

RUTH

THEME

If you look at commentaries or listen to sermons on the book of Ruth, you will find there is much disagreement about the theme of the book of Ruth. Some see it as the story of Ruth; others as a story of redemption; still others as an illustration of how God loves Gentiles.

Part of the difficulty in determining the theme is that the book is misnamed. It is much more the story of Naomi, than of Ruth. And it is even more the story of God, than of Naomi. Of course, this is a different way of looking at the book, so allow me to provide reasons for this view.

Growing up in a secular culture we do not often see God (who He is and what He does) as a part of our reality. We live our lives by the wrong narrative – a narrative without God.

Likewise when we approach our Bible reading, we focus on human beings as the center of the story and think of God more as part of the setting. For example, do we think of the book of Acts as “The Acts of the Apostles” or “The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles”?

It is my conviction that God, not people, is the first story of the Bible. Because we are blind to the leading character, we miss the wealth of what the Bible has to say about God for us. God is the hero of every book of the Bible. The only way we can mine the richness of the Bible is to hear what the passage says about God before we hear what it says for us (personal application).

So how do we see God in the book of Ruth? Well, one way to answer that question is to highlight all the statements in the book about God.

- 1:2 “God is King” – the meaning of the name “Elimelech.”
- 1:6 Yahweh came to the aid of His people.
- 1:8 Will Yahweh show kindness?
- 1:9 Will Yahweh grant another husband?
- 1:13 “Yahweh’s hand has gone out against me.”
- 1:16 “your God, my God”
- 1:17 “may Yahweh deal with me”
- 1:20 “the Almighty has made my life bitter.”
- 1:21 “Yahweh has brought me back empty...Yahweh has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”
- 2:1 “In him is strength” – the meaning of the name “Boaz.”
- 2:4 “Yahweh be with you! Yahweh bless you!”
- 2:12 “May Yahweh repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by Yahweh, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”
- 2:20 **[This is the exact middle of the book.]** “Yahweh bless him!” “He has not stopped showing His kindness to the living and the dead.”
- 3:10 “Yahweh bless you.”
- 3:13 “as surely as Yahweh lives...”
- 4:11 “May Yahweh make the woman like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house
- 4:12 of Israel.”
- 4:13 “Through the offspring (the seed) Yahweh gives you.”
- 4:14 “Yahweh enabled Ruth to conceive.”
“Praise be to Yahweh, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer.”

The many references to God make the theme plain: “Will God show kindness again when life has become empty or bitter?” The best title for this book is not “Ruth,” but “God is kind to Naomi.”

A second way to confirm this theme is to note that the book begins and ends with Naomi, not Ruth (1:1; 4:17). Ruth and Boaz are the helpers that God uses to bring Naomi through her despair. Naomi moves from a pleasant life down to a life of despair and back up again (1:2, 20; 4:14-15). Naomi moves from fullness to emptiness to fullness again (1:1-5, 21; 4:16-17). At the beginning of the book we see Naomi with family, then she loses all her husband and sons. She believes she will be empty the rest of her life and there is no future for her (1:11-13), but at the end of the book (because of God’s faithful kindness to her), Naomi has a lap full of blessing, literally (4:16).

In addition, the theme of God’s kindness is meant to apply beyond Naomi. Naomi is a real person, but she is also a picture of Israel and God’s blessing. A picture of how Israel came into the Promised Land, how they experienced the withdrawal of God’s blessing, and yet how God was gracious to restore His people by providing a godly king. How do we know that the author intended the story to apply to more than just Naomi?

The book *begins* with the statement: “In the days when the judges ruled...” (Ruth 1:1), so we are immediately reminded of the *end* of the book of Judges: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). So there is an immediate connection between this book and the problem of Judges.

Now note how the book ends. It concludes with a genealogy ending with the name of David, Israel’s king (Ruth 4:22). So what does the book of Ruth show us about God? It shows us that God is kind to His people and loyal to His promise to provide a royal seed for His people so that they might be preserved and have rest (Genesis 17:6,16). In other words, it shows us God’s faithfulness to His covenant with Abraham.

Of course, it also points us to the ultimate fulfillment of all the promises in the Jesus the Messiah. Hence, the book is a very personal illustration of God’s love, faithfulness, divine sovereignty, and redemption for all God’s people, including us. God will be kind to His people!

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The action of the book occurred during the violent days of the judges (1:1) probably at the time of Gideon. The recording of events, however, took place during the days of David. This fact is obvious from the perspective on the period of the judges shown in 1:1 and 4:7, and from the ending of the genealogy of 4:17-22 with David rather than continuing it through Solomon and others. Cultural and literary considerations also point to this time of writing.

SUMMARY OF CONTENT

The action centers around Naomi. The book is divided into six different sections: a prologue of 71 Hebrew words, an epilogue of the same number of words, and four dramatic episodes in between. [See outline.] The crucial turning point occurs exactly midway (2:20). The book uses the lives of Naomi the widow, Ruth the Moabite, and Boaz of Bethlehem to illustrate themes of God’s kindness, God’s faithfulness, God’s mercy, prayer, redemption, and the responsibilities of

a kinsman-redeemer. God is the one at work behind the scene and as a result the widow is filled, the alien is redeemed, and their child becomes a link in the line of the Messiah.

Contrast is also a major part of the book: pleasant (the meaning of "Naomi") and bitter (1:20), and full and empty (1:21). Most striking is the contrast between two of the main characters, Ruth and Boaz: The one is a young, alien, destitute widow, while the other is a middle-aged, well-to-do Israelite securely established in his home community. For Ruth and for Boaz there is a corresponding character whose actions highlight (by contrast) their selfless acts: Ruth — Orpah, Boaz — the unnamed kinsman who will not redeem Ruth.

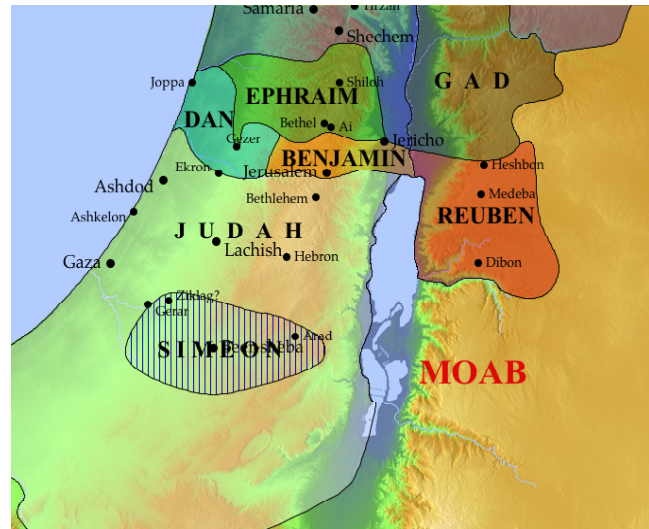
LOCATION

The action takes place between Bethlehem (located in the Promised Land) and Moab (a country on the opposite side of the Dead Sea).

When we move from one place to another in modern times, we think mostly about location. But in Naomi's day to move to another country (especially from the Promised Land) was to move under the influence of another god, another religion. It would be similar to a Christian in the United States moving to Saudi Arabia.

The people of Moab worshipped Chemosh, a savage war god who accepted child sacrifice as an offering (1 Kings 11:7; 2 Kings 3:26-27; 23:13).

Also Moab did not have a proud heritage. Naomi's husband took his family to a nation that began in incest (Lot and his oldest daughter — Genesis 19:30-38) and to a people banned from the Temple courts of Israel. Read Deuteronomy 23:3-6.



SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BOOK OF RUTH

1. Reveals God's faithfulness and power to complete His promise-plan for His people. Ultimately it reveals His sovereign plan to fulfill His covenant through the seed of David, Jesus Christ.
2. Demonstrates the grace and enabling of God in a context of evil. — You can live right in an evil world, because you have a God who cares for you.
3. Illustrates God's grace and salvation for believing Gentiles. — In Ruth we see a partial fulfillment of the promise that God gave to Abraham: "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3).
4. Illustrates God's sovereign love and His control of people and events (the providence of God). — God is at work in simple circumstances.
5. Illustrates Kinsman-Redeemer concepts pointing to Christ: He must be:
 - * A near Kinsman
 - * Able to redeem
 - * Willing to redeem

6. Is a contrast and balance to the book of Judges:

<u>Judges</u>	<u>Ruth</u>
Unfaithfulness	Faithfulness
Jews Abandoning Yahweh	Gentiles turning to Yahweh
Emphasizes miracles	Emphasizes providence
Prayerlessness	7 prayers answered

SOME IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES FROM THIS BOOK

1. God can bring “beauty from ashes” (Isaiah 61:3), turning around the deepest sorrow into the highest joy. For...

- Naomi from

Famine	to	Family = a grandmother with a baby boy in her arms
Funerals		

- Ruth from

Widowhood	to	Marriage
Alienation		Motherhood Acceptance

2. God is faithful to His promises. We can trust him to fulfill His promise-plan in Christ.

3. God loves aliens/“ordinary people” and meets all their needs when they turn to him in worship and commitment.

4. It is possible to live for God in spite of an evil culture and peer pressure.

When almost all the “lights” in Israel had gone out, a woman came from Moab to reconfirm that God was there and that His standards and values were right and rewarding.

5. God has a wonderful plan for every person, even widows and old bachelors!