



RUTH 101

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Some books of the Bible are named after their presumptive author, and some are even letters to a specific person from a specific person, or at least are written in the style of a particular person. With Ruth, authorship is unstated. Tradition teaches that Ruth was written by the prophet Samuel. Scholars still debate about when Ruth was written. Some believe that because of its style, the book was likely written around the time of King David (which would support the prophet Samuel as a possible author), as it ends with a genealogy tracing Ruth to David. Others argue via a study of language as well as themes of migration that Ruth was written after the exile to and return from Babylon. If true, then this book about a faithful foreign wife who gave birth to an ancestor of David could have been written as an alternate viewpoint to the book of Ezra, in which foreign wives and their children were sent away.

ABOUT THE BOOK OF RUTH

Some have wondered over the centuries why Ruth is the titular character instead of Naomi of Bethlehem, who has been compared to Job. Naomi felt hopeless, having lost everything: first she and her family moved to Moab during a famine, then her husband died, then both of her sons. Like Job, Naomi blamed God for these losses. Naomi encouraged her widowed daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, to return to their homes, but instead, Ruth stays with Naomi, an example of stunning selflessness and love. No matter the protagonist, this story explores themes of *chesed*—sacred kindness—as well as suffering, identity and foreignness, migration and food insecurity, and survival.

In the Old Testament, Ruth is gathered into the “Writings” section, which also includes the Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes. The other sections of the Old Testament are “Torah”—the first five books—and “Prophets.” Our Jewish siblings read Ruth during the observation of Shavuot; for Christians, it was during this festival—the Feast of Weeks—that Pentecost, the Spirit descending on the disciples, occurred. For Episcopalians and other mainline Christians who use the Revised Common Lectionary, we hear readings from Ruth on two Sundays of the three-year lectionary cycle (Year B), at the end of October through the beginning of November (and the second reading is often superseded by the Feast of All Saints). That’s not much liturgical exposure, but the Good Book Club comes to the rescue, with an opportunity to study the book in-depth.



THEMES

Chesed. This word, meaning sacred kindness or steadfast lovingkindness, first shows up Chapter 1, when Naomi directs both daughters-in-law to return to their parental homes, asking that the Lord show them the *chesed* they have shown to Naomi. Naomi sees *chesed* from God when she learns about the kindness of Boaz, who allowed Ruth to glean in his field. The way Ruth remains loyal to Naomi and offers her firstborn son to Naomi also exemplifies *chesed*.

Suffering. Naomi, like Job in a much longer biblical book, loses everything in the first chapter of this book, leading to questions about where God is amidst suffering.

Identity and Foreignness. Ruth becomes part of Naomi's family and refuses to change this identity, even as she changes homes and husband. Ruth is continually referred to as Ruth the Moabite in the book, until she and Boaz marry. Calling her Ruth the Moabite emphasizes her foreignness. This works to Boaz's advantage when she speaks to the other kinsman about her, as emphasizing her foreignness appears to discourage that kinsman from purchasing the family land because marrying Ruth would be part of the deal.

Migration and Food Insecurity. A famine in Bethlehem (literally "house of bread") leads to a family migrating to another land, and the end of the famine prompts their return. Many today can relate to this theme of food insecurity linked to drought/famine from climate change. In fact, in 2021, the Oxford English Dictionary introduced the word "eco-anxiety," which means anxiety about threats to the environment.

Survival. The family initially migrates to survive. Later, after her husband and sons are dead, Naomi seems to want to give up, but her daughter-in-law Ruth is determined to survive. When Naomi sees the opportunity Ruth has opened up for them, she also makes plans to secure their survival.

SOUNDBITES

But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; 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 will I be buried. May the LORD do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" —Ruth 1:16-17

Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, "The LORD be with you." They answered, "The LORD bless you." —Ruth 2: 4

He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin." —Ruth 3:9

He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.—Ruth 4:15

The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David." — Ruth 4:17