



WHY STUDY THE BOOK OF RUTH?

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The book of Ruth is one of the shortest books in the Old Testament, consisting of only four chapters, and at first sight it may seem a rather gentle domestic story tucked away among much larger biblical narratives of kings, prophets, wars and national crises. There are no spectacular miracles in Ruth, no dramatic appearances

of God, no parting seas, no fire from heaven and no prophetic speeches beginning, "Thus says the Lord." Indeed, God is remarkably quiet throughout much of the book.

And yet perhaps that is precisely why Ruth deserves our attention in 2026.

Ruth is a story about ordinary people trying to live faithfully in difficult circumstances. It deals with bereavement and economic insecurity, migration and prejudice, food and poverty, sexuality and family, power and vulnerability, generosity and belonging. It asks who counts as an outsider, what responsibility we have towards those who are vulnerable, and where God might be found when there is no obvious miracle to explain what is happening.

For contemporary Christians, these are hardly remote questions.

A Christian reading of Ruth does not require us to pretend that the book simply dropped from heaven with one obvious meaning which every generation must reproduce. We can take seriously the historical world from which the story emerged, the cultural assumptions within it, the tensions between biblical texts, and the questions contemporary scholarship raises about its purpose. But none of this diminishes Ruth. On the contrary, reading carefully can enable us to hear just how radical this little book may be.

1. Ruth challenges us to reconsider who belongs

Perhaps the most striking fact about Ruth is also the most obvious: Ruth is a Moabite.

The narrator keeps reminding us of it. Ruth is not simply Ruth; repeatedly she is "Ruth the Moabite." She is the foreigner, the migrant, the woman from somewhere else.

That matters because relations between Israel and Moab were complicated and sometimes deeply hostile. Deuteronomy 23:3 famously declares that "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD." Other biblical traditions portray Moab negatively.

And then along comes Ruth. She is a Moabite, yet she becomes one of the most compelling examples of faithfulness in the Hebrew Bible. Her famous words to Naomi remain among Scripture's most beautiful expressions of commitment:

"Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16)

There is an important theological lesson here. The Bible itself contains conversations, tensions and developing understandings about identity and belonging. Ruth can be read as one of those biblical voices which challenges the temptation to draw the boundaries of God's people too tightly.

This is enormously relevant in 2026. Across Britain and elsewhere, societies continue to wrestle with immigration, refugees, national identity, multiculturalism and the question of who properly "belongs." These are politically complicated matters, and Christians need not pretend that there are simple policy solutions to every question. But Ruth asks something deeper than a question about government policy. It asks a spiritual question: How do we see the stranger? Do we begin with suspicion, or with curiosity? Do we define people primarily by where they came from, or do we recognise the humanity, courage and gifts they bring?

Ruth arrives in Bethlehem as someone who could easily have been dismissed as an outsider. Yet gradually the story turns our expectations upside down. The foreign woman becomes the bearer of extraordinary faithfulness. The person who might have been regarded as a threat becomes a blessing.

There is something profoundly important here for the Church. Christianity is healthiest when it remembers that God's grace is always larger than the boundaries human beings construct around it. Jesus repeatedly crossed boundaries between respectable and disreputable, male and female, Jew and Samaritan, healthy and unclean. The early Church then had to discover, sometimes painfully, that the Spirit of God was already at work among people whom established religious communities had regarded as outsiders.

Ruth prepares us for that discovery. Perhaps one of the questions every church should periodically ask is not simply, "Who comes here?" but "Who might find it difficult to belong here?" Ruth invites us to become communities in which the stranger can become neighbour and the outsider can become family.

2. Ruth helps us discover God in ordinary human kindness

One of the fascinating features of Ruth is the apparent hiddenness of God.

Naomi certainly speaks about God, sometimes with considerable bitterness. After losing her husband and sons, she tells the women of Bethlehem:

"Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me."
(Ruth 1:20)

We should not rush past those words. There is a mature spirituality in allowing Naomi to say what she feels. The Bible does not silence her grief by giving her an easy religious answer. Nobody tells her that everything happens for a reason. Nobody demands that she smile because God has a wonderful plan.

She grieves.

For Christians today, particularly those who have experienced bereavement, disappointment, illness, unanswered prayer or shattered expectations, Naomi can be an important companion. Faith does not require us to pretend that suffering does not hurt.

Yet something else gradually happens. God's presence begins to be glimpsed, not primarily through supernatural intervention, but through human kindness. Ruth refuses to abandon Naomi. Boaz allows Ruth to glean in his fields and ensures that she is protected. Food is shared. Vulnerable people are noticed. Responsibilities are accepted. A future slowly emerges from what initially appeared to be hopelessness.

One of the great Hebrew words associated with Ruth is *hesed* — a rich term conveying steadfast love, covenant loyalty, kindness and faithful commitment. Perhaps this is one of the most important theological insights Ruth offers Christians in 2026: God's activity is often mediated through ordinary acts of human faithfulness.

We sometimes look for God only in the spectacular. We want dramatic answers to prayer, unmistakable miracles or overwhelming spiritual experiences. Ruth invites us to look again. God may be encountered in the person who brings a meal. In someone who telephones when everybody else has forgotten. In the employer who treats workers generously. In the church member who quietly gives someone a lift. In the neighbour who notices that somebody is struggling. In the person who chooses loyalty when walking away would have been easier.

This does not mean that God simply becomes another name for human kindness. Rather, it suggests that divine grace frequently becomes visible through human relationships.

For churches this has enormous practical implications. Our theology is tested not simply by what we say about God on Sunday morning, but by the kind of community

our beliefs create from Monday onwards. If we worship the God of Ruth while ignoring the Ruths and Naomis around us, we have missed part of the point of the story.

3. Ruth makes us look seriously at power, poverty and vulnerability

It is easy to romanticise Ruth. Beautiful harvest fields, loyal friendships and eventual marriage can make the story appear almost idyllic. But underneath the surface lies a much harder social reality.

Naomi and Ruth are widows in a patriarchal society. Their economic position is precarious. Ruth goes gleaning because she needs food. The practice of leaving parts of the harvest for poor people and foreigners, reflected in texts such as Leviticus 19:9–10, provided an important form of social protection, but Ruth nevertheless enters the fields as a vulnerable woman whose safety cannot be assumed.

Boaz specifically instructs the young men not to bother her. That small detail tells us something about the world Ruth inhabits. Contemporary readers should therefore resist turning the story simply into a romance between Ruth and Boaz. Questions of gender, economics, land, power and survival run throughout the narrative. That makes Ruth surprisingly contemporary.

In 2026 we continue to live in societies marked by enormous disparities of wealth and opportunity. Food banks have become familiar features of British communities. Churches encounter people struggling with housing costs, insecure employment, loneliness, debt and the pressures associated with caring responsibilities. Around the world, women remain disproportionately vulnerable to poverty, exploitation and violence. Ruth asks us to notice the structures surrounding individual lives.

Boaz is significant not merely because he is personally pleasant. He has power, and the moral question is what he does with it. He owns land. Ruth does not. He has social standing. Ruth has very little. He is male in a patriarchal culture. Ruth is a vulnerable foreign woman. Yet Boaz uses his relative privilege to create safety, provide food and restore dignity. That is a deeply relevant model of discipleship.

The question is not whether we possess power; almost everybody possesses some kind of power. We may have money, education, professional standing, influence, citizenship, property, experience, networks or simply the confidence to speak when somebody else cannot.

The Christian question is: What will we do with the power we possess? Will we use it simply to protect ourselves, or will we use it to enlarge the possibilities available to others? Ruth therefore moves Christian ethics beyond private morality. Faithfulness is not simply about being personally respectable. It concerns the ways we organise communities, share resources, protect vulnerable people and create conditions in which others can flourish.

The church that studies Ruth seriously should become more attentive to poverty, safeguarding, migration, gender, economic justice and hospitality.

4. Ruth reminds us hope can emerge from unexpected places

The book begins with famine. Then comes migration. Then bereavement.

Naomi loses her husband and both her sons. By the time she returns to Bethlehem she believes that her life has become empty:

"I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty." (Ruth 1:21)

But the reader knows something Naomi cannot yet see. She has returned with Ruth. Naomi thinks she has nothing, while standing beside her is the person through whom much of her future will unfold. That is one of the most beautiful dimensions of the story.

Human beings often interpret life from the middle rather than the end. We look at what has been lost and conclude that nothing new can emerge. Ruth does not offer a simplistic promise that every tragedy will be reversed or every bereavement compensated. Such theology would be pastorally cruel. What it offers instead is a gentler hope: the present moment does not necessarily contain the whole meaning of our story. New possibilities can emerge. Relationships can form. Communities can change. Foreigners can become friends. Those who have been emptied can discover that life still contains gifts they had not anticipated.

And the ending of Ruth deliberately expands the horizon. The story which seemed to concern two obscure widows becomes connected with the genealogy of David. Christian readers encounter another surprise when Matthew's Gospel includes Ruth among the women named in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). The outsider becomes part of the story through which Christians understand Christ himself. That should make us cautious whenever we imagine we already know where God will be found. God may be at work beyond the boundaries of our denomination, our tradition, our culture and our expectations. God may speak

through people whose theology differs from ours. God may confront the Church through voices from its margins. God may already be active among communities we have been too quick to dismiss.

This is particularly important at a time when churches can become anxious about numerical decline, cultural change and an uncertain future. Ruth begins with emptiness but ends with possibility. It does not teach us that faithful people will always become successful. It teaches something subtler and perhaps more trustworthy: despair does not deserve the final word.

Conclusion: A small book for a complicated world

So why study Ruth in 2026? Because Ruth asks questions our churches and our society are already asking.

- Who belongs?
- How should we treat strangers?
- Where is God when life goes wrong?
- What responsibilities accompany privilege?
- How should women and vulnerable people be treated?
- What does faithful love look like?
- Can hope emerge after devastating loss?
- And might God be at work through people we have regarded as outsiders?

Perhaps above all, Ruth encourages us to pay attention to the quiet places where grace is happening. There are no heroes in Ruth. Instead, there is a grieving older woman, a courageous migrant and a landowner learning what generosity requires of him. And somehow, through these ordinary people and their complicated relationships, a future begins to emerge.

That may be exactly the kind of theology many Christians need in 2026. We live in an age which often looks for dramatic personalities, instant solutions and spectacular answers. Ruth directs our attention elsewhere — towards loyalty, hospitality, justice, courage, generosity and the patient rebuilding of lives. It invites us to believe that God may be encountered not only in extraordinary moments of religious experience, but in the ordinary places where human beings choose to care for one another.

And perhaps, when the Church learns to recognise that kind of grace, we may discover that some of the people we once thought were standing outside God's story were already helping to carry it forward.

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