

## BOOK OF RUTH

### The Faithful Woman—God’s Universal Love

[In addition to the pause questions offered here, you can ask: What spoke to you most in a particular chapter?]

The Book of Ruth is one of the most loved books of the Bible. Its main characters are ordinary people like ourselves. The events that make up the story are ones that we can easily identify with. As we read the book, we feel the pain of Naomi and we are inspired and touched by the loyalty of Ruth and the goodness of Boaz.

Ruth is one of only three books in the Bible that bears the name of a woman. The other two are Esther and Judith. Ruth is one of four women mentioned in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:5).

**God’s universal love.** In the larger picture of the history of salvation, the purpose of the Book of Ruth serves a twofold function:

- To show God’s love for *all* people. The main character in the book is a non-Israelite who comes to know and love the God of Israel. She is shown as acceptable to God. By including her in God’s genealogy, Matthew shows that Ruth participated in God’s plan to save all people—Jew and Gentile alike. God’s love is inclusive and not exclusive.
- To set up the ancestral lineage of King David, Israel’s greatest ruler. Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of David.

From the above, we can say that the “theme that runs throughout the whole book and holds it together is that of *fidelity, loyalty born of covenant bonding*. Both human fidelity and divine fidelity are combined in such a way that potential tragedy is turned into ultimate happiness” (Eugene Hensell, O.S.B).

**God in the book.** Although God never speaks or directly acts in the book, his presence is very tangible. That presence is frequently referred to in the blessings spoken by the main characters.

Naomi blesses her two daughters-in-law (1:8); Boaz blesses Ruth for her loyalty to Naomi (2:12) and her good character (3:10); Naomi blesses Boaz for his kindness to Ruth (2:20); the blessing of fertility is bestowed upon Ruth by the men at the city gate (4:11-

12); and finally, the lady friends of Naomi bless her and her grandson (4:15).

**The Story.** Because of famine, Naomi’s family migrates to Moab where her sons marry Moabite women. Later, Naomi’s husband and sons die, so she prepares to return home. One daughter-in-law, Ruth, insists on going back to Canaan with her. There she meets and marries Boaz, a kinsman. They bear a child, Obed, who will become the grandfather of King David.

This short book can be subdivided as follows:

**CHAPTER 1:1-18:** Naomi and her family in Moab

**CHAPTER 2:** Ruth meets Boaz

**CHAPTER 3:** Naomi the matchmaker

**CHAPTER 4:** Ruth marries Boaz

### COMMENTARY

#### CHAPTER 1: Naomi in Moab

*“‘See now!’ she said, ‘your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her god. Go back after your sister-in-law!’ But Ruth said, ‘Do not ask me to abandon or forsake you! For wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Wherever you die I will die, and there be buried. May the Lord do so to me, and more besides, if aught but death separates me from you!’”*

*“Naomi then ceased to urge her, for she saw she was determined to go with her.” (vv 15-18)*

Because of a famine, Naomi and her husband and sons leave Bethlehem for Moab. The Moabites are enemies of Israel.

Shortly after arriving in Moab, Naomi’s husband dies. Her sons marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Ten years later, both of Naomi’s sons die. Neither had children. Naomi is now a widow without sons or grandchildren in a foreign land. This part of the story is sometimes called by scholars as the “emptiness of Naomi.” The emptiness of her

homeland causes Naomi and her family to leave their home. Then we have the emptiness that Naomi experiences when she loses her husband and sons. When she returns to Israel, she is too old to give birth, but Naomi's emptiness is taken away when her daughter-in-law, Ruth, gives birth to a son.

After her sons die, Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to go back to their parents' homes until they find a new husband. After an emotional farewell, Orpah follows Naomi's advice, but Ruth insists in going with Naomi and delivers the most famous words of this book:

*"Wherever you go, I will go,  
wherever you lodge, I shall lodge.  
Your people will be my people  
and your God shall be my God.  
Wherever you die, I will die  
and be buried beside you..."* (vv 16-17)

By leaving her homeland, Ruth leaves behind whatever security she may have enjoyed with her own people, and she goes with her mother-in-law out of love for her and her deceased husband.

The two destitute women return to Bethlehem. In her lament, Naomi asks the townspeople not to call her Naomi which means "lively" and "delightful" but, instead, Mara which means "bitter." Like Job, Naomi wonders why the Lord has "pronounced against her."

**Pause:** Can you feel and identify with Naomi's bitterness? What kind of experiences in life can leave you feeling bitter? What helps us to let go of bitterness?

## CHAPTER 2: Ruth meets Boaz

*"Boaz said to Ruth, 'Listen, my daughter! Do not go to glean in anyone else's field; you are not to leave here. Stay here with my women servants. Watch to see which field is to be harvested, and follow them; I have commanded the young men to do you no harm. When you are thirsty, you may go and drink from the vessels the young men have filled.'"* (vv 8-9)

Boaz, a man with a prominent position in Bethlehem, is a relative of Naomi's husband.

Ruth tells Naomi that she wants to go out into the fields to work so that she can support them both. In God's providence or plan, Ruth ends up in Boaz's

field and proves to be an excellent worker (v.7). When Boaz inquires about her, he learns that she is Naomi's daughter-in-law and that she has been very good to Naomi. This wins her Boaz's favor. He tells his men to take good care of Ruth. He even invites her to come eat at his table. No doubt a relationship is beginning to develop. Naomi is pleasantly surprised when she hears that Ruth is working in Boaz's field. We can almost hear her express her excitement: "He is a relative of ours." Immediately, Naomi sees possibilities not only for work but for a relationship. We can imagine her saying to Ruth: "Stick with Boaz, girl, and you will do well."

**Pause:** What speaks to you most in Chapter 2? What qualities do you most admire in Boaz? His rapport with his workers, his respect and protection for a foreign woman, his generosity with the grain, other?

## CHAPTER 3: A midnight rendezvous

*"Boaz ate and drank to his heart's content. Then when he went and lay down at the edge of the sheaves, she stole up, uncovered a place at his feet, and lay down."* (v.7)

*"Chapter 3 is a model of artistic suspense that will lead up to Chapter 4. All the actors think they know where they are going."* (Collegeville Commentary, p.800).

*Background note:* In Jewish society in Ruth's time, it was understood that when a man died, his nearest blood relative would marry the widow to continue the family's name. Naomi devises a plan to set in motion this process between Ruth and Boaz, who was a relative of Naomi's deceased husband and son.

Naomi, always looking out for the interests of others, tells Ruth: *"My daughter, I must seek a home for you that will please you"* (v.1), to which Naomi asks: *"Now, is not Boaz, with whose servants you were, a relative of ours?"* (v.2). This is a loaded statement, for it means that Boaz has a responsibility to care for his destitute relatives. Marriage to Naomi is not a viable option for Boaz, since Naomi is probably too old to bear him children.

But Boaz certainly could marry Ruth. So Naomi plots to set things in motion for this to happen. She tells Ruth to present herself in her best clothing when evening comes and the men are celebrating the

harvest. But she is not to present herself to Boaz until after supper and after he has had a few beers.

When Boaz goes to bed, Ruth is to “go, uncover a place at his feet, and lie down” (v.4), and see what happens. There is risk in this move as Boaz may become upset to find Ruth at his feet. When Boaz wakes up during the night, he is startled to find a stranger lying at his feet. He asks: “Who are you?” Ruth replies: “I am your servant Ruth. Spread the corner of your cloak over me, for you are my next of kin” (v.9). Ruth reminds Boaz that he is her kinsman, not to justify her bold behavior but to remind him of their close ties. Some scholars interpret Ruth’s words, “spread the corner of your cloak over me,” as a marriage proposal to Boaz—a pretty gutsy move by a woman of no means in those days.

It seems Ruth didn’t need to worry, for Boaz had already fallen for her (v.10). But there is a land issue that could derail their plans. While Boaz is indeed a relative of Ruth through marriage, there is an unnamed man who is an even closer relative (v.12). Boaz cannot marry Ruth because a closer relative has a prior claim. We can imagine Naomi and Ruth going into high gear with the best novenas they knew. Fortunately, for them, Boaz is in their corner and wants what they want but, first, he must meet with the close relative. The night scene ends with Boaz telling Ruth to leave his bed before his men see her (v.14).

At this point in the story, we are left in suspense as to what will happen. Having said that, verse 18 implies that Naomi is confident of a positive outcome.

**Pause:** When it comes to dating, what advice would you give a young man or woman: marry someone from a similar background; don’t marry an Irishman; marry someone you love and who shares your values? Why do you think Naomi was pushing Ruth to go after Boaz?

#### CHAPTER 4: Boaz marries Ruth

*“Boaz took Ruth. When they came together as man and wife, the Lord enabled her to conceive and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed is the Lord who has not failed to provide you today with an heir! May he become famous in Israel! He will be your comfort and the support of your old age,*

*for his mother is the daughter-in-law who loves you. She is worth more to you than seven sons!’”* (vv 13-15)

Boaz goes out to the city and meets with the close relative in the presence of the elders who will be witnesses to the conversation about the plot of land. Naomi inherited the land from her late husband.

Boaz tells the unnamed relative that because he is the next of kin, he has first claim to the land. But when he hears that marriage to Ruth is part of the bargain, he backs away. He formally renounces his claim to the land by removing his sandal (Deut 25:9). Thence, Boaz acquires the land and Ruth. He is happy to take Ruth as his wife in order “to raise up a family for her late husband or his estate, so that the name of the departed may not perish among his kinsmen and fellow citizens” (v.10).

In taking Ruth as his wife, Boaz has done something very generous in that their first son will be regarded not as Boaz’s but that of Ruth’s deceased husband Mahlon. According to the “levirate law” (Deut 25:5-10), if a man’s brother dies before he has a child, it is his duty to marry his brother’s widow and raise their first child as the child of the deceased brother. In Boaz’s case, Mahlon was not his brother, just a relative of his mother.

The elders witness the transaction and wish Boaz God’s blessings. They liken Ruth (a non-Israelite) to Rachel and Leah, the nation’s matriarchs, and to Tamar (also a non-Israelite) who perpetuated Judah’s threatened line (Gen 38). In mentioning Rachel, Leah and Tamar, the elders are suggesting that the union of Boaz and Ruth may be as important in God’s plan of salvation as the above-mentioned persons.

Boaz and Ruth conceive a son. Naomi’s lady friends are ecstatic and begin praising God for Ruth who is better than seven sons.

The son is named Obed. When the city ladies pray that he “becomes famous in Israel” (v.14), they get their wish—for Obed is destined to be the father of Jesse who would become the father of Israel’s greatest king, David.

Verse 16 tells us that “Naomi took the child, placed him on her lap, and became his nurse.” Her husband’s line will be continued, and she, who once was very bitter, is now full of joy.

The Book of Ruth is a beautiful story of three people—Naomi, Ruth and Boaz—manifesting a great sense of family, faith, loyalty and love. The story symbolizes God’s love for all people—for Jews and non-Jews—and how the latter could show great love for God and people. We might say that the author of Ruth is saying to the book’s readers: “Go and do likewise.”

**Pause:** When Naomi returned to Israel, her life was full of bitterness and emptiness. Now with the marriage of Ruth to Boaz, and the birth of Obed, her life is full of joy. What fills your life with joy?