

# Book of Ruth: An Introduction

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**Scripture Focus:** Ruth 1:1-5

The Old Testament book of Ruth provides a wonderful reminder that even in the darkest times, God is at work in the hearts of people who choose to be faithful to God's divine purposes. The story of Ruth reminds us of God's abundant grace and mercy and our need to faithfully respond in gracious acts toward others.

Ruth has sometimes been called "a lovely lily in a stagnant pond." She has also been referred to as "a bright light in a very dark world." What made the pond stagnant and the times so dark?

## Setting

The story takes place, ***In the days when the judges ruled...*** (v. 1). Notice the last verse of Judges, preceding the start of the book of Ruth. ***In those days there was no king in Israel: all the people did what was right in their own eyes.*** (Judges 21:25) The Israelites disobeyed God, failing to worship and serve only God.

The judges appeared during the "theocracy" when God alone desired to be their true leader. Yet because of the disobedience of the people, judges had to be appointed. Their main responsibility was to deliver Israel from foreign oppressors and to try to curtail sin among the people. It is a difficult and dark time for the Israelites due to their own lack of faithfulness. As the story progresses, you will come to understand why Ruth might be considered that "lovely lily in a stagnant pond" and a very "bright light."

## Main Characters of the Story

Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz are the main characters in the story. Elimelech was married to Naomi and made the decision to move her and their sons, Mahlon and Chilion, from Bethlehem to the country of Moab because "there was a famine in the land." Moab was one of Israel's most hated enemies. Yet Elimelech obviously felt desperate and believed he could better provide for his family if he moved to Moab.

The Old Testament is filled with examples of people moving from their homelands to find a better life. (Note: The Hebrew word for stranger or foreigner is “ger” and appears 92 times in the Old Testament.)

While in Moab, Mahlon and Chilion marry Moabite women (Ruth and Orpah). It was not forbidden by God’s law but those in Bethlehem in Judah would generally have disapproved of these marriages or at the very least, considered them far from ideal. While in Moab, tragedy struck. (The causes are unknown.)

The father and family patriarch, Elimelech, died and then his two sons died as well, leaving Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth widows. Naomi, after living in Moab for 10 years, found herself without a husband or sons. This was a terrible situation for a woman to be in during biblical times. Naomi was not only full of grief, but her very survival was at stake. And so, she decided to return home to Bethlehem. But how will a Moabitess be welcomed if her daughters-in-law chose to go with her? Would the Hebrew people in Bethlehem of Judah obey the law of God? It reads:

***The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt:  
I am the LORD your God.  
(Leviticus 19:34)***

- What in the story, known so far, relates to conditions in the present day? Think both in the local community and beyond.
- What is the advantage of a “theocracy” over a monarchy, which is what God desired for his people in the beginning? (See 1 Samuel 8:4-9.)
- Even though not explicitly expressed, how does the commandment to love God with all that you have and love others as Christ has loved you factor into this introduction?