sovereign orchestration. The word “LORD” is repeated 18 times (1:6,8,9,13,17, 21[2]; 2:4[2],12[2],20; 3:10,13; 4:11,12,13,14). The LORD’s actions appear in 1:6 and 4:13. In other cases, the LORD’s name appears as it is spoken by people, mostly as they bless others. The LORD orchestrated the events of this book from the beginning to the end according to his sovereign will.

God’s love story reflected in the love of Boaz and Ruth. In the book of Ruth we can find the beautiful love story of Boaz and Ruth. Their love transcended mere human love, which changes according to the situation. Their love originated from God. God’s love is unconditional, unchanging, unfailing and sacrificial. So their love was genuine and this kind of love always touches people’s hearts. This is why their love story is most beautiful and relevant to everyone and in every generation.

*Purpose of our Study*

1. We can learn from Naomi and Ruth how to practice self-giving love. Each one was more concerned for the other than for themselves. Both of them sacrificed for and devoted themselves to the other. Each one’s love was motivated by and reflected God’s hesed love. When we receive God’s love, we can love as they did.
2. We can learn from Boaz and Ruth how to share in God’s grace. As a giver, we should not have a condescending attitude, but an attitude of sharing what we freely received by God’s grace. We should be generous and open-hearted, not prejudiced. Most of all, we should be humble. As a receiver, we should not have a sense of entitlement or a demanding spirit. Rather we should recognize the grace of the giver and be thankful and humble.
3. We can learn God’s unfailing love. Even in dark times, God works through a few people who have faith in him. God guides and rewards those who earnestly seek him. God uses them greatly to carry out his redemptive work. God is the Sovereign Ruler of people’s lives and history.

*Outline*

1. Background: Naomi lost her husband and two sons (1:1-5)
2. Naomi returned to Bethlehem along with Ruth (6-22)
   1. Naomi’s decision to return to Bethlehem (6-7)
   2. Dialogue between Naomi and two daughters-in-law (8-14)
   3. Ruth determined to follow Naomi (15-18)
   4. Naomi and Ruth came to Bethlehem (19-22)
3. Boaz meets Ruth (2:1-23)
   1. Ruth gleans in Boaz’s field (1-3)
   2. Boaz discovered Ruth was working in his field (4-7)
   3. Dialogue between Boaz and Ruth (8-13)
   4. Boaz invited Ruth for lunch (14-16)
   5. Dialogue between Naomi and Ruth (17-23)
4. Ruth obeys Naomi and proposes to Boaz (3:1-18)
   1. Naomi instructed Ruth to propose to Boaz (1-6)
   2. Boaz promised to redeem Ruth and her family honorably (7-13)
   3. Boaz protected Ruth by sending her at dawn with abundant grain (14-15)
   4. Naomi counsels Ruth to wait and see what happens (16-18)
5. Boaz redeemed Ruth (4:1-17)
   1. The marriage of Boaz and Ruth (1-12)
   2. The birth of Obed (13-17)
6. The genealogy of David (4:18-22)



(Logos, Atlas)



(Wikipedia)

1. See ESV Study Bible: Introduction to Ruth. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Zuck, Roy B., Walvoord, John F., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Introduction to Ruth.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. See NIV Study Bible: Introduction to Ruth. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)