

AN INVITATION TO RUTH

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1. The significance of Ruth's story being in the days of judges and of famine (Ruth 1:1):

- a. What does "in the days that the judges ruled" mean?
 - *Days of Israel's tribal confederation*, after the initial conquest under Joshua and before the rise of Israel's monarchy under Saul and then David (ca. 1380–1050 BC).
 - *Days of Israel's Canaanization*—increasing worldly influence and infection: "You have not obeyed my voice.... So now I say, 'I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you'" (Judg 2:2–3).
 - *Days of cycles of disobedience and divine curse*: idolatry > foreign oppression > cries for help > deliverance (2:11–19).
 - Judg 2:15. "The hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress."
 - Deut 28:15, 25. "But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then ... the LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You shall go out one way against them and flee seven ways before them. And you shall be a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth."
 - *Days of increasingly degenerate thinking, relationships, and rule*, including the negative treatment of women:
 - Positive: Achsah, daughter of Caleb and wife of the judge Othniel (Judg 1:12–15) was blessed by her father (rather than killed by him), inspired a man to great acts of obedience (rather than seducing him into sin), and married within the covenant (rather than taking a Canaanite spouse).
 - Negative: Because of Barak's unwillingness to accept his responsibility in war without the aid of a woman (Judg 4:9), Jael is forced into the unlikely role of military hero (4:21–22).
 - Negative: Jephthah's daughter became the innocent victim of her father's foolish vow (11:39).
 - Negative: Samson's wife is burned to death as a consequence of his own actions (15:6).
 - Negative: The nameless woman, treated without identity or personhood, is brutalized, dismembered, and easily forgotten (ch. 19).
 - Negative: All the women of Benjamin are destroyed through civil war (20:48), and those found from other tribes to replace them were either intentionally orphaned by brutal destruction of their immediate families (21:11–23) or kidnapped by desperate Benjamite bachelors.
 - *Days when "there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes"* (Judg 21:25).

- b. How does knowing “there was a famine in the land” impact the story?
- *The famine highlights the curse-context of the book. Deut 28:15, 23–24. “But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then ... the heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron. The LORD will make the rain of your land powder. From heaven dust shall come down on you until you are destroyed.”*
 - *The famine pushes the family away from “Bethlehem,” the “house of bread,” into Moab (Ruth 1:1), a place of exile and a place of a historical enemy (see below).*
 - *The famine draws attention to “Bethlehem,” the “house of bread.”* While Ruth comes after Judges and before 1 Samuel in our Christian Bibles, in Jesus’s Hebrew Bible it came after the Latter Prophets at the head of the Writings, standing as an introduction to the Psalms. When reading Ruth in Jesus’s Bible, we already see “Bethlehem” as a place of redemptive hope, for by the time we read the story we have already learned two key truths:
 - Bethlehem is where David was born. 1 Sam 16:1, 12–13. “The LORD said to Samuel, ‘How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.’ ... Now [David] was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. And the LORD said [to Samuel], ‘Arise, anoint him, for this is he.’ Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward.”
 - Bethlehem is the place from which the promised ruler-deliverer would rise. Mic 5:2. “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth from me, the one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”
- c. How does this make the message of Ruth all the more amazing?
- *The curse-context of the book identifies the great need for hope, the great need for “redemption.”* 22x in the book the words “redeem” or “redeemer” appear (see below).
 - *While there is a famine, the “place of bread” is still the context for life in Israel.* Bethlehem in general and Boaz in particular stand out when placed against the backdrop of the period of the judges. In contrast to the typical man in Judges, Boaz:
 - Blesses rather than abuses (Ruth 2:4).
 - Provides and protects rather than withholds or hurts (2:8–9, 14–16, 22).
 - Fills rather than empties (2:14, 17–18).
- 2. The theological significance of Ruth’s Moabite background:**
- a. Moab’s origin. The Moabites were descendants of incest through Lot and his daughters (Gen 19:36–37).
 - b. God’s curse against Moab. Moab’s king Balaak hired the prophet Balaam to stand against Israel in the conquest (Num 22–24), and because of this act God declared that he would not allow Moabites into the worshipping assembly of Israel. Deut 23:3–4. “No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the LORD forever, because they did not meet you with

bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you.”

- c. Moab’s influence in the days of the judges:
- The Moabites were one of the enemies of Israel and agents of God’s curse against Israel in the days of the judges. They actually controlled Israel for eighteen years until the judge Ehud, the Benjamite, delivered them by thrusting a dagger into the belly of fat Moabite King Eglon (Judg 3:12–30).
 - The Israelites worshipped Moabite gods in the days of the judges (Judg 10:6).
- d. The significance of Ruth’s Moabite descent.
- *God wholly redeems those who repent.* Moses had declared that Moabites/Ammonites up to the tenth generation were not allowed to enter the assembly of YHWH, gathering with the Israelite community for worship of YHWH (Deut 23:3). On the surface, the guideline regarding Moabites would seem to impact our interpretation of Ruth the Moabitess (Ruth 1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10), whom Scripture tags a “worthy woman” (Ruth 3:11; cf. Prov 31:10) and whom Scripture places alongside Rachel and Leah as a builder of a new Israel (Ruth 4:11). Ruth’s life testifies that, for those who repudiate a Moabite spiritual allegiance to follow YHWH (Ruth 1:16–17), God can reverse generational curse with blessing.
 - Deut 23:3. “No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the LORD forever.”
 - *God uses broken people for great things.* Not only this, because Ruth is David’s great-grandmother (Ruth 4:21–22) and because David’s line gives rise to the Messiah Jesus, we see that God purposed that his Messiah would rise out of an ancestry that is filled with brokenness and redemption (Matt 1:5). Note also that Ruth’s mother-in-law was Rahab, the former prostitute turned Yahweh-fearer (Matt 1:5; cf. Josh 2:9, 11; 6:25), and David’s son Solomon came through the wife of Uriah the Hittite (Matt 1:6).
 - Matt 1:5–6. “And Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah.”
 - *God is slowly making friends out of enemies.* With this, Ruth’s life anticipates the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises that through Israel all the world will be blessed (Gen 12:3; 22:18). Even as a foreigner, Ruth’s profession of faith (Ruth 1:16–17) made her a full-fledged Israelite as if she were native-born (Exod 12:48), and this anticipates how “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:28–29).
 - Gen 12:3. “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”
 - Gen 22:18. “And in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”
 - Exod 12:48. “If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it.”

3. Key themes in Ruth:

a. Yahweh treasures covenant faithfulness.

- *Ruth is loyal both to her mother-in-law Naomi and to Naomi's God (Ruth 1:16–17).*
- *Ruth is dependent, seeking refuge in Yahweh (Ruth 2:12).*
- *Ruth is a "worthy woman" (Ruth 3:11) who inspired Boaz to follow the covenant and who, in the end, brought him honor at the city gate (4:11) (cf. Prov 12:4; 31:10, 23).*
 - Prov 31:10, 23. An excellent wife [lit., worthy woman] who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.... Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land."
- *Boaz is an ideal Israelite, a "worthy man" (Ruth 2:1) who stands in antithesis to the typical man of the period of the judges. He blesses (2:4), provides and protects (2:8–9, 14–16, 22), and fills (2:14, 17–18; 3:17; 4:13), and he is motivated to see others blessed through their dependence on God (2:12).*
- *Boaz is faithful to God's covenant.* He would not have been forced to marry Ruth, but he willingly did so in obedience to the spirit of the law of levirate marriage, wherein a man assumed the wife of the deceased relative in order to protect this relative's property and family and to continue his line at great cost to himself (Ruth 4:1–14; cf. Deut 25:5–10). Naomi pointed to this principle when she told Ruth, "This man is a close relative of ours, *one of our redeemers*" (Ruth 2:20; cf. 3:9, 12).
 - Deut 25:5–10. "If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.' Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him, and if he persists, saying, 'I do not wish to take her,' then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, 'So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.' And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, 'The house of him who had his sandal pulled off.'"

b. Yahweh is a redeeming God.

- The Hebrew terms for "redeem" or "redeemer" occur 22x in the book (2:20; 3:9, 12[2x]–13[4x]; 4:1, 3–4[5x], 6[5x], 8, 14) and identify a central theme in the story. Ruth went to Bethlehem, seeking refuge under Yahweh's "wings" (Ruth 2:12), and Yahweh provided her with a tangible expression of his care under the "wings" of Boaz, a kinsman "redeemer" (3:9).
- The image of the "redeemer" provides part of the background for the work of Jesus, through whom God saved his own from destruction. Directly after this oracle about the Suffering Servant, who "has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isa 53:4), the prophet Isaiah declared, "Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your

- Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your *Redeemer*, the God of the whole earth he is called” (Isa 54:4–5).
- c. Yahweh will fulfill his promises to redeem and restore Israel, ultimately through the line of David.
- *The blessing of the community anticipates that through Boaz and Ruth God is doing something akin to reconstituting a new Israel (Ruth 4:11).*
 - *The book’s last word is “David,” which issues a ray of messianic hope in the midst of darkness.* At the culmination of the genealogy that ends the book (Ruth 4:18–22) we learn that Boaz and Ruth’s son Obed was the grandfather of David, the Old Testament’s royal image of hope.
 - 2 Sam 7:12–13. “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”
 - Isa 9:6–7. “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”
 - Jer 23:5–6. “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”
 - Jer 30:9. But they shall serve the LORD their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.
 - Ezek 34:23–24. “And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.”
 - Ezek 37:24–25. “My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children’s children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever.”
 - Hos 3:5. “Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days.”
 - Amos 9:11–12. “‘In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name,’ declares the LORD who does this.”
 - *The ending of Ruth recalls messianic promises from Genesis.*
 - The ten-person genealogy that ends the book (Ruth 4:18–22) recalls the ten-person genealogy in Genesis 5 and the nine-person genealogy in Genesis 11 that

focus on the line of promise (from Adam to Noah and from Shem to Terah, father of Abraham) through whom hope was retained in the offspring of promise that would destroy the serpent and the curse (Gen 3:15).

- Gen 3:15. “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”
- The starting of the genealogy with Perez and ending with David also emphasizes hope of redemption in two ways: (1) Perez was the grandson of Jacob and son of Judah and Tamar, whose own story involved the institution of levirate marriage and the role of the kinsman redeemer (Gen 38); (2) Perez’s link to Judah recalls the promise that the royal deliverer would rise from his line (Gen 49:8, 10).
 - Gen 49:8, 10. “Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father’s sons shall bow down before you.... The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.”

4. Conclusion:

- a. The book of Ruth is far more than a story of the salvation of Naomi’s family line. On the one hand, in almost every way the story contrasts and answers the message of Judges. In a context where “there was no king in Israel” and “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 21:25), God preserved a man and a foreign woman who put their hope in God and set a trajectory for light to overcome darkness. On the other hand, the placement of Ruth in Jesus’s Bible after the Prophets and as an introduction to the Psalms, sets Ruth up as both answer and lens. In light of the ominous chaos in Israel and the nations that the Former and Latter Prophets declare, the book of Ruth provides great encouragement by disclosing that a remnant, faithful to Yahweh, did exist and that God was in the process of fulfilling the Davidic promises. And as an introduction to Psalms, the book of Ruth calls us to read the Psalter as the words by and about the ultimate redeemer, David’s greater Son. In him alone will refuge be found (Ps 2:12).
- b. In the ordering of Jesus’s Bible, the book of Ruth tells us that Yahweh had redeemed the ancestors of David from their temporary “exile” in Moab, and the story gives hope that he would do so again to David’s descendants living under Persian rule. Out of Bethlehem, the “house of bread” he would raise up the “bread of life” (John 6:35, 48), the promised Son of David, and through him he would redeem and restore. The story of Ruth provides a hope-filled analogy for those living apart from complete fulfillment of the restoration promises. God would be faithful, and he would redeem.
- c. The new and ultimate David (Jesus) will do on a global level what the first David does on a national level and what Boaz does on a personal level. No substantive difference exists in the character portrayals of Boaz and the first David; the difference is in the size of the stage. The same Godliness that drove Boaz will drive his great grandson to bless his nation and redeem their lives from the moral chaos of the judges. And God would continue to be faithful, and the characters of Boaz and the first David supply hope in the Son of David, whose Godly character and sacrificial leadership would ultimately redeem all believers from the chaos of sin and death.
- d. The book of Ruth’s placement before Psalms in Jesus’s Bible adds a messianic stamp to the book’s whole message of redemption, for Ruth is now read after the stories of Israel/Judah’s exile (Former Prophets) and after the prophetic voices (in the Latter

Prophets) that extend into the period following initial restoration when there was once again no king in Israel and so many were doing what was right in their own eyes (so Ezra-Nehemiah, Malachi). Thus, Ruth's focus on Boaz of Bethlehem as a pointer to David of Bethlehem gives rise to the hope of a royal deliver from Bethlehem whose own life and work are then portrayed in the Psalms—a Davidic king who will restore people from exile and a triumph over evil but only through great tribulation.

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