

רוּת

Ruth

THIS BEAUTIFUL SHORT STORY revolves around the relationship between Naomi, a woman from Bethlehem, in Judah, and her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth. Naomi, her husband, and their two sons have come to Moab to escape from famine in Bethlehem. The first chapter recounts, in short order, the death of Naomi's husband, the marriage of her sons to Moabite women, the sons' deaths ten years later, and Naomi's decision to return to Bethlehem. One daughter-in-law, Orpah, returns to her Moabite family. The other, Ruth, declares allegiance to Naomi and to the God of Israel and returns with Naomi. Despite Ruth's company, Naomi is embittered at her many losses. In the course of the coming weeks, however, these losses are all reversed. In the second chapter, Ruth gleanes in the field of Naomi's kinsman, Boaz, and acquires enough grain to sustain Naomi and herself for some time. In the third chapter, Naomi devises a plan for Ruth's future security: Ruth will pay a nighttime visit to the threshing floor where Boaz has been winnowing the barley harvest, and will thereby elicit a promise of marriage. The plan is successful and culminates, in chapter four, in the marriage of Ruth and Boaz and the birth of their child, Obed. The book ends with a genealogy which traces the line of Obed back to Perez, the child of Judah and Tamar (Gen. ch 38), and forward to King David.

The simplicity of the story belies the literary craft of the book. Its central theme is the movement from emptiness to fulfillment. This theme is expressed on two planes, the agricultural and the personal. The agricultural sequence anticipates the personal sequence by one step all along the way. The famine precedes Naomi's bereavement, whereas the renewed harvest during which Ruth gleanes in Boaz's fields anticipates the abundance that awaits Naomi herself with Obed's birth. The fidelity and love between Naomi and Ruth is the most positive portrayal of women's relationships in biblical literature. The centrality of women is also emphasized by the references in Ruth 4.11-12 to other prominent biblical women, namely, Leah and Rachel, the two wives of Jacob, and Tamar, whose son by Judah, who himself is Jacob's son, is an ancestor of Boaz, and therefore of Obed and David as well.

The story portrays Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz as models of *hesed*, that is, of loyalty and commitment that go beyond the bounds of law or duty. *Hesed* is exemplified in the fidelity of Ruth to Naomi, the loving concern of Naomi for Ruth, and the kindness of Boaz.

to both women. Related to the motif of *hesed* is the role of God. God is mentioned numerous times by the three main characters, but the actions of the story are never explicitly mentioned as deriving from God. Rather, God remains in the shadows, implying that divine activity lies behind the reversal of the deprivations that have afflicted Naomi and the nation as a whole.

The authorship of the book is unknown and its date is difficult to establish. Many scholars propose a date between 950 and 700 BCE, that is, between the time of David and the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Others suggest a date during the period of the Babylonian exile or in the early period of the return (586–500 BCE). In the latter case, the book may be read as promising that those who return from exile will be blessed, just as Naomi was when she returned from Moab to Bethlehem. A story recounting the lineage of David might also have had special meaning at a time after the Davidic monarchy had come to an end. If the story is dated to the early exilic period, its positive depiction of Ruth the Moabite may be polemical, emphasizing, in contrast to Ezra-Nehemiah, that foreigners may be integrated into the Jewish community.

In the Jewish Scriptures, Ruth is included among the five "megillot" (scrolls) in the third division, namely, the "writings" (Kethuvim). Because the book is read in the synagogue on Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, it usually appears second among the megillot, after Song of Songs, which is read at Passover, though other sequences for these five books are found in manuscripts. The association with Shavuot is appropriate. The events told in Ruth span a period somewhat equivalent to that of Passover to Shavuot, that is, a seven-week period from the beginning of the barley harvest to the end of the wheat harvest. Furthermore, King David, the culmination of the genealogy in Ruth 4.18–22, was traditionally thought to have been born and to have died on Shavuot. Finally, Shavuot has been identified since the 2nd or 3rd centuries of the Common Era as the time of the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai (cf. Exod. chs 19–20). This element of the feast is related to the prevalent rabbinic theme of Ruth as the ideal convert to Judaism who takes the Torah upon herself just as the Israelites did at Mount Sinai.

In non-Jewish versions and translations of the Bible, Ruth is placed between Judges and the books of Samuel, following the order of the Septuagint. This placement acknowledges the fact that the book is set in the period of the judges (1.1) and ends with a genealogy of David (4.18–22). It therefore provides a link between the chaotic period when Israel was ruled by judges and the stories that lead up to the establishment of the monarchy, which reaches its highest point in the reign of David.

[ADELE REINHARTZ]

1 In the days when the chieftains* ruled, there was a famine in the land; and a man of Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons, went to reside in the country

* *I.e., the leaders who arose in the period before the monarchy; others "judges."*

1.1–22: From Moab to Bethlehem.
1.1–5: Naomi and her family in Moab. **1:** The judges (*chieftains*) were tribal leaders of Israel in the period before the monarchy. Several biblical texts reflect tension

of Moab. ²The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name was Naomi, and his two sons were named Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. They came to the country of Moab and remained there.

³Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. ⁴They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth, and they lived there about ten years. ⁵Then those two—Mahlon and Chilion—also died; so the woman was left without her two sons and without her husband.

⁶She started out with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab; for in the country of Moab she had heard that the LORD had taken note of His people and given them food. ⁷Accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, she left the place where she had been living; and they set out on the road back to the land of Judah.

⁸But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Turn back, each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me! ⁹May the LORD grant that each of you find security in the house of a husband!" And she kissed them farewell. They broke into weeping ¹⁰and said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people."

¹¹But Naomi replied, "Turn back, my daughters! Why should you go with me? Have I any more sons in my body who might be husbands for you? ¹²Turn back, my daughters, for I am too old to be married. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I were married tonight and I also bore sons, ¹³should you wait for them to grow up? Should you on their account debar yourselves from marriage? Oh no, my daughters! My lot is far more bitter than yours, for the hand of the LORD has struck out against me."

¹⁴They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law." ¹⁶But Ruth replied, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷Where you die, I will die, and

between the Israelites and the Moabites, who lived east of the Dead Sea (see Num. 21.29-30; Deut. 23.4; Jer. 48.1-9). This tension, however, is not apparent in the book of Ruth (cf. 1 Sam. 22.3-4). Bethlehem means "house of bread"; this v. thus contains a pun of a famine in

"the house of bread." **2:** Ephrathites: Ephrathah (see 4.11) is another name for Bethlehem. **3-5:** The names of Naomi and her family members may have symbolic significance. Elimelech literally means "my God is king"; Mahlon means "sickness"; Chilion may mean

"consumptive"; Orpah is interpreted as "back of the neck"; Ruth may be "friend" or "companion"; Naomi is "pleasant"; and Boaz (2.1) is "in him is strength." These traits describe, to some degree, the role or the fate of the character within the story. Combined with the pun in v. 1, the symbolic nature of these names suggests that Ruth should not be read as a historical text.

1.6-18: Naomi plans her return to Bethlehem. 6: Naomi attributes relief from the famine to God. This is one of several hints of a divine hand guiding the events in the story. **8:** The term *mother's house* occurs elsewhere (Gen. 24.28; Song 3.4; 8.2). Childless widows are normally portrayed as returning to their fathers' homes (Gen. 38.11; Lev. 22.13). The unusual formulation is appropriate because Naomi is asking the young women to return to their mothers rather than remaining with their mother-in-law. **11:** According to Deut. 25.5-10, a childless widow is bound to marry her dead husband's brother. This is referred to as levirate law (from Latin "levir," "brother-in-law"). The first son of a levirate marriage will legally be the dead man's son for purposes of inheritance. Even were Naomi to give birth to more sons, they would not be obligated by levirate law to marry the widows, because they would not have had the same father as did the dead men.

12: Ruth Rabbah points out that Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to turn back three times (vv. 8, 11, 12). This number corresponds to the number of times that potential converts should be strongly discouraged. Those who persist, however, should be educated and accepted as sincere converts.

14: Ruth clung to her: Ruth's attachment to Naomi is reminiscent of Gen. 2.24, which refers to the "clinging" of husband to wife. The connotation here is not sexual but rather signifies Ruth's unwavering devotion to Naomi. **16-17:** This moving plea is among the best-known lines of the book. It expresses Ruth's devotion and key

there I will be buried. *Thus and more may the LORD do to me* if anything but death parts me from you." ¹⁸When [Naomi] saw how determined she was to go with her, she ceased to argue with her, ¹⁹and the two went on until they reached Bethlehem.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole city buzzed with excitement over them. The women said, "Can this be Naomi?" ²⁰"Do not call me Naomi,"^a she replied. "Call me Mara,^b for Shaddai^c has made my lot very bitter. ²¹I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. How can you call me Naomi, when the LORD has *dealt harshly with* me, when Shaddai has brought misfortune upon me!"

²²Thus Naomi returned from the country of Moab; she returned with her daughter-in-law Ruth the Moabite. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

2 Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a man of substance, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.

²Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "I would like to go to the fields and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone who may show me kindness." "Yes, daughter, go," she replied; ³and off she went. She came and gleaned in a field, behind the reapers; and, as luck would have it, it was the piece of land belonging to Boaz, who was of Elimelech's family.

⁴Presently Boaz arrived from Bethlehem. He greeted the reapers, "The LORD be with you!" And they responded, "The LORD bless you!" ⁵Boaz said to the servant who was in charge of the reapers, "Whose girl is that?" ⁶The servant in charge of the reapers replied, "She is a Moabite girl who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. ⁷She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.' She has been on her feet ever since she came this morning. ⁸She has rested but little in the hut."

^a Formula of imprecation.

^b *Le.*, "Pleasantness."

^c *Ur.*, "Bitterness."

^d Usually rendered "the Almighty."

^e Others "testified against."

^f Meaning of Heb. uncertain.

Why to Naomi. *Ruth Rabbah* and Rashi view Ruth's passionate declaration of allegiance as the point at which Naomi instructs Ruth in a formal process of conversion. The

story, however, contains no reference to formal conversion, since that institution did not come into existence until rabbinic times. Thus . . . do to me: Ruth's oath under-

scores the seriousness of her declaration. It has been interpreted to mean "only death will part us" or "not even death will part us."

1.19-23: Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem. 20-21: Shaddai, a divine epithet, perhaps used here as an archaism; in Job, where it is frequent (5.17ff.), it is translated "the Almighty" (see translators' note *d*). **22: The beginning of the barley harvest** is associated in Lev. 23.10 with the Passover festival, in the spring.

2.1-23: The field. 2.1-7: Ruth's plan. 1: Boaz, see 1.3-5 n. **2: According to biblical law**, the poor were permitted to walk behind the harvesters and gather the grain that they left behind (Lev. 19.9; 23.22; Deut. 24.19). Ruth's remark is puzzling in that she apparently plans to work among the ears themselves, that is, in the area that has not yet been harvested. This differs from what was permitted in extant biblical law, but some laws differed in different times and places in the biblical period. The fact that Naomi calls Ruth daughter suggests that Ruth's love, devotion, and sense of responsibility is now reciprocated by Naomi. **3: Luck**: By coincidence—or perhaps divine providence—the field in which Ruth hopes to glean is that belonging to Boaz. Ruth is apparently unaware of the connection between Boaz and Naomi. **7: Among the sheaves**: Ruth's request exceeds biblical law. Here the text suggests that Ruth will glean in the area of harvested grain. Some interpreters suggest that her request was a ploy to meet the owner of the field, since special permission to glean among the sheaves is granted in 2.15. *She has rested . . . hut*: The literal translation is "this is her sitting the house a little." Some commentators emend the text by omitting "the house," in conformity with the Septuagint. The overall sense is clear, however. The servant is commenting on Ruth's stamina and perseverance, perhaps with some admiration.

⁸Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen to me, daughter.^a Don't go to glean in another field. Don't go elsewhere, but stay here close to my girls. ⁹Keep your eyes on the field they are reaping, and follow them. I have ordered the men not to molest you. And when you are thirsty, go to the jars and drink some of [the water] that the men have drawn."

¹⁰She prostrated herself with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner?"

¹¹Boaz said in reply, "I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before. ¹²May the LORD reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge!"

¹³She answered, "You are most kind, my lord, to comfort me and to speak gently to your maidservant—though I am not so much as one of your maidservants."

¹⁴At mealtime, Boaz said to her, "Come over here and partake of the meal, and dip your morsel in the vinegar." So she sat down beside the reapers. He handed her roasted grain, and she ate her fill and had some left over.

¹⁵When she got up again to glean, Boaz gave orders to his workers, "You are not only to let her glean among the sheaves, without interference, ¹⁶but you must also pull some [stalks] out of the heaps and leave them for her to glean, and not scold her."

¹⁷She gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned—it was about an *'ephah* of barley—¹⁸and carried it back with her to the town. When her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned, and when she also took out and gave her what she had left over after eating her fill, ¹⁹her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be he who took such generous notice of you!" So she told her mother-in-law whom she had worked with, saying, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz."

²⁰Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he of the LORD, who has not failed in His kindness to the living or to the dead! For," Naomi explained to her daughter-in-law, "the man is related to us; he is one of our redeeming kinsmen."^b ²¹Ruth the Moabite said, "He even told me, 'Stay close by my workers until all my harvest is fin-

a-a Lit. "Have you not heard, daughter?"

b Cf. Lev. 25:25 and note and Deut. 25:5-6. The fact that Boaz was a kinsman of Ruth's dead husband opened up the possibility of providing an heir for the latter.

2.8-16: Ruth meets Boaz in the field where she is gleaning.

8: Like Naomi, Boaz refers to Ruth as *daughter*. This form of address conveys his warm attitude toward her, and also stresses the generational difference between them.

12: This v. summarizes the message of the book: Whoever seeks shelter with the God of Israel will be rewarded. Rabbinic interpreters understand this phrase as a reference to Ruth's conversion.

14: *Vinegar*, actually a refreshing drink of sour wine and oil. Boaz's generosity, in providing drink and *roasted grain*, foreshadows the important role he will come to play in providing for both Ruth and Naomi.

2.17-23: Ruth reports back to Naomi.

17: An *'ephah* is approximately two-thirds of a bushel, a substantial amount for one day of gleaning. **20:** By identifying Boaz as *one of our redeeming kinsmen*, Naomi suggests his potential role in providing for Ruth and herself, since a "go'el" (redeeming kinsman: see translators' note b) had a special obligation to the family.

ished." 22 And Naomi answered her daughter-in-law Ruth, "It is best, daughter, that you go out with his girls, and not be annoyed in some other field." 23 So she stayed close to the maidservants of Boaz, and gleaned until the barley harvest and the wheat harvest were finished. Then she stayed at home with her mother-in-law.

3 Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, "Daughter, I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy. Now there is our kinsman Boaz, whose girls you were close to. He will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor tonight. 3 So bathe, anoint yourself, dress up, and go down to the threshing floor. But do not disclose yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he lies down, and go over and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what you are to do." 5 She replied, "I will do everything you tell me."

6 She went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. 7 Boaz ate and drank, and in a cheerful mood went to lie down beside the grainpile. Then she went over stealthily and uncovered his feet and lay down. 8 In the middle of the night, the man gave a start and pulled back—there was a woman lying at his feet!

9 "Who are you?" he asked. And she replied, "I am your handmaid Ruth. 9 Spread your robe over your handmaid, for you are a redeeming kinsman."

10 He exclaimed, "Be blessed of the LORD, daughter! Your latest deed of loyalty is greater than the first, in that you have not turned to younger men, whether poor or rich." 11 And now, daughter, have no fear. I will do in your behalf whatever you ask, for all the elders of my town

H A formal act of espousal; cf. Ezek. 16:8.

I L^a she sought out a kinsman of her dead husband; see note at 2:20 above. Her first act of loyalty had been to return with Naomi.

S Lit. "gate of my people."

11-18: The threshing floor.

11-6: Naomi's plan. 2: The threshing floor is an elevated open space where the kernels of grain were separated from the chaff (winnowed). Winnowing was done in the evening when strong breezes would carry the chaff away. 3: Rashi, following *b. Shabbat* 113b, comments that Ruth reversed the order of preparation that Naomi had proposed. First

she went down to the threshing floor and then beautified herself, lest passers-by believe her to be a harlot. According to Rashi, following *y. Pe'ah* 8:7, Ruth's preparations related directly to her conversion. In washing herself, Ruth purified herself from her earlier idolatry; in anointing herself, she took upon herself the commandments; in dressing, she put on Sabbath garments, that is, full obser-

vance of the Sabbath. 4: The crucial aspect of Naomi's instructions to Ruth, to uncover Boaz's feet and lie down, is also the most ambiguous. Naomi may simply mean that Ruth should uncover a place at Boaz's feet and lie down. The word *feet*, however, may also be a euphemism for sexual organs (see Isa. 7:20). In this case, Naomi may have a bolder and less respectable act in mind. Similarly, the verb *lie down*, which appears eight times in this chapter, may be a euphemism for sexual intercourse. The frequent use of the verb "to know" also contributes to the sexual innuendo. Most commentators agree that sexual intercourse did not actually take place, though several suggest that after awakening from a drunken stupor after a long day's work (3:7), Boaz was unsure whether or not he had intercourse with Ruth. The language conveys the sexual tension that must have been present.

3.7-13: Ruth meets Boaz at the threshing floor after he has winnowed. 9: Rather than wait for Boaz's instruction, as Naomi had proposed, Ruth takes the initiative. She asks him to spread his robe ("kanaf") over her, because he is a redeeming kinsman. In doing so, she echoes his own words in 2:12, in which he describes her as seeking shelter under God's wing (also "kanaf"). Ruth's words are also a marriage proposal (see translators' note 9-a). In referring to Boaz as a redeeming kinsman, Ruth links the concepts of redemption and levirate marriage that are not otherwise connected in the Bible. The situation is not precisely that of levirate marriage, however. Had Boaz in fact been the brother of Ruth's dead husband, Mahlon, he would have been obligated by law to marry Ruth. No elaborate pretense would have been required. This might suggest that the legislation of Deut. 25:5-10 was not normative at this period. 10: Boaz may be suggesting that Ruth's proposal of marriage is an even more daring and comprehensive attempt to provide for Naomi's well-

