

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND FOR RUTH

Authorship and Date

While authorship is not explicitly stated anywhere in the book, church tradition as far back as the 4th century Talmud attributes authorship to Samuel, a prophet during the reign of King Saul. However, several details, including the reference to the period of Judges¹, concluding genealogies about David's kingship (which began after the death of Samuel)², and the long explanation of the legal customs for kindred redeemers³, all seem to contradict this idea. Other options for authorship include a scribe in the palace of King David or a later female prophet, although given little support for these positions, authorship is widely still credited to Samuel.⁴

Given references to the genealogies concluding the book, authorship must be some time around 1000 B.C. The prevalent view is a date between 1011 and 931 B.C., although some scholars date it as late as the 4th or 5th century B.C.

Historical Background and Setting

The main clue we are given as to the time of events in the book of Ruth is in chapter 1, verse 1 where it reads, *"In the days when the judges ruled..."*. The time period for the judges began with the first named judge in the Bible, Othniel, in 1397 BC and ended with Samuel in the year 1024 BC, around the time in which Saul was crowned king.

As we know from Judges 21:25, this is a lawless time of evil for Israel. Judges 21:25 describes this time, *"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* There was a pattern during the time of the Judges that would go something like this:

1. God's people rebel against Him and His reign.
2. God sends discipline and judgment against them for their sin.
3. God sends a judge to warn the people and call them back to repentance.
4. The Israelites repent and God restores them for a little while until...
5. God's people (again) rebel against Him and His reign.

This pattern continues over and over again for the people of God, and yet God remains faithful to them in the midst of it. It is into the middle of one of these cycles that the story of Ruth begins. The author tells us there is a famine in the land⁵ (indicating an act of God's judgment and discipline), and later that a harvest has returned⁶ (indicating repentance from God's people and a return of His favor).

The two primary settings for the book are the land of Moab and the city of Bethlehem. *Moab* is not a place that is friendly to the people of God. When God led the Israelites out of Egypt, the Moabite king Balak paid a

¹ Ruth 1:1, ESV.

² Ruth 4:17-22, ESV.

³ Ruth 4:7, ESV.

⁴ Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 23-24.

⁵ Ruth 1:1, ESV.

⁶ Ruth 1:22, ESV.

wicked prophet Balaam to pronounce a curse on Israel.⁷ Moabite women would seduce Israelite men to make them fall in love with them so they would start worshipping their false gods.⁸ Just a few years earlier they had oppressed and mistreated the Israelites. This was a place of darkness for the people of God.

The other prominent setting is that of Bethlehem. Bethlehem plays a distinct role in the story of God, as it is the city where Jesus is to be born when He comes to earth as the promised Messiah.⁹

Major Themes and Ideas in Ruth

1. *The Sovereignty and Character of God*

Similar to another short Old Testament story, the book of Jonah, Ruth is packed full of drama and mystery. In just four chapters we experience much suffering, uncertainty, and suspense. And yet it is easy to miss who is really working behind the scenes in the midst of all of it. It is not simply a story about Naomi and Ruth's humble return to Bethlehem, or about Boaz's sacrifice and redemption (although those are major themes), it is ultimately a story about the sovereignty and goodness of God. Though Naomi turns her back on God in chapter 1, God never turns His back on her. He remains faithful, providing for Naomi and Ruth every step of the way.

2. *The Necessity of Human Action*

While God's sovereignty is at work throughout this story, none of the characters sit back and wait. Naomi takes matters into her own hands to head back to Bethlehem. Ruth makes a conscious decision to stay by her side, even though it means giving up her home and family. Boaz seeks out redemption for Ruth, going through the necessary steps to be her redeemer. While God works in the midst of all of it, this does not devoid anyone from their human obligation to act. The story of Ruth holds in tension the theological paradox of God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

3. *Kinsman Redeemer*

The story of Ruth begins with death, sorrow, and tragedy, but it ends with a glorious hope. Boaz goes to great lengths to become Ruth's *Kinsman Redeemer*. A Kinsman Redeemer in that time was a male relative who could act on behalf of someone in trouble, danger, or need, by redeeming (or making his own) that person's property, spouse, or heir. Boaz is Ruth's Kinsman Redeemer. He takes Ruth to be His own, bringing her into his family at great cost to himself and no cost to her, ultimately leading to the birth of a child through which David, and one day the Messiah, will come.

In being a Kinsman Redeemer for Ruth, Boaz points us all forward to our true Kinsman Redeemer, the one who redeems us to Himself, makes us His own, and cares for us as His family at great cost to Himself and no cost to us.

⁷ Numbers 23, ESV.

⁸ Numbers 25, ESV.

⁹ Micah 5:2, ESV.