

CHAPTER 1

Ruth

Ruth 1–4

**For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God my God;**

Ruth 1:16b

Writing—About 2800 years or more before the birth of Christ, the Sumerians invented writing. Before then, people lived in a strictly oral culture. What literature existed was passed by word of mouth from one generation to the next, by tribal historians and sages. The invention of writing was the biggest revolution in human history, really the beginning of history as we know it. It became possible for knowledge to be codified and passed, with new stability, from one generation to the next. Writing was new; writing was exciting; writing was magical.

Only a few people could actually read or write, however. The scribes, or scribes, would write out documents for people and read them back. Only with the spread of universal literacy in the past couple of centuries has it been possible for most people to write their own documents and read them back. Some ancient cultures promoted literacy more than others. The Athenians expected their citizens to be able to argue their own cases in court, and this required an ability to read court documents. Alexander the Great was tutored by Aristotle and was certainly able to read and write.

The Jews too, promoted reading and writing, especially from the period of the exile onward. They wanted to preserve their traditional language of Hebrew and the sacred literature that existed in that language. The eventual result of their efforts is the Holy Bible as we know it today.

The Jewish name for the Hebrew Bible is “The Law, the Prophets, the Writings” (*Torah, Nebiyim, Ketubim*). The Law comprises the five books of Moses; the Prophets comprise both the prophetic books and those historical books that contain stories of the prophets. The Writings comprise everything else.

Psalter—Among the Writings, the most important and best-loved is the Psalter, a collection of 150 religious poems and prayers. The word “Psalm” (Hebrew *Tehillah*) means “praise,” but there are many kinds of psalms. Within the Psalter are different kinds of prayers—praise, adoration, thanksgiving, petition and, contrition.

The original music of the psalms has been lost, but down through the ages both Jews and Christians have continued the tradition of chanting the psalms. David sang psalms before the Ark of the Covenant; the Levitical priests sang psalms on the steps before the altar of sacrifice in the Temple of Jerusalem. Jesus and the Apostles and the Jews of

all time sang psalms during the celebration of the Passover Meal. Monks and nuns sing psalms during communal recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours, and the whole Church sings a responsorial psalm during the Mass of every day of the year. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal decrees, “The responsorial psalm is an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word.” Individual believers have also found personal inspiration from incorporating particular psalms into their prayer lives.

Ruth—The Writings also contain a set of five small books called “The Scrolls” (*Megilloth*), because Ruth, Esther, Qoheleth, Song of Songs, and Lamentations are short enough that they could each fit on a single scroll. Each of these books is a masterpiece of inspired literature that has contributed greatly to the biblical heritage.

The Book of Ruth is probably the most ancient of these writings, predating even most of the Psalms. Written in an elegant Hebrew narrative style, it tells the story of one of King David’s ancestors, a Moabite woman. The book is biographical and genealogical, but also much more. Ruth can be read on several levels.

Historical Background of Ruth—The Moabites, who lived to the southeast of Israel, were sometimes foes, sometimes allies of the Israelites. The Hebrew judge Ehud assassinated Eglon, King of Moab (Judges 3:15–25), and under his command the Israelites slew about ten thousand Moabite men (Judges 3:26–30). One wonders how Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, and father-in-law of Ruth, found a welcome in the Plain of Moab for himself and his family, after so many Moabites had been slaughtered by Israelites in battle. Perhaps the key lies in the fact that the judge Ehud was of the Tribe of Benjamin (Judges 3:15) while Elimelech belonged to the Tribe of Judah (Ruth 1:1).

During the period of the Judges (roughly 1200–1000 BC), the Hebrews had no central government. Each of the twelve tribes managed its own affairs independently, except during a crisis, when they would come together under a charismatic “judge.” They didn’t necessarily all come together at once, and some tribes had more belligerent policies than others towards the neighboring peoples. The Benjamites seem to have been hostile to Moab, but the Judaites were friendly. At one point, King David entrusted his aged parents to the safekeeping of the King of Moab (1 Samuel 22:3). He would never have done this unless there had been a long bond of good feeling between the tribe of Judah and the Kingdom of Moab.

The Drama of Ruth—The Story of Three Widows—The Book of Ruth is not just about one woman, but about a set of family relationships. Before Ruth herself is named, the book introduces her father-in-law, her mother-in-law, her future husband, and her future brother-in-law and sister-in-law. Clearly, the whole family is critical to this book, and not just the individual Ruth herself.

Life is not easy for this family. First they suffer famine in their native land. Then they

travel as refugees to another land. All the men in the family die, leaving the women as widows. If survival was difficult beforehand, the deaths of all the men make things worse. Naomi is a powerful figure in this book, because she turns adversity into opportunity for her surviving daughters-in-law. First she offers them the chance to go back to their mothers and obtain second husbands. Instead, Ruth chooses to retain Naomi as her mother with the responsibility of finding Ruth a second mate. They would never have done this if the relationship was strained. Naomi brings her sons' wives into a sense of true belonging in the family circle.

Naomi kisses her daughters-in-law and weeps in saying good-bye (Ruth 1:9). Naomi is a faith-filled and loving mother-in-law. But, now bereft of the hope of grandchildren, Naomi allows the tragedies of her life to plunge her into bitterness. Naomi grieves over the disasters that have fallen upon her. "Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me" (Ruth 1:20). Widowhood is obviously a bitter experience, and the loss of her sons and hoped-for grandchildren obscures the great blessing that is yet to come.

People love the Book of Ruth because it describes a beautiful relationship between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law. Ruth shows the possibility of a functional family, an ideal toward which we all can strive. Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law show love, loyalty, and care for one another.

Ruth travels to Bethlehem, Naomi's hometown, with Naomi and begins to support the older widow. Ruth gleanes grain in the field of Boaz. When Boaz blesses his workers, he demonstrates his personal reliance on the Lord in his life. While Ruth brings home food for her mother-in-law, Naomi does not selfishly bask in Ruth's exceptional devotion to her, but seeks to secure a good future for Ruth. When Naomi observes her kinsman Boaz and his generous treatment of Ruth, she gives motherly guidance and Ruth accepts the advice of her mother-in-law. Boaz also notices that Ruth has not chased after rich young men.

Boaz invites a nearer kinsman to redeem the property and marry Ruth. The property will not increase his personal assets but will pass on to a son from a union with Ruth. Selfishly, the nearer kinsman declines. Boaz, with a generous heart and a sense of community, accepts the responsibility of both Ruth and Naomi, and acts as the kinsman redeemer.

The marriage of Boaz and Ruth is blessed with a son. Naomi becomes a grandmother through the divine providence of God and the devotion of her daughter-in-law Ruth. God blessed Ruth's sacrifice with the gift of faith and marriage to a noble, God-fearing husband with whom she becomes the ancestress of King David and Jesus Christ and His co-heirs forever.

Messianic Ruth—The Book of Ruth belongs to the canon of Sacred Scripture not just because it has a wonderful story with a beautiful message. The Book answers a problem

that existed for the Kingdom of Judah: there was a gentile woman in the ancestry of the royal line. Some Jews were scandalized that David had a Moabite great-grandmother. The author of the Book of Judges says that disaster came upon Israel because Hebrew men married foreign women, and served their wives' foreign gods, forgetting the Lord the One True God. Therefore, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel (Judges 3:5–8). When the sons of Naomi took Moabite wives for themselves, they were putting their religious heritage at risk.

Whenever David or his successors ran into trouble, the intermarriage issue would resurface. People would suspect that the reason Israel was having difficulties was because the royal line was tainted with mixed blood. The Book of Ruth tackles this difficulty head-on, showing that Ruth herself, though indeed a Moabite by birth, was a genuine convert to Judaism—to the people and to the people's God. For the original author, the fact that Ruth was a Moabite, was a problem to be resolved. Later, Matthew will find in her a foreshadowing of the universal nature of the Messiah. As Ruth was grafted onto the people of God by conversion, and contributed to the Messianic line, so we, on the receiving end of the Messiah's grace, can be grafted onto God's people in the new dispensation.

<p>These are the descendants of Perez; Perez was the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshan, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David. (Ruth 4:18–22)</p>	<p>Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz <i>by Rahab</i>, and Boaz the father of Obed <i>by Ruth</i>, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David <i>the king</i>. (Matthew 1:3-6, emphasis added)</p>
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Liturgical Ruth—As is evident above, the very first words of the New Testament comprise a quotation from the last three verses of the Book of Ruth. On the Vigil of Christmas, the priest or deacon proclaims, “The beginning of the Gospel according to Matthew,” but what he reads is also the ending of the Ruth. Of all the feasts in the Christian calendar, then, Christmas is the one most closely associated with the Book of Ruth.

Jewish liturgical practice called for the reading of Ruth during the celebration of Pentecost. On the first Christian Pentecost, the apostles gathered with Mother Mary (Acts 1:14) and read Ruth. Hearing the passage: “call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me” their eyes certainly went to the Sorrowful Mother, because the name Mary comes from Mara. At that moment, Mary is Naomi. She is every woman who has lost a child. Only 52 days before, she had been standing at

the foot of the cross.

Spiritual Ruth—When Ruth pledges herself to continue with Naomi, she says, “Your people will be my people and your God will be my God” (Ruth 1:16b). This is a very interesting conversion formula. Ruth not only believed that God existed, but that the Jews were the chosen people of God. She could not accept God while rejecting His people, or accept the people while rejecting their God.

In Ruth’s attitude, we see the beginning of the Christian doctrine of the “Communion of Saints.” Ruth finds faith in the context of family. Millions of believers after Ruth have found faith in the context of fellowship. To pursue God outside the Church is a lonely road. Pilgrimage is so much easier in the company of others, and when we get to the end of our pilgrimage, people will still be there. When we find God, we find others, and we find ourselves as well. So the search for God is not a flight from society. Even the hermit monk chooses solitude only for the sake of praying more intensely for the needs of others. As Saint John writes, “for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20b).

Musical Ruth—The music of ancient Israel has been lost, along with the music of all her neighbors. Certain musicologists have made efforts to reconstruct the music of the Sumerians, the Hebrews, and the Greeks, but the results are tantalizingly elusive. We know that these cultures influenced each other musically. Their musical instruments that have survived are physically similar, and the surviving texts also show mutual influence, and so the original music probably did as well. Intermarriage was a factor contributing to musical interdependence. When a child sat on his grandmother’s knee, he would hear her sing the songs of her native land, and these musical strains would enter into his own heritage. When the child David was around the women of his family, he heard them humming the melodies of Moab. A precocious musical genius, David integrated these melodies into the fabric of his own musicality. Later, after she herself was dead and gone, Ruth’s melodies became some of the Psalms of David.



1. Identify the members of the family in Ruth 1:1–4.

_____ married Naomi

Mahlon and Chilion married _____ and _____

2. From what tribe of Israel and what town did this family come? Ruth 1:1–2

10. What did Naomi wish to be called and why? Ruth 1:19–22

11. Describe Ruth's activity in Ruth 2:1–16.

12. How did Boaz greet his workers? Ruth 2:4

13. What did Boaz say about Ruth? Ruth 2:11–14

14. How did Boaz provide for Ruth and Naomi? Ruth 2:14–18

15. What did Naomi say about Boaz? Ruth 2:20–22

16. In your own words, describe the events in Ruth 3.

17. Why didn't the nearest relative marry Ruth? Ruth 4:1-6

18. How did the elders bless the marriage of Ruth and Boaz? Ruth 4:11-12

19. When Ruth conceived a child, what did the women say? Ruth 4:14-15

20. Identify character traits and virtues found in Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz.

* Choose a family member that you could bless this week. Is there some hurt in your family that you could repair? Pray about it and then do whatever God tells you to do and report the results to your small group.