

Ruth: A Short Story

Compared to the epic stories of the Exodus, Numbers, Joshua and Judges, the Book of Ruth is like a short story. It is only 84 verses in length.

You can read so many of the books of the Old Testament in search of a great children's tale, suitable for bedtime stories. If this is all you're looking for, it's all you will find. But there is so much more below the surface. Edward Campbell says it best in the *Anchor Yale Bible Commentary*,

"The Book of Ruth is an intricately woven, magnificently crafted story. It is the work of a person standing in the mid-stream of Israelite life and thought, a person wishing to communicate to his audience things very close to the heart of the Old Testament."

Introduction & Prologue: The Book of Ruth begins by highlighting the Judges theme of Israel needing a king and exploring the misery and emptiness a singular family might experience during these dark times (Ruth 1:1–6). All the males of this Israelite family leave Bethlehem and die in Moab, leaving Naomi without a male relative to care for her.

- Act 1: Naomi returns (Ruth 1:7–22). Ruth the Moabite is loyal to Yahweh and Naomi.
- Act 2: Ruth and Boaz the Judahite meet in the fields (Ruth 2:1–23). Boaz is presented as a “man of character” (Ruth 2:1). Naomi hatches a “plan” to join Ruth and Boaz for “good” (Ruth 2:22).
- Act 3: Ruth and Boaz are at the threshing floor (Ruth 3:1–18). Ruth is then presented as a “woman of character” (Ruth 3:10). Naomi furthers her “plan” to join Ruth and Boaz for “good” (Ruth 3:1).
- Act 4: Boaz arranges to marry Ruth (Ruth 4:1–12). Boaz's loyalty to God, his commandments, and his family is highlighted.
- Epilogue: Satisfaction and Fullness (Ruth 4:13–17). A son is born to Naomi from Ruth and Boaz in Bethlehem and Naomi is restored to life and fullness.

Not just a love story

It's a story about God and how he restores those who look to him with hope. It's about God's covenant faithfulness and it contributes to the overall covenantal storyline that unifies the entire Bible. The author has gone to great care to honor Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz through the development of their characters in the story. They are character studies of how God works in mundane, everyday events in the lives of his people (and what human covenant faithfulness looks like in return).

Ruth is an outsider, a Moabite of all people, (Moabites should make you uneasy at this point, see Numbers 25) who breaks social conventions to do right by Naomi. Ruth trusts in Yahweh and commits herself to his people.. She makes the offer of marriage to Boaz in an upstanding way in Chapter 3, which is culturally honorable at the time, not scandalous. God honors Ruth's integrity and diligence by weaving her into the big story of salvation.

Boaz is a no-nonsense man of character, principle, and responsibility. Boaz is offered as a model of obedience to the Torah in his treatment of the poor. In Ruth 2, Boaz follows Leviticus 19:9–10 by leaving work in his fields for the poor widows in his community. He follows Deuteronomy 24:19 in redeeming Naomi's endangered lineage, according to the family-marriage law in Deuteronomy 25:5–10. He catches the closer kinsman trying to defraud Naomi of the land and redeems Naomi and Ruth, to his own

economic disadvantage. God uses his integrity to save a widow's family and he becomes the ancestor of the Messiah.

Naomi loses her entire family early in this story. But these tragedies do not surprise God, and he's able to steer Naomi's losses back into restoration. Naomi's dark night of the soul becomes part of the story of God bringing King David to Israel. The concluding blessing of the elders and the women of Bethlehem weaves the story of Ruth and Naomi into the themes of the messianic seed from Genesis. It concludes with the genealogy that very clearly connects King David with the line of Judges, via Boaz and Ruth.

The Genealogy

The author is clearly drawing a connection between David and his great-grandparents, but why the second, bigger genealogy? The short genealogy in Ruth 4 makes the longer one in 4:18 – 22 technically unnecessary within the framework of the story. The longer one is a strategic effort to weave Ruth's story into the narrative of Genesis and into the future hope of the prophets. The opening phrase, "these are the generations of..." in Ruth 4:18, is identical to the same phrase that divides the book of Genesis into ten parts. It occurs one other time in the Torah (see Numbers 3:1). This makes the appearance of this key phrase in Ruth 4:18 the twelfth occurrence in the entire Old Testament and that's hardly a coincidence. Twelve is symbolic of the unified tribes of Israel, and this story points to the future king of Israel who will unify the tribes in one kingdom. Also, 4:18 – 22 is a ten-person genealogy and there are only two other ten-person genealogies in the Hebrew Bible - Genesis 5 (Adam to Noah) and Genesis 11 (Descendants of Shem (to Abram)). It is an indication that a new age was beginning; as it did with Noah, and then with Abraham, so too it would with King David.

This is a big message in this short story. It shows how God is constructing his grand story out of the small, seemingly inconsequential stories of everyday people. This little story is intentionally framed at the beginning and end by the larger storyline of the Bible. Ruth shows how God is at work in the day to day activities of average people. All the characters face life's normal challenges (death, moving, lack of financial resources, familial responsibilities, etc.) and find God is weaving a story of redemption out of all the details. The Book of Ruth encourages us to view our day-to-day lives as part of God's bigger plan for our lives and world.