

The Book of Ruth

by Tom Wilson, Scotland

The name of the book

In the New Testament, The Gospel according to Luke is the only book named by a Gentile name. In the Old Testament, Ruth is the only book named by a Gentile name. Strangely, although the book is named after her in the Bible, the name Ruth only occurs 12 times in the book that bears her name, whereas Naomi's name occurs 22 times and Boaz' 20 times. Only once in the book do lips pronounce her name; on that occasion Ruth herself is the speaker (3:9). There are no mentions of her name elsewhere in the Old Testament and, in the New Testament, only once at Matthew 1:5 in Christ's genealogy.

The purposes of the book

The purposes of the Book of Ruth are several, including:

1. To provide a link between Judges and 1 & 2 Samuel, particularly in respect of the Davidic royal lineage.
2. To offer an insight into the role, responsibilities and piety of women during the period of the Judges.
3. To record the actions of men during a period when the nation's priests and its judges were almost invisible, and certainly many out of touch with God.
4. To note how a citizen of the nations around Israel became a proselyte and her welcome in Israel.
5. To illustrate the role of the kinsman redeemer (Hebrew *gō'ēl'*).

From three perspectives, the book of Ruth is of abiding significance. It is:

1. of *personal* significance to the godly of every age, as it illustrates principles of perennial value;
2. of *national* significance to Israel, as it introduces the line of David;
3. of *typical* significance to Jew and Gentile in setting out the rights of Christ, Israel's Kinsman Redeemer.

Apart from Ruth 1:1-18, the location of the remainder of the Book is Bethlehem-judah.

The book of Ruth contrasted with Judges

Although set in the period "when the judges ruled" in Israel, the book of Ruth is the Holy Spirit's contrast to the Judges 17-21, which chapters highlight, by reference to Bethlehem-judah, the appalling state of the nation, in which every

man did that which was right in his own eyes.¹ Those end chapters of Judges record the shameful sins of idolatry and gross immorality and the other sins that followed in their wake, such as theft and manslaughter. However, the book of Ruth is *not* a third appendix to the book of Judges.

Three of the last four chapters of Judges contain the statement: “there was no king in Israel.”² The writer of the Book of Ruth does not use that phrase but sets events “in the days when the judges ruled” (1:1). (Based on the reference to David, the youngest of Jesse’s eight sons, some conclude that Boaz may have been a contemporary of Gideon.) However, the mention of David at 4:22 reminds the reader of the ever-darkening scene that must have awakened in some hearts a desire for a king. The writer’s view was that “in the days when the judges ruled,” some in the nation did yearn for a king like David – not Saul! – to be the answer to Israel’s needs. Indeed the very meaning of Elimelech’s name – “My God is king” – points up those yearnings (1:2).

The structure of the book of Ruth

The book of Ruth centres round five locations, four of which are at, or around, Bethlehem:

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| 1. | The country of Moab | 1:1-18 |
| 1. | The city of Bethlehem | 1:19-2:2 |
| 2. | A field in Bethlehem | 2:3-18 |
| 3. | A threshing floor in Bethlehem | 3:1-18 |
| 4. | The city of Bethlehem | 4:1-2 |

The structure of Ruth 1

Chapter 1 comprises five sections:

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| 1. | The <i>devastation</i> of famine and Elimelech’s <i>emigration</i> to a land stalked by death | vv.1-5 |
| 2. | Jehovah’s gracious <i>visitation</i> to relieve His impoverished people in Judah and its <i>communication</i> to Naomi | vv.6-10 |
| 3. | Orpah’s <i>vacillation</i> about her future | vv.11-14 |
| 4. | Ruth’s <i>determination</i> to serve Israel’s God | vv.15-18 |
| 5. | Naomi’s <i>humiliation</i> before her peers and her <i>affirmation</i> that Jehovah had afflicted her | vv.19-22 |

¹ Judges 17:6; 21:25.

² Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25.