

Background to the Book of Ruth

A Companion Resource for Going Deeper

Ruth is a short book (only four chapters), but it sits at a hinge point in Israel's story. It closes out the chaotic era of the Judges and quietly opens the door to the monarchy of David, and ultimately to Christ. Understanding what's happening beneath the surface will help you feel the weight of what, at first glance, looks like a simple family story.

Where Ruth Sits in the Bible

Ruth occupies two different “homes” depending on which canon you're looking at, and both are worth knowing because each highlights something different about the book.

In the Hebrew Bible, Ruth is placed among the *Ketuvim* (“the Writings”), the third and final division of the Old Testament, as part of a small collection of five short books called the *Megilloth* (“the Scrolls”): Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther. Each of these scrolls came to be associated with a Jewish festival, and Ruth is traditionally read aloud in the synagogue at **Shavuot**, the Feast of Weeks (the same festival on which the Holy Spirit was poured out in Acts 2). The connection makes sense thematically: Shavuot celebrates both the giving of the Law and the early grain harvest, and Ruth's story unfolds during the barley and wheat harvests in Bethlehem.

In the Christian Old Testament (following the order inherited from the Greek Septuagint), Ruth is placed among the historical books, directly between Judges and 1 Samuel. This placement locates Ruth's events squarely within “the days when the judges ruled” (Ruth 1:1, NKJV) and treats the book as a hinge leading from the anarchy of Judges into the rise of the monarchy under Samuel, Saul, and David. That's the order most of us are familiar with, and it's a natural way to read Ruth: as a bridge from Israel's darkest chapter into the beginning of hope.

Who Wrote It

The book itself never names its author; it is technically anonymous, like Judges, Samuel, and Kings. That said, there is a long-standing Jewish tradition, recorded in the Talmud (*Bava Batra* 14b–15a), that attributes Ruth to the prophet **Samuel**. This is the traditional view, and a reasonable one to build on, for a few reasons:

- Samuel was actually Israel's last judge himself (1 Samuel 7:15–17), so his life bridges directly out of this era and into the beginning of the monarchy. He had firsthand knowledge of this world and a personal stake in showing that God's hand had long been on David's family.
- The elegant, classical Hebrew prose style of Ruth is consistent with other early monarchic-period writing.

- Samuel had every reason to want David's ancestry documented, since he was the one who anointed David and had a stake in showing God's providence over this family across generations.

It's worth being honest that this is a tradition, not a certainty. The text doesn't name an author, and some later Jewish and Christian scholars have proposed other writers or a later composition date (more on that below). But “written by, or very near, Samuel's circle, in support of David's legitimacy” is the standard, defensible view, and the one this resource follows.

When It Happened and When It Was Written

Ruth actually has two dates worth distinguishing: the date of the events themselves, and the date the book was written down.

Date of the events (the setting): Ruth 1:1 places the story “in the days when the judges ruled,” a period spanning roughly 1375–1050 BC. Internal clues, especially the genealogy at the end of the book (which lists only three generations between Ruth's son Obed and David: Obed → Jesse → David), point to the story taking place toward the *later* part of that period, likely somewhere around **1150–1100 BC**.

Date of the writing: The genealogy that closes the book (Ruth 4:18–22) ends with David and does not mention Solomon. If the author had been writing after Solomon's famous reign began (c. 970 BC), you'd expect him to get a mention, given how well known he became. His absence points to a writing sometime before Solomon's reign made him a household name.

If Samuel is the author, this narrows things further. Samuel actually died *before* David became king: 1 Samuel 25:1 records his death well before Saul's death in 1 Samuel 31, which is itself before David's coronation in 2 Samuel 2 and 5. So the most likely window for Samuel to have personally written Ruth is after he privately anointed David as the future king (1 Samuel 16) but before Samuel's own death, meaning most likely while Saul was still on the throne. Some, recognizing this narrow window, suggest the book may have been completed or preserved by someone in Samuel's prophetic circle, such as Nathan, working from material Samuel had gathered, sometime after David's actual coronation but before Solomon.

A note on scholarship you may encounter: Some modern critical scholars date Ruth much later, to the post-exilic period (5th–4th century BC), pointing to a few late-sounding Hebrew word forms and suggesting the book was written to counter the strict prohibitions on intermarriage with foreigners found in Ezra and Nehemiah. This is a minority-but-notable position in academic circles. The traditional early date remains the more natural reading of the text's own internal evidence (especially the genealogy stopping at David), and is the view this resource follows.

Where It Was Written

The text doesn't state a location, but the internal evidence points toward **Judah**, most likely in or near **Bethlehem** or the Jerusalem/Hebron area. The story's obvious affection for Bethlehem, its detailed familiarity with local customs (gleaning rights, the elders at the city gate, redemption procedures), and its clear interest in documenting David's family line all suggest a Judean author writing for a Judean audience who already had some stake in David's rise.

The World of the Judges: What Was Going On

Ruth opens in one of the darkest periods of Israel's history, and the contrast between that darkness and the quiet faithfulness of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz is a big part of what makes the book work. Understanding this backdrop helps you feel the story rather than just read it.

Politically and religiously, Israel had no king and no centralized government. The tribes were a loose confederacy, each largely fending for itself, and the book of Judges famously closes with the refrain: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25, NKJV). Judges records a repeating cycle: Israel abandons the LORD for the gods of surrounding nations, God allows a foreign power to oppress them as discipline, the people cry out, and God raises up a judge to deliver them, after which the cycle begins again. By the end of Judges, the moral and religious rot is severe: the book closes with the story of Micah's idols and a hired Levite priest (Judges 17–18) and the horrific account of the Levite's concubine and the resulting civil war that nearly wiped out the tribe of Benjamin (Judges 19–21). Many scholars believe Ruth's story unfolds in roughly this same late-Judges timeframe, which makes the quiet integrity of Ruth's small Bethlehem household even more striking. In a period defined by “everyone did what was right in his own eyes,” Ruth 1–4 give us people who instead ask, again and again, what is right in God's eyes.

Economically, famine (Ruth 1:1) was understood in Israel's theology as one of the covenant curses for unfaithfulness (see Deuteronomy 28:15–24), which is likely why Elimelech's family left the Promised Land for Moab in the first place, a decision the original audience would have recognized as fraught, since it meant leaving the land of promise during a time when the LORD's discipline was falling on it.

Regionally, Israel was surrounded by hostile or semi-hostile neighboring peoples who repeatedly raided or oppressed them during this era according to Judges: Moab, Ammon, Midian, the Amalekites, and eventually the Philistines, who were beginning to settle and consolidate power along the southern coastal plain during roughly this same window of time.

In the wider ancient Near East, this period (roughly 1200–1100 BC) followed closely on the heels of what historians call the **Late Bronze Age Collapse**, a sweeping breakdown of the major Bronze Age powers (the Hittite Empire fell, Egypt's New Kingdom was in serious decline and largely withdrew its grip on Canaan, and Mycenaean Greek civilization collapsed) accompanied by mass migrations of the so-called “Sea Peoples,” among whom were the Philistines, who settled on Canaan's coast around this time. This regional power vacuum is part of why the era of the Judges was so unstable: with no dominant empire policing the region, small nations and tribal groups were left to fend for and defend themselves, setting the stage for the constant low-grade warfare and lawlessness that fills the book of Judges.

Moab and the Moabites: Essential Background

Since Ruth is a Moabite, understanding who the Moabites were, and what kind of baggage that identity carried for an Israelite audience, is essential to feeling the force of the story.

- **Origin:** According to Genesis 19:30–38, the Moabites descended from Moab, son of Lot through an incestuous union with his older daughter after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. From their earliest origin story onward, Moab carried a stigma in Israel's memory.

- **Territory:** Moab was located east of the Dead Sea, across the Jordan from Judah: close enough to be a constant neighbor, far enough to be considered foreign and pagan. Moabites worshiped the god Chemosh, and child sacrifice was associated with Moabite religion (2 Kings 3:26–27).
- **History of hostility:** Moab's relationship with Israel was marked by repeated conflict. In Numbers 22–25, King Balak of Moab hired the prophet Balaam to curse Israel as they traveled toward the Promised Land (he couldn't), and Moabite women were later involved in drawing Israelite men into idolatry and sexual immorality at Baal-Peor, which triggered a deadly plague (Numbers 25). During the period of the Judges itself, Israel spent eighteen years oppressed under a Moabite king, Eglon, until the judge Ehud delivered them (Judges 3:12–30).
- **Legal exclusion:** Because of this history, Deuteronomy 23:3–6 explicitly bars Moabites (and Ammonites) from entering “the assembly of the LORD” for ten generations, on account of their refusal to help Israel with food and water during the wilderness wandering, and their hiring of Balaam against Israel.

This is the weight worth feeling as you read: Ruth is not just “a foreigner.” She is a Moabite: a member of a people group with a long, ugly history of enmity toward Israel, technically excluded from Israel's worshiping assembly. That a Moabite widow would become not just an accepted member of Israel but the great-grandmother of King David, and an ancestor of Jesus himself (Matthew 1:5), is not a minor detail. It's one of the loudest statements the book makes about the character of God: his covenant grace reaches beyond ethnic Israel to welcome in the outsider who comes to trust in him (see Ruth's own confession of faith in Ruth 1:16–17).

Customs You'll Need to Know

A few ancient Israelite customs are load-bearing for the plot and will be confusing without a little explanation:

- **Gleaning** (Leviticus 19:9–10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19–22): Landowners were commanded not to harvest the edges of their fields or go back for dropped grain, leaving it instead for the poor, the foreigner, and the widow to gather for themselves. This is how Ruth initially provides for herself and Naomi (Ruth 2), and Boaz's generosity in this law is one of the first signs of his character.
- **The kinsman-redeemer, or *go'el*** (Leviticus 25:25–55): A close relative had the right, and in some cases the responsibility, to “redeem” family land that had been sold due to poverty, keeping it within the family and tribe. This role becomes central in Ruth 4.
- **Levirate marriage** (Deuteronomy 25:5–10): When a man died without an heir, a near relative was expected to marry the widow and raise up a son to carry on the dead man's name and inheritance. Boaz's marriage to Ruth combines and extends both this custom and the kinsman-redeemer law in a way that goes beyond the strict letter of what was legally required of him: another mark of his character, and, typologically, a picture of Christ's redemption of his people.
- **Legal proceedings at the city gate**, including the sandal custom (Ruth 4:1–12): Business and legal transactions in ancient Israel were conducted publicly at the city gate before witnesses and elders. The removing and handing over of a sandal (Ruth 4:7–8) was a customary way of formalizing a legal transfer of rights. The author even notes this was “the custom in former times in Israel,” suggesting the practice had already become unfamiliar by the time of writing.

How the Story Is Built

Ruth is widely regarded, even by secular literary critics, as one of the most skillfully constructed short narratives in ancient literature. It reads as a tightly crafted short story in four scenes, roughly one per chapter:

- **Emptiness:** Naomi loses her husband and sons in Moab and returns to Bethlehem bitter and empty-handed, accompanied only by Ruth (ch. 1).
- **Provision:** Ruth gleans in the fields and “happens” to come to the field of Boaz, a relative of Naomi's late husband (ch. 2).
- **Petition:** Naomi sends Ruth to the threshing floor to ask Boaz to act as kinsman-redeemer (ch. 3).
- **Redemption:** Boaz secures the right of redemption at the city gate, marries Ruth, and the book closes with the birth of Obed and a genealogy running to David (ch. 4).

The recurring key word of the book is *hesed*, usually translated “loyal love,” “kindness,” or “steadfast love,” a rich Hebrew term for covenant faithfulness that goes beyond what's required. It's used of Ruth's loyalty to Naomi, of Boaz's treatment of Ruth, and ultimately points to the character of God himself, who works through ordinary, faithful people in the background of history to accomplish his purposes.

Why It Matters

Putting all of this together, here are a few threads worth carrying with you as you read:

- **It legitimizes David's kingship.** By tracing David's great-grandparents, the book answers a real question David's contemporaries may have asked: where did this shepherd-turned-king come from, and does God's hand show any prior sign of favor on his family? Ruth answers with a resounding yes.
- **It shows God's providence in the ordinary.** God is never described performing a miracle in Ruth: no burning bush, no parted sea. Instead, the narrator repeatedly shows God working quietly through famine, chance meetings (“she happened to come,” Ruth 2:3), and the faithful choices of unremarkable people. This is a book about providence hidden in the everyday.
- **It's a story of redemption that anticipates a greater Redeemer.** Boaz's role as kinsman-redeemer (a near relative who has both the right and the willingness to pay the price to rescue his family) becomes one of the Old Testament's clearest pictures of what Christ would later do for his people.
- **It reveals the breadth of God's grace.** A Moabite woman, technically excluded from Israel's assembly, becomes not only included but exalted: an ancestor of David and, ultimately, of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Ruth stands alongside Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba as one of only four women named in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew, each with a complicated or foreign background, foreshadowing a Messiah who welcomes the outsider.
- **It contrasts sharply with the moral chaos of Judges.** In an era summarized by “everyone did what was right in his own eyes,” Ruth gives us people who did what was right in God's eyes: quietly, faithfully, without fanfare. That contrast is likely intentional on the part of the original author and audience.

Quick Reference Summary

Question	Answer
Author	Anonymous; Jewish tradition (the Talmud) attributes it to Samuel or his prophetic circle
Date of events	c. 1150–1100 BC, late in the period of the Judges
Date of writing	Most likely late in Saul's reign (if Samuel personally wrote it) or early in David's reign (if completed by his circle), before Solomon (c. 1050–970 BC)
Where written	Judah, likely the Bethlehem/Jerusalem area
Where set	Moab and Bethlehem of Judah
Canon placement	Hebrew Bible: among the Writings/Megilloth, read at Shavuot. Christian OT: historical book between Judges and 1 Samuel
Genre	Short narrative / historical short story, four-act structure
Key theme word	<i>Hesed</i> : loyal, covenant-faithful love
Purpose	Legitimize David's line; display God's providence; model covenant loyalty; foreshadow redemption and the inclusion of outsiders

All Scripture references follow the New King James Version (NKJV) unless noted otherwise.