

## Ruth(1)

July 7, 2022

### Background

There are two books in the Bible named for a woman, and Ruth is the first one. We will investigate the other one, Esther, later. The book of Ruth in the Old Testament is not a made-up story intended to help us feel good. Instead, it is a truthful account of a real person about whom we can glean real understanding and applications of the things of God (II Timothy 3:16-17).

Ruth lived during the time after Israel had entered its promised land (after Moses took the nation out of Egypt) and had lived in it over an extended period of time. It was also during the time the nation was governed by judges, which was before it was governed by kings. As we'll see, Ruth was a Gentile; that is, she was not born into the family of Israel. She was a Moabite (she lived in the land of Moab outside of Israel east of the Dead Sea) and, therefore, was a member of an idol-worshipping nation that was an enemy of God. In fact, *all* nations other than Israel were idol-worshipping enemies of God (Deuteronomy 7:1-6; Exodus 19:3-6; Romans 1:18-25).

So, why do we have a book in the Bible dedicated to the account of a Gentile woman named Ruth? Most commentaries focus on the character of Ruth, which I will try to describe in this study. However, I think the book of Ruth is a very important part in the revelation of God's plan for Israel that is often overlooked. Finally, I'll try to relate the account of Ruth to us as members of the body of Christ in this dispensation of the grace of God (I Corinthians 12:12-13; Ephesians 3:1-12). I recommend that you read this short book before proceeding with this study, as I will not address all the details contained in it. I will begin by providing a shortened account of the book of Ruth.

### The Account of Ruth

- During a famine in the land of Judah (one of the twelve tribes of Israel), a man from Bethlehem took his family to live in the neighboring land of Moab. The man, Elimelech, took his wife Naomi and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion (Ruth 1:1-2).
- At some point after arriving in Moab, Elimelech died (apparently sooner than normally expected), and Naomi's two sons married Moabite women. The wife of Chilion was Orpah, and the wife of the Mahlon was Ruth (Ruth 4:10). They lived in Moab for another ten years and then both of Naomi's sons died without fathering children, leaving her without a husband or sons—she was destitute (Ruth 1:3-5).
- Naomi decided to return to Judah for she heard the Lord was providing her people with food (i.e., the famine was over). She started her journey with her daughters-in-law but told them to return to their own mothers, hoping that the Lord would bless them as they had been a blessing to Naomi in her time of sorrow (Ruth 1:6-9).
- Both Orpah and Ruth wanted to stay with Naomi, but Naomi believed that the hand of the Lord had gone against her (i.e., she felt that the loss of her husband and sons was a judgment by God against her). She convinced Orpah, though distraught about leaving Naomi, to return to her family. Ruth, however, refused to leave Naomi (Ruth 1:10-14).
- When urged again to return to her own people and their gods, Ruth insisted on staying with Naomi. Ruth's commitment to Naomi was all-embracing and absolute based on what she told her (Ruth 1:15-17):

- Where you go, I will go.
- Where you lodge, I will lodge.
- Your people shall be my people.
- Your God shall be my God.
- Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried.
- Nothing but death will part us; otherwise, may the Lord do to me as He pleases (even death).
- Naomi and Ruth, therefore, continued their journey to Bethlehem. Although apparently welcomed by the people who had known her, Naomi complained, or stated what she believed to be true, that the Almighty God had dealt bitterly with her (afflicted her) because she had returned without her husband and sons—she had returned empty (Ruth 1:18-22).
- Ruth gleaned the fields<sup>1</sup> of a wealthy man named Boaz who was a relative of Naomi's husband Elimelech. One day Boaz noticed Ruth and learned from others what she had done for Naomi. Boaz then told her to glean only his fields and commanded the servant in charge that she be treated like his other reapers even though she was a foreigner (Ruth 2:1-13).
- Boaz personally served Ruth roasted grain that day during the reapers' mealtime, and also commanded his servants to leave extra grain among the sheaves for Ruth to glean (Ruth 2:14-18).
- Ruth learned from Naomi that Boaz was a close relative of Elimelech. Ruth continued to work with the servants of Boaz through the barley and wheat harvests while continuing to live with Naomi (Ruth 2:19-23).
- With Ruth's future security in mind (as an unmarried Gentile woman in Judah), Naomi told Ruth to do a specific set of things to get the attention of Boaz; she said that Boaz would then tell Ruth what she should do (Ruth 3:1-6).
- Ruth did as she was told. Boaz recognized her integrity and excellence, and promised to take care of her through a practice of redemption (Ruth 3:7-18).
- Boaz followed the custom of the day by taking a closer relative of Elimelech to confer with the elders of the city about selling a piece of land which belonged to Elimelech (therefore, it belonged to Naomi). The closer relative had first right to that land, and by redeeming it he would also acquire Ruth (a condition required by Boaz) so as to continue the inheritance of Elimelech. The closer relative could not redeem the land and Ruth on account of his own inheritance and gave Boaz the right to redeem them, which he did (Ruth 4:1-12).
- Boaz married Ruth, the Lord enabled Ruth to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. Naomi became his nurse. The neighbor women proclaimed that a son had been born of Naomi, and they named him Obed. Obed later became the father of Jesse, who became the father of David (Ruth 4:13-17).
- The book of Ruth closes with the lineage of David, beginning with Perez (Ruth 4:18-22).

The account of Ruth in the Bible is brief but amazing. What have you learned from it? I will address what I consider to be takeaways for our understanding in the next lesson.

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<sup>1</sup> Gleaning referred to following the reapers (who were servants or slaves of the landowners) of grain fields and collecting grain that had fallen from the sheaves of barley and wheat (Ruth 1:22; 2:23) that they had gathered. Those who gleaned were able to keep the grain that they had collected.