

BIBLICAL WOMEN: RUTH

At its heart, the Book of Ruth is about covenant fidelity – both the fidelity of the widow Ruth to her widowed mother-in-law, and the fidelity of the Lord to his covenant promise to care for his people. The storyline is this: a couple and their two sons left Bethlehem during a famine to live in Moab. While there, the man died and his sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. These men also died, childless. Naomi, the mother, decided to return to Judah, urging her daughters-in-law to stay with their own people. Both resisted, but eventually Orpah relented, while Ruth insisted that she'd go with Naomi, vowing, "Your people will be my people and your God, my God" (Ruth 1:16).

They arrived at the start of the barley harvest. Ruth went to glean grain in the fields belonging to Boaz, a clansman of her father-in-law. Knowing how Ruth cared for Naomi, Boaz invited her to return to his field and told his harvesters to leave extra amounts behind for her to glean. Boaz then acted to "redeem" his deceased clansman's land, asking the only closer relative if he wished to take up the redemption. But since that also involved marrying Ruth, he declined, so Boaz took the land and married her. Their son was Obed, the grandfather of David. Thus Ruth was David's great-grandmother.

The book develops the narrative through extensive dialogue among the characters. Ruth is blessed by the Lord due to her devotion to Naomi, and Boaz is blessed because of his kindness to Ruth and his fulfillment of the "levirate marriage" provisions of the Law. Both are blessed by the Lord with their child, as is Naomi, who had considered herself stricken by God in the loss of her husband and sons.

It is not known when the Book of Ruth was written. Judaism places it in their Bible among the Writings, a collection of generally later-written books. If composed after the Exile (late 500s B.C.), it may have been to strengthen the theological position that non-Jews who were faithful to the Lord were acceptable to him, and hence should also be to the Jews. When many thought that intermarriage was wrong, the book presents King David's great-grandmother, a Moabite, as a heroine, showing that non-Jewish people should not be condemned out of hand.

Christian churches place the Book of Ruth between Judges and 1st Samuel, because the book's setting is "in the time of the judges" (Ruth 1:1). This placement also implies an earlier date of composition, possibly during Solomon's reign (mid-900s B.C.). Putting the book in its historical timeline was understandable when its events were presumed to be factual. It also supports a hypothesis that the author's purpose was to establish David's lineage.

Most scholars today hold that the Book of Ruth is a fictional narrative set in history. It's possible that the story originated early in the monarchy, then circulated orally for centuries, embellished over time, before being edited into its written form.

[Some explanatory notes:]

Moab – this territory east of the Dead Sea was home to a non-Israelite people. Some areas in the northern portion of the Moabite plateau have wheat and barley fields, but most of the tableland offers rich grazing for flocks. Moab's wealth in ancient times was primarily in its sheep,

Gleaning – going through the fields after the harvesters had finished, to pick whatever grains might be remaining or might have fallen to the ground. It was Israel's custom, prescribed in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy, that harvesters were not to go back to recover what they missed the first time through, but to leave these gleanings for the widow, the orphan, and the alien. "When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; let it be for the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord, your God, may bless you in all your undertakings" (Dt 24:19).

Levirate marriage – Since early Israelites did not believe in life after death, the only way to continue one's existence after death was through one's children. Absence of children meant one would cease to exist in Israel. To prevent such a tragedy in this patriarchal society, if a man died before his wife had conceived any offspring, his brother (or the closest male relative) was to marry his widow so that she could bear a son who would be considered the deceased's, thus continuing his name and line in Israel and ensuring the retention of his property within the family. But a passage in Deuteronomy (25:5-10) shows that this duty was not always fulfilled and Leviticus (18:16) has a prohibition on having relations with a brother's wife, not making any exception for a levirate marriage, so the practice may have been abandoned early in Israel's history. In the Book of Ruth, a closer relative is willing to "redeem" the deceased clansman's land until Boaz points out that doing so means also taking Ruth as his bride. At this, he declines and allows Boaz as the next-in-line to have both the land and the widow.