



"RUTH GLEANING," JAMES TISSOT, 1896

## Before we delve into the text

THE NOTES IN THIS SERIES RELY UPON KEIL AND DELITZSCH'S COMMENTARY ON THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE BAKER ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE BIBLE (EDITED BY WALTER ELWELL).

The book of Ruth is a biographical story of devotion and love. It is one of two biblical books named after women (the other one is Esther). Ruth is placed with the historical books of the Old Testament (Hebrew scriptures) ▶, and the book itself tells us that the story in it took place while the Judges were ruling over Israel.

### The time of the judges: instability, anarchy, disunity

Israel at that time was in possession of the Mosaic Law and under God-appointed leadership. Those benefits aside, the time of the judges was a tragic period in Israel's history. The epilogue of the book of Judges repeats the phrase "in those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." It was a period marked by instability, anarchy and disunity.

The story of Ruth offers a redeeming contrast, showing that even in the midst of dark times, faithful people and God's blessings are still to be found.

### Life for women in Ruth's day

It's important to understand that the time and culture of Ruth's story is very different from our own, in particular as it relates to the role and rights of women. The culture was patriarchal. Women had no means of supporting themselves. Women without the protection of male family members faced poverty and social vulnerability. In the context of this sort of culture, the Mosaic Law put in place a number of protections for women. Although wives and children were regarded as a man's possessions, he was responsible for providing for the family, and ensuring their financial welfare and security.

### A crash course in Mosaic Law

Beyond this, it's also important to recognize two key laws that have relevance for Ruth's story. (There are other relevant laws, but we'll note those as we go along).

The first is the Israelite custom of "Levirate Marriage," which served two functions. It provided for widows, and it carried on the family name of a deceased husband. Here's how it worked ▶

BOOKS OF MOSES  
OR "THE LAW"

Genesis  
Exodus  
Leviticus  
Numbers  
Deuteronomy

HISTORICAL BOOKS

Joshua  
Judges  
**Ruth**  
1st Samuel  
2nd Samuel  
1st Kings  
2nd Kings  
1st Chronicles  
2nd Chronicles  
Ezra  
Nehemiah  
Esther



"MOSES AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS,"  
JAMES TISSOT, 1902

#### DEUTERONOMY 25:5-10

<sup>5</sup>If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. <sup>6</sup>The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

<sup>7</sup>However, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, "My husband's brother refuses to carry on his brother's name in Israel. He will not fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to me."

<sup>8</sup>Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, "I do not want to marry her," <sup>9</sup>his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, "This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line."

<sup>10</sup>That man's line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsandaled.

The practice of this custom underwent changes over the centuries (there's no spitting in this story), but events in the book of Ruth clearly hearken back to this law.

The second set of laws we need to be aware of relate to land ownership and redemption. According to Hebrew scripture, God was the actual owner of the land that he had given to his people for an inheritance and they had use of it. The person who possessed the land was not permitted to sell the family portion permanently, but could only part with it temporarily - at worst until the next year of Jubilee (which occurred every 50 years) when the land would revert back to its original owner. These laws were put in place to remind the people of God's ultimate ownership over Israel, but also to prevent unbridled accumulation on the part of some resulting in desperate poverty on the part of others.

When poverty led someone to temporarily sell his inheritance, it was the duty of the nearest relation to buy it back on his behalf (or redeem it). ▶

## Themes to watch for

- The example of godly love, as demonstrated by both Ruth and Boaz.
- God's grace in welcoming Gentile converts to the fellowship of his people. This foreshadows blessings to come, calling to mind the Messianic passage in Isaiah which speaks of the Lord's servant (Jesus) as "a light for the Gentiles."
- The role of the kinsman-redeemer, which is a "Messianic type" and helps us to explore and better understand our relationship with Jesus.
- The significance of the inclusion of a Gentile in the ancestry of King David - and consequently in the ancestry of Jesus.

#### LEVITICUS 25:17, 23-25

<sup>17</sup>Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the Lord your God...

<sup>23</sup>The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers. <sup>24</sup>Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.

<sup>25</sup>If one of your fellow Israelites becomes poor and sells some of their property, their nearest relative is to come and redeem what they have sold.