

## GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

### Commentary

### The Book of Ruth

**The Hebrew Short Story.** The Book of Ruth is an excellent example of the Hebrew short story, a literary form created relatively early in the history of Israel. Scholars guess that this particular story, for instance, was written sometime between 950 and 700 B.C.

These stories were something new in the literature of the ancient Near East. For the most part, they dispensed with the obvious magical and fairy-tale elements that characterized other Near Eastern tales. Coming relatively early in the birth of a new nation, they had a dual purpose: to entertain their audience and at the same time strengthen their faith. The Book of Ruth, with its skillfully contrasted characters and poetic prose, is ideally suited to both these aims.

Before being written down, the Book of Ruth was probably told orally. Just who told it and where is a matter for guesswork. The story may have been recited at festivals in capital cities and well-known centers of worship; however, it may also have been told in the many small towns that dotted the countryside. Townsfolk could have gathered in the evening at the town spring or gate to hear the story of Ruth and Naomi. The storytellers may have been Levites, members of a Hebrew tribe whose role was to assist with religious ceremonies.

An even more interesting possibility is that "wise women" told this tale. Such female storytellers are mentioned in more than one Biblical narrative; one is selected, for instance, to tell a story to King David (II Samuel 14:1–20).

### Writing

Ruth chooses to live in the southern part of the Hebrew kingdom, a land that is unfamiliar to her. Some of the problems she faces and the feelings she experiences are probably familiar to you. Freewrite about a time when you were a stranger.

### Primary Source

The contemporary novelist Cynthia Ozick feels a special affinity for the Book of Ruth: "Only eighty-five verses tell Ruth's and Naomi's story. To talk of it takes much longer. Not that the greatest stories are the shortest—not at all. But a short story has a stalk—shoot—through which its life rushes, and out of which the flowery head erupts. The Book of Ruth—wherein goodness grows out of goodness, and the extraordinary is found here, and here, and here—is sown in desertion, bereavement, barrenness, death, loss, displacement, destitution. What can sprout from such ash? Then Ruth sees into the nature of Covenant, and the life of the story streams in. Out of this stalk mercy and redemption unfold. . . ."

# The Book of Ruth

## King James Version

### CHAPTER 1

1 Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem-judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab,<sup>1</sup> he, and his wife, and his two sons.

2 And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem-judah. And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there.

3 And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons.

4 And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelled there about ten years.

5 And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband.

6 And she arose with her daughters-in-law, that she might return from the country of Moab: for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread.

7 Wherefore she went forth out of the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return unto the land of Judah.<sup>2</sup>

8 And Naomi said unto her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each to her mother's house: the Lord deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.

9 "The lord grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept.

10 And they said unto her, "Surely, we will return with thee unto thy people."

11 And Naomi said, "Turn again, my daughters: why will ye go with me? are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?"

12 "Turn again, my daughters, go your way; for I am too old to have an husband. If I should say, I have hope, if I should have an husband also tonight, and should also bear sons;

13 "Would ye tarry for them till they were grown? would ye stay for them from having husbands? nay, my daughters; for it grieveth me much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord is gone out against me."

14 And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law; but Ruth clave unto her.

15 And she said, "Behold, thy sister-in-law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister-in-law."

16 And Ruth said, "Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God:

17 "Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me,<sup>3</sup> and more also, if ought but death part thee and me."

18 When she saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her.

1. **Moab** (Mō' ab'): An ancient kingdom east and south of the Dead Sea, and east of the Jordan River.

2. **Judah**: The Jewish kingdom in the southern part of Palestine.

3. **do so to me**: Punish me.

19 So they two went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, "Is this Naomi?"

20 And she said unto them, "Call me not Naomi, call me Mara:<sup>4</sup> for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.

21 "I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?"

22 So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.

## CHAPTER 2

1 And Naomi had a kinsman of her husband's, a mighty man of wealth, of the family of Elimelech; and his name was Boaz.

2 And Ruth the Moabitess said unto Naomi, "Let me now go to the field, and glean ears of corn after him in whose sight I shall find grace." And she said unto her, "Go, my daughter."

3 And she went, and came, and gleaned in the field after the reapers: and her hap was to light on a part of the field belonging unto Boaz, who was of the kindred of Elimelech.

4 And, behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem, and said unto the reapers, "The Lord be with you." And they answered him, "The Lord bless thee."

5 Then said Boaz unto his servant that was set over the reapers, "Whose damsel is this?"

6 And the servant that was set over the reapers said, "It is the Moabitish damsel that came back with Naomi out of the country of Moab:

7 "And she said, 'I pray you, let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves': so she came, and hath continued even from the morning until now, that she tarried a little in the house."

8 Then said Boaz unto Ruth, "Hearest thou not, my daughter? Go not to glean in another field, neither go from hence, but abide here fast by my maidens:

9 "Let thine eyes be on the field that they do reap, and go thou after them: have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch thee? and when thou art athirst, go unto the vessels, and drink of that which the young men have drawn."

10 Then she fell on her face, and bowed herself to the ground, and said unto him, "Why have I found grace in thine eyes, that thou shouldest take knowledge of me, seeing I am a stranger?"

11 And Boaz answered and said unto her, "It hath fully been showed me, all that thou hast done unto thy mother-in-law since the death of thine husband: and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity, and art come unto a people which thou knewest not heretofore.

12 "The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust."

13 Then she said, "Let me find favor in thy sight, my lord; for that thou hast comforted me, and for that thou hast spoken friendly unto thine handmaid, though I be not like unto one of thine handmaidens."

14 And Boaz said unto her, "At mealtime come thou hither, and eat of the bread, and dip thy morsel in the vinegar." And she sat beside the reapers: and he reached her parched corn, and she did eat, and was sufficed, and left.

15 And when she was risen up to glean, Boaz commanded his young men, saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not:

16 "And let fall also some of the handfuls of purpose for her, and leave them, that she may glean them, and rebuke her not."

17 So she gleaned in the field until even, and beat out that she had gleaned: and it was about an ephah<sup>5</sup> of barley.

18 And she took it up, and went into the city: and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned: and she brought forth, and gave to her that she had reserved after she was sufficed.

19 And her mother-in-law said unto her, "Where hast thou gleaned today? and where wroughtest thou? blessed be he that did take

4. **Naomi** . . . **Mara**: In Hebrew, Naomi means "my delight" and Mara "bitter."

5. **ephah** (ē' fā): An ancient Hebrew unit of dry measure, estimated at from one third of a bushel to a little over one bushel.



**Detail from a French illuminated manuscript showing scenes from the story of Ruth**

*C. A.D. 1250*

*The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York*

knowledge of thee.” And she showed her mother-in-law with whom she had wrought, and said, “The man’s name with whom I wrought today is Boaz.”

20 And Naomi said unto her daughter-in-law, “Blessed be he of the Lord, who hath not left off his kindness to the living and to the dead.” And Naomi said unto her, “The man is near of kin unto us, one of our next kinsmen.”

21 And Ruth the Moabitess said, “He said unto me also, ‘Thou shalt keep fast by my young men, until they have ended all my harvest.’”

22 And Naomi said unto Ruth her daughter-in-law, “It is good, my daughter, that thou go out with his maidens, that they meet thee not in any other field.”

23 So she kept fast by the maidens of Boaz to glean unto the end of barley harvest and of wheat harvest; and dwelt with her mother-in-law.

### CHAPTER 3

1 Then Naomi her mother-in-law said unto her, “My daughter, shall I not seek rest for thee, that it may be well with thee?”

2 “And now is not Boaz of our kindred,<sup>6</sup> with whose maidens thou wast? Behold, he winnoweth barley tonight in the threshing-floor.

**6. kindred:** According to Jewish law, the closest unmarried male relative of Ruth’s deceased husband was obligated to marry her.

3 “Wash thyself therefore, and anoint<sup>7</sup> thee, and put thy raiment upon thee, and get thee down to the floor: but make not thyself known unto the man, until he shall have done eating and drinking.

4 “And it shall be, when he lieth down, that thou shalt mark the place where he shall lie, and thou shalt go in, and uncover his feet, and lay thee down; and he will tell thee what thou shalt do.”

5 And she said unto her, “All that thou sayest unto me I will do.”

6 And she went down unto the floor, and did according to all that her mother-in-law bade her.

7 And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of corn: and she came softly, and uncovered his feet, and laid her down.

8 And it came to pass at midnight, that the man was afraid, and turned himself: and, behold a woman lay at his feet.

9 And he said, “Who art thou?” And she answered, “I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid: for thou art a near kinsman.”

10 And he said, “Blessed be thou of the Lord, my daughter: for thou hast showed more kindness in the latter end than at the beginning, inasmuch as

**7. anoint** (ָ noint’) *v.*: Rub oil or ointment on.



thou followedst not young men, whether poor or rich.

11 "And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to thee all that thou requirest: for all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman.

12 "And now it is true that I am thy near kinsman: howbeit there is a kinsman nearer than I.

13 "Tarry this night, and it shall be in the morning, that if he will perform unto thee the part of a kinsman, well; let him do the kinsman's part: but if he will not do the part of a kinsman to thee, then will I do the part of a kinsman to thee, as the Lord liveth: lie down until the morning."

14 And she lay at his feet until the morning: and she rose up before one could know another. And he said, "Let it not be known that a woman came into the floor."

15 Also he said, "Bring the vail<sup>8</sup> that thou hast upon thee, and hold it." And when she held it, he measured six measures of barley, and laid it on her: and she went into the city.

16 And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, "Who art thou, my daughter?" And she told her all that the man had done to her.

17 And she said, "These six measures of barley gave he me; for he said to me, 'Go not empty unto thy mother-in-law.'"

18 Then said she, "Sit still, my daughter, until thou know how the matter will fall: for the man will not be in rest, until he have finished the thing this day."

#### CHAPTER 4

1 Then went Boaz up to the gate, and sat him down there: and behold, the kinsman of whom Boaz spake came by; unto whom he said, "Ho, such a one! turn aside, sit down here." And he turned aside, and sat down.

2 And he took men of the elders of the city, and said, "Sit ye down here." And they sat down.

3 And he said unto the kinsman, "Naomi, that is come again out of the country of Moab, selleth a parcel of land, which was our brother Elimelech's:

4 "And I thought to advertise thee, saying, 'Buy it before the inhabitants, and before the elders of my people. If thou wilt redeem it, redeem it: but if thou wilt not redeem it, then tell me, that I may know: for there is none to redeem it beside thee; and I am after thee.'" And he said, "I will redeem it."

5 Then said Boaz, "What day thou buyest the field of the hand of Naomi, thou must buy it also of Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance."

6 And the kinsman said, "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I mar mine own inheritance: redeem thou my right to thyself; for I cannot redeem it."

7 Now this was the manner in former time in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning changing, for to confirm all things; a man plucked off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbor: and this was a testimony in Israel.

8 Therefore the kinsman said unto Boaz, "Buy it for thee." So he drew off his shoe.

9 And Boaz said unto the elders, and unto all the people, "Ye are witnesses this day, that I have bought all that was Elimelech's, and all that was Chilion's and Mahlon's, of the hand of Naomi."

10 "Moreover Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, have I purchased to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place: ye are witnesses this day."

11 And all the people that were in the gate, and the elders, said, "We are witnesses. The Lord make the woman that is come into thine house like Rachel and like Leah,<sup>9</sup> which two did build the house of Israel: and do thou worthily in Ephratah, and be famous in Bethlehem:

12 "And let thy house be like the house of Pharez, whom Tamar bare unto Judah,<sup>10</sup> of the seed which the Lord shall give thee of this young woman."

8. vail: Veil.

9. **Rachel . . . Leah:** Wives of Jacob, whose sons, along with those of their handmaids Bilhah and Zilpha, became the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel.

10. **Pharez . . . Judah:** Ruth, like Tamar, was a childless widow who conceived a son with her husband's kinsman.

13 So Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife: and when he went in unto her, the Lord gave her conception, and she bare a son.

14 And the women said unto Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel.

15 "And he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life, and a nourisher of thine old age: for thy daughter-in-law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath born him."

16 And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and become nurse unto it.

17 And the women her neighbors gave it a name, saying, "There is a son born to Naomi"; and they called his name Obed: he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

18 Now these are the generations of Pharez: Pharez begat Hezron,

19 And Hezron begat Ram, and Ram begat Amminadab,

20 And Amminadab begat Nahshon, and Nahshon begat Salmon,

21 And Salmon begat Boaz, and Boaz begat Obed,

22 And Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David.

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**Reader's Response** *What character did you identify with most closely? Why?*

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## THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

### Interpreting

1. The Book of Ruth has been praised for its poetic and moving prose. (a) Find a passage that you think is especially poetic. Explain how this passage contributes to the story. (b) Did you feel moved by it? Why or why not?
2. This tale is realistic, yet novelist Cynthia Ozick has said that it is filled with "extraordinary" events. Explain how the Book of Ruth is a mixture of the ordinary and the extraordinary.
3. (a) How does Naomi move from complaint to celebration in this tale? (b) How does this emotional journey reflect the movement of the story from misfortune to restoration of loss?
4. How does the naming of Naomi's descendants—down to David, the greatest king of ancient Israel—reflect the theme of restoration?
5. God does not take a direct part in this story as he does in Genesis 1–3 and 6–9. Yet in some ways he is the most important character in the story. Explain.
6. In what way is this story an attack on racism?

### Applying

7. What aspects of the Book of Ruth are timeless and universal? Support your answer.

## ANALYZING LITERATURE

### Understanding the Hebrew Short Story

The Hebrew short story developed at about the same time the people of Israel were finding their identity as a nation. Early examples of this form, like the Book of Ruth, were realistic; their purpose was to teach and to entertain.

1. (a) How is Ruth a role model in her attitude toward God and her relationships with her fellow humans? (b) In what way does her foreign birth add to her stature?
2. How do the final sentences of the first three chapters foreshadow coming events?
3. Show how the pace of the story varies and explain how this varying pace helps convey the story's message.

## THINKING AND WRITING

### Writing About a Role Model

Ancient Hebrew storytellers presented Ruth as a person to be imitated. Choose someone you know who could also serve as a role model. Brainstorm to gather some of the admirable deeds that he or she has performed. Then write a narrative of these deeds. Do not praise your subject directly; instead, let his or her actions speak for themselves. As you revise your account, consider inserting memorable dialogue at crucial points.