

Introduction to the Book of Ruth

from a Jewish Perspective

*To Ruth Stanley, my grandmother. Saint Francis of Assisi said,
"Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words."
From her Quaker roots, my grandmother preached the Gospel her whole life.*

The book of **Ruth** is a flawless love story in a compact format. It's not an epic tale, but a short story of only eighty-five verses. Nevertheless, it runs the full range of human emotions, from the most gut-wrenching kind of grief to the very height of triumph.

Ruth's life was the true, historical experience of one genuinely extraordinary woman. It was also a perfect picture of the story of redemption (see the commentary on **the Book of Exodus Bz - Redemption**). **Ruth herself** furnished a fitting picture of every sinner. **She** was a widow and a foreigner who went to live in a strange land. Tragic circumstances reduced **her** to hopeless poverty. **She** was not only an outcast and an exile, but also left without any resources - reduced to a state of utter destitution from which **she** could never hope to redeem **herself** by *any* means. When **she** had nowhere else to turn, **she** sought the grace of **her** mother-in-law's closest **kinsman**. The story of how **her** whole life changed is one of the most deeply touching stories in the whole Bible.¹

Title

The biblical book of **Ruth** derives its name from one of its three main characters, the **Moabite** daughter-in-law-of **Na'omi** and eventual wife of **Bo'az**. That the book should be named after **Ruth** is truly remarkable for several reasons. First, **Ruth** was not even an **Israelite**. **She was a Moabite**. Second, **Ruth** is not the main character in the story. The story opens up describing the crisis in **Na'omi's** family, highlighting **her** own emptiness, and concludes with the resolution of the crisis and the declaration of **her** fullness in the birth of **Obed**. Scholars have recognized the importance of direct speech in this book. Fifty-five out of eighty-five verses contain dialogue and 52.4 percent of the words occur on the lips of the characters. Of the three main characters, however, **Ruth** speaks least often, and **her** speeches are the shortest. Based on the plot, the book could be called "The Book of Na'omi" and based on the dialogue, "The Book of Bo'az." In addition, given the concluding Epilogue and genealogy, as well as the purpose of the book, it might even have been called "The Book of Obed." No doubt the present title reflects the narrator's and reader's fascination with and special admiration for the character of **Ruth**.²

Authorship

The identity of **Ruth's** author is uncertain. The author records the events that took place 100 to 150 years earlier. Whoever the author was, he was not an eyewitness to these events because he records the events well before his time. However, it is obvious he must have had access to the written accounts of the family of **Y'hudah** and the line of **Perez**. **The Talmud (200 AD) ascribes the book to Samuel.**

Date

The book gives us several clues about the timing of its writing. To begin with, although the story itself takes place during the period of **the judges**, it was written *after* the period of **the judges** because the first verse of the book is in the past tense: **Back in the days when the judges were judging (1:1a)**. Therefore, it was probably near the end of the period of **the judges**, which covered 450 years (**Acts 13:20**). The story of **Ruth** took place over a period of **10 years**. A second clue occurs in **Chapter 4**. **In the past, this is what was done in Isra'el for the redemption and transfer of property to become final: a man took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Isra'el (4:7)**. Here the author has to explain a custom in **Isra'el** that was no longer practiced, which shows a lapse of time between the event and the writing of the story. A third clue is the fact that the genealogy ends with **David** and does not mention **Solomon**. Fourthly, the language of **Ruth** is classical Hebrew and this indicates an early date for the book. Fifthly, it contains many archaic forms, which were not found later in Hebrew. So **Ruth** was probably written during **King David's** reign in about 1000 BC. And for reasons we will discuss later, it was probably written when **David** was king over Judah only, before he became king over all **Isar'el**.

The Place in the Canon

In the Hebrew Bible (which is divided into three parts: the Torah, the Prophets, or the *Nevi'im*, and the Writings, or the *Ketuvim*) is found in the fifth book of the third division known as the *Ketuvim*. It is also one of the five books (the **Song of Songs**, **Ruth**, **Lamentations**, **Ecclesiastes** and **Esther**) known as *the megillot*, meaning *scrolls*, which are read in the synagogue on five holy occasions. They are read in the following order: **Song of Songs** is read at Pesach; **Ruth** is read during the feast of Shavu'ot (see **Ah - The Book of Ruth and Shavu'ot**); **Lamentations** is read during the ninth of Av (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Mt - The Destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple on Tisha B'Av in 70 AD**); **Ecclesiastes** is read at Sukkot; and the book of **Esther** is read at Purim (see the commentary on **Esther Bn - The Feast of Purim**).

The English Bible follows the order of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the TaNaKh) and places **Ruth** after the book of **Judges**. **Ruth** gives a more positive side of life during the time of **the judges** and showing that there were those who sought after **ADONAI**. **Ruth** also serves as an introduction to the books of **Samuel** and background for King **David**.

The Historical Background

The book took place during the time of **the Judges**. Within the book we are told that it took place during and after a time of famine. We see a famine mentioned in **Judges 6:3-4**, so the story probably took place during the time of Gideon.

There are similarities and differences in the book of **Judges** and the book of **Ruth**. **Judges** shows immorality, homosexuality (**Judges 19:16-24**), while **Ruth** demonstrates fidelity, righteousness, and purity. The book of **Judges** shows idolatry, the book of **Ruth** shows the worship of **the One True God**. **Judges** shows decline and disloyalty, whereas **Ruth** shows devotion. The book of **Judges** shows lust, but the book of **Ruth** shows love. **Judges** shows war, however, **Ruth** shows peace. The book of **Judges** demonstrates cruelty, while the book of **Ruth** demonstrates kindness. **Judges** reveals disobedience leading to judgment, but **Ruth** reveals obedience leading to blessing. Lastly, the book of **Judges** demonstrates spiritual darkness, however the book of **Ruth** demonstrates spiritual light.

Ruth was a **Moabitess** and the **Moabites** generally had a contentious relationship with **Isra'el**. The **Moabites** were descendants of **Mo'av**, who was the son of Lot, through his older daughter (see the commentary on **Genesis Fb - Let's Get Our Father to Drink Wine, and then Lie With Him to Preserve Our Family Line**). The descendants of the son of Lot occupied the plateau directly southeast of the Dead Sea. The **Moabites** became prominent in **Isra'el's** history during the time of the exodus. At the time when **Isra'el** passed through **Moabite** territory the Ammonites controlled it and were defeated by **Isra'el** under the leadership of Moses (see the commentary on **Exodus Cv - The Amalekites Came and Attacked the Israelites at Rephidim**).

Now Balak, who was the king of **Mo'av** during the time of Moses, did not try to stop **Isra'el's** militarily as did the Edomites. Instead he summoned Balaam, a wicked prophet (not a false prophet), to curse **the Jews** instead (**Numbers 22-24**), but to no avail. Finally, in **Numbers 25:1-9**, it was **Moabite** women who finally succeeded in seducing **Isra'el** and resulting in **her** judgment. In spite of that enmity, **God** forbid **Isra'el** from provoking **Mo'av** to war because **YHVH Himself** had given **them their land** (**Deuteronomy 2:9**). In the subsequent history, however, the **Moabites** were a major source of **Isra'el's** troubles.

For example, in **Judges 3:12-14**, for **eighteen years the Moabites** subjugated **Isra'el** under **Eglon**. Later on, after **King Sha'ul** had assumed rule over **Isra'el**, he fought against the **Moabites (First Samuel 14:47)**. In the early days of **David**, he had a friendly relationship with the **Moabites** and when **Sha'ul** was perusing him, he even took his parents to **Mo'av** for safe keeping from the hands of **Sha'ul (First Samuel 22:3-4)**. The chief god of the **Moabites** was **Chemosh (Numbers 21:29)**, which included human sacrifice (**Second Kings 3:26-27**), and they also worshiped **Ashtar**, the wife of **Chemosh**. Now the **Moabite Stone**, a famous archeological stone, gives us information about the conflict between **Mo'av** and the dynasty of **Omri** in the northern kingdom of **Isra'el**.

Social Background

Ruth is not a history of public events, but a picture of humble village life, painted on a quiet background away from the turmoil and strife that fills the pages of the book of **Judges**. The existence of such peaceful conditions in that era would be unknown to us but for the book of **Ruth**. Who would have dreamed that so beautiful a society as described in its chapters could flourish in those lawless times? Life in the towns was insecure, and corrupt rulers administered justice. It was, in the words of the Rabbis, a generation that judged its judges. Describing the rampant lawlessness, the Midrash tells of men who, having been tried and convicted of crime, would turn and assault their judges. Nevertheless, it was a generation that had the judges they deserved.

What a relief to turn to the placid scene of goodness in the small town of **Beit-Lechem!** And how happy we are to feel that the simplest country life can, and did, exist side by side with the general state of social disorder and continuous warfare. We thank **YHVH** for so ordaining that no times shall be so wild, but that in them one might find quiet corners and green oases, all the greener for their somber surroundings, where life might glide on in peaceful isolation from tumult and strife.

At some such quiet period in the history of the **Judges**, the incidents of the book of **Ruth** took place. Their lives could apparently be lived in comparative safety, without hindrance, and men and women would love and work and weep and laugh and enjoy their tranquil days about their homes. We see these folk with their time-honored customs and family events; the toiling shepherd, the busy reaper, the women with their cares and uncertainties, the love and labor of simple life, the sympathetic crowds that gathered to share the sorrow of the bereaved or the joy of the newly-wed . . . all of the various religious and social occasions. A religious influence was evidently emanating from some central place of worship and spreading far and wide.

This was where the real world history was being made. Not in the arena of battle, but in the peaceful homes of the simple country folk – there Israel's character was built and her heroes were fashioned. The “unimportant people” who lived and died unnamed and unseen in their homes actually shaped the course of history and it was there, as seen in the book of Ruth, that world-changing event took place.

Structure

The structure contains four basic scenes:

Aj - Scene One: Na'omi's Return to Bethlehem

Ap - Scene Two: Ruth Meets Bo'az in the Grain Field

Av - Scene Three: Na'omi's Wonderful Plan for Ruth's Life

Az - Scene Four: Bo'az Marries Ruth

Literary Features

The book of **Ruth** is a Jewish short story, told with flawless skill. Among the historical narratives, only **Esther** reviles it in its compactness, vividness, warmth, beauty and dramatic effect. Wonderfully symmetrical, the action moves from a **prologue** of distress, see **Ai - Na'omi's Misery and Emptiness** (with 71 words in Hebrew), through the four scenes, to an **epilogue** of relief and hope, see **Bc - Na'omi's Satisfaction and Fullness** (with 71 words in Hebrew). The crucial turning point occurs exactly midway: **Na'omi said to her daughter-in-law, “May he be blessed by ADONAI, who has never stopped showing grace, neither to the living or the dead.” Na'omi also told her, “That man is one of our closest relatives; he is one of our kinsman redeemers” (2:20 CJB).**

The opening line of each of the **four scenes** signals its theme: **1:6** the return; **2:1** the meeting with **Bo'az**; **3:1** finding a home for **Ruth**; **4:1** the decisive event at the gate, while the closing line of each scene facilitates transition to what follows: **1:22**, **2:23**, **3:18** and **4:12**. Contrast is also used effectively: pleasant (the meaning of **Na'omi**) and **bitter (1:20)**, **full and empty (1:21)**, and **the living and the dead (2:20)**. The most striking is the contrast between two of the main characters, **Ruth** and **Bo'az**. The one is a young, foreign, destitute widow, while the other is a middle-aged, well-to-do **Israelite** securely established in **his** home community. For each there is a corresponding character whose actions highlight, by contrast, **his or her** selfless acts: **Ruth** to **Orpah** and **Bo'az** and the unnamed **kinsman-redeemer**.³

Aim and Purpose

There are several purposes to the book. The first purpose is to provide a genealogical link between Judah and **David**, and so continue the messianic line because there is no genealogy given of King **David** in the book of **First Samuel**. A second purpose is to show there was faith and obedience in that time of apostasy, that **God** still had a remnant. A third purpose is to foreshadow the person of **the kinsman-Redeemer**. A fourth purpose was to show that the grace of **YHVH** includes the Gentiles. But a fifth, and most important purpose, was to show the superiority of the house of **David** over the house of Sha'ul, and therefore defend the claims **David** over the claims of Sha'ul's son Ish-Bosheth. After Sha'ul was killed, **David** did not become king of all **Isra'el** for seven years, rather, Ish-Bosheth became king of all the tribes except for Judah. **If it were not for the genealogy in Ruth, David would not have been able to defend his right to the throne over all Isra'el.**⁴

The Use of the New International Version

This commentary on **Ruth** is written from a Jewish perspective, using *the New International Version* unless otherwise indicated. There will be times when Hebrew is substituted for English names using the Complete Jewish Bible by David Stern; but generally the **NIV** translation will be used for the Jewish perspective.

The use of ADONAI

Long before **Yeshua's** day, the Hebrew word **ADONAI** had, out of respect, been substituted in speaking and in reading aloud for **God's** personal name, the four Hebrew letters *yud-heh-vav-heh*, variously written in English as **YHVH**. **The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) made it a requirement not to pronounce Tetragrammaton**, meaning the four-letter name of **God**, and this remains the rule in most modern Jewish settings. In deference to this tradition, which is unnecessary but harmless, I will be using **ADONAI** where **YHVH** is meant.⁵ In ancient times when the scribes were translating the Hebrew Scriptures, they revered the name of **YHVH** so much that they would use a quill to make one stroke of the name and then throw it away. Then they would make another stroke and throw that quill away until the name was completed. **His** name became so sacred to them that they started to substitute the phrase **the Name**, instead of writing or pronouncing **His Name**. Over centuries of doing this, the actual letters and pronunciation of **His Name** was lost. The closest we can come is **YHVH**, with no syllables. The pronunciation has been totally lost. Therefore, the name Yahweh is only a guess of what the original name sounded like. Both **ADONAI** and **Ha'Shem** are substitute names for **YHVH**. **ADONAI** is more of an affectionate name like *daddy*, while **Ha'Shem** is a more formal name like *sir*.

The use of TaNaKh

The Hebrew word **TaNaKh** is an acronym, based on the letters **T** (for "Torah"), **N** (for "Nevi'im," or the Prophets), and **K** (for "Ketuvim," or the Sacred Writings). It is the collection of the teachings of **God** to human beings in document form. The term "Old Covenant" implies that it is no longer valid, or at the very least outdated. Something old, to be either ignored or discarded. But **Jesus Himself** said: **Don't think I have come to abolish the Torah and the Prophets, I have not come to abolish but to complete (Matthew 5:17 CJB)**. The Hebrew acronym **TaNaKh** is used in this devotional commentary. Sometimes instead of the phrase, the Old Testament, the phrase the Old Covenant is used when comparing something to the New Covenant.

*The use of the phrase, "the righteous of the TaNaKh," rather than using
Old Testament saints*

Messianic synagogues, and the Jewish messianic community in general, never use the phrase Old Testament saints. From a Jewish perspective, they prefer to use the phrase, "righteous of the TaNaKh." Therefore, I will be using "the righteous of the TaNaKh," rather than Old Testament saints throughout this devotional commentary.

Key Verse: Ruth 2:20

Key Word: shuwb

The key word in **Ruth** is *shuwb*, meaning *to repent* (from evil), *to return*, or *to turn back* (to something or someone good). This is a significant Hebrew verb and embodies the essence of the book of **Ruth**. This verb occurs 1,059 times in the **TaNaKh** and in every chapter of **Ruth**. I will be inserting the word (**shuwb**) in the text when it is used.